

Bias Cues to Watch Out for When Assessing Neurodivergent Talent

Bias cues are not explicit acts of discrimination. Rather, they are automatic interpretations of behaviours that deviate from expected norms, such as assuming that a lack of eye contact implies dishonesty or disengagement, or that fidgeting suggests inattention. In neurodivergent individuals, these actions may be entirely unrelated to performance, and in some cases, they may even support focus and self-regulation.

Below are common bias cues to be aware of and reframe in assessment settings:

Observed Behaviour		Risk of Biased Interpretation		Alternative Inclusive Perspective
Limited eye contact	→	<i>"They're disinterested or untrustworthy"</i>	→	For some, sustained eye contact is uncomfortable or distracting. Reduced eye contact may allow better focus on listening and thinking.
Fidgeting, movement, or doodling	→	<i>"They can't concentrate"</i>	→	These actions may aid self-regulation, reduce anxiety, or improve focus.
Flat or atypical voice	→	<i>"They lack enthusiasm or engagement"</i>	→	Tone varies naturally; it does not reliably indicate motivation or interest.
Tangential or non-linear responses	→	<i>"They don't understand the question or can't think clearly"</i>	→	Non-linear thinking can produce highly creative, multi-layered responses. Ideas may need structured prompts or more time to articulate.
Delayed responses	→	<i>"They don't know the answer"</i>	→	Processing information before speaking can produce more considered and accurate answers.
Minimal small talk or social reciprocity	→	<i>"They won't fit into the team culture"</i>	→	Social energy may be conserved for task-related discussion; rapport can be built in other ways.
Requesting clarification	→	<i>"They're unprepared or inattentive"</i>	→	Seeking clarity often reflects thoroughness and care to meet expectations precisely.

Strategies to Challenge Your Own Assumptions

Recognising bias cues is only useful if assessors have concrete ways to prevent them from shaping outcomes. Building checkpoints into the assessment process helps ensure judgements rest on substance rather than style.

Before the Assessment

✓ Set expectations of inclusivity

Brief candidates that different communication styles and behaviours are welcome. This reduces pressure to “perform” in narrowly defined ways.

✓ Prepare structured scoring rubrics

Align criteria with job-relevant skills so observations are anchored in evidence, not assumptions.

During the Assessment

✓ Create space for reasoning

Invite candidates to explain their thinking or decision-making process, especially where their answers may differ from expected norms.

✓ Cross-check perspectives

Where possible, use more than one assessor. Shared discussion of evidence reduces the weight of any single viewpoint.

After the Assessment

✓ Reflect on reactions

Ask yourself whether style influenced your judgement more than content.

Self-Check Questions for Assessors

Before drawing conclusions, pause and ask:

Am I basing my judgement on social norms or a job requirement?

Have I seen evidence that this behaviour actually impacts the skill being measured?

Would I interpret this behaviour differently if I already knew the candidate was competent?

Have I given candidates clear conditions to demonstrate skill in their own way?

“Am I interpreting this behaviour through a neurotypical lens?”

“Could there be a valid alternative explanation for what I’m observing?”

