

Briefing number 046 v2 – March 2018

2017/00731

Think **ability** not **disability**

Neurodiversity and Organisational Change

Organisational change seems to be a fact of life in these uncertain times and it is unsettling for all of us. However, for those of us who are neurodivergent (ND) it can be more than just unsettling, it can be highly disruptive. Neurodiversity (ND) covers a range of differences in the way our brains are wired and includes dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism / Asperger's syndrome, attention deficit disorders (ADD/ADHD), and dyscalculia (see our webpage on [neurodiverse differences](#) for more information). It is estimated that around 10 - 15% of workers can be considered as ND.

Organisational change can be difficult for anyone but it poses some particular challenges for ND people. An understanding of these challenges will help all of those concerned with organisational change – managers, those being managed and union reps – to plan effectively for the changes and ensure they go as smoothly as possible. Here are some of the main issues to address:

- as job responsibilities change it is likely that the ND person may need to learn new skills.
- changes of personnel can affect an ND person's performance, while new relationships are established.
- changes in the work environment can disrupt performance.

More detailed advice regarding how to deal with these factors is given further below.

Having an appropriate degree of control in the workplace is identified as an important factor that contributes to the success and well-being of most employees, but it is especially important for those who are ND.

So a change process that takes account of all of these factors, and time taken to explain, consult and incorporate the suggestions of those involved, is a good starting point for success. An issue for ND employees will be that the compensatory strategies they have built up over time may become redundant and new strategies will need to be established.

Public sector organisations must carry out an equality impact assessment as policies for change are developed, but very often these tend to overlook the impact on those with hidden disabilities. Negotiators and reps may therefore need to remind managers to take

account of the effect of the changes on their ND staff and consult them at the earliest opportunity.

There are many theories and approaches to effective change management, and there are a plethora of change management tools to help employers organise their projects to the benefit of the organisation. It is not the intention of this briefing to examine change management tools, but to remind negotiators and reps that significant change is likely to be particularly stressful for members who are ND, and to suggest things to take into account that may help.

A Whole Organisation Approach

A key part of this approach is that the organisation should put in place policies and procedures that take account of diversity and disability, so the strengths of all workers can be recognised and barriers removed to allow them to perform at their best and contribute effectively.

A "whole organisation" approach recognises the strengths and weaknesses of everyone, benefiting both the organisation and individuals within it.

Some flexibility in job design is helpful so ND workers can spend their time working on what they are good at. Also, as far as practicable, provision of a flexible working environment is likely to be beneficial to everyone, for example it may help individuals avoid the stresses of rush-hour if they can vary their start and finish times, or work from home part-time or occasionally.

It is important to emphasise how crucial communication is to the "whole organisation" approach towards ensuring a fairer and more effective workplace for everyone. In situations of organisational change, it will be important for ND workers to be kept up-to-date on how the changes will affect them.

Disclosure / Workplace Assessments

Although many ND people may not regard themselves as having a hidden disability, it can be to their considerable advantage to disclose their ND status. When employers are aware, they will be required under the Equalities Act 2010 to provide reasonable adjustments. Obtaining a Workplace Assessment from a suitably qualified person is part of this process. Although it is good practice for employers to provide disability and neurodiversity friendly workplaces proactively, the employer won't generally arrange for a workplace assessment and then make the specific adjustments recommended, unless they know an employee is ND and requires them. However any decision to inform your employer that you are ND needs to be considered carefully, and advice on disclosure is available from our website – see [helping members](#).

Passports – many organisations use these documents which explain a ND worker's strengths and weaknesses and what adjustments should be provided. These are very helpful because people don't then have to explain everything and go through a complicated process when they get a new manager or move from one team to another.

Selection Procedures

Sometimes organisational change involves a reduction in staff numbers and people having to reapply for their jobs. To avoid discrimination, selection procedures should take account of

ND cognitive processing differences, so for instance the use of psychometric tests is likely to be highly problematic as specialist expertise is required to administer them and interpret the results, and is not usually available. Interview questions should be clear and concise, and tests that involve a lot of reading and writing in a limited time should be avoided. Managers should be clear about what skills are required for a particular job and make sure that selection procedures only test for those, and not for other attributes which are not needed for the role.

Learning New Skills

Organisational change often results in job responsibilities changing, which requires learning some new skills. How employees can be empowered to acquire these new skills should be factored into the change process, and how training will be delivered for people who are ND should be carefully considered. There is much information available about this rather specialised subject and some pointers are available via the links shown below, under Resources. Clearly-written instructions with diagrams and pictures, to supplement information delivered verbally, are likely to be helpful. Suitably designed interactive computer-based training modules that allow people to work at their own pace can also facilitate learning.

Managing Personnel Changes

Getting used to new colleagues can create difficulties in social interactions. One element of the whole organisation approach is providing awareness training about neurodiversity. This can help to alleviate a difficulty that ND people often experience, which is that their work colleagues may not understand their differences and can be unsympathetic and unhelpful. In the normal course of events this is often overcome as time passes and relationships have been built up, weaknesses understood and strengths appreciated. Delivery of ND awareness training should help to speed up this process and foster effective working relationships more quickly.

A difficult relationship with a new manager can undermine an ND employee's confidence and adversely affect performance. Use of the Passport system, already mentioned, is likely to help establish a positive new relationship.

Changes in support staff can also disrupt performance. For example: a successful ND manager's personal assistant left the organisation and was replaced by someone who was less organised. This resulted in the need to spend more time sorting out problems, and the manager's own work suffered.

Remember also that some of our ND members may be managers who are responsible for implementing organisational change and they will need to be supported too.

Taking account of these likely difficulties when managing organisational change and trying to put in place appropriate ways to ameliorate them, is of great importance.

Changing workplace environment/location

Many organisations in both the private and public sectors will, at some point, consider where they conduct their business and whether there might be organisational benefits of relocating.

Providing quieter workspaces that minimise distractions are beneficial to most workers, but can make a crucial difference for many ND people.

'Hot desking' in an open plan environment can put them at a particular disadvantage and cause many difficulties. Here are some suggestions that may mitigate this and help the changes go well:

- Facilitate visits to the new workplace and ensure that there is clear signage within the building.
- Provide a map showing the location of the new workplace, together with an internal map indicating the location of the individual's workspace, team, etc.
- Consider allowing a separate working space for ND staff, so that they can order their work and work processes around them, (i.e. not a shared working space).
- The workspace should be located in a quiet area, away from distractions.
- And there should also be reduced sensory stimulation, ie away from bright lights, loud machinery.
- If there is no alternative to an open plan environment, partitions and headphones may be an acceptable alternative, in consultation with the individual. It can help if hot desking is restricted to a minimal number of desks for the ND individual, rather than all of them.
- Provide specific tools to aid work organisation, such as planners, visual timetables, etc.
- Provide a mentor or buddy to help the individual throughout the process.

Be aware that not everyone with the same ND condition will require the same adjustments, so appropriate workplace assessments should be carried out, taking account of the new environment, and consulting with the ND individuals throughout the process. Further [advice and guidance on reasonable adjustments](#) is provided on our neurodiversity webpages.

Many of the workplace adjustments mentioned here and on our webpages reflect good practice for all, and should be embedded in workplace procedures including change management. They are often **straightforward and likely to benefit everyone**.

Remember that managing change is tough so working with the managers involved will help to ensure a better outcome for all, and ideally the managers responsible should be properly trained in regard to the implementation of change, but most particularly on managing ND staff. There is further detail on our webpages setting out the [business case for providing reasonable adjustments](#).

Resources:

Prospect's [Neurodiversity webpages](#)

Prospect's campaign on [Good Work](#)

Prospect's health and safety guidance on [managing change](#)

Prospect's [Fair change, a guide to organisational change](#)

Sandie Maile, Research Officer

John Timms, Neurodiversity Working Group Member

March 2018