

Does your company nurture neurodiverse talent?

By Chi Chi Izundu Reporter

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Nat Hawley told Chi Chi Izundu what challenges some neurodivergent people may encounter

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Media caption Nat Hawley told Chi Chi Izundu what challenges some neurodivergent people may encounter

How do you make your workplace more welcoming to neurodiverse employees, and ensure their talent is nurtured?

David Joseph takes off his shoes, crosses his legs and tucks himself into an armchair. For the CEO of one of the biggest record labels in the UK - Universal Music UK - he's unassuming. Our interview is supposed to last 10 minutes, but nearly an hour later (and several reminders by his assistant that he has other meetings), David is still talking, with pride, about diversity. Because he wants change. He wants to talk about diversity, especially a hidden diversity that never really gets a look in on any conversation about difference - neurodivergence.

"A defining moment was that I got a text from this artist about three days after I saw them," he says. "This artist has unquestionably changed culture, but the words [in the text] were in the wrong order. I always speak to this person, seen them a lot, worked with them for a long time, but this was the first time I've ever had a text from them. And then I realised why."



Image copyright Universal Music UK Image caption David Joseph is the Chairman and CEO of Universal Music UK

Neurodivergence - also known as neurodiversity - is a term many people may not be familiar with. It refers to the community of people who have dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, are on the autism spectrum, or have other neurological functions.

According to to **the conciliation service ACAS**, "these are 'spectrum' conditions, with a wide range of characteristics, but which nevertheless share some common features in terms of how people learn and process information".

"Our artists, not all of them, certain ones, definitely think differently," says David. He's not just talking about Florence Welch or Billie Eilish - whose neurodiversity is well documented - he's talking about any employee at the label who is part of the creative process.

An estimated **one in seven people are neurodivergent** in the UK but this isn't something that is routinely acknowledged in the workplace.



"I need to reinforce that this is interwoven with all the other issues around diversity. It's not like we're picking this one over and above all the others," says David.

This isn't about being nice and just giving people jobs.

"There is an unconscious bias towards hiring people you think you'll get on with, share similar views, and dare I say it, might not be rebellious or cause dissent. I am a big fan of respectful outliers," says David.

"I've been allowed to grow through this company and fundamentally be myself."

After carrying out a fair amount of research, David and his HR team have produced a guidebook that more than 100 companies have expressed an interest in.

It's cream coloured, to make it easier to read for people with dyslexia (the advice is to use dark coloured text on a light - not white - background, and sufficient contrast levels between background and text). It's full of simple graphics and isn't too wordy.

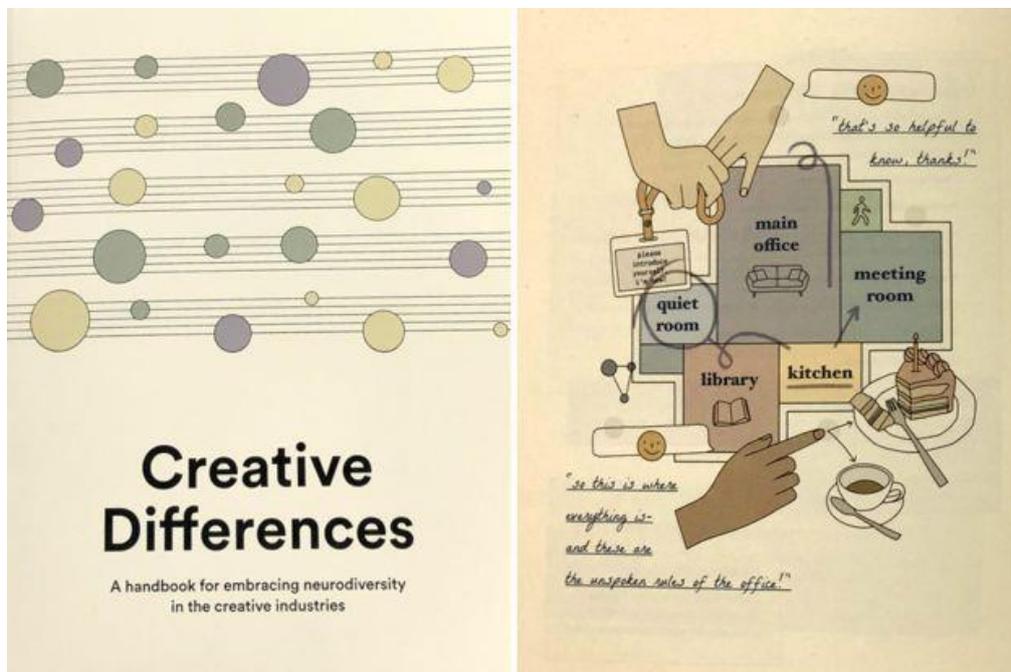


Image caption

The Universal Music guide explains some of the active ways they are trying to make their workplace more neurodiverse friendly.

The message is to stop focusing on things that neurodivergent people can't do and start celebrating what they are exceptional at.

It's something that insurance company Direct Line, which actively recruits neurodivergent individuals, has been working on for some time.

"There are so many different strengths that we hold, and I think it's easy to focus on the negatives but you get so much more when you focus on the positives," says Yvonne Akinwande.



Image caption Yvonne Akinwande

The 31-year-old marketing consultant says her employer recognises the need to ensure the working environment is suited to neurodiverse employees.

She says that because of her dyslexia, she mixes up certain letters and doesn't easily recognise errors, such as spelling, punctuation and grammar.

But the company has given her specific software to help with recording and writing up meeting notes. And even simple things, from the colour of her notepads to situating her desk in a quieter part of the office, has helped create a comfortable environment.

More importantly, she feels that the more creative marketing role that she now holds suits her skill set more than the one she held previously.

"In my previous role we would be audited monthly on our work. One of the things that would continuously come out was my grammar and spelling mistakes. We would need to send out formal correspondence to customers, and if they included car registrations, for instance, I would mix up letters.

"All these things would mean I was marked down. It made me feel negative in terms of my capabilities, which is not normal for me because I am very confident and very positive about what I can bring to the table.

"I needed a role that highlighted and praised the skills that I do have that can be beneficial to the company."

Yvonne is co-lead of a neurodiversity strand that has been created within the business.

Change your processes

Intelligence agency GCHQ is proud of what it has described as its "mix of minds".

"Without neurodiversity, we wouldn't be GCHQ," it says in a statement.

It is another employer that actively recruits neurodivergent people, and has been doing so for more than 20 years.



Image copyright Getty Images Image caption The Government Communications Headquarters, also known as GCHQ, Cheltenham

It is the ability to focus and find links and patterns, among other things, that is attractive about people in this community.

The spy agency, which works alongside MI5, MI6 and law enforcement, will soon open a site in Manchester that has been designed with special adjustments to support neurodiverse staff.

It already makes things like noise-cancelling headphones and voice-to-text and text-to-voice software available.

"Some of our most talented and creative people have a neurodiverse profile - from autism spectrum condition to dyslexia, and from dyscalculia and dyspraxia. Our apprentices are three to four times more likely to have dyslexia than the national average," the statement says.

GCHQ examples of workplace adjustments can include:

- Mind mapping software
- Noise cancelling headphones
- Voice to text/Text to voice software
- On-screen reading rulers

GCHQ examples of typical adjustments at interview:

- Taking notes and mind maps into interview

- Having extra time to compensate for slower processing speed
- Not being asked multiple questions at the same time
- Using a whiteboard or flipchart to "car park" questions to return to later

Recruitment agency Exceptional Individuals is made up of a team of neurodivergent individuals who understand the challenges that even a job interview can pose for people like themselves.

They help with CVs, filling out applications, interview prep, and maintain a relationship with that person to make sure they have longevity in their job.

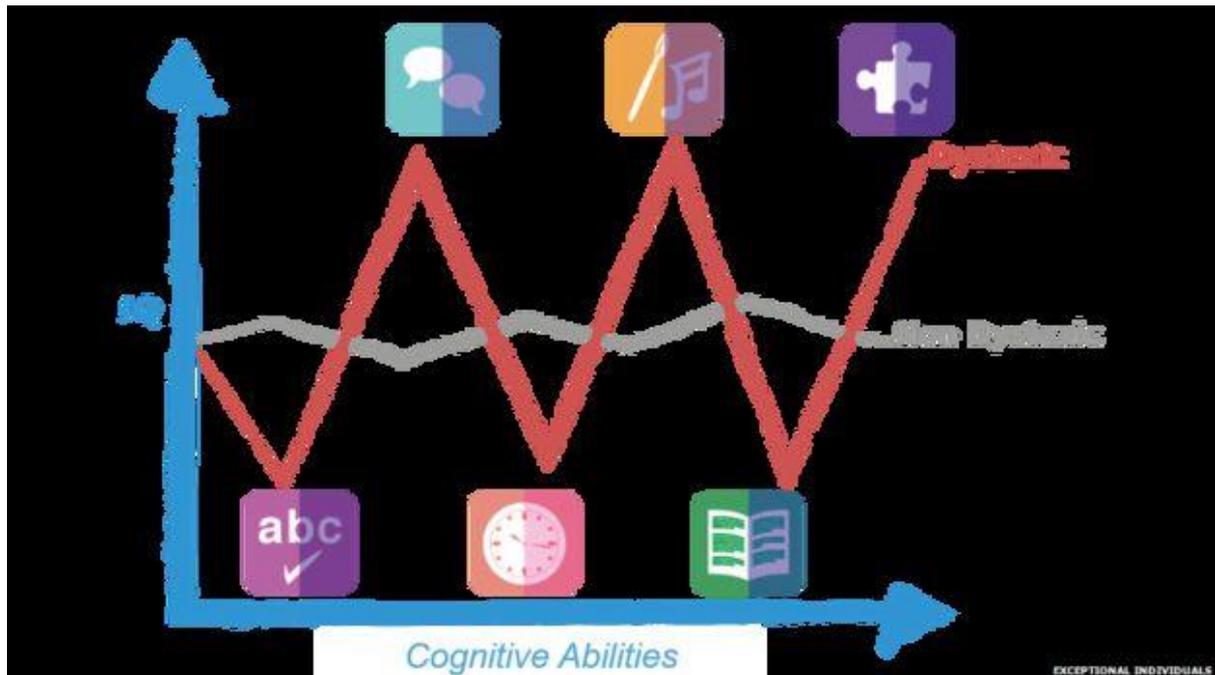


Image copyright Exceptional individuals Image caption Graph showing the differences between the skillset of someone who may be dyslexic in comparison to someone considered neurotypical.

They also work with businesses to help them make their workplace more inclusive, and educate and inform staff on working in a neurodiverse workplace.

"Employers are using processes that are quite dated, which is screening talent out," founder Matt Boyd says. So, he says, if you are bad at spelling and get something wrong on an application form, you're not going to be considered for the job.

"People with autism, for example, because of how they can communicate in an interview and how that's perceived, are often not considered for the role or taken onto the next round.

"There are lots of challenges that people with ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism come up against just because employers don't understand and don't have processes in place."

And that process could be something as simple as how a job ad is worded.

For Direct Line's Yvonne, key to getting her dream job was that the advert didn't specify something like: "Must be exceptional at written communication".

"I am not exceptional at written communication," she says. "But it did ask for someone who's creative in their mind-set and likes to engage and work with other people. Skills that I possess."

The Office For National Statistics doesn't break down unemployment by neurodiversity, so there are no specific statistics on unemployment among neurodivergent people. But according to the **National Autistic Society**, only an estimated 16% of autistic people are in full-time employment.

Inexpensive reasonable adjustments

Neurodiversity is protected under the Equality Act 2010, and according to the **Department of Work and Pensions**, an employer should make "reasonable changes" if someone discloses their neurodiversity.

Making those changes doesn't have to be costly. The government's Access to Work Scheme allows employers to access money for any "extra disability related costs of working that are beyond standard reasonable adjustments people have when starting work or maintaining employment".

But for David, back at Universal, as we chat, he smiles at the strides his company has made in this area.

"Part of our job is to meet a lot of people. And we sometimes sit with them and notice that that was like the same person 12 times. They dressed the same, they talked the same.

"And it makes me feel really proud of what we've got here. We really have created, without meaning to a 'come as you are and lets try and make you be the best version of yourself possible' policy. We're creatively curious."

As singer Florence Welch wrote in the Universal Music UK guidebook: "It would be wonderful if people could walk into jobs and be honest about how they move through the world."