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tomorrow



Neurodiversity and language.

Contested language.

It is important to use the right language when talking about neurodiversity. However, what is acceptable to one person may be wrong for another.

Neurodiversity is a relatively new word – it was coined in 1998. Cultural and personal understandings of neurodiversity and neurodiverse conditions have changed significantly and rapidly, and in many cases, they continue to do so.

Neurodiversity is also a deeply personal subject that goes to the heart of many people's identities. All this means that people talk about neurodiversity differently and use other words.

For example, instead of saying someone is 'neurodiverse', some people use alternatives such as:

- Neurodivergent
- Neurominority
- Neuroatypical
- ND.

Similarly, you may hear these words for people who are not neurodiverse, such as:

- Neurotypical
- Neuromajority
- NT.

The term 'neuroinclusion' is becoming more common and some people may prefer this term to 'neurodiversity'.

The language we use.

In this Toolkit, we use the terms 'neurodiverse' and 'neurodivergent' to refer to people with a neurodiverse condition – for example, 'serve neurodiverse customers'; or 'neurodivergent employees'.

While there are alternatives, this Toolkit uses just these two terms interchangeably. one word – rather than switching between the options listed above – for clarity and ease of use. They are also the most commonly used terms and preferred by many in the neurodiversity community and that comes through in our conversations with neurodiverse individuals.

We also felt that they ‘othered’ neurodiverse people to a lesser extent than the alternatives. Terms such as ‘neuroatypical’ and ‘neurominority’ focus more on the otherness of neurodiverse people, but we recognise that other people might prefer to use different terms.

Similarly, we opted not to use words such as ‘neurotypical’ to refer to people who do not have a neurodiverse condition, as this focuses on their supposed ‘normality’ and implies that neurodiverse people lack this ‘normality’. However, this term is used by many within the neurodiverse community.

Neurodiversity is ‘diverse,’ meaning no two people will be alike. In fact, they can have the same condition and have very different profiles from each other.

We also use the terms ‘neurodiversity’ and ‘neuroinclusion.’ Neuroinclusion is being increasingly used in corporate settings when designing policies and strategies. As the term suggests, its focus is on inclusion of neurodivergent people rather than the individual.

Grammar.

There is a grammatical objection to applying the term ‘neurodiverse’ to individuals, in that you cannot have a diversity of one. No one person can be diverse because only a multiplicity can be diverse. Only a group including people who think differently can be considered neurodiverse – for example, a group of autistic people may be as neurodiverse as a group of non-neurodiverse people.

This is something we have considered. However, for several reasons we still decided to continue using ‘neurodiverse’ when talking about individuals. Firstly, because this is an accepted usage. It is not an innovation we have made, and in any case all the language in this area is innovative because it is a young field.

We also wanted as many people as possible to know what we mean. ‘Neurodiverse’ seems like the option that people who aren’t as familiar with this area will find easiest to understand. This is something that has been borne out in conversations and testing. That is why this is called the Neurodiversity Toolkit.

Combined, we felt that these reasons were strong enough to overcome this grammatical objection.

Person-first and identity-first language.

What is person-first and identity-first language?

There are different ways of talking about disability in English, and the main two are 'person-first' and 'identity-first.'

An example of person-first language is 'person with autism' or 'person with dyslexia'.

Using identity-first language, those examples would be 'autistic person' or 'dyslexic person'.

How should I talk about neurodiversity?

Some people prefer one over the other, and it can depend on the condition and the individual. For example, some autistic people feel that their autism is such an integral part of their identity that it would be inaccurate to say they are a 'person with autism' because the person and the autism are inextricable. They might say that identity-first language better reflects their identity.

On the other hand, some people prefer to use person-first language. Someone who prefers person-first language may see themselves as having an identity that isn't defined by their disability.

Our feedback showed that there are strong views in favour of both using person-first language and identity-first language when talking about neurodiversity. As a result, we use both interchangeably in this Toolkit. This does not reflect any judgement about an individual and the nature of their condition.

There are no fixed rules about what language to use with individuals. You should always ask someone how they like to identify if you are unsure. Take your lead from them, and don't be afraid to ask – respectfully – if you're not sure. Not speaking about neurodiversity due to fear of 'getting it wrong' is far more damaging than making an honest mistake.

Be led by the individual.

Though we review our language regularly, this Toolkit has had to adopt a fixed way of talking about neurodiversity. However, you don't have to. You should try to be flexible when talking about neurodiversity. For example, if someone says that they don't like the word 'neurodiverse', try to remember that and avoid using it to describe them.

This is the most important principle around language and neurodiversity – be led by the individual. There are different ways to talk about neurodiversity, but when talking to a person, you should try to only speak in the way that person prefers.

Whether this is at an individual level – for example, asking the person you're talking to what language they prefer – or an organisational level – for example, by consulting with relevant networks and Employee Resource Groups – be bold and ask what language you should use.

Corporate language.

When talking to groups or writing corporate documents – for example, if your organisation is writing a neurodiversity policy – you will probably have to adopt one way of talking to and about all neurodiverse people in your organisation. It is helpful to include an explainer of why you talk the way you do, and how you reached this decision.

Always consult with neurodiversity employee network groups and other stakeholders when deciding what language to use as your house style and when reviewing it. Language is constantly evolving, and these groups can help keep your organisation current.

Focus on processes, not conditions

It's often not necessary to talk about conditions at all. A person's medical diagnosis is often not what actually matters – instead, it is what they are trying to achieve and whether anything is making that challenging.

Focusing on individual labels can lead to stereotyping and silo-ing rather than seeing the individual with unique abilities, challenges and circumstances. In addition, there will be individuals who are unaware that they are neurodiverse and others who choose not to use any of the labels. There may be other people who are not neurodiverse but still encounter some of the same barriers for other reasons, including other disabilities.

Instead of focusing on labels, talk about specific barriers and processes. For example:

- Communication
- Time management
- Reading and writing
- Impulse control
- Visual processing
- Structure and routines.

When discussing environments or adjustments, for example, it can be more helpful and effective to talk about how these affect work and processes, rather than whether an individual has a condition.