

# The future of inclusion: Building Neuro-Affirmative workplaces beyond DEI

*During the Covid-19 pandemic, our society advanced by decades in a matter of months. Overnight, our societal definition of 'normal' was replaced with working and learning from home.*

Temps de lecture : minute

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This global collective experience heightened awareness of how the most vulnerable people in our society are treated. The outcry against systemic racism following George Floyd's murder in 2020 compelled companies to confront their roles in perpetuating barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

This led to a 55% increase in DEI roles, but the momentum was not sustained. By the end of 2022, the attrition rate for DEI roles rose to 33%, compared to 21% for non-DEI roles.

As we emerge from the pandemic, a clear power struggle has surfaced. Just as children are resisting returning to school, adults are resisting returning to the office.

This has seen collective movements, such as Apple employees publishing an open letter to CEO Tim Cook against a 3-day office mandate, highlighting DEI concerns such as accessibility and a feeling of being unheard. This pressure resulted in an extension of Apple's work-from-home policies, demonstrating the shift in power dynamics at play.

# Why DEI needs reinventing

The recent backlash against DEI initiatives, evident in cuts at companies like Google, Microsoft and Zoom, signal that these efforts are often perceived as fleeting trends rather than genuine priorities.

Without genuine intention and vulnerability from everyone in an organisation, DEI initiatives are doomed to fall short. Individuals championing DEI within hierarchical structures founded on discrimination, bias and exclusion, are set up to fail.

Many DEI advocates operate within hierarchical structures steeped in discrimination and bias, making success nearly impossible. Ultimately, true inclusion would mean a change in the status quo, representing a threat to those currently in power.

The transgender co-owner of Miss Universe illustrated this superficiality in a leaked video, saying, 'the trans women, the women with husbands, divorced women... this is a communication strategy, because... they can compete but they cannot win. We just put the policy out there. Social inclusion, as people would say.'

This demonstrates the reality behind many 'social inclusion' initiatives, which prioritise appearance over meaningful or tangible action.

However, DEI isn't merely a 'nice to have'; it embodies core societal values of respect, dignity, equality, and accessibility. Forcing individuals into a 'one size fits all approach' can be as pointless as forcing people to attend inclusion training who don't believe in it: resulting in presenteeism, resentment, and disengagement.

Employers are increasingly feeling the consequences of this disconnect. Since 2020, there's been a 400% increase in adults seeking an ADHD

assessment, alongside a 30% increase in employment disability discrimination tribunal cases related to neurodiverse conditions. Notably, awards for disability discrimination are uncapped, as seen in a £4.6 million award to an employee who was repeatedly told 'her brain didn't work like other people's'.

The Equality Act 2010 imposes legal duties on employers to pro-actively make reasonable adjustments for disabled employees, tailored to individual needs. Nearly 1 in 4 individuals are classified as disabled in the UK, a number which is increasing over time. This underscores the necessity for a new approach that prioritises accessibility and adaptability.

## Neuro-Affirmative workplaces

One of the common fears employers face in making reasonable adjustments for disabled employees is the notion of 'setting an example' for others. However, reverse discrimination claims are not possible, and setting a positive example can benefit everyone.

If an adjustment - like remote work - enhances one employee's performance, why not extend it to others? For instance, John Lewis has adopted a practice of providing interview questions in advance to *all* candidates, not just those with disabilities who require this as a reasonable adjustment. This reflects a shift towards inclusivity and innovation in hiring practices, showcasing an employer committed to neuro-affirmation from the outset.

Being 'neuro-affirmative' is essential for employers aiming to connect with a diverse workforce in today's ever-changing society. This requires genuine respect for differences in how individuals think and function, creating environments that accommodate all, and thrive on innovation.

With the rise of remote work, individuals no longer rely solely on a single employer or role. This shift opens up a global opportunity for employment, and companies that fail to adapt risk losing out on exceptional candidates. Critical skills - such as effective communication, collaboration, and compromise - are more vital than ever in our increasingly polarised and fragmented world.

Just as the benefits of DEI initiatives are difficult to quantify and commodify with metrics, so too are the intrinsic factors that unite us: our shared humanity and the need for mutual respect and support.

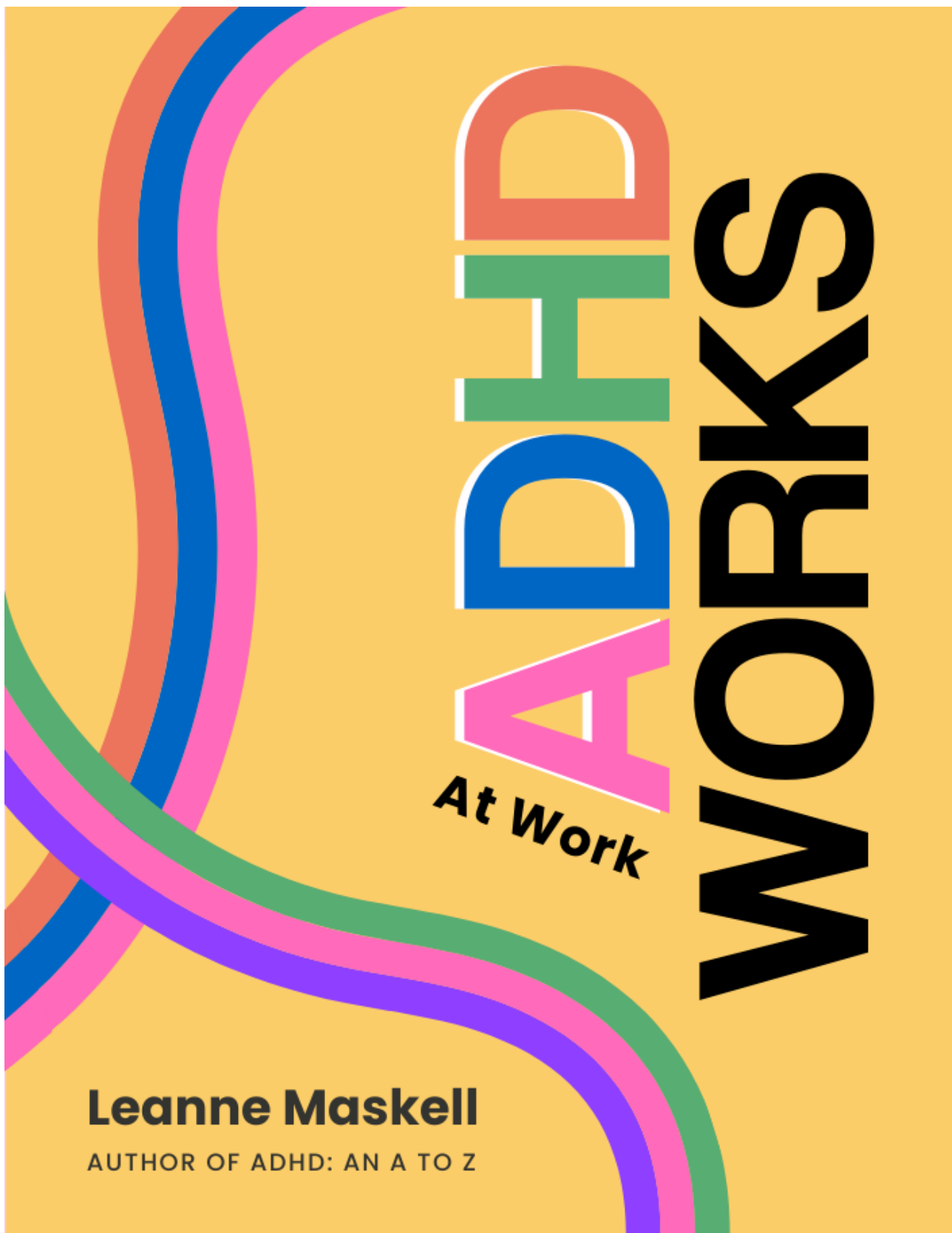
To survive and thrive, workplaces must recognise that change is inevitable. They can choose to be part of the solution, or risk losing out to the competition. True power is not measured by our ability to control others out of force, but by our capacity to inspire their support through mutual respect and collaboration.

Leanne Maskell is the director of *ADHD Works*, creators of the *Neuro-Affirmative Certification Programme* and other *ADHD coaching courses*. She is also the author of *ADHD Works at Work* and *ADHD an A-Z*.



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