



Report

An inclusion revolution

**Scoping a neurodivergent-friendly quality
mark for the workplace**

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Mā te huruhuru ka rere te manu
Adorn the birds with feathers so it may fly
(Whakataukī)



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1 | Executive summary



“Tapping into the strengths of neurodivergent people can help bridge the skills gap and create a workplace that is fit for the future.” (p. 3, para 3)

The wealth of research published in recent years across the globe on neurodiversity, the strengths it can bring and the barriers that exist in workplaces, has highlighted the need for support within organisations to review their systems, processes and policies, and put effective measures in place to create an inclusive environment.

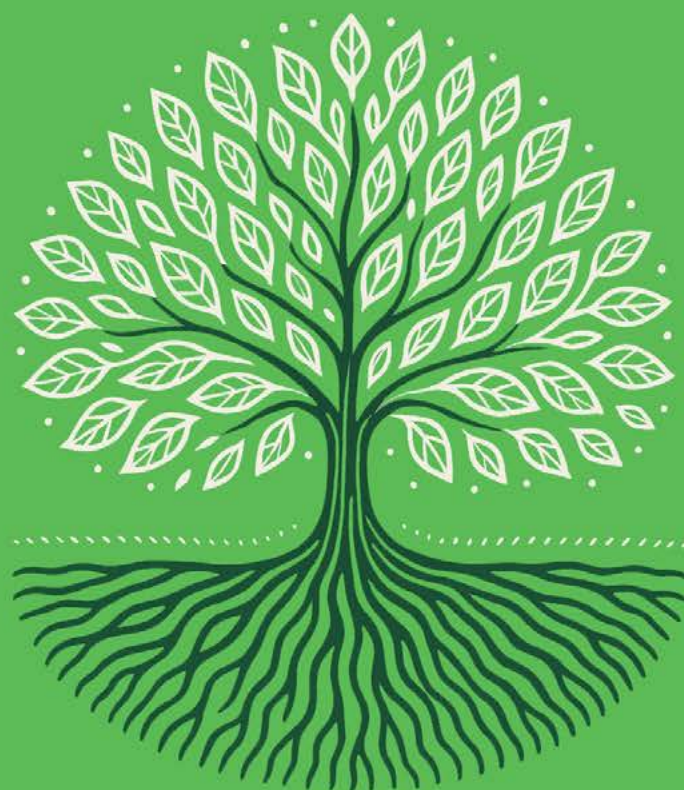
This research project was designed to investigate how a ‘Neurodivergent-Friendly Quality Mark’ can support workplaces in Aotearoa New Zealand to be more accommodating to the needs of neurodivergent staff, and attract people with diverse skillsets and perspectives to enhance innovation, creativity, and productivity.

Workplaces are being transformed by Artificial Intelligence and automation, and the skills needed in workplaces are evolving fast. Tapping into the strengths of neurodivergent people can help bridge the skills gap and create a workplace that is fit for the future.

Becoming more responsive to different needs and perspectives will not only help an organisation reap these benefits of the unique talents that neurodivergent staff can bring. It will also be a game-changer for neurodivergent employees, enabling them to function at their best, and making them feel welcomed, heard, included, and valued.

A literature review was conducted to investigate the barriers and challenges for neurodivergent staff and identify effective practices in creating inclusive, barrier-free workplaces. Key stakeholders were consulted to capture their thoughts and perspectives on the proposed Quality Mark and how it can support workplaces in becoming neurodivergent-friendly.

2 | Introduction



“We can all agree it is unacceptable to expect a person in a wheelchair to climb a set of stairs ... in their daily workplace. It is also unacceptable to insist that someone who is sensitive to light and sound can’t have adjustments made to help them succeed at work.” (Smith & Kirby, 2021, p. 62)

Picture a workplace that actively attracts neurodivergent people as part of their recruitment policies, because they want to create diverse teams. A workplace where neurodivergent people feel a sense of belonging, safe in the knowledge they are accepted for who they are and can ask for support if needed, because people value neurodiversity and fully realise the strengths and talents that neurodivergent people can bring to the workplace. In this workplace, people are given a chance to shine and apply their strengths, because they can work in a way that suits their needs. They have choices around when and where they work, when to take breaks and how to manage work tasks. Assistive technologies are available to all, and workspaces can be organised to accommodate individual needs.

This may seem like a pipe dream, but many workplaces are already taking action to become more inclusive (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Diversity Works New Zealand, 2024a), and studies show it can bring substantial benefits to organisations and their staff (Ernst & Young, 2019; Lorenzo & Reeves, 2018; Thompson & Miller, 2024).

Universal Design

In education Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a ‘research-based framework that helps teachers plan learning to meet the diverse and variable needs of all students’ (Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga Ministry of Education, 2024).

UDL is about creating learning environments that meet the needs of all learners, where barriers to learning are anticipated and removed when planning the teaching, rather than

waiting for obstacles to arise. It's a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning, which includes flexible options and choices for engaging with the learning.

In the workplace, the principles of Universal Design are being used in designing workspaces and creating an inclusive physical environment, but they can equally be applied to the ways people act, interact and organise work. This holistic approach may help create a truly inclusive workplace, that benefits all staff, not just those who are neurodivergent. In other words, Universal Design principles could help people work in a way that suits them, which would more than likely not just enhance their productivity and creativity, but also their personal wellbeing.

Although this report focuses on neurodivergent-friendly workplace practices, general comments will at times be made to include all staff, as the examples of adjustments will be of benefit to all staff.

An inclusion 'revolution'

Too often, neurodivergent employees have been regarded as a 'problem' and 'not fitting in' (Patton, 2022). We need to flip the script and recognise the barriers presented by the work systems and culture (WAC, 2017).

In the medical model of disability, the individual is required to take responsibility for their 'condition' and make adjustments to fit in with the expectations of society. It's a deficit model where disability is viewed as an innate 'disorder' that needs to be remediated (Fitzgibbon & O'Connor, 2002).

By contrast, in the social model of disability, people with individual differences are disabled by expectations of society. The disability does not lie within the individual, but in societal assumptions, attitudes and systems. The focus is on removing the barriers to create equal opportunities (Fitzgibbon & O'Connor, 2002; Office for Disability Issues, 2024; Reid, Came & Price, 2008). In other words, it's society that accommodates, accepts and values individual differences, rather than the individual having to adjust to societal expectations.

It is not simply the right thing to do to make adjustments: In Aotearoa New Zealand we also have a legal obligation, under Article 5(3) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to ensure reasonable accommodation is provided to disabled persons (The Office of the Ombudsman, 2023). Also, under the Human Rights Act 1993, it is "unlawful to discriminate against a person because of disability in relation to employment matters" (The Disabled People's Organisations Coalition, the Human Rights Commission and the Office of the Ombudsman, 2023, p. 13).

The title of this report refers to the fact that, if we want to make the most of the value neurodivergent people add to the organisation, we may need to 'revolutionise' workplaces in terms of the way we recruit and manage staff and how we expect them to perform their work tasks. Taking the employee's talents, needs, preferences and requirements into account in designing ways of working does not need to be a huge undertaking, and it can be a gradual process with ongoing improvements. It's about shifting the perspective towards a person-centred approach and changing the company culture and people's mindsets to embrace neurodiversity, so that people understand we are all different and that we all have our own strengths and challenges.

The question may come to mind how we can make this happen. To support organisations in starting this process and embarking on the journey towards inclusion, a Quality Mark, combined with expert guidance and training, could provide the mechanism for accessing support, formalising the organisation's commitment, identifying what's already going well and what can be improved, and effecting sustainable organisational change. At the same time, it will acknowledge and validate organisations for the efforts and investments made.



3 | Project purpose and background



“Most neurodivergent adults do not feel safe disclosing their neurodiversity at work... for fear of being misunderstood and judged.”

(McDowall, Doyle & Kiseleva, 2023; Tolooei, 2022)

Project purpose

The purpose of this research project was to scope the development of a Neurodivergent-Friendly Quality Mark for the Workplace (NFQM) and present recommendations for developing this Quality Mark.

The following questions were explored as part of the project:

1. What are the barriers neurodivergent people experience in the workplace?
2. How can these barriers be addressed?
3. What practices are effective in supporting neurodivergent people in the workplace?
4. What cultural aspects need to be considered to ensure the Quality Mark is culturally inclusive and responsive?
5. What initiatives already exist in Aotearoa New Zealand to support organisations in becoming neurodivergent-friendly?

Figure 1 on the following page shows how the next sections in this report are structured.

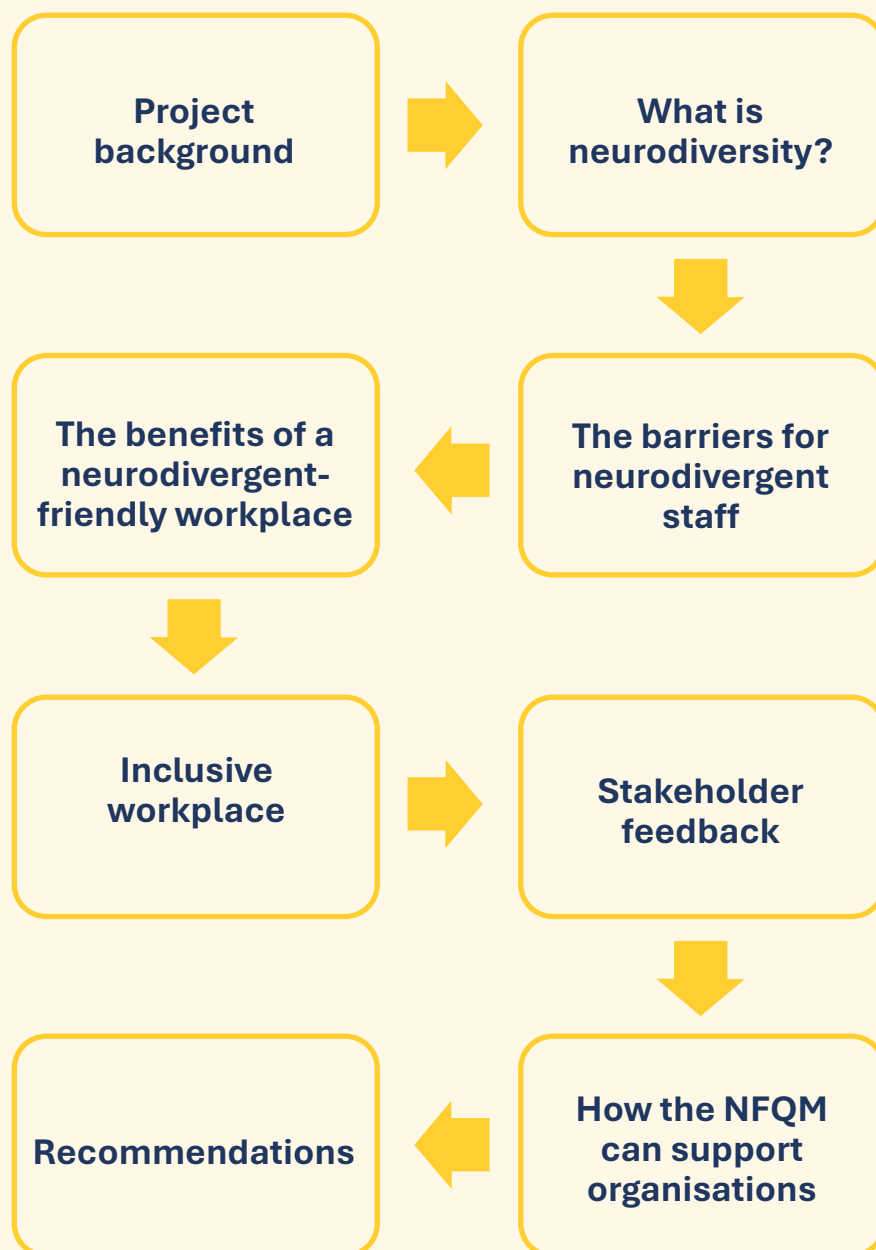


Figure 1. Report structure.

Project background

A large proportion of the population experiences challenges in securing a job, learning on-the-job, and meeting workplace demands due to the fact that their skills and strengths are not recognised and their needs not accommodated for. Neurodivergent people experience high rates of unemployment (Bury, Hedley, Uljarević, Li, Stokes, & Begeer, 2024; Deloitte Insights, 2024). Most neurodivergent adults do not feel safe disclosing their neurodiversity at work for fear of being misunderstood and judged (McDowall, Doyle & Kiseleva, 2023; Tolooei, 2022).

A collective effort is needed by employers, educators, government, policymakers, and organisations that operate across the disability, education and workforce sectors to address this inequity in Aotearoa New Zealand and achieve the systemic shift that is needed (Hanga-Aro-Rau & Waihangā Ara Rau, 2024).

As the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, Ako Aotearoa is well-placed to make a meaningful contribution. They launched the ‘Te Tohu Kounga Whakarata Tipaopaoatanga | New Zealand Dyslexia-Friendly Quality Mark’ (DFQM) in 2021.¹ This initiative has been highly effective in creating dyslexia-friendly tertiary education organisations and enhancing support for organisations, educators and learners.

What often happens, however, when tertiary learners transition to the world of work, is that they come up against barriers in accessing work and coping with rigid work structures and expectations that don’t align with how they work best (Bell, 2010; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2024).

Dymock and Nicholson (2012) point out that the workplace can be a “tougher, faster, more demanding and far less supportive environment” (p. 118) than the tertiary education space. In education errors are seen as opportunities for learning, extra time and extensions to deadlines can be provided. In the workplace there is much less room for error. There are targets and deadlines to be met and the performance of each employee impacts on the achievement of the team. For neurodivergent learners who have had a positive learning experience in a supportive and safe education environment the transition to work can be particularly challenging if there is no support system in place.

Thankfully, in recent years progress has been made in establishing better support systems for neurodivergent learners within tertiary education organisations. Aotearoa New Zealand’s Tertiary Education Commission, for example, has published a compilation of neurodiversity resources.² Ako Aotearoa has been offering a broad range of neurodiversity professional development opportunities for tertiary organisations and educators, including the Neurodiversity Community of Practice; workshops and courses on autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, ADHD, learner agency and Universal Design for Learning; a comprehensive collection of neurodiversity resources and research reports; the Tapatoru Ako Professional Practice Award; and the whole-organisation DFQM programme.^{3, 4}

The progress being made in the education environment can pave the way for enhanced awareness and support in the workplace, and initiatives such as the NFQM can help facilitate the transition from education to work for neurodivergent learners.

With the current focus on the need to engage in lifelong learning, workplaces are increasingly seen as places of learning, and employers as key stakeholders in learner success. Tertiary education is no longer confined to a defined phase between secondary education and employment. It encompasses all the work-based, on-the-job learning people engage in during their lifetime. Therefore, insufficient support within the workplace can adversely affect people’s continued learning journeys, which in turn can impact their career opportunities.



1 <https://ako.ac.nz/programmes-and-services/the-dyslexia-friendly-quality-mark>

2 <https://www.tec.govt.nz/oritetanga-learner-success/new-oritetanga-tertiary-success-for-everyone/resources-to-help-support-your-learners/neurodiversity-resources>

3 <https://ako.ac.nz/manako/neurodiversity-in-tertiary-education>

4 <https://ako.ac.nz/programmes-and-services/tapatoru>

This research project is intended to scope the opportunity to extend the existing DFQM with a Neurodivergent-Friendly Quality Mark for the Workplace, to ensure adequate support is available in workplaces for all neurodivergent staff, so that they can work and learn in a way that is suited to their needs and preferences.



4 | What is neurodiversity?



“If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.”

(Dr Stephen Shore)

Neurodiversity means that we are all neurologically different. All of us are neurodiverse because our brains all work differently, with a unique set of connections between our nerve cells. That’s why we all think, learn, behave, communicate, and sense things differently, and why each of us has a unique combination of strengths and challenges (Smith & Kirby, 2021).

A person can be referred to as ‘neurotypical’ if their mind conforms to what is constructed as ‘normal’ in their society. Conversely, a person can be referred to as ‘neurodivergent’ if their mind functions differently from the dominant societal standards of normal. However, some people may not want to be defined by a specific label and may choose to describe themselves differently (CIPD, 2024; Smith & Kirby, 2021). For every individual it’s a personal choice as to what they feel comfortable with or how they prefer to self-identify.

Although the word ‘neurodiversity’ refers to the diversity of all people, it is an umbrella term often used in the context of certain ‘neurotypes’, including, but not limited to, autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia/ Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), dysgraphia and Tourette Syndrome. Although people with a specific neurotype can have broadly similar ways of thinking, communicating and processing information it’s not helpful to categorise people according to certain skillsets, as every individual is different with their own unique make-up (Smith & Kirby, 2021; Thompson & Miller, 2024). Each person with ADHD, for example, will be very different, with their individual strengths and challenges. Neurotypes also frequently co-occur. For example, a dyscalculic person may also have ADHD.

Traditionally, definitions have focused on the diversity ‘between’ individuals, highlighting the differences between neurotypical and neurodivergent brain functioning. A more recent

perspective centres on the diversity ‘within’ individuals, particularly their cognitive ability, whereby a neurodivergent person is described as having a ‘spiky profile’, with relatively large disparities between cognitive scores, such as verbal skills, working memory, visual skills and processing speed (Doyle, 2020; Smith & Kirby, 2021).

In contrast, a neurotypical person has a relatively ‘flat profile’, with a more even pattern of cognitive scores. Figure 2 shows an example of how a spiky profile can contrast with a neurotypical profile.

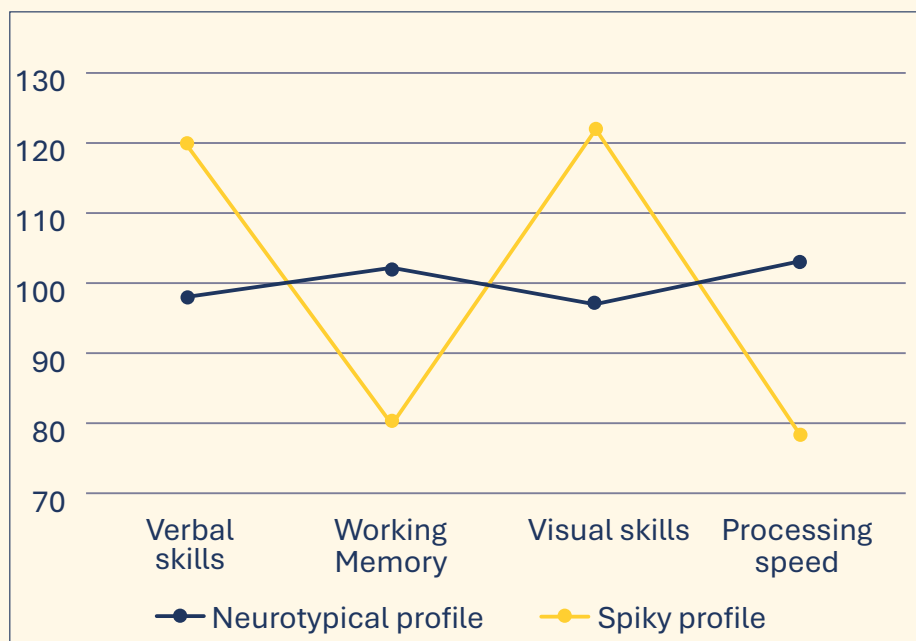


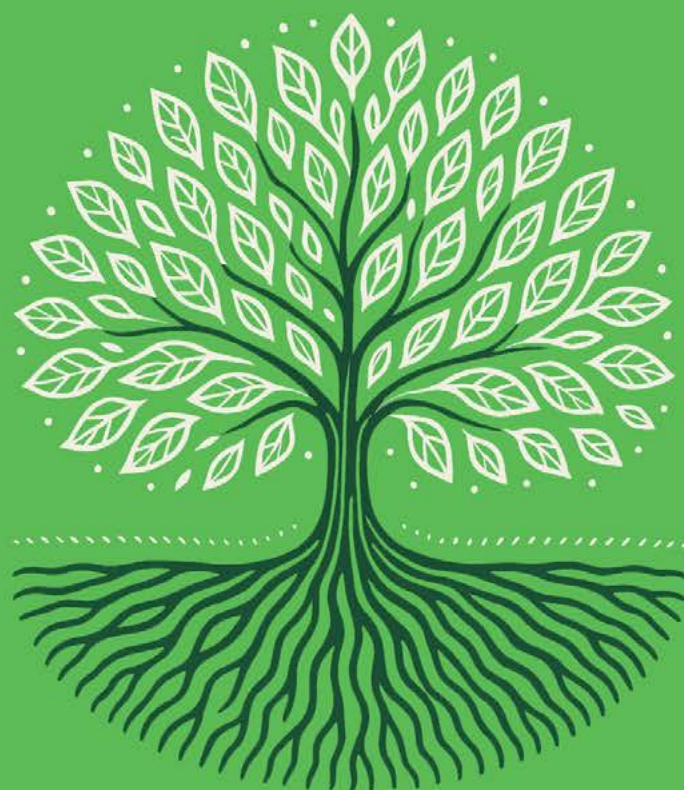
Figure 2. A ‘Spiky Profile’ showing example IQ scores. From ‘Neurodiversity at work: A biopsychosocial model and the impact on working adults’ by N. Doyle, 2020. *British Medical Bulletin*, 135, p. 110. Copyright 2020 by Nancy Doyle. Reprinted with permission.

In this view the divergence is between the strengths and challenges within the individual.

This spiky profile concept is helpful, as it highlights the fact that neurodivergent people may bring distinct strengths and talents to the workplace, but may, on the other hand, experience some challenges.

We’ll first discuss how these strengths can benefit workplaces.

5 | The benefits of a neurodivergent-friendly workplace



“We just built this culture at work where it was okay if you’re not good at stuff, and then you find out weirdly that you’ve got these wonderfully different colleagues who, they’re awesome at all the stuff that you’re crap at, and it’s like, you do all of that and I’ll do all of this. And, you know, that’s real collaboration.”

(Rich Rowley⁵)

Creating a neurodivergent-friendly workplace has numerous benefits for the organisation and their staff. It opens up opportunities for organisations to attract and retain talented people, build well-balanced teams, and address inequalities at work. At the same time, it has a positive impact on staff wellbeing, engagement and morale (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Deloitte Insights, 2024; Ernst & Young, 2019; Lorenzo & Reeves, 2018; McDowall et al., 2023; Thompson & Miller, 2024).

Innovation

The world of work is changing rapidly and the unabated pace of developments in AI, digitisation and automation has resulted in a shift in skills needs, with a high demand for skills and abilities such as analytical and creative thinking, problem-solving and innovation (Ernst & Young, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2025). The main barriers for organisations to adopt new technologies are persistent shortages of people with these skills in the labour market (World Economic Forum, 2025). These are the very skills that neurodivergent people can excel in (Eide & Eide, 2012; Ernst & Young, 2018; Talent Solutions, 2021).

Diverse teams, made up of people with different thinking styles, will have complementary skills and the ability to look at problems from different angles. Neurodivergent people tend to have distinct strengths in seeing the big picture, spotting patterns, creativity and thinking outside the box. For example, autistic skill sets can include “visual acuity, more deliberative

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGzoxoidrLs>



decision-making, increased attentional focus, logical thinking, and affinity for technology, as well as professional and occupational interests in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields” (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022, p. 60). People with ADHD can have strengths in problem-solving and a predisposition towards entrepreneurial mindsets (Moore, McIntyre & Lanivich (2021). They can also have ‘hyper-focus’, allowing them to give their full attention to a work task.

Dyslexic people often have a strong preference for visual thinking, as opposed to verbal thinking, and processing information holistically, which means they are good at coming up with new, innovative ideas and fresh solutions to problems (Cooper, 2010; Fitzgibbon & O'Connor, 2002; Ernst & Young, 2018). Empathy, creativity, persistence, determination, work ethic, and auditory skills are all associated with dyspraxia (Cognassist, 2024; The Dyspraxia Foundation, 2011).

Staff wellbeing

Durie's 'Te Whare Tapa Whā' model (Durie, 1994) shows the four dimensions of a person's wellbeing that influence and support each other: 'te taha wairua' (spiritual wellbeing), 'te taha hinengaro' (emotional wellbeing), 'te taha tinana' (physical wellbeing) and 'te taha whānau' (social wellbeing).

There are many examples in the literature of neurodivergent people having had difficult and painful school experiences, affecting their feelings of self-worth, confidence and wellbeing (Bell, 2010; Dymock & Nicholson, 2012; Whitten, 2025). They often mask their struggles and prefer to keep under the radar (Bell, 2010, Dymock & Nicholson, 2012; Smith & Kirby, 2021; Whitten, 2025). In a neurodivergent-friendly workplace, where their needs in all four of these dimensions are supported, they would not feel the need to hide. This will enhance their work satisfaction and have a positive impact on their wellbeing and quality of life (Taylor, Livingston, Clutterbuck, Callan & Shah, 2023; Thompson & Miller, 2024). They may enjoy their job more. In turn, this may enable them to be more creative and productive at work.

Staff engagement and loyalty

If an organisation makes a genuine commitment to support all staff and puts diversity practices into place, staff will feel included and sense a climate of trust within the organisation, which enhances their engagement and loyalty (Downey, van der Werff, Thomas, & Plaut, 2015). It helps create a reciprocal relationship of trust. If an employee feels valued and supported, they will, in turn, feel motivated to do the best they can to contribute to the team and the organisation as a whole.

High staff morale and loyalty are of significant benefit to the organisation, as they help boost staff commitment and lower staff turnover (McDowall et al., 2023).

Productivity

The innovative edge that comes with attracting and supporting neurodivergent employees, coupled with better staff morale and engagement, will boost an organisation's productivity (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Uptimize, 2024). For example, high attention to detail can result in fewer errors. Pattern recognition abilities can speed up detection processes in certain jobs. Problem-solving abilities can help identify process improvements and increase efficiency (Austin & Pisano, 2017).



“Organisations that make an extra effort to recruit, retain, and nurture neurodivergent workers can gain a competitive edge from increased diversity in skills, ways of thinking, and approaches to problem-solving” (Deloitte Insights, 2024, p. 1).

Influencing stakeholders and building reputation

As an organisation positions itself as a neurodivergent-friendly workplace, the positive messages will extend to external stakeholders, including clients, contractors, suppliers, staff, whānau and others, enhancing their awareness and understanding of neurodiversity and the need for inclusion.

In addition, the organisation will strengthen their reputation as an inclusive employer and a fair workplace, where staff are valued and supported, diversity is embraced and diverse thinking is encouraged.

6 | The barriers and challenges experienced by neurodivergent people



“Barriers in the workplace can include physical, attitudinal, technological and systemic barriers, and those relating to information and communication.” (The Office of the Ombudsman, 2023)

Neurodivergent people often feel “marginalised by workplace processes, management practices or the way work is organised” (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2024). Workplaces tend to be designed around neurotypical ways of working, which can make them daunting to navigate for neurodivergent people. The barriers that exist can affect people’s wellbeing and prevent them from performing at their best.

For example, some neurodivergent employees can struggle to concentrate in a busy open-plan office, full of distractions (The Dyspraxia Foundation, 2011; Fitzgibbon & O’Connor, 2002; Optimize, 2024). They can suffer from sensory overload, experience anxiety in social situations, or feel exhausted, stressed and overworked.

It’s also common for neurodivergent people to have a weakness in executive functions, which can affect their working memory, attention span, planning and organising work, and time management (Doyle, 2020; The Dyspraxia Foundation, 2011; Fitzgibbon & O’Connor, 2002).

In a study conducted by Birkbeck University in the UK, in which 1117 employers and neurodivergent employees were surveyed, it was found that “career progression and psychological safety were critical for retention and wellbeing” (McDowall et al., 2023, p.6). The top four challenges reported by the 990 neurodivergent employees in the survey included:

- » Looking after yourself mentally (77.6%)
- » Concentration (76.5%)
- » Asking for help when you need it (69.5%)
- » Looking after yourself physically (67.2%)

When asked to rate their level of wellbeing on a scale of 0 to 5, the average score across the sample of 990 neurodivergent employees was 2.02, which reflects a “worrying low level of wellbeing” (McDowall et al., 2023, p.56).

In a survey conducted with 594 respondents employed in the public, private and non-profit/ NGO sectors in Aotearoa New Zealand, one of the key priorities identified was “the need for organisations to create environments that promote wellbeing and psychological safety” (Diversity Works New Zealand, 2024b, p. 4).

In a similar survey conducted by Diversity Works New Zealand in 2022, the three main issues identified by the respondents (N=555) were ‘wellbeing’, ‘bias’ and ‘flexibility’ (Tolooei, 2022).

As part of the current research project feedback was sought from stakeholders through a survey and conversations regarding the barriers and challenges for neurodivergent employees. The results are reported in the ‘Stakeholder feedback’ section of this report.

Barriers in the workplace can include physical, attitudinal, technological and systemic barriers, and those relating to information and communication (The Office of the Ombudsman, 2023). Next, some examples will be discussed of barriers that can exist in the workplace for neurodivergent staff.

Workspace design

The way workspaces are designed can make neurodivergent people feel overwhelmed or ill-at-ease (Doyle, 2020; Smith & Kirby, 2021). It can be little things like too much daylight, phones ringing, people chatting or food smells. Open plan offices and hot-desking arrangements can cause problems for some neurodivergent people, because the noise and people moving about can be distracting (Fitzgibbon & O’Connor, 2002). However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. What works for one person may not necessarily work for another.



It's always best to ask people what works for them. The issues are generally easy to address through accommodations without the need to redesign the entire workspace.

Lack of neurodiversity awareness

Ignorance, stereotypes and stigma around neurodiversity can lead to neurodivergent employees feeling misunderstood, isolated and different (Bartlett & Moody, 2004; Hanga-Aro-Rau & Waihanga Ara Rau, 2024; Rowan & Petersen, 2023; WAC, 2017).

Neurodivergent people may come across as 'different' from the 'average' employee, which could be misinterpreted as incompetence (Patton, 2022; WAC, 2017). They can come across as lazy, bored, difficult or non-co-operative (CIPD, 2024; Ernst & Young, 2018), but misconceptions such as these simply stem from a lack of understanding (Smith & Kirby, 2021).

Co-workers can engage in 'othering', viewing people who are different from 'the norm' as less worthy, less skilled or simply 'not one of us' (Whitten, 2025). It creates an 'us' and 'them' mentality, and leads to feelings of exclusion and a lack of a sense of belonging. Attitudes such as this are often subconscious and stem from a lack of awareness, and an absence of personal contact and relationships.

"A constant feeling of not fitting in, not being understood" (WAC, 2017, p. 4).

Sweeping statements, such as 'all autistic people are good at IT' or 'all dyslexic people are creative' are not only unhelpful, but also not true (Smith & Kirby, 2021, p. 33). It's not helpful to categorise people, as the risk is that people's individual strengths and qualities are not recognised. Human beings are complex and don't fit neatly into 'boxes'. Neurodiversity awareness training can help avoid these stereotypes and build understanding across the organisation of neurodiversity and how we all think and function differently.

Unintentional bias in recruitment and selection processes

Finding a job can also be harder if you are neurodivergent. Traditional assessments don't always reflect their skills and abilities and employers are not always aware of the strengths neurodivergent people can offer (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Jones, Akram, Murphy, Myers, & Vickers, 2019; Talent Solutions, 2021).

Autistic adults, for example, experience high rates of unemployment across the globe. In Australia only 27.3 % of autistic adults are employed; in the United States and Canada the employment rate is as low as 14 % (Bury et al., 2024).

We often recruit in our own image and look for qualities like ability to work in teams, communication skills, and interpersonal skills. In doing so, we may not realise that we could be unintentionally excluding neurodivergent people who may not excel in these areas, but who may have different skills and abilities that we overlook (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Smith & Kirby, 2021).

People on interview panels may be unintentionally biased and reject talented candidates because of lack of eye contact, atypical body language, poor spelling, or lack of social

interaction (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022; Smith & Kirby, 2021). Spelling mistakes can be misinterpreted as a lack of ability.

“The main challenge is the neurotypical way of thinking, leading to our work ecosystem including HR processes and systems requiring candidates/employees to adhere to certain traditional norms or behavior patterns. And our mind is conditioned to misread any deviation as a hiring risk. A candidate not making eye contact is misjudged as not likely to be a team player or not interested...without appropriate awareness and training current practices just do not provide an equal opportunity for neurodivergent individuals” (Deloitte Insights, 2024, p.14).

Neurodivergent people may be disadvantaged when it comes to job interviews and interviews may cause them undue anxiety (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022; Patton, 2022). They may lack confidence due to previous negative experiences or may simply be better at showing what they know and can do, rather than talking about it (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Smith & Kirby, 2021; WAC, 2017).

When it comes to assessments, the practice of using psychometric tests disadvantages neurodivergent people during the hiring process (Fitzgibbon & O'Connor, 2002; Talent Solutions, 2021; WAC, 2017). These are not reliable in assessing their skills and abilities, as they tend to have inaccessible formats.

Performance reviews and career progression

Neurodivergent people may miss out on promotion opportunities, despite having all the skills and talents required to progress in their career, for a number of reasons.

They may come across as ‘different’ from the ‘average’ employee, which could be misinterpreted as incompetence due to lack of awareness (WAC, 2017).

Due to low self-esteem caused by negative school experiences they may not have the confidence to show their achievements and advocate for themselves during the performance review discussion (Bell, 2010). It’s also possible they don’t recognise their own strengths and qualities, or underestimate them.

Also, line managers may deem the person unsuited to a leadership role because they have pre-conceived ideas of what it takes to be an effective manager or leader.

Although career progression is critical for retaining neurodivergent staff (McDowall et al., 2023), there may be systemic barriers in the career advancement process which can hamper career progression. In her paper on the work transition experiences of dyslexic adults Bell provides the example of a caregiver in a residential care home, who had difficulty filling in logs (Bell, 2010). She was well-suited for her role as a caregiver, but having to write the log posed a challenge. Simply adjusting the format of the log, so that it still had all the necessary information but was less demanding in terms of literacy, was an easy solution.

If a neurodivergent employee does make promotion due to their achievement and performance, the risk is that their success is undermined due to increased demands on their organisational, time management or literacy skills (Bell, 2010). Promotions often mean more reports, meetings and administration. Co-designing career pathways and considering the

person's individual aptitudes, needs and preferences can help prevent obstacles along the way.

Barriers to disclosure

Neurodiversity is often invisible. In an environment where there is a lack of neurodiversity awareness, neurodivergent employees don't feel comfortable or safe to disclose their neurodiversity, for fear of being judged, discriminated or even bullied (Bell, 2010; Fitzgibbon & O'Connor, 2002; Hanga-Aro-Rau & Waihanga Ara Rau, 2024; Jones et al., 2019; Patton, 2022).

They are concerned about "people making assumptions based on stereotypes", the stigma attached to neurodiversity and the possible impact on their career (Thompson & Miller, 2024, p. 8).

"Disclosure is not helpful if people do not understand what it means" (WAC, 2017, p. 19).

In the study by Birkbeck University in the UK the 990 neurodivergent survey respondents reported multiple barriers to disclosure (McDowall et al., 2023).

The top three barriers reported were:

- » worried about stigma and discrimination from management (637 respondents)
- » worried about stigma and discrimination from colleagues (542 respondents)
- » no supportive and knowledgeable staff. (399 respondents).



7 | Inclusive workplace practices



“Changing a workplace culture is not an easy task and neurodiversity awareness training plays a pivotal role in the process.” (Taylor et al., 2023)

To support the development of a Quality Mark it is helpful to identify practices that foster inclusion and help create neurodivergent-friendly workplaces. Workplace processes can be adjusted to make them more inclusive, and accommodations can be put in place to ensure staff can achieve their potential.

In Aotearoa New Zealand professional support and assistance is available for both employers and jobseekers. For example, Workbridge helps jobseekers connect with employers, but they also provide free advice on accessible recruitment processes, support with accommodations, and assistance to access funding through the Job Support Fund.⁶

The purpose of adjustments is to support neurodivergent employees in accessing the strengths of their spiky profile, while at the same scaffolding any weaknesses through putting supports and accommodations in place.

According to the Universal Design principles, adjustments and flexibility can become part of the structure of an organisation, and made available to all staff, as they will help remove systematic barriers. Once these inclusive processes are in place, there will be less need for specific adjustments, although some people may still need individual, tailored solutions (CIPD, 2024; The Disabled People’s Organisations Coalition, the Human Rights Commission and the Office of the Ombudsman, 2023; McDowall et al., 2023; Smith & Kirby, 2021).

The different thinking styles of neurodivergent people, in terms of information processing, learning and communication, need to be considered when designing inclusive workplace practices (CIPD, 2024).

⁶ <https://workbridge.co.nz/employer-information>

Adjustments need to be carefully selected, as they need to be appropriate and relevant for the individual staff member.

Reid, Came and Price (2008) explain that “a shift towards greater personal responsibility, self-direction and self-advocacy is crucial to the attainment of employment success” (p. 483). Neurodivergent people think differently, so they need to be able to work differently. Some prefer to approach tasks differently and have different work environment needs. Asking people what works for them and what accommodations will help them in their work, and providing opportunities to design their own work practices and habits, will empower them and give them agency (Hanga-Aro-Rau & Waihangā Ara Rau, 2024).

In 2024 two Workforce Development Councils in Aotearoa New Zealand, Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihangā Ara Rau, investigated “what is required to achieve meaningful inclusion of disabled communities in the workforce” (p. 7). They conducted a survey, interviews and a focus group with 272 employers; and interviews and focus groups with 34 disabled people. One of the key findings of their research was that “what most enabled them to perform their role was a robust, holistic support structure that they could consistently access” (Hanga-Aro-Rau & Waihangā Ara Rau, 2024, p. 34). In this section an overview will be provided of inclusive workplace practices and some of the key elements of such a support structure.



The recruitment and selection process

Neurodivergent-friendly approaches to recruitment and selection processes would make a big difference to neurodivergent people. The standard core components of CVs, job interviews and standardised testing can unfairly disadvantage them. Alternative, flexible options can be offered to ensure people have the opportunity to show their skills, experience and capability for the position (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022).

A job analysis can be conducted to prepare the job and person specification to identify essential job requirements and ensure the descriptions are accurate and specific to the role (Fitzgibbon & O'Connor, 2002; Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022). When job and person specifications include skills or qualifications that are not relevant to the job, or describe an ideal skill profile, a neurodivergent person may decide not to apply, or may be excluded during the selection process, as they may not tick all the boxes, while they may have all the essential skills.

“A lot of jobs list requirements such as skill working in a team, people skills, peppy attitude, etc, even when you will be working alone and those skills are irrelevant” (WAC, 2017, p. 43).

Including neurodiversity in the organisation’s diversity and inclusion policy, and referencing this in the job advertisement or application form will demonstrate the organisation’s commitment to supporting neurodivergent people and encourage them to apply (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022). Smith and Kirby provide a helpful example of a statement:

“Diversity of thought is an important part of our organisational makeup. We will look to offer adjustments across our recruitment, selection, assessment, workplace and work practices to help those who apply for our jobs and work within our organisation to have a better experience and to be able to bring their real whole selves to work. We don’t just see this as a legal obligation to provide reasonable adjustments, but an opportunity to offer the best experience for all involved” (Smith & Kirby, 2021, p. 117).

Table 1 includes a selection of examples of inclusive recruitment and selection practices.

Examples of inclusive recruitment and selection practices	Benefits
<p>Written information is accessible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Examples: job descriptions, application forms, job advertisements. » Use plain English. » Alternative formats. » Accessible for screen readers. 	<p>People who don't process written documents easily can access the information and can use assistive technology.</p>
<p>Neurodiversity policy and organisational values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Specific reference to a diversity and inclusion or a neurodiversity policy, statement or charter in job advertisements. » Information about the mission, vision and values of the organisation in job advertisements. 	<p>It is clear, right from the start, that the workplace is supportive and welcomes candidates with different thinking styles.</p> <p>People feel safe to disclose their neurodiversity and discuss what support they might need</p>
<p>Alternative assessment and CV options</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Examples: a video CV, a practical assessment of work skills, a work trial, presentation, portfolio of work, online questionnaire, or verbal test. » Invite suggestions from applicants re their preferred option. 	<p>People can show what they know and can do.</p>
<p>Job descriptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » State the specific skills needed for the role. » Specify the key work tasks. » Avoid more generic skillsets or skills that are not necessary for the role. 	<p>Clarity for both parties on the core skills needed for the job.</p>
<p>Interview questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Provide questions prior to the interview. » Use concrete, short and direct questions. » Avoid open-ended and compound questions. » Questions focus on the skills needed for the job. » Can include a question on any workplace adjustments the applicant might need. 	<p>Being able to prepare for the interview can avoid stress and anxiety.</p> <p>Direct questions help avoid undue working memory overload and make it easier for the candidate to gauge the intent of the question and how much information to give.</p>

<p>Interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Offer alternative options for the more traditional face-to-face interview, such as a video, phone call, or a more informal personal or group chat. » Let people know what to expect: who will be there; how to get there and where to park, if face-to-face; what the dress code is; how long it will take. » Provide training to the interview panel to ensure people are well-informed, empathetic and unbiased. » Avoid potential distractions or sensory issues in the interview room, such as noise, smells or outdoor stimuli. 	<p>Applicants have options, they know what to expect and efforts are made to ensure a fair, unbiased process, and reduce anxiety and sensory overload.</p>
<p>Feedback</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Seek feedback from applicants re the recruitment process. » Provide applicants with feedback about the interview. 	<p>Feedback from applicants, as well as existing staff members, about their experience can help identify how the recruitment and selection process can be improved.</p> <p>Feedback provided to applicants can help give them insight in their interview skills, their strengths and any areas for improvement.</p>

Table 1. Examples of inclusive recruitment and selection practices.

Flexible work environment

A good start to adjusting the work environment to suit the needs of individual staff members is simply to have a conversation with them, and ask them what they need, what they are worried about, what has been helpful previously, etc. Assistive technology, for example, can have a profound impact on a person's ability to do their job.⁷ In Table 2 examples are given of a range of adjustments which can be particularly helpful for neurodivergent employees, but can equally benefit all staff.

Adjustment examples	Benefits
Allow flexible work schedules and breaks.	People who need more time to perform certain tasks or who prefer set routines can better organise their workload. Also, people who need to move regularly can take mini-breaks.
Have a quiet or private space available for work and breaks and/or provide noise-cancelling headphones.	People who are sensitive to sound, light, or distractions can concentrate better.
Coloured backgrounds, readable font, double spacing, clear structure and layout, consistent formatting etc. for digital and printed documents. Ensure video clips have transcripts and closed captions.	Clarity, consistency and providing a range of formats will enhance accessibility.
Easy access to information. Key information in visual formats (pictures, diagrams, flowcharts, mindmaps).	Prevents memory overload and ensures key information is clear and accessible.
Offer work-station adjustments, such as whiteboards, standing desks, pin boards, wobble boards, fidget toys, dual screens, Swiss ball, adjustable lighting, dual screens.	Can help people who need to move.
Allow working from home or hybrid arrangements.	Can help avoid sensory overwhelm, improve concentration and reduce social anxiety.
Allow a range of communication methods.	People who struggle with emails can communicate with co-workers in a way that suits them, e.g., through phone calls, MS Teams, personal catch-ups etc.

⁷ A resource collection on assistive technology is available on the Ako Aotearoa website.

Provide assistive technology, and/or administrative support.	People who have difficulty with organising and planning work, report writing, taking notes, filing etc. can access people, technology or hardware support.
Review the technology used within the organisation to check if it is accessible.	For example:
Provide training in using the software, where needed.	» Artificial Intelligence tools
	» grammar, spell check and proofreading software
	» speech-to-text and text-to-speech software
	» mind-mapping software
	» memory aids for instructions, messages, deadlines etc.
	» voice recorders
	» smart pens
	» note-taking and organisational tools
	» coloured overlays.

Table 2. Adjustment examples.

Neurodiversity awareness training

Changing a workplace culture is not an easy task and neurodiversity awareness training plays a pivotal role in the process (Taylor et al., 2023). Awareness is the first step towards inclusion and acceptance. Staff at all levels of the organisation need to be included, from executive staff, managers, HR and workplace trainers to administrative and operational teams (Bell, 2010; Fitzgibbon & O'Connor, 2002) and the training needs to be tailored to people's roles and responsibilities within the organisation (Smith & Kirby, 2021). As the journey towards inclusive practices is a strategic decision, it's important for governance bodies to be on board too and receive appropriate training. A culturally responsive approach can be embedded in neurodiversity awareness training to ensure cultural worldviews of neurodiversity are affirmed and respected.

Staff training

Neurodiversity awareness training helps staff become aware of the barriers that can exist for neurodivergent colleagues and be more sensitive to the feelings of others and people's needs for different ways of working. It will help people reflect on any preconceived ideas they might have about the different types of neurodivergence. It can help people become aware of the strengths neurodivergence can bring, so that they come to respect and value differences, rather than view them as deficits or disorders (CIPD, 2024; Whitten, 2025).

“By examining and changing our beliefs, we can move from exclusion to inclusion and from adversity to equity” (Hanga-Aro-Rau & Waihanga Ara Rau, 2024, p. 8).

Raising the self-awareness of neurodivergent employees is equally important. We often don't recognise our own strengths, and it's often our shortcomings and challenges that we

are aware of. This can be particularly the case for neurodivergent people, as the language around neurodiversity has traditionally focused on the deficit model and the difficulties that may exist. Awareness training can help them identify their spiky profile, find out what they are really good at and also what their specific weaker points can be. This self-awareness can help them take control of their work, which in turn will greatly enhance their self-esteem, and help them become more confident, focused and productive (Fitzgibbon & O'Connor, 2002).

Managers

Neurodivergent staff are sometimes perceived as lazy or incompetent, because of a lack of understanding, despite the fact that they often work much harder than others (Bartlett & Moody, 2004; Smith & Kirby, 2021). Training will help managers build their awareness, so that any misconceptions such as these can be avoided.

Raised awareness will enhance managers' confidence in discussing neurodiversity with staff and equip them with the knowledge and confidence to respond to disclosures and requests for adjustments (McDowall et al., 2023). For a neurodivergent person, disclosing their neurodivergence can be very emotional and daunting. If managers are appropriately trained, it will help them respond with empathy and understanding.

Growing awareness will also help managers identify people's strengths and encourage them to utilise and develop them.

Human Resources

Training of HR staff can inform their work in adjusting policies and procedures to foster inclusion. Training of an interview panel for the recruitment and selection can help avoid bias and ensure a fair process. (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022; Smith & Kirby, 2021).

Whanaungatanga

Whanaungatanga, strong, meaningful relationships, within the workplace are crucial and can shape a person's experience at work for better or for worse (Alkema, Kerehoma, Murray & Ripley, 2019; Berryman & Woller, 2011; Fitzgibbon & O'Connor, 2002; Kalan, 2024). Building whanaungatanga helps create an environment where people feel a sense of connection and belonging, and an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect and camaraderie. It brings people together, fosters collaboration and helps build cohesive teams, where people feel safe to share and contribute. Whanaungatanga is nurtured in many different ways in workplaces, such as celebrating achievements, sharing kai, incorporating karakia and waiata in staff hui, team building activities, and including whānau in get-togethers.

For line managers, it's particularly useful to build a solid, trusting relationship with neurodivergent staff, as it will help them feel safe to share their neurodivergence, and discuss what supports would help them in their work (Patton, 2022).

Also, having the opportunity to build relationships with people and organisations that can provide external support can be particularly useful for neurodivergent staff. This will be discussed in more detail later.

Communication

Enabling conversations

As an employer or colleague, you can't be expected to know everything about neurodiversity. You may feel apprehensive about raising something for fear of making a mistake or offending someone. If conditions are created where dialogue can happen, it will help open up conversations about what support might be helpful, what barriers there are to perform tasks, what tasks are more challenging and how this could be addressed, what training a person might need, etc. Requests for adjustments can be invited from all staff, so that this becomes normalised (Patton, 2022; Thompson & Miller, 2024).

"I think we need an appropriate checklist of NT support available – so it's easier to ask for what we need without fear of discrimination" (WAC, 2017. P. 29).

Day-to-day interactions

Clear communications are vital in any workplace. Because we all process information differently, there is always a risk of ambiguity or miscommunication, particularly in hybrid environments. Clarity on when, where and how meetings are held is important. For example, knowing if it's acceptable to turn your camera off during a meeting helps people to know what to expect. Meeting reminders can be set up and agendas can be available in a range of formats. Following up an online meeting with an email or online chat summarising the key points can help. Also, meeting transcripts and recordings can be accessible for reference.

Instructions

People have different working styles. Some need broad, high-level instructions and break tasks down into steps themselves, others prefer more clarity around the steps in the process to complete a task. Managers can find out how people work best and adjust their style accordingly (Deloitte Insights, 2024). Having a written, visual or audio record of verbal instructions can be helpful too.

Encouraging disclosure

As we've seen, many neurodivergent people are reluctant to disclose their neurodivergence for fear of being judged or misunderstood. Yet if the employer is not aware someone is neurodivergent, they can't put the appropriate support in place. Employers can actively encourage a culture of disclosure, by destigmatising neurodiversity. For example, they can openly encourage staff to disclose their neurodiversity and seek support, ensure confidentiality around disclosure, show staff what supports can be available, and be transparent about the fact that they are aware of the strengths neurodiversity can bring and the needs neurodivergent staff might have. A public commitment statement or charter communicating that the organisation is committed to the journey of becoming a more accessible, inclusive and neurodivergent-friendly organisation can be prominent on the website and on the wall in the physical space of the organisation.

"I am concerned that they would not understand once I tell them (WAC, 2017, p. 21)."

Creating a psychologically safe space, and treating people with respect and kindness, is key, as disclosing one's neurodivergence can make people feel vulnerable and exposed (Thompson & Miller, 2024). It can take a lot of courage.

“Any employee disclosure should be swiftly followed by a workplace needs assessment and implementation of any strategies and equipment that are recommended” (Nancy Doyle in WAC, 2017).

The power of words

Language is important. Historically, terms with negative connotations have been used, such as specific learning disabilities, deficits, disorders, learning difficulties, impairments and co-morbidities. Words like this can perpetuate societal misunderstandings, assumptions, prejudice, discrimination and marginalisation. Instead, using words focused on embracing differences can help shift negative perceptions to positive ones (Smith & Kirby, 2021).

The words we use can help create a new reality, where differences are seen as ‘normal’.

Mentorship programmes, support network and professional support

A support system can be set up to ensure neurodivergent staff have access to the guidance and support they need.

A buddy or peer mentor from the same team can assist with daily tasks, and help with managing workloads and prioritising tasks, or simply “provide comfort, encouragement and support” when needed (Patton, 2022, p. 200). They can also explain the social etiquette in the workplace. Tuakana-teina relationships, based on the values of whakapapa (kinship) and whanaungatanga (family relationships), can be fostered to support staff, both Māori and non-Māori, and promote cultural connectedness (Kalan, 2024). Knowing where to get help and having someone to turn to, who is empathetic and understanding, can make the world of difference to a neurodivergent employee. It will help them feel safe and supported, and can also help prevent errors occurring and issues arising.

A coach or mentor can provide assistance with career advice and work-related strategies and skills, such as planning, organisational skills, literacy and numeracy, time management, and wellbeing. This can be a supervisor, colleague, neurodiversity champion or HR support person. It can also be a neurodivergent colleague who would like to support others. The coach or mentor can be the key support person within the organisations, and can also act as an advocate, where needed. The organisation may also have a kaumātua (respected elder) who can support employees. External support can also be provided in the form of a job coach or external organisation offering support or advocacy.

A support network or community can be created within the workplace, so that neurodivergent staff can support each other and be supported by co-workers. Whitten (2025), for example, describes how dyscalculic employees use a support network to help them manage challenging tasks or to double-check their work. A network or community can also be a useful platform for neurodiversity awareness building. All members would benefit, as everyone has different skills, strengths and perspectives to contribute, and people can learn from each other. Beckwith explains how “supportive and inclusive communities utilise the strengths of each person for the benefit of the collective” (2024, p. 105). Being neurodivergent can be an isolating experience. Having access to a community where differences are discussed,



accepted and supported will show them they are not alone, and that there are others who have similar challenges. People can advocate and act as role models for each other (Hanga-Aro-Rau & Waihangara Rau, 2024).

In addition to these internal initiatives, organisations can also create partnerships with experts and specialist organisations, or community-based organisations, to provide specialist support services, such as counselling, pastoral care, therapy, or literacy training. Training can also be given to neurodivergent staff to promote metacognition, to develop a better understanding of their own thinking and learning processes, and their particular strengths and weaknesses.

Many neurodivergent people have never been diagnosed and are not aware of their neurodivergence (Smith & Kirby, 2021; WAC, 2017). The professional support provided by the organisation could include access to screening or diagnostic services, which can be transformative for a person. It can help them better understand themselves, and enable them to ask for support targeted to their needs (Reid et al., 2008; Hanga-Aro-Rau & Waihangara Rau, 2024). Caution is needed around screening or diagnosis, as discovering you are, or may be, neurodivergent in adulthood can be traumatic for a person without appropriate advice and guidance (Fitzgibbon & O'Connor, 2002). Naturally, all screening or diagnostic results would need to be treated with confidentiality.

“So I didn’t find out until I was in my forties just by accident that I got ADHD, I dunno, it was interesting ‘cause like, I’d always felt like I was just a ... alien walking round and never really known what it was or why I was different. And so it was like, ‘Oh, well that explains it.’”⁸ (Rich Rowley).

Protocols, policies and procedures

A clear organisational policy can be helpful to be transparent to staff about targets for inclusion, support that is available, privacy protection, measures that can be taken in case of discriminatory behaviour, and complaints procedures (Deloitte Insights, 2024). This helps create a clear message to staff that the organisation takes inclusion seriously.

Documentation, such as manuals, company policies and business plans, can be in plain English and available in accessible formats. Style guides are available with tips and guidelines on neurodivergent-friendly formats for documents.⁹

Recruitment and selection procedures can be adjusted to make them more inclusive to create a level playing field for neurodivergent people, as per the examples in Table 1.

Induction and onboarding

Induction and onboarding processes can include neurodiversity training, information about the social norms and expectations of the workplace, and a conversation about possible support and training needs (Smith & Kirby, 2021).

In any workplace there are often accepted ‘ways of doing and communicating’, the hidden social rules that people are generally expected to simply pick up from social cues. This may be harder for some neurodivergent people, so including a conversation about these unspoken rules within the organisation may help get them off to a good start.

It can also be helpful to have an induction pack about the organisation, which could include a glossary available of terms, jargon and acronyms that are often used within the workplace; information about the organisation’s values, mission and purpose; a staff list with roles and contact details; an organisation ‘Q&A’; and support and services available to staff.

Appropriate and intensive support during the onboarding period can help the new staff member settle into their role, as the first few weeks in a new job can be daunting for anyone. There is a wealth of information to process, new systems and software to get used to, and new people to meet. A structured process, with ample time for processing information, easy access to information, and a dedicated support person will help get the new staff member off to a good start.

Performance reviews

Performance review procedures can be evaluated and redesigned to ensure they focus people’s individual goals and capabilities, and career pathways tailored to the individual. Growth and success mean different things to different people. Some people aspire to moving up to a more senior role and taking on more responsibility. Others may prefer to grow within their role. The career pathway can be co-designed to include opportunities to extend and

⁸ <https://www.adhd.org.nz/rich-rowley-on-living-with-adhd.html>

⁹ For example: <https://ako.ac.nz/assets/Knowledge-centre/ALNACC-Resources/Dyslexia-resources/230907-Dyslexia-Friendly-Style-Guide.pdf>

challenge the person in a way that suits their needs and interests. Finding the person's strengths and special skills interests will help adopt a strengths-based approach, whereby strengths are acknowledged, praised and harnessed, and weaknesses scaffolded (Reid, Came & Price, 2008).

The performance review meeting can also be used as a regular check-in on support needs and any new barriers. It can be useful to provide clear information beforehand about the purpose of the meeting, what will happen at the meeting, how long it will last, what questions will be asked, and what the next steps will be (Smith & Kirby, 2021). Some staff members may also find it helpful to have a support person attending.

Clear structures and routines

Set routines, predictability and a consistent structure at work can be helpful for neurodivergent employees ((Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui, 2019; Reid et al., 2008; Deloitte Insights, 2024; Jones et al., 2019) so that there is clarity around work tasks, timeframes and expectations. Communicating changes within the organisation, and preparing staff for change, is equally important.

Staff training and development

For staff training and development courses, such as First Aid, Health and Safety or work-specific courses it can be useful to ask staff what support they might need. Measures that can be helpful include assessing the literacy demand of the course material, including summaries, diagrams and flowcharts in the course material, making technology available, providing clarity around the purpose and learning outcomes, incorporating opportunities for practice and application, and using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and multi-sensory teaching approaches, where possible.

Cultural inclusion

It goes without saying that initiatives to achieve inclusion for neurodivergent people need to be culturally appropriate to ensure equitable and respectful processes and interactions. This can be achieved in a seamless way, as neurodivergent-affirming approaches intersect with culturally affirming approaches in a myriad of ways (Beckwith, 2024). Cultural inclusion can be achieved through acknowledging, respecting and valuing cultural differences, and taking them into account when shaping new ways of working.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi

Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) serves as the foundational document of Aotearoa New Zealand. It can guide organisations in acknowledging the impact of colonisation, and fostering collaboration and engagement with Māori as the Tangata Whenua (indigenous people) of Aotearoa New Zealand (Riwai-Couch, 2021). Central to this are building relationships with iwi, hapū and whānau, actively seeking their input, and respecting their cultural values and tikanga (customary rules) (Berryman & Woller, 2011; Tupou, Curtis, Taare-Smith, Glasgow & Waddington, 2021).

In a broader sense, the guiding principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi can benefit people of all cultural backgrounds, by embracing cultural diversity and ensuring everyone's voice is heard. This is increasingly important, as our workforce in Aotearoa New Zealand is more multicultural than ever (Kiernan, 2018).

Building cultural competence

Part of the journey towards inclusion is building cultural competence, including an awareness of cultural worldviews of neurodiversity, as this will help people work with neurodivergent colleagues of different ethnicities in a culturally sensitive way (Berryman & Woller, 2011; Riwai-Couch, 2021).

Māori and Pacific perspectives and values

In te ao Māori (the Māori world) two terms used for neurodiversity are ‘kanorau ā-io’ and ‘kanorau ā-roro’. ‘Kanorau’ means ‘diverse’ or ‘diversity’; the word ‘io’ is used to describe the nerves or the nervous system; and the word ‘ro-ro’ means ‘brain’ (Riwai-Couch, 2021).

Although there is paucity of research on Māori perspectives of neurodiversity (Rangiwai, 2024; Riwai-Couch, 2021) efforts have been made to develop better understandings and conceptualise neurodiversity from a Māori perspective.

For ‘autism’ the word ‘Takiwātanga’ was proposed by Keri Opai, meaning “my/his/her own time and space” (Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui, 2019, p. 5). It draws on a whakataukī (Māori proverb) about the tītoki tree, which “does not fruit regularly but does it in its own time, an allusion to autistic people blooming in their own time and space” (Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui, 2019, p. 5).

Like any other people, Māori are a diverse group, and there is no single Māori viewpoint on disability or neurodiversity (Bevan-Brown, 2013; Tupou et al., 2021). However, an understanding of Māori worldviews, tikanga, concepts and values can help ensure a culturally appropriate approach to inclusion.

In traditional Māori worldviews inclusion comes naturally. Māori traditionally have a holistic view of the world and a deep sense of, and need for, connection and belonging (Berryman & Woller, 2011). Māori are traditionally group-oriented and whānau play a central role in people’s identity and wellbeing (Bevan-Brown, 2013). Māori worldviews tend to focus on collective approaches and benefits, with whānau members having shared obligations and responsibilities to each other (Berryman & Woller, 2011).

Being open to more collective and reciprocal approaches, such as ‘tuakana-teina’ (mentor-mentee) relationships and team building activities can therefore be particularly helpful in providing support in a culturally sensitive way (Alkema et al., 2019; Kalan, 2024).

Incorporating approaches such as these, building good relationships and working in partnership will help foster a sense of belonging and ensure neurodivergent Māori employees and their whānau have agency. It can help shape an environment where they are included in information sharing and decision making (Riwai-Couch, 2021), where there is respect for their mana (prestige, authority, status) and their rangatiratanga (self-determination), and where their culture and language are valued and embraced.

Core Māori cultural values, such as wairuatanga (spirituality), aroha (love), manaakitanga (respect, kindness), whanaungatanga (relationships) and awhitanga (inclusion, support) underpin the building of meaningful relationships within the workplace. Embedding these values into everyday work interactions and practices helps to create an environment of trust and supports the wellbeing of all employees, not just Māori.

Naturally, no generalisations can be made about Pacific perspectives and worldviews, with each Pacific nation having their unique traditions, culture and language. However, Nafatali explains that certain features make Pacific-indigenous worldviews different from Western worldviews, including “differing perceptions of the self and the collective, increased value and sacred status placed on relationships, the centrality of faith, and more holistic views of health and wellbeing” (Nafatali, 2023, p. 52). Certain concepts and values are important to most Pacific people. These include respect for others, especially for elders or those who are more senior; connectedness; relationships with family and the community; caring for and supporting others; spirituality and spiritual wellbeing; humility; and leadership and service.

The church plays a central role in the lives of many Pacific people, and service in communities is often an important part in people’s lives.

In the workplace, having an interest in the things that are important to Pacific employees can help build trusting, collaborative relationships. There are also Pacific frameworks that can help support and strengthen relationships with neurodivergent Pacific employees. These include ‘Teu Le Vā’, and ‘Talanoa’.

Traditionally, for Pacific peoples, a sacred space exists between people, between people and the environment, and between people and the divine. This sacred space is referred to as vā, va’a, vaha (Airini, Anae, Mila-Schaaf, Coxon, Mara, & Sanga, 2010). The concept of ‘Teu Le Vā’ refers to respecting and maintaining this sacred space, nurturing the relationships, and maintaining harmony and balance within the relationships. Central to this is the notion that relationships need to be valued and looked after (Airini et al., 2010).



‘Talanoa’ refers to dialogue, discussion, conversation or an exchange of ideas (Nafatali, 2023). Creating a safe space to have informal, open and honest conversations can help lower the barrier for people to share their knowledge, stories and experiences, so that mutual understandings can be created, and issues can be addressed.

Celebrating cultural events and practices

Affirming people's cultural backgrounds and including cultural practices in the workplace helps foster a sense of cultural connectedness and belonging. This can be done in a variety of ways, such as using karakia and waiata, celebrating Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori (Māori Language Week) and the annual Pacific Language Weeks, Māori and Pacific greetings and email protocols, and celebrating cultural events, like Matariki, Waitangi Day, Eid al-Fitr and Diwali.

Including the neurodivergent employee voice

When designing inclusive workplace practices, it is crucial to involve the perspectives of neurodivergent employees, and invite their input. They will have some good ideas on how the organisation can be more neurodivergent-friendly. Also, consulting with Māori and Pacific staff, and those with other cultural backgrounds, will help ensure they have input in decisions affecting them.

“There aren't single solutions that are the right fit for everyone” (Smith & Kirby, 2021, p. 27.)

It's good to keep in mind that what works for one person may not necessarily work for another. For example, when it comes to making adjustments for individual staff, it's important not to make assumptions about what would help, but be guided by the person as to what they need to help them function at their best. Every person has individual needs and preferences (Thompson & Miller, 2024) and can only speak for themselves. Being dyslexic does not make one an expert on dyslexia, as people's experiences and needs may vary widely. As Smith and Kirby (2021, p. 118) point out, “One person's experience doesn't make them an expert in a specific condition or the expert in advising adjustments for others.” However, at the same time, an individual's lived experiences are to be respected and valued accordingly.

The importance of leadership

Leadership is a key success factor, particularly leaders' commitment, expertise and capability (CIPD, 2024; Diversity Works New Zealand, 2024b; Patton, 2022). The process towards neuro-inclusion needs to be driven from the top to achieve the shifts needed in the work culture and get the buy-in from all staff (Ernst & Young, 2018).

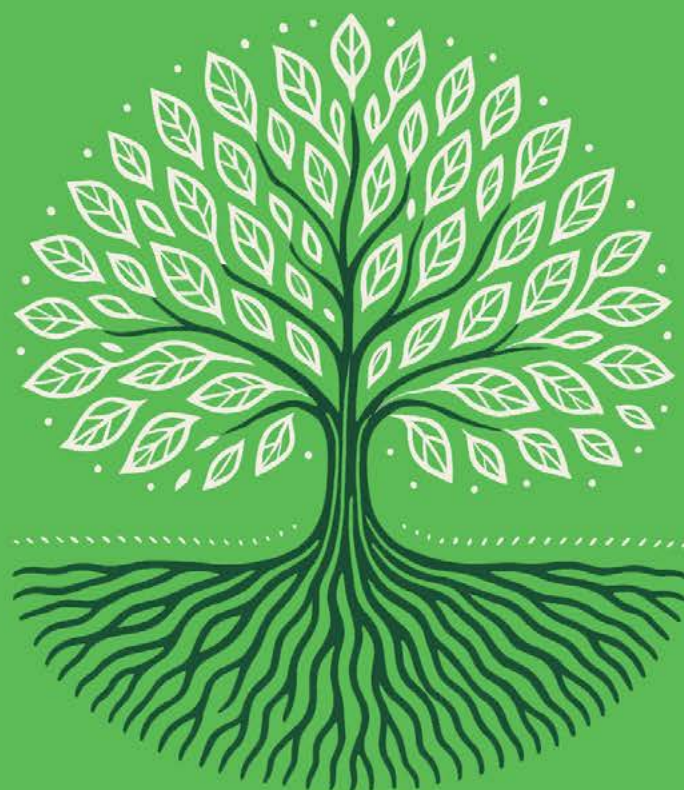
Leaders can be role models, if they lead by example (Diversity Works New Zealand, 2024b; McDowall et al., 2023). Through encouraging open communication about neurodivergence, they can help destigmatise it in the workplace.

If leaders are seen to actively champion inclusion, it sends a powerful signal to all staff that inclusion is taken seriously.

Leaders can ensure inclusion is integrated into the organisation's vision, values and mission, so that these can guide strategic objectives and management decisions.

Leaders may need training and support themselves in leading the agenda and implementing change. This is one of the key functions of the NFQM, to provide dedicated, targeted support.

8 | Stakeholder feedback



“Businesses vary in size, so a structure may need to be developed to ensure the programme can be implemented for smaller and larger workplaces.” (p. 52)

Consultation was held with stakeholders to seek feedback on the need for, and interest in, a Neurodivergent-Friendly Quality Mark and the barriers and challenges that can exist for neurodivergent people in the workplace.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to all those who kindly took the time to share and discuss their thoughts with us. It was greatly appreciated. Their insights have helped inform this scoping report and will help shape the development of the NFQM.

A survey was distributed and informal conversations were held. The stakeholder group included employers, neurodivergent people, members of Ako Aotearoa’s Neurodiversity and Manako Communities of Practice, Disability Advisors, employer networks, researchers, educators, and organisations providing neurodiversity support, advocacy, information and education services.

The survey included two questions for neurodivergent people and two questions for employers, managers or directors.

A total of 68 respondents participated in the survey. Thirty-two of these identified as neurodivergent, and 26 identified as an employer, manager or director. Seven respondents were not sure if they were neurodivergent or preferred not to share it.

A summary of the findings from the survey and verbal feedback results is provided below.

Is there a need for a Neurodivergent-Friendly Quality Mark in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Survey responses indicated an overwhelming need for a NFQM, with 95% of the respondents answering ‘yes’ to this question.

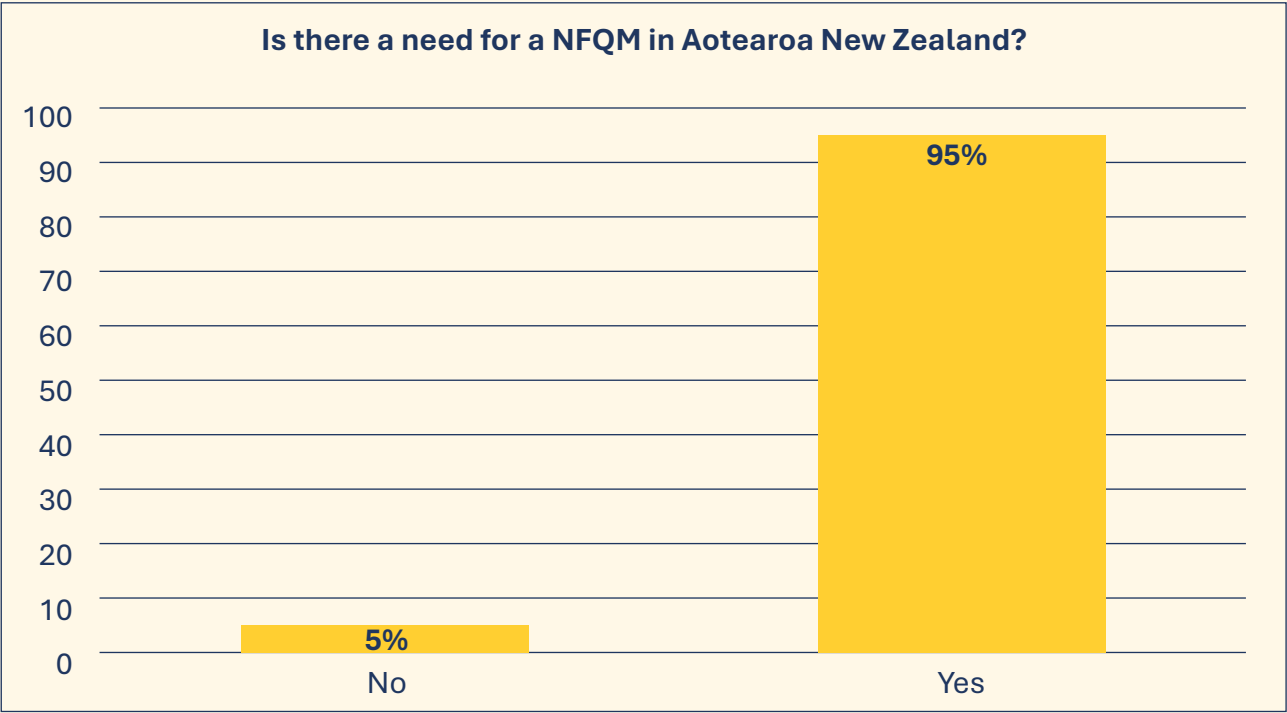


Figure 3. Percentage responses to NFQM need in Aotearoa New Zealand (n=37).

Key themes in the survey and verbal feedback included:

- » Raising awareness of neurodiversity and the strengths of neurodivergent people is very needed in New Zealand workplaces. The NFQM programme can serve as a platform to meaningful conversations in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- » Having standards in place for accessibility and inclusion is needed to ensure employees are supported. However, it’s important that the organisation makes a genuine commitment, rather than merely paying lip service to inclusion and seeing the Quality Mark as a marketing ploy and a way of being perceived as an inclusive employer, without making meaningful change. Also, how do we ensure organisations maintain the standards?
- » Neurodivergent people can feel vulnerable and inadequate if they have to ask for adjustments or explain why they are needed. It can be exhausting to continually have to explain what it’s like and advocate for change. If there was more awareness, people would not need to explain all the time.
- » Strong recommendations were made to consult with diverse voices in the development and design of the NFQM, including neurodivergent people, neurodiversity advocates and specialists, employers, and Māori and Pacific people.
- » Neurodivergence is often undisclosed and invisible. Better awareness of neurodiversity would be a win-win for employers and neurodivergent staff. It would help employers recruit and retain staff and neurodivergent staff would be better supported.

- » There is no consensus around neurodiversity. There are differing viewpoints. This needs to be taken into account when developing the standards. They need to allow for flexibility and different perspectives within organisations.
- » Several respondents commented they haven't seen a programme in Aotearoa that fills this gap. A number of similar initiatives already exist in Aotearoa New Zealand, but they are all distinct in their scope and focus. For example, some programmes focus on inclusion as a whole, not specifically on neuro-inclusion. Others focus on a particular neurotype, like autism or dyslexia.

What are the barriers or challenges for neurodivergent people in the workplace?

Thirty-seven people responded to this survey question, most of whom, thirty-two people in total, identified as neurodivergent. Lack of neurodiversity awareness was reported as the main barrier or challenge, with lack of flexibility in work processes a close second.

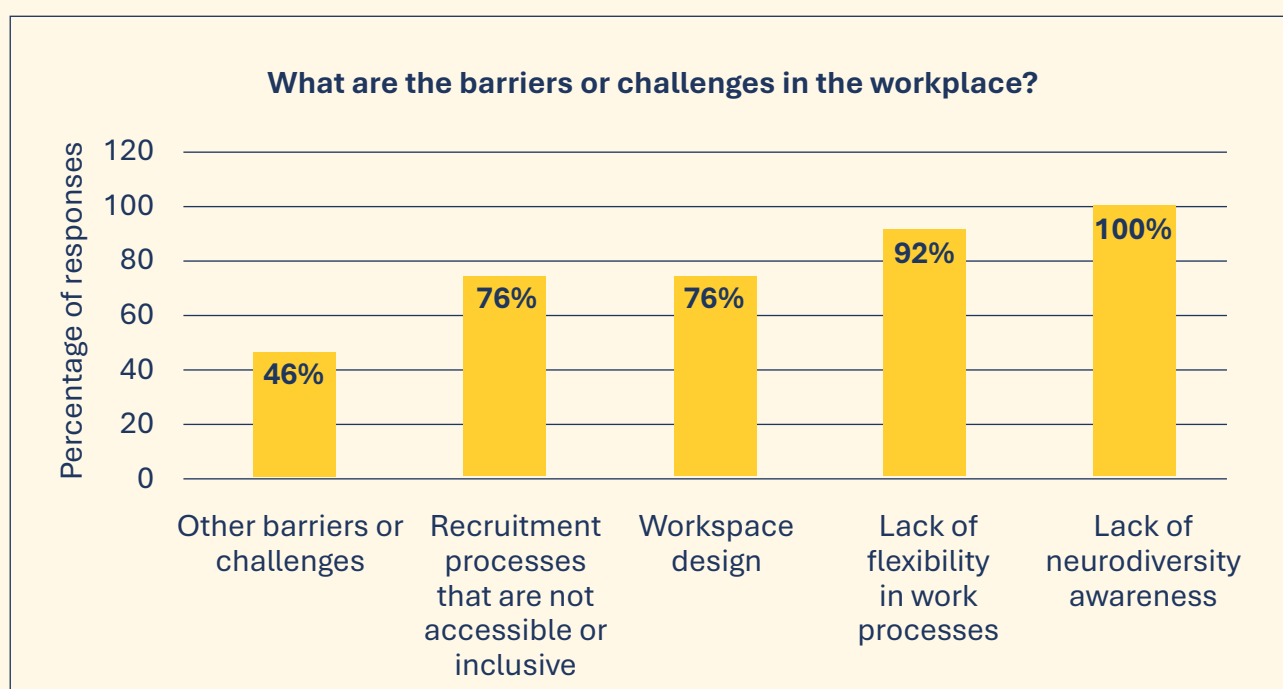


Figure 4. Workplace barriers or challenges for neurodivergent employees (n=37).

Key themes in the survey and verbal feedback, and examples of other challenges and barriers, included:

- » There is a lot of stigma around neurodiversity. As a result, neurodivergent people often hide their neurodivergence and feel unsafe to express their needs.
- » There is a lack of awareness of neurodiversity in workplaces, strengths are not recognised and support is typically not available, Ableist beliefs and misconceptions abound, leading to a lack of psychological safety for neurodivergent staff.
- » Workplace training and career development opportunities tend to be offered in traditional formats, which aren't engaging or accessible for diverse needs.
- » Working environments are often inflexible, with noisy, crowded space and limited options to work remotely.

What might the challenges or barriers be for your organisation to engage with the NFQM programme?

In the survey we asked the people who identified as an employer, director or manager what the barriers or challenges for their organisation might be to engage with the NFQM programme. The two main barriers reported were the cost and the time involved.

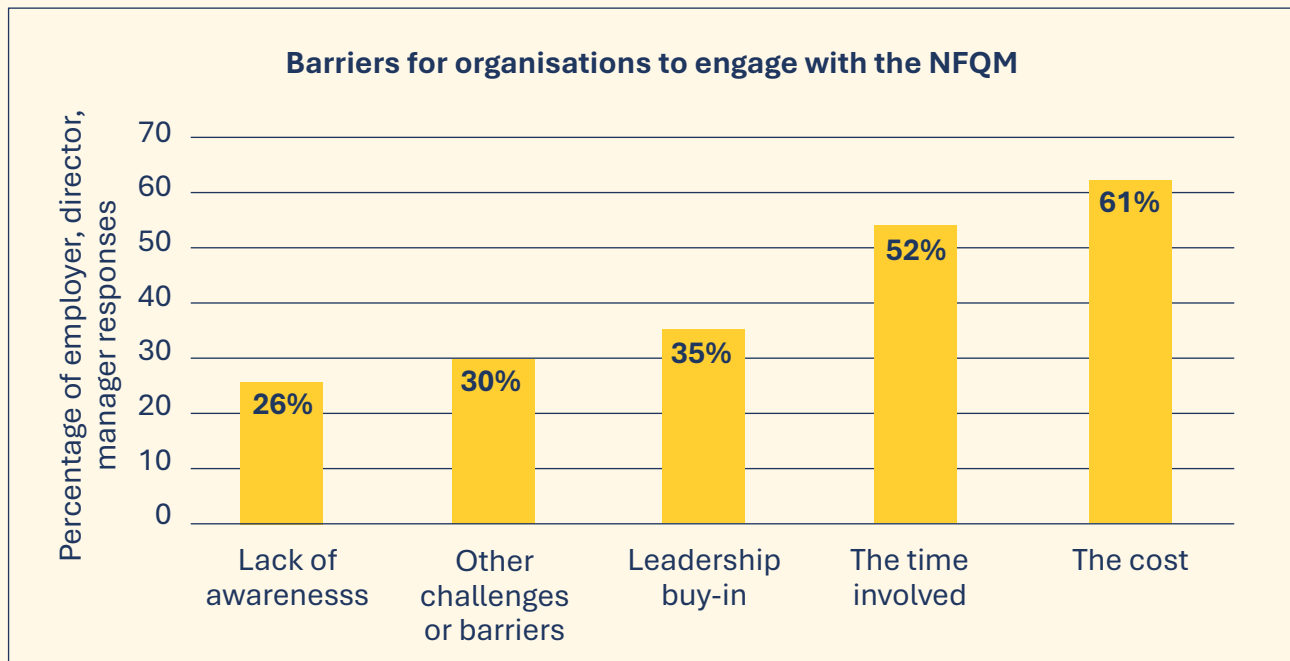


Figure 5. Barriers or challenges for organisation to engage with the NFQM (n=23).

Key themes in the survey and verbal feedback included:

- » Large organisations face logistical challenges, while small organisations may have limited resources.
- » Technology can be a useful support, but requires employer buy-in and investment.
- » There is a need to create safe environments, so that neurodivergent staff can disclose their needs, along with training for management on how to meet these needs.
- » There can be institutional constraints, such as rigid rules and structures, that make implementing NFQM difficult.
- » Businesses vary in size, so a structure may need to be developed to ensure the programme can be implemented for smaller and larger workplaces.
- » Some respondents expressed a level of apprehension around accreditation programmes, as they don't always lead to systemic change. For some businesses the accreditation can be a type of marketing tool and a way of profiling themselves. They are seen to be doing the right thing by others in the market, but there is no genuine commitment to make positive changes. For others the driver can be compliance. Therefore, it is of vital importance for the NFQM programme to have the same level of credibility which the New Zealand Dyslexia-Friendly Quality Mark has achieved. It cannot be a 'tick-box exercise'. It needs to be robust and instigate policy-level changes which are evidenced and verified. Like the DFQM, it needs to have a rigorous verification process, with, ideally, ongoing support and assessment to ensure sustained organisational commitment.

In principle, might your organisation be interested in considering registering for the NFQM?

We wanted to gauge the interest in the NFQM and asked those who identified as an employer, director or manager if, in principle, their organisation might be interested in registering. The vast majority of respondents, 91.3 %, responded 'yes' to this question.

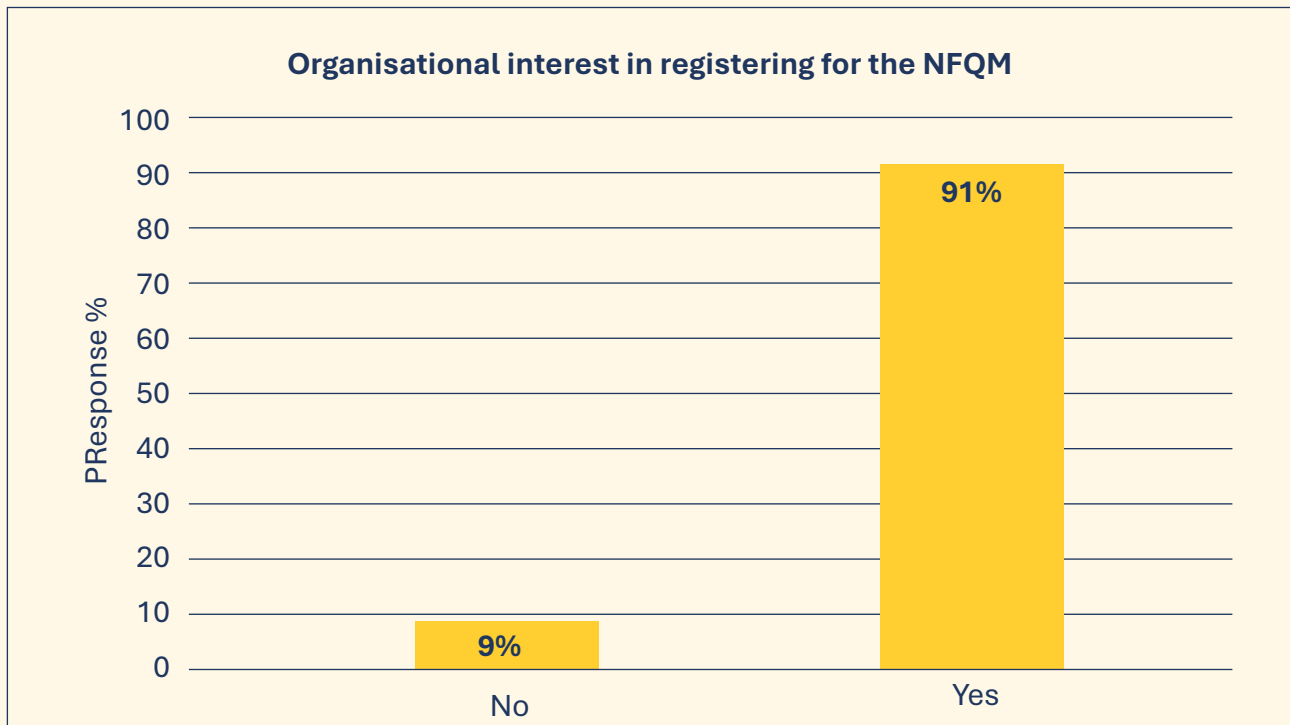
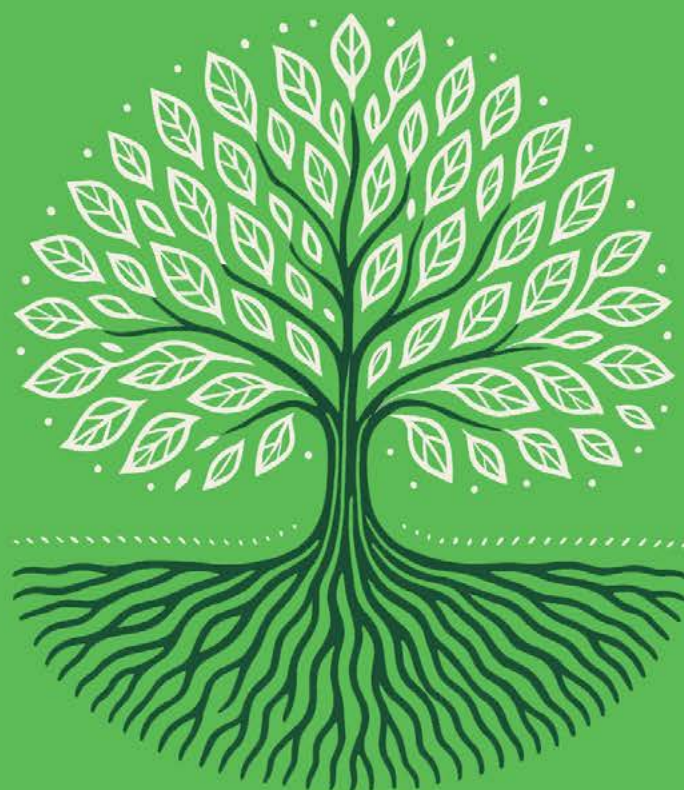


Figure 6. Organisational interest in registering for the NFQM (n=23).

Key themes in the survey and verbal feedback included:

- » The NFQM can help increase awareness of neurodiversity in a structured way, that is evidence-based and robust.
- » It aligns with organisational values, supporting staff and learners, lifelong learning, and community engagement.
- » The NFQM can be used to support and enhance organisational goals of inclusion.
- » There is a growing 'appetite' among employers for neuro-inclusion.
- » We need to move from intent to action. While some initiatives are in place, NFQM represents a meaningful step towards taking positive action.

9 | How the NFQM can support organisations



“An essential first step is to understand where your organisation is now in terms of neuroinclusion, create and commit to a plan of action, and then act on it.” (CIPD, 2024)

Many organisations have started to recognise the value of hiring neurodivergent staff (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Uptimize, 2024). They are also keen to learn how they can transform their organisation into a more inclusive and supportive workplace. This may seem like a daunting task. This is where the NFQM can help. It can serve as a roadmap for success, as it can provide employers with a structured process for improvement, coupled with specialist support and guidance.

The specific programme of support would need to be co-designed with relevant stakeholders, but could, for example, include the following process:

Neurodiversity awareness training	Neurodiversity awareness training for staff, targeted to people’s roles and context. Self-directed resources can complement facilitated training.
Self-assessment	The organisation reviews standards of good practice and identifies the organisation’s areas of strength and areas for improvement.
Action plan	An action plan is prepared with tasks for establishing and implementing inclusive workplace practices and adjustments. A portfolio of evidence is prepared to document the improvements made.
Verification	The portfolio of evidence is assessed and a verification visit is held to ensure the standards and NFQM requirements are met, and actions are being implemented.

Table 3. Example of NFQM programme of support.

The purpose of the process is for organisations to review their processes, work environment and workplace culture, with support from the NFQM facilitators, and create a roadmap of measurable objectives and clear outcomes. Through a collaborative process, and with input from all staff, inclusive workplace practices are put in place.

This process is by no means a tick-box exercise, but rather a journey towards neuro-inclusion. Achieving the Quality Mark will mark an important achievement, but the journey will be ongoing, as continual refinements and adjustments will be needed, as well as ongoing capability building.

The ultimate goal is to bring about sustainable, systemic change so that neuro-inclusion becomes part of the DNA of the organisation, where staff feel confident to be the person they are and ask for support when needed.



10 | Recommendations



“For people and organisations to have confidence in the NFQM programme it needs to be robust and lead to meaningful, systemic and sustainable change.” (Table 4, p. 60)

Based on the findings of this scoping report, and the feedback provided by stakeholders, a number of recommendations have been developed to inform the development of the NFQM programme, see Table 4.

Recommendations	
Draw on the learnings, and build on the success, of the DFQM	Ako Aotearoa has been successfully offering the New Zealand Dyslexia-Friendly Quality Mark over the past three years. The learnings and experiences gained over this period can help inform the development of the NFQM, with well-considered adaptations to the workplace context.
Incorporate existing tools and resources	<p>A number of tools and resources is already available for employers to support them in becoming more inclusive. Funding is also available for neurodivergent staff and their employers. It would be useful to incorporate information around these opportunities in the NFQM programme to enhance awareness of support available.</p> <p>For example, guidance and tools for organisations are available on the following websites:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">» Work and Income» Ministry of Social Development» Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled People» Achieve» Workbridge» Disability Support Services

Work with a reference group	Consult with a reference group to create the NFQM standards and process. This group should include neurodivergent people; people and organisations specialising in the field of neurodiversity; people who can advise on cultural aspects; and employers. It could also include interested parties from the Neurodiversity Community of Practice, Chambers of Commerce, Workforce Development Councils, Workbridge, Centres of Vocational Excellence, BusinessNZ, the Institute of Directors, and other business and/or health and safety networks.
Embed a culturally affirming approach	To ensure cultural inclusion, a culturally affirming approach needs to be embedded in the NFQM standards and implementation. Some examples of culturally responsive practices have been included in this report. Guidance can be sought from the reference group.
Ensure robustness and relevance	<p>For people and organisations to have confidence in the NFQM programme it needs to be robust and lead to meaningful, systemic and sustainable change. Mechanisms for accountability can be built in, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » a robust assessment process to verify achievement of the standards » a monitoring process during the term of the Quality Mark to track progress against the inclusion goals and assess the effectiveness of workplace adjustments » a dedicated renewal process to ensure organisations can continue to hold the Quality Mark from term to term, provided they remain on track with achieving their goals » an evaluative framework to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the NFQM. <p>To ensure relevance, wherever possible, the NFQM programme needs to align with an organisation's purpose, vision and values, so it can be responsive to the organisation's needs and become an integral part of the organisation's people strategy.</p> <p>Also, companies come in all shapes and sizes, from small family businesses to large corporates, each with their unique context, needs and budget. A structure of targeted packages of support can be developed to suit a range of organisations.</p>
Trial the process and standards	Once developed the NFQM standards and process can be trialled with one or two organisations to identify areas for improvement and refinement.

Provide neurodiversity awareness training	Neurodiversity awareness training needs to be the foundation of the NFQM, so that a learning phase precedes the implementation phase. Training can be targeted to people's roles and context within the organisation. It needs to include attention to individual neurotypes. The NFQM provider can partner with suitably qualified and accredited experts or specialist organisations, with expertise in the relevant neurotypes.
Support business leaders	The success of the NFQM hinges on the commitment of business leaders. They will need ongoing support to maintain the momentum and effect positive change within their organisations. Supporting them in achieving their goals needs to be embedded in the NFQM programme.
Build and strengthen relationships and work in partnership	<p>Relationships with stakeholders are a key success factor, both in the development phase of the NFQM and the implementation. Relationships and partnerships need to be built, strengthened and maintained with neurodivergent people, employers, neurodiversity experts and specialist organisations, business networks and collectives.</p> <p>As an organisation serving New Zealand's tertiary education sector Ako Aotearoa may not be best placed to offer the NFQM. Instead, it could work in partnership with a suitable existing employer group as the NFQM provider. This network or organisation would need to have the right skillset, be familiar with the world of business in Aotearoa New Zealand, and experienced in working with, or offering services to, employers.</p>
Develop a marketing strategy	Once developed, the NFQM will need a dedicated marketing strategy to communicate the purpose and benefits to the target audience, highlighting the uniqueness of the NFQM programme and the points of difference with similar initiatives.

Table 4. Recommendations.

11 | Conclusion



“There’s a deeper one that matters more and that’s diversity of thought and I’ve got something that I’m incredibly, incredibly grateful for every day that I can go to work and I can be myself” (Rich Rowley¹⁰)

Conclusion

Creating workplaces where people thrive in their roles is simply the right thing to do. Both the organisation and the employees will be the better for it. It’s a win-win. Workplaces are by definition diverse, and have staff with different thinking styles and from different backgrounds, genders and ethnicities. This diversity can help organisations to grow. It can enrich teams and enhance productivity and efficiency. To make the most of this diversity the barriers to inclusion need to be removed, as the reality is that work can be a daily struggle for some.

At the start of this report the social model of disability was discussed. This model helps employers shift their focus from viewing some of their staff as ‘exceptions’ to examining the barriers within the workplace. The barriers to success are not within the people, but in workplace policies, practices and beliefs. Removing these barriers helps transform the workplace culture to one of belonging, where people’s individual potential is nurtured, differences are honoured and supported, and where diversity is celebrated and embraced. Different ways of working are accommodated. People feel safe to speak up and be open about their differences, and their ideas are welcomed. People feel included, valued and accepted for who they are.

This report included a selection of examples of inclusive workplace practices. Putting these in place will not only benefit neurodivergent staff, but it will accommodate the needs and preferences of all staff.

The Neurodivergent-Friendly Quality Mark can support organisations in making these adjustments, which will help create a better workplace for all.

¹⁰ <https://www.adhd.org.nz/rich-rowley-on-living-with-adhd.html>

12 | Author's Declaration and Glossary



Author’s declaration

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

Glossary of Māori words

aroha	love
awhitanga	inclusion, support
hapū	subtribe
iwi	tribe
karakia	prayer, blessing
kaumātua	respected elder
manaakitanga	kindness, showing respect
tikanga	customary rules
tuakana-teina	mentor-mentee
waiata	songs
wairuatanga	spirituality
whānau	family, extended family
whanaungatanga	relationship, connection
whakapapa	kinship, descent, genealogy

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14 | Appendix



Relevant initiatives in Aotearoa New Zealand

Accessibility Tick

“The Accessibility Tick Programme is helping New Zealand organisations become more accessible and inclusive of disabled and neurodivergent people” (New Zealand Disability Employers’ Network).

BrainBadge

“The BrainBadge Certification Programme is a 12-month, immersive journey that equips organizations to create a workplace where neurodivergent talent thrives. Through expert facilitation, and tailored education, BrainBadge addresses neurodiversity challenges with a comprehensive approach” (Neurofusion).

nQTick

“The nQTick Programme is an annual programme focussed on building understanding, empathy and flexibility, along with psychological safety for neurodiverse and Neurodiverse individuals in organisations in order to thrive” (DivergenThinking).

Te Tohu Kounga Whakarata Tipaopaotanga | New Zealand Dyslexia-Friendly Quality Mark

“The Quality Mark recognises organisations that take a strategic approach to creating an inclusive environment for learners, trainees, or clients with dyslexia. It is designed to promote appropriate support measures and practical guidance.” (<https://ako.ac.nz/programmes-and-services/the-dyslexia-friendly-quality-mark>)

Unlock Innovation

“These tailored programmes aim to equip your team with the knowledge and tools required to transform into a more inclusive and supporting work environment for dyslexics.” (Unlock Innovation).

