

Promoting Neurodiversity in the Project Management Profession

- Building a neurodiverse project management team offers an opportunity to adapt to the unique needs of various stakeholders, fostering a more inclusive environment. Although underrepresentation affects various marginalised groups in project management, neurodivergent individuals face additional barriers, with existing research revealing the underrepresentation of neurodivergent individuals, women and minority ethnic groups. These barriers include gender bias, stereotyping, systemic discrimination, and a lack of support for the distinct strengths and challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals.
- Despite the recognition of the strengths that neurodivergent individuals can bring to project management, research highlights that barriers to inclusion persist. For example, neurodivergent individuals often face challenges such as higher rates of incarceration, unemployment, and difficulty achieving their academic and career potential.
- The project management landscape, exemplified by the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP), containing 227 projects with a total cost of £834bn, demands a diverse array of skills and experiences to succeed. While diversity and inclusion have gained prominence, neurodiversity remains an important consideration that requires further exploration.

Key Insights:

- **Diagnosis and disclosure:** The diagnosis of neurodivergence is a turning point for individuals, providing a sense of validation and self-understanding. However, disclosing neurodivergence in the workplace can be a complex decision due to potential risks, particularly for those in junior roles. When done thoughtfully, disclosure can empower individuals and foster a more inclusive work environment.
- **Organisational culture:** There is a critical need for a cultural shift in organisations to view neurodivergence as a valuable asset rather than a challenge. This change can reduce discrimination and unlock opportunities for neurodivergent individuals in leadership and innovation roles.
- **Training and development:** A lack of neurodiversity-specific training and support in recruitment and career development processes creates significant barriers for neurodivergent employees. It is vital for organisations to integrate neurodiversity awareness and training into their standard procedures to promote inclusivity.
- **Strengths and challenges:** Neurodivergent professionals bring valuable skills, such as creativity, system thinking and hyperfocus, which are critical in project management. However, challenges such as sensory overload and difficulties with unstructured interactions can hinder performance if not properly addressed.
- **Workplace environment:** A flexible and controlled work environment that accommodates sensory and cognitive needs is essential for neurodivergent individuals to thrive. This can include personalized adjustments, clearer communication and the use of assistive technologies.
- **Support systems and coping strategies:** While neurodivergent individuals often employ self-initiated coping strategies like therapy or personal networks, organisational support and formal policies are needed to improve effectiveness and reduce stress.
- **Communication and meetings:** Clear communication and structured meetings are vital for neurodivergent individuals, especially those with memory challenges. Predictable and accessible meetings help increase engagement and reduce anxiety.

Recommendations:

1. **Recruitment and training processes should be modified to make them more inclusive for neurodivergent individuals.** This includes offering extended interview times and alternative communication methods, ensuring fair assessment practices. Also, allowing interview questions to be sent beforehand can help those candidates who struggle with executive dysfunction.

2. **Organisations should consider neurodiversity training for all employees**, particularly those in managerial and HR roles, to foster an inclusive environment. This training could also support a culture where disclosing neurodivergence is viewed positively. This can be particularly empowering for individuals in senior roles, who can act as mentors and role models for others.
3. **Formal policies for reasonable adjustments should be established and consistently applied**, including the provision of tools, technology and resources (e.g. assistive software) to help neurodivergent employees to succeed. Tasks should be assigned based on individual strengths rather than job titles or hierarchical roles. This will enable neurodivergent employees to excel in areas where they are most confident, leading to better team outcomes.
4. **Formal and informal peer support networks, such as disability networks or employee resource groups, are encouraged** and would provide neurodivergent individuals with a sense of belonging and a space to share strategies and experiences.
5. **Workspaces should be redesigned to support sensory needs**, with quieter spaces and virtual meeting options. Meetings should be structured and predictable to reduce anxiety and ensure accessibility.

You can read the full report here: <https://www.apm.org.uk/media/md5drzbv/promoting-neurodiversity.pdf>

About APM:

The Association for Project Management (APM) is the Chartered body for the project profession, with over 45,000 individual members and over 470 corporate partners. We aim for a world in which all projects succeed because, when they do, society benefits.

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