



Creating Inclusive Assessments for Neurodivergent Talent

Introduction

This guide is designed to support more inclusive, fair, and accessible assessment practices in the workplace. It is intended for practitioners, employers, HR professionals, and anyone involved in recruitment, development, or performance evaluation using psychometric tools.

Inclusive assessment practices are essential to ensure that all individuals have an equitable opportunity to demonstrate their strengths and potential. Standardised assessments can unintentionally disadvantage those with differences in communication, sensory processing, cognitive style, or executive functioning. Without thoughtful adaptation, employers risk missing out on valuable talent and perpetuating systemic bias.

This guide draws on Lumina Learning's research into neurodivergent individuals' experiences with a range of workplace assessments, including interviews, ability tests, personality measures, in-tray exercises, and 360-degree feedback. Participants identified both common and condition-specific challenges, as well as practical adjustments to make assessments more accessible. These insights form the foundation of the recommendations in this paper.

At its core, this guide advocates for fairness not just in outcomes, but in the assessment process itself. Apart from being ethically sound, inclusive practices unlock talent, reduce bias, and strengthen organisational performance. In many regions, they also align with legal obligations to provide reasonable accommodations during assessments.

Understanding Neurodivergence in Assessment Contexts

As employers increasingly seek to diversify their talent pipelines and create more inclusive assessment processes, there is growing recognition that traditional evaluation methods may not serve all individuals equally. Many assessment tools were designed around standardised expectations of how people should think, communicate, and behave. These assumptions often fail to reflect the cognitive diversity present in today's workforce.

Supporting neurodivergent individuals requires more than simply modifying tests or adding accommodations. It demands a deeper, evidence-based understanding of how cognitive differences shape performance: not from a lens of deficit or disorder, but from one of variation and strength. Inclusive assessment design begins with recognising that diverse ways of perceiving, engaging with, and responding to tasks that stem from authentic, embodied experience.

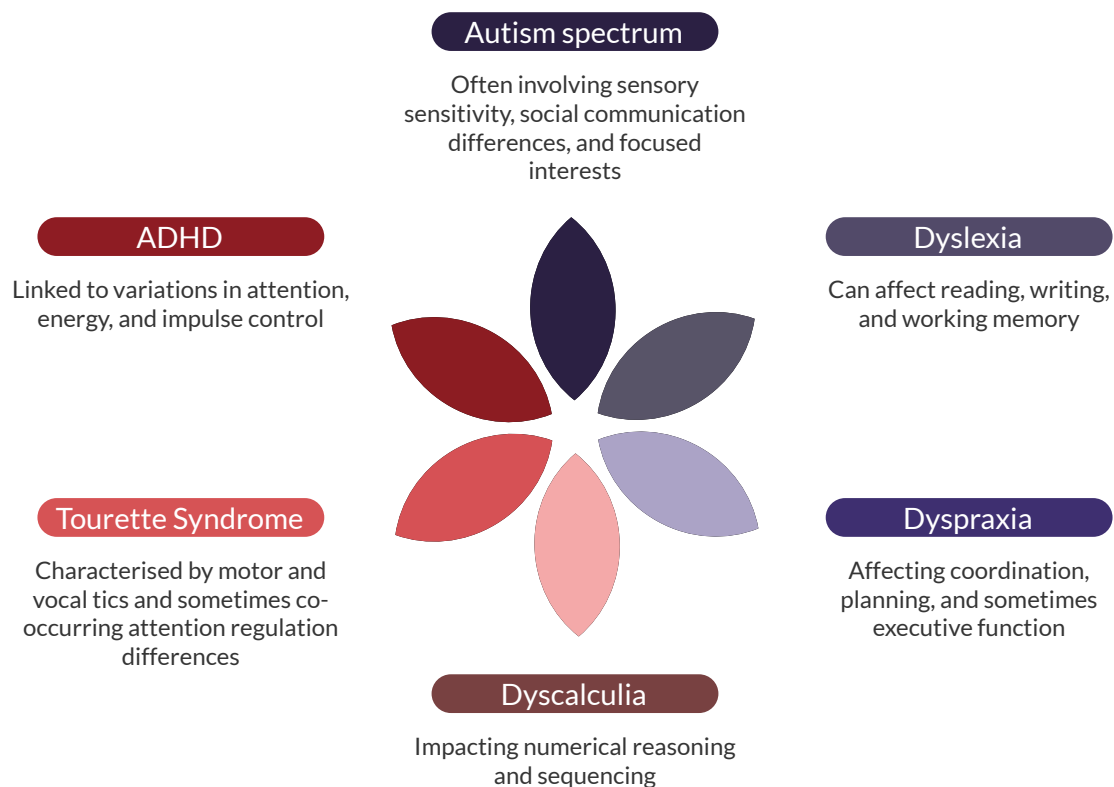
What is Neurodivergence?

Neurodivergence refers to the natural variation in how human brains develop and function. Instead of treating differences in cognition, attention, communication, or perception as deficits, the neurodiversity paradigm recognises them as part of normal human variation. This perspective moves away from older medical models that pathologised conditions such as autism, ADHD, or dyslexia, and instead acknowledges that these traits can present both opportunities and challenges, depending on context.

The concept of neurodiversity emerged in the late 1990s, most notably through the work of sociologist Judy Singer, who used the term to frame neurological difference as a form of social diversity, comparable to gender, culture, or language (Singer, 1998). From this perspective, neurodivergent individuals are not broken versions of a "normal" mind, but people with distinct cognitive profiles that require different forms of support, recognition, and opportunity. In practice, this means that efforts to include neurodivergent talent should begin not with attempts to "fix" or remediate individuals, but with rethinking the systems and standards they are measured against.

This shift is particularly relevant in workplace assessments. Many evaluation methods assume that the "best" candidates are those who can demonstrate quick recall, linear thinking, fluent verbal communication, or confident self-presentation. But these are not neutral measures; they favour certain cognitive styles while disadvantaging others. A neurodiversity-informed approach recognises that ability and potential can be expressed in many ways, and that fair assessment design should reflect this breadth.

Neurodivergence can be linked to several neurodevelopmental conditions, each with implications for assessment design. These include, but are not limited to:



While neurotypes vary in how they are expressed and experienced, many neurodivergent people face similar friction points during assessments. For those with more than one condition, such as autism alongside ADHD, or dyslexia alongside anxiety, overlapping traits can compound the effort required to navigate assessment environments.

Drawing on qualitative data from Lumina Learning’s research, the guide highlights common patterns that cut across different neurodivergent experiences. This lens offers a more practical way to understand where barriers emerge, and how adjustments can reduce them, without resorting to narrow or reductionist classifications.

The following sections bring these experiences to life, synthesising the most commonly reported challenges faced in psychometric assessments. Grounded in lived experience, they show that difficulties rarely come from a single source, but from the interplay of cognitive, emotional, and environmental pressures. By identifying these friction points, practitioners can move beyond assumptions and design assessments that more accurately recognise and support diverse talent.

Strive to keep assessments free from labels:

- ✓ Avoid reducing candidates to diagnosis or category
- ✓ Address barriers, not conditions
- ✓ Take a holistic, person-centered view

Challenge: Working Memory & Processing Speed

Working memory refers to the ability to hold and manipulate information in mind, while processing speed relates to how quickly someone can take in, understand, and respond to that information. Difficulties in these areas can affect everyday performance, such as following long instructions, organising thoughts, or responding under stress.

In Lumina Learning's research, challenges with working memory and processing speed were among the most frequently reported by participants. These issues were especially evident in high-pressure contexts such as timed assessments, multi-step tasks, and interviews requiring rapid responses.

As one participant put it:

I have very poor working memory and processing speed, so my performance does not always reflect my abilities or intelligence.

Another reflected:

I freeze on tests as I need more time to process and respond, and often forget things, only remembering them once the assessment is over.

When under time constraints, many reported forgetting the original question halfway through an answer, rushing before they lost their train of thought, or feeling overwhelmed by multi-part instructions. The result was often a sense that their true capability hadn't come across, and that the assessment measured speed more than potential.



Evidence

Contemporary research supports these experiences; while working memory and processing speed contribute to performance on standardised tests, they fall short as indicators of real-world intelligence or professional capability (Mashburn & Burgoyne, 2023; Halpern & Dunn, 2021). This means assessments that emphasise speed risk undervaluing candidates who think deeply, strategically, or creatively but at a slower pace.

In short, traditional assessments often confuse fast thinking with smart thinking.



Suggested Adjustments

- ✔ Offer additional time in timed tests to allow candidates space to process and respond without undue pressure
- ✔ Break tasks into clear, smaller steps, and provide both verbal and written instructions
- ✔ Encourage notetaking, so candidates don't have to rely solely on working memory
- ✔ Train assessors to allow pauses and resist interpreting slower responses as weaker capability
- ✔ Build in short breaks during longer assessments to reduce fatigue and give space for processing and recall

Challenge: Communication & Verbal Processing

Communication and verbal processing involve organising thoughts and expressing them clearly in spoken form. Challenges in this area can make it difficult to respond fluently, stay on topic, or adapt answers under pressure.

This area of challenges was another frequently mentioned in our research, particularly during interviews and assessment conversations. Many candidates described having strong ideas and insights but struggling to express them effectively under time constraints.

Typical experiences included losing track mid-sentence, going off on tangents, stumbling over words, or forgetting key points due to cognitive overload. Some reported overexplaining or “rambling”, not from a lack of focus, but from an anxious effort to ensure they were understood:

*Once I get started talking on a subject it's hard for me to stop.
So, in interviews I can talk for too long and get off topic.*

*I find it difficult to speak spontaneously...
Sometimes I can't finish sentences.*

For individuals who think in non-linear or highly associative ways, structured methods like the STAR technique (Situation, Task, Action, Result) were difficult to apply in real time. Others experienced verbal processing delays, where the clearest or most relevant answers only emerged after the conversation had moved on. Vague or multi-part questions further intensified the struggle, placing additional mental strain on candidates and making it harder to provide concise, well-framed responses.

I often follow branching thoughts in my examples to interview questions, and they do not always connect for the interviewer, so it comes off as rambling.



Evidence

Differences in executive functioning and information retrieval in conditions such as ADHD and autism are linked to greater difficulty with spontaneous verbal communication under pressure (Spek et al., 2009, Westby & Watson, 2021). This means that fast-paced interview settings may privilege fluency over substance, leaving capable candidates misjudged on how quickly they can package responses rather than the depth of their experience.



Suggested Adjustments

- ✓ Provide interview questions or themes in advance so candidates have time to prepare examples and organise their thoughts, reducing reliance on instant recall
- ✓ Break down questions into smaller, clearer parts to reduce cognitive load
- ✓ Prompt gently if a candidate goes off-track, helping them return to the question without penalty
- ✓ Reframe evaluation criteria to emphasise the quality and relevance of answers rather than fluency or polish
- ✓ Give space for reflection by allowing a pause before answering or offering the chance to return to questions later in the interview

Challenge: Social Expectations & Masking

In many assessments, candidates are judged not only on what they say, but how they say it through eye contact, facial expressions, posture, or tone of voice. These social cues are often (consciously or unconsciously) interpreted as signs of confidence, professionalism, or “fit”. For neurodivergent candidates, however, these expectations create hidden barriers unrelated to ability. To meet these norms, many feel pressure to engage in masking: the effort of suppressing or altering natural behaviours to avoid misunderstanding, stigma, or unfair judgement.

In our research, participants described the constant struggle required to monitor themselves and appear more “acceptable”. Though masking was a shared experience across neurotypes, its expression varied. Autistic participants reported forcing eye contact or mimicking facial expressions despite discomfort, while those with ADHD described holding back fidgeting to avoid seeming unprofessional. Candidates with DCD often found role play exercises especially stressful, regarding them as inauthentic compared to real-world tasks.

I constantly have to think about how my body language and facial expressions come across, whether I’m making the right amount of eye contact, or if I’m fidgeting or moving too much.

Another participant noted the impact of interview dynamics:

Being put on the spot, having to maintain eye contact, and sensing impatience when I need more time to process - all of that makes it impossible to focus on the actual question. Even looking at my notes for prompts meant being marked down, though I’m a visual thinker.

The emotional impact of masking was considerable. Many reported leaving assessments feeling drained or disconnected. The constant effort to appear “normal” often meant shifting attention away from the content of their responses and toward self-monitoring. Instead of showcasing their genuine strengths, they felt they were performing a cautious version of themselves: overly polished, overly cautious, and ultimately inauthentic.



Evidence

Research highlights the significant impact of masking on both wellbeing and performance. Studies show that while masking may help individuals “pass” in the short term, it is linked to mental fatigue, anxiety, and long-term stress (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Hull et al., 2017). Importantly, the mental effort spent monitoring and controlling one’s behaviour can drain cognitive resources, making it more difficult to concentrate, solve problems, or recall information.

This reveals a design flaw in many traditional assessments; when polished delivery is mistaken for potential, authenticity can be overlooked.



Suggested Adjustments

- ✔ Offer alternatives to role play (e.g., task-based simulations or problem-solving exercises) that reduce pressure to perform social scripts
- ✔ Provide clear expectations and explain in advance what behaviours will be evaluated so candidates can prepare without guessing
- ✔ Focus on content, not style by training assessors to evaluate what candidates contribute rather than how they package it
- ✔ Encourage assessors to allow natural pauses and avoid penalising fidgeting, stimming, or reduced eye contact
- ✔ Offer one-to-one assessments instead of panel formats when possible, reducing the intensity of social performance

Challenge: Inflexible Interfaces & Blocked Assistive Tools

For many neurodivergent candidates, assessment difficulties extend beyond communication or cognitive processing into the practical design of the testing environment itself. When assessments lack flexibility in how tasks are delivered or fail to support assistive technologies, they create unnecessary barriers.

Participants in this research described frustration when they were unable to use assistive technologies, such as dictation tools, screen readers, or voice-to-text software, that they relied on in their daily work. Tasks requiring long periods of typing or handwriting were particularly challenging for those with motor coordination differences (such as dyspraxia), often leading to fatigue and limiting their ability to articulate responses fully.

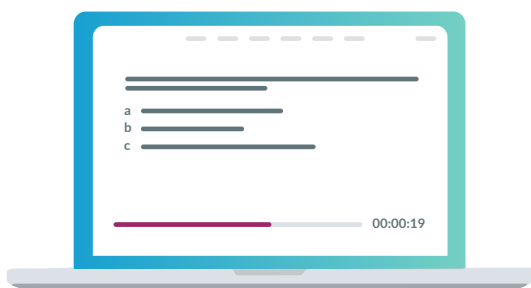
Interface design also created obstacles. Candidates pointed to:



High-contrast white screens that triggered eye strain or visual discomfort



Small fonts, lack of dark mode, or limited ability to enlarge text



Rigid answer boxes or time-limited formats that discouraged thoughtful responses



Technical tasks that penalised those using alternative shortcuts or customised methods

As one participant explained:

I am an advanced Excel user – with shortcuts and my own way of implementing commands. But when tested by traditional methods, I do not score highly as I do not use the direct route to get things done as per the typical instructions for using the software.



Evidence

Inclusive interface design can reduce cognitive load and improve accuracy, particularly for neurodivergent individuals. Features like flexible input methods, multimodal instructions, and personalised layouts help users with autism, ADHD, and related conditions stay focused and perform more effectively (Paulino et al., 2024; Al-Azawei et al., 2017). Ultimately, small design choices can make a big difference.



Suggested Adjustments

- ✓ Enable assistive technologies, so candidates can work with the tools they already rely on in daily tasks
- ✓ Design accessible interfaces with adjustable font sizes, colour themes (including dark mode), and flexible layouts to reduce sensory strain
- ✓ Offer format flexibility by allowing written, verbal, or recorded responses based on candidate preference
- ✓ Accommodate alternative methods, ensuring candidates are not penalised for using shortcuts, customised commands, or non-linear approaches if they reach the correct outcome

Challenge: Sensory Processing & Environmental Factors

Assessment performance is not only shaped by the tasks themselves but also by the physical environment in which they are completed. Bright lights, background noise, strong smells, or crowded rooms may trigger sensory overwhelm, draining energy and narrowing focus.

As one participant explained:

I found it hard to concentrate on the questions because I was too busy trying to block out noises and smells...

Several participants noted that outcomes varied depending on whether the assessment was delivered remotely or in person. Some found online formats more comfortable and less distracting, while others valued being face-to-face but struggled in group interviews or panel settings where the number of people present heightened stress. Others mentioned practical adjustments that helped them cope, such as using noise-cancelling headphones to filter out distractions.

One candidate suggested a simple solution: ***“A quieter environment where I could focus on the task”***.



Evidence

Sensory sensitivities are well-documented in neurodivergent populations. These sensitivities often include heightened reactivity to sound, light, and other environmental stimuli, which can contribute to increased stress and difficulty concentrating (Robertson & Baron-Cohen, 2017). Research has also shown that individuals with autism may perceive sounds as louder or more intense, indicating a heightened auditory sensitivity that can affect comfort and engagement in certain environments (Khalifa et al., 2004). Recognising and accommodating these sensory differences in assessment

settings is therefore essential, not just for fairness, but as a strategy to optimise performance across all candidates.



Suggested Adjustments

- ✔ Offer candidates a choice of format (remote or in-person) wherever possible and be transparent about who will attend interviews or panels. Reducing the need to commute can also lower stress before assessments begin
- ✔ Minimise sensory triggers by using quiet rooms, adjustable lighting, neutral scents, and reduced foot traffic
- ✔ Allow supportive tools such as noise-cancelling headphones or tinted lenses if candidates prefer them
- ✔ Schedule short breaks in longer assessments to reduce fatigue and allow candidates to reset



Note on Disclosure and Safety

True inclusion means designing assessments where candidates don't have to mask who they are just to get through the process. Adjustments should be built in as standard, so that support is available to everyone, whether or not they choose to share a diagnosis. Disclosure should always be an option, never an expectation. The aim is a process that feels safe, fair, and flexible by default.

Assessment-Specific Suggestions

Inclusive assessment principles apply across settings, but the specific adjustments required depend on the format used. Below are examples of how common assessment methods can be adapted to better support neurodivergent candidates while maintaining rigour and fairness.

360 Feedback

Provide clear explanations

Outline the purpose, process, and how feedback will be used to reduce ambiguity and anxiety

Offer guidance and support

Allow a coach, mentor, or trusted colleague to walk through the process, especially when receiving constructive or critical feedback

Use regular, smaller feedback touchpoints

Ongoing feedback may be less overwhelming and more actionable than one-off, long-form reviews

Train feedback providers

Ensure colleagues understand neurodiversity and avoid misinterpreting differences as deficiencies

Follow up on feedback

Explain which suggestions will be actioned and why, to prevent the process feeling superficial

Interviews



Provide questions or themes in advance

Send key topics ahead of time and display them in writing during the interview



Give extra time for responses

Allow pauses without penalty; some candidates process best with reflection



Offer clear, structured instructions

Explain what is being assessed and illustrate with examples



Enable clarifying questions

Encourage candidates to check understanding without stigma



Be transparent about logistics

Share details on format, panel members, and timeline in advance



Offer flexible formats

Remote or in-person, written responses, or audio-only where helpful



Minimise distractions

Provide a quieter, low-stimulus environment for focus



Signal inclusivity

Reassure candidates that neurodivergence is accepted and adjustments are encouraged



Probe constructively

Use follow-up prompts and evaluate answers holistically, not only question by question

Ability Tests



Provide extra time and breaks

Reduces pressure from speed and allows fairer demonstration of ability



Give clear, precise instructions

Use step-by-step guidance, examples, and practice items with explanations



Allow clarifying questions

Candidates should be able to check instructions before/during the test



Permit supportive tools

Calculators, Excel, or accessibility settings (e.g. dark mode, larger fonts, screen readers)



Offer flexible formats

Smaller sets of questions at a time, audio or video instructions, or open-book elements where appropriate



Provide feedback and reasoning review

Share correct answers afterwards and allow candidates to explain their logic if it was misunderstood



Consider job relevance

If the test does not directly reflect workplace tasks, consider alternative assessments (e.g. practical work samples)

Situational Judgement Tests

Give clear explanations and examples

Explain what the test is measuring and provide sample questions with rationale for correct answers

Allow clarifying questions

Especially when scenarios seem unrealistic or ambiguous, as understanding the intent can change how candidates respond

Acknowledge multiple valid approaches

Real-life problem-solving is rarely one-size-fits-all; consider scoring a range of reasonable responses rather than a single “correct” one

Offer meaningful feedback

Explain how answers were evaluated and what they demonstrate, rather than just giving a pass/fail result

Review test design for inclusivity

Ensure SJTs are normed with neurodiverse populations and avoid scenarios that reward only neurotypical communication styles

In-Tray & Role Play Exercises

Give clear explanations and criteria

Spell out what is being measured (e.g., prioritisation, communication) and provide transparent scoring guidance so candidates know where to focus

Allow clarifying questions

Ensure candidates can check understanding of tasks or scenarios without penalty

Provide extra time

Longer processing periods help reduce errors from time pressure rather than ability

Offer practice materials

Sample exercises or mock tasks can build familiarity with format and reduce anxiety

Use realistic, relevant scenarios

Avoid artificial or exaggerated roleplay; where possible, use real work-based tasks that reflect the role

Ensure accessibility

Provide suitable tools (e.g., calculator, accessible software, quiet environment) so candidates aren't disadvantaged by logistics

Offer feedback and space to explain reasoning

Allow candidates to clarify their approach if the outcome doesn't show their full capability

Consider alternatives to role play

If communication is being tested, assess it through structured discussion or work simulations rather than improvised scenarios

Disclosure Guidance

While disclosure can enable tailored support, relying on it as a prerequisite for adjustments is both limiting and exclusionary. Many neurodivergent candidates may not feel safe disclosing or may not even have a formal diagnosis.

Invite, don't require

Create open, optional spaces for disclosure (e.g., “Is there anything we can adjust to help you perform at your best?”), without asking for diagnostic labels

Respond with care

When someone does disclose, thank them, ask what works for them, and avoid intrusive questions

Adjust proactively

Design assessments with built-in flexibility, such as quiet rooms, extra time, or alternative formats, so adjustments don't hinge on disclosure

Beyond disclosure

A universally supportive process anticipates varied needs, rather than reacting to them. Psychological safety is best achieved when inclusion is embedded by design, not by exception

Adjustment as Alignment, Not Exception

Inclusive assessment is not about giving some candidates an advantage - it's about designing environments that allow everyone to show their best. As highlighted by Doyle (2020), the focus should shift from “fixing” the individual to adjusting the fit between the person and the environment. From this lens, neurodivergent challenges in assessment are not signs of impairment, but signs of environments misaligned with human cognitive diversity.

What this report makes clear is that while neurodivergence often brings cognitive complexity, the adaptations required to support it are not necessarily complicated. Instead of including elaborate redesigns, they frequently require simple tweaks to clarity, pacing, transparency, and flexibility that are based more on professional judgement and attentiveness (Rice & Brooks, 2004). These are not technical fixes, but human-centred responses to real-world barriers that are often preventable.

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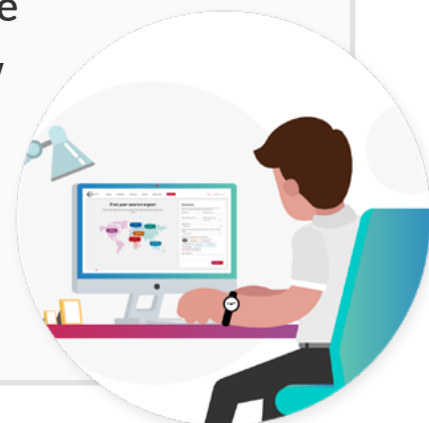
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