Vocational rehabilitation and neurodiversity

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Will Lakeman biography

- Disability and low-income benefit lead
- Return to work - work as a health outcome
- Neurodiversity Staff Network
- Autistic (ADHD and dyslexia)
- Certified Disability Management Professional





Neurodivergent conditions represent a growing employment challenge

Only

3 out of 10

Autistic adults are in employment

Source: Ambitious for Autism, 2026



Young people with SEND needs are

80% more likely to end up as NEET

Source: Young People and Work: interim report (Milburn Report)



A 40% increase since 2020

in the number of people claiming Personal Independence Payment for ADHD

Source BBC News, 2026



How far does the diagnostic pathway solve these problems?

What does medical diagnosis offer?

- Limited legal protection?
- Access to medications?
- Suggestion of targeted therapy?
- Some direct adjustments…
- Self-knowledge, validation self confidence?

How far do these respond to work or the person’s actual job?

What are the consequences of not helping people?



Calculating the costs of workplace ill health

- **Overall Employer Impact:** Poor workplace health and sickness absence cost UK employers roughly £85 billion to £103 billion annually
- **Wider Economic Inactivity:** Broader illness-related economic inactivity and lost output cost the wider UK economy up to £212 billion per year

Source: Keep Britain Working: Technical Note (Gov.UK 2026)

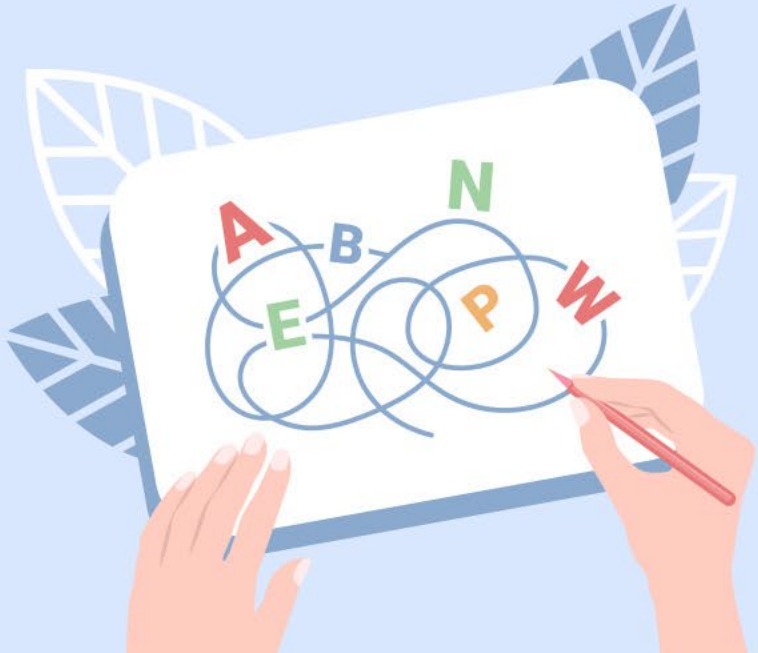
What about reasonable adjustments?

- A legal right, but not universal or straightforward
- Seen as expensive, inconvenient, a “privilege”
- Even supportive managers struggle to design and implement them
- Often a remedial action after difficulties rather than a positive offer
- Absence means worse careers, greater absence, unwillingness to discuss issue
- Absence often manifests as stress and depression



A solution? better use of reasonable adjustments and a shift in workplace expectations

- Neurodiversity friendly or neurodiversity positive workplaces
- “Neurodiversity” actually means
  - All people
  - ND friendly workplace is one that supports the needs of all people
  - “diversity” is the important part – we’re all different
- Offer adjustments up front
- Design work to meet the needs of different employees
- Support everybody to give their best
- Sounds like common sense…







What would an ND positive workplace look like?









Recognise that meeting diverse worker preferences could drive increased productivity

- Attention
- Noise
- Intensity
- Communication and structure of work
- Shift and starting times
- Team dynamics
- Daily energy cycle

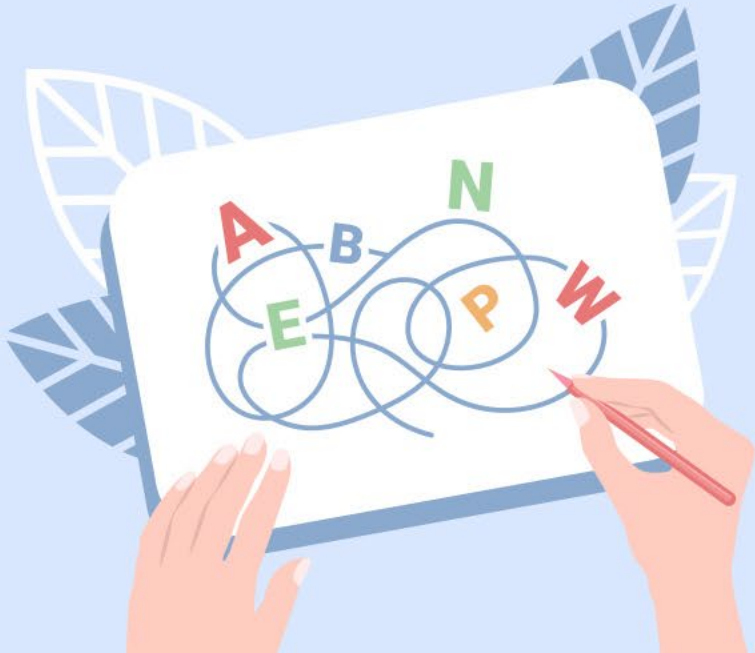


Potential benefits …

- Decreased sickness absence / presenteeism
- Happier more engaged workers
- Recognising strengths and preferences makes workplaces
  - more resilient
  - more productive
- Creativity and innovation
- Workplaces also better at accommodating
  - Older people
  - People with caring responsibilities
  - People returning from other illnesses

So what is the relevance to vocational rehabilitation?

- Work as a health outcome
- Recognises that individual workers often know what is going to help them return to work
- Encourages management flexibility
- Works via discussion
- Intervenes early
- Cost-effective



Further study needed?

- Does VR mental health approach apply to neurodivergent conditions?
- Does the extended diagnostic pathway represent a special factor?
- Ethics of supporting people who may have low/no insight into their condition
- Some employers won't/can't accommodate ND reasonable adjustments

Thanks for listening!

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