WHITE PAPER

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The Design Gap™

Rethinking Workplace Design for Human Difference

Sarah Tancell FCIPD
Founder, Neuro-D.

> Written for senior leaders, HR Directors and People professionals who have invested in neurodiversity awareness and are wondering why so little has changed.

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THE DESIGN GAP™

Rethinking Workplace Design for Human Difference

At a Glance

A White Paper by Sarah Tancell FCIPD, Founder, Neuro-D.

Written for senior leaders, HR Directors and People professionals responsible for how their organisation supports its people. Particularly if they have already invested in neurodiversity awareness and found themselves wondering why so little seems to have changed.

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This white paper introduces the Design Gap Model™. If you read nothing else, read this page.

> **The Design Gap, defined**
>
> *The measurable difference between how work is currently designed and the conditions required for people with different cognitive styles to perform, contribute and thrive.*

The five pillars

- **Manager capability** - the single highest-weighted pillar
- **Leadership and culture** - visible commitment beyond HR
- **People processes** - recruitment, performance, onboarding
- **Communication and language** - clarity across processing styles
- **Physical and sensory environment** - the day-to-day conditions of work

Four places to start

- **Psychological safety first** - without it, disclosure does not happen
- **Honest diagnosis** - assess actual practice, not delivered training
- **Manager capability** - the single highest-leverage investment
- **Build for review, not resolution** - adjustments are not set and forget

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Executive Summary

Neurodiversity has moved onto the organisational agenda, but it would be generous to call this progress. For most organisations, it is still a slow burn, somewhere close to where workplace wellbeing sat fifteen years ago, when the conversation was dominated by stress and nobody quite knew what to do with someone who was off sick because of it. We are at the equivalent early stage with neurodiversity now.

A significant number of HR professionals are still unsure what neuroinclusion requires of them in practice. Others have done just enough to be seen to be doing something - a training session, a line in the values deck - without any real shift in how people are managed day to day.

Performative is not too strong a word for a lot of what currently passes for neuroinclusion strategy.

This paper argues that the gap exists because organisations have approached neuroinclusion as an awareness challenge rather than a workplace design challenge. It introduces the Design Gap Model™, a practical framework for closing that distance, with a clear methodology and a starting point for any organisation ready to move from awareness to action.

About the Author

I spent more than twenty years as a senior HR professional, including as International HR Director for a global organisation employing over eleven thousand people across multiple territories.

In that time I built neuroinclusion programmes, sat in the rooms where decisions about neurodivergent employees were made, and watched well-intentioned organisations repeatedly fail the people they were trying to support. I also watched myself do the same thing, before I understood why.

I am triple neurodivergent: ADHD, autistic and dyslexic. I was not diagnosed until adulthood, which means I spent the earlier part of my career both designing systems and being failed by them simultaneously.

That experience, more than any research or framework, is what convinced me that the problem is structural rather than behavioural. Organisations are not failing neurodivergent employees because they do not care. They are failing them because work was never designed with those employees in mind.

I founded Neuro-D. and developed the Design Gap Model™ because I could not find a methodology that treated neuroinclusion as the design problem it actually is. This paper sets out that methodology. It is built on twenty years of practice, informed by research, and has been tested in organisations.

It is also written by someone who has been on both sides of the conversation, and who knows what it costs when the design gets it wrong.

Introduction

Over the past several years I have worked alongside organisations across multiple sectors, supporting leaders committed to creating more neuroinclusive workplaces. One theme has emerged with remarkable consistency: organisations want to do the right thing, and many have already invested considerable time, energy and resources in trying to achieve it.

Yet the conversations I have with neurodivergent employees often tell a different story. Many continue to mask their differences to fit workplace expectations. Others describe:

- Lengthy delays in receiving adjustments
- Uncertainty about whether disclosure will help or hinder their careers
- Managers who are supportive in principle but lack the confidence to translate good intentions into practical action

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If organisations are investing more than ever before in neuroinclusion, why do so many neurodivergent employees continue to experience the workplace as somewhere they must adapt rather than belong?

None of this is new. The social model of disability has argued for decades that the barrier is rarely the individual: it's the environment that was never designed with them in mind [18]. What is missing is not the insight, but a way of applying it specifically, measurably, to how organisations design work for neurodivergent employees.

That is the gap this paper sets out to close. I describe this difference as the Design Gap: the gap between the way organisations have traditionally been designed and the conditions that enable a broader range of people to thrive.

Although this paper focuses on neurodiversity, the argument extends further. Every organisation employs people who think, communicate and process information differently. By viewing neuroinclusion through the lens of workplace design, organisations have an opportunity not only to improve inclusion, but to rethink how work itself is organised for the benefit of everyone.

1. The Illusion of Progress

For many years, there has barely been a conversation about workplace neuroinclusion at all, let alone one focused on the right things. Awareness has existed in pockets: a training session here, a LinkedIn post there, the occasional policy line added to a wellbeing strategy that was really written about something else.

Most organisations have not yet had the conversation, so it is difficult to argue they have had the wrong one.

Progress in language, not in practice

What has happened instead is something narrower: pockets of activity that get described, internally and externally, as progress. A training session becomes 'we have done neurodiversity'. A policy line becomes 'we have a neurodiversity strategy'.

The language of conversation has outpaced the conversation itself.

What the data shows

The confidence gap is widening

The gap between employer confidence and employees' lived experience widened year on year. *City and Guilds Neurodiversity Index 2026 [1]*

Only 6.5% of managers rate themselves as very confident discussing reasonable adjustments; over a third lack confidence altogether. *2026 HR/L&D/compliance survey [2]*

Tribunal claims involving neurodiversity discrimination have risen 95% over five years. *[2]*

The City and Guilds Index has also consistently found that only a minority of neurodivergent employees receive workplace adjustments even after raising the issue directly, and that the large majority continue to mask their traits at work, often delaying or avoiding the adjustment conversation altogether.

Many take time off work as a result, a pattern more often linked to burnout, sensory overload and the toll of masking than to the underlying condition itself. A 2023 UCL study on workplace masking found that concealing neurodivergent traits at work is widespread, and not confined to autistic employees alone [3].

None of this happens because organisations do not care. It happens because awareness has been mistaken for implementation.

Awareness changes what people know. Design changes what people experience.

This distinction sits at the heart of the Design Gap. The organisations making the greatest progress are rarely those delivering the most awareness sessions. They are the ones asking a different question:

Not 'Do our people understand neurodiversity?', but 'Where are we unintentionally creating barriers, and which of our systems were designed around assumptions that no longer reflect today's workforce?'

That shift, from awareness to workplace design, is where meaningful and sustainable neuroinclusion begins.

2. Work Was Never Designed for Every Brain

Meetings, job descriptions, performance reviews and office layouts often feel like natural features of organisational life. In reality, they are the product of design decisions that evolved to solve a very different challenge: the consistency and predictability industrial organisations needed at scale, formalised in the early twentieth century through Frederick Winslow Taylor's Scientific Management [4].

Familiar assumptions

Many of those underlying assumptions remain familiar today. Productivity is associated with visibility. Communication favours speed over reflection. Recruitment prioritises confidence in interviews over capability in the role.

None of this was designed to disadvantage neurodivergent employees. It simply evolved around an assumption that there is a typical way to think, communicate and work.

No typical employee exists

An estimated 1 in 5 people are neurodivergent.

They are not a future consideration for any organisation reading this. They are already in it, in every team, at every level, right now. Many have never disclosed, and many do not know it themselves.

For many neurodivergent employees, the challenge is not the diagnosis but the cumulative effect of navigating systems designed around assumptions that do not match how they naturally process information. When these mismatches occur every day, they shape an employee's entire experience of work.

Individuals begin adapting themselves to fit the environment rather than questioning whether the environment could adapt to them. This is masking, and it is increasingly recognised as one of the most significant contributors to stress, burnout and poor mental health among neurodivergent adults.

Every process, every policy and every workplace norm was designed by someone at some point. If they were designed once, they can be redesigned again.

That is the point at which neuroinclusion moves beyond awareness and becomes a question of organisational design. It is also the point at which the Design Gap begins to emerge.

3. Why a Neurodiversity Policy Is the Wrong Instrument

Policies may exist yet remain largely irrelevant to the problem they were written to solve. Most organisations that write a neurodiversity policy are making a category error before they have even finished the first draft: attempting to standardise support for something that, by definition, cannot be standardised.

No two neurodivergent brains present the same way, so a policy written to cover neurodivergent employees as a group ends up either too vague to be useful or too specific to apply to anyone it was not written about.

Where policy does earn its place

Where policy does genuinely earn its place is narrower and more procedural: a requirement that a performance improvement plan cannot commence until a workplace needs assessment has taken place. That is a useful, enforceable rule, because it changes a process rather than attempting to define a person.

But even this surfaces the deeper problem that policy alone cannot solve. The employee may not have disclosed. They may not know they are neurodivergent at all. A policy that assumes disclosure as its starting point will fail exactly the employees most at risk of being managed out before anyone understands why they are struggling.

What the Equality Act actually requires

It is worth being precise about what the Equality Act 2010 actually requires, because the distinction matters and the confusion between the two is itself part of the problem.

Policy vs. process

The Equality Act does not require a neurodiversity policy.

It requires reasonable adjustments: individual, needs-based, reviewed regularly, and applicable regardless of whether a formal diagnosis exists.

The organisations that face tribunal claims are not, in the main, the ones without a neurodiversity policy. They are the ones without proper processes: no needs assessment before a performance improvement plan, no structured adjustment conversation, no record of what was agreed and whether it was reviewed.

Tribunal claims involving neurodiversity discrimination have risen 95% over five years [2], not because organisations lack documents, but because their everyday management practice has not kept pace with their stated commitments.

A structured assessment of current practice, measuring what actually happens rather than what is written down, identifies this gap precisely. That is not a compliance exercise. It is the honest version of the question.

4. Introducing the Design Gap Model™

The Design Gap can be defined precisely:

The measurable difference between how work is currently designed and the conditions required for people with different cognitive styles to perform, contribute and thrive.

The emphasis on measurable is deliberate. Many organisations describe themselves as inclusive because they have invested in awareness or developed policies. Inclusion cannot be measured by intention alone. It must be measured by experience.

Needs, not diagnosis

Most conversations about neurodiversity still start in the wrong place. They start with diagnosis: what ADHD is, what autism looks like, how dyslexia affects reading.

That framing has a hidden cost. It encourages managers to look for traits and conditions rather than needs, and it risks something far more serious: managers and HR teams informally diagnosing the people they manage, based on a half-day training session and a behaviour they have noticed.

The diagnosis gap

2.5 million neurodivergent adults in the UK have never received a formal diagnosis. *Autistica [5]*

Over 140,000 people were waiting for an autism assessment in England alone; adult pathways now often stretch beyond two years. *NHS England [6]*

A workplace strategy that waits for diagnosis before offering support is, in practice, a strategy that fails most of the people it is meant to help.

This approach deliberately avoids that trap. It does not ask what condition someone might have. It asks what they need to do their best work:

- Structured information rather than verbal instruction
- Predictability rather than last-minute change
- Written follow-up rather than relying on memory

These are needs, not symptoms. They do not require a diagnosis to be legitimate, and they are frequently needed by people who would never identify as neurodivergent at all.

This distinction matters practically as well as ethically. An employee does not need to know they are autistic for a manager to notice they consistently do better with clear written instructions. Starting with need rather than diagnosis means support can begin immediately, for anyone.

The five pillars

The framework assesses organisations across five weighted pillars, reflecting where the design gap most commonly appears and where the cost of getting it wrong is highest:

- **Manager capability** - the single highest-weighted pillar. Managers are the point at which neuroinclusion either happens or does not, in the everyday disclosure conversation, the adjustment decision, the feedback moment.
- **Leadership and culture** - whether commitment exists beyond HR and is visible in how the organisation actually behaves.
- **People processes** - recruitment, performance management, onboarding, and whether they were designed around one type of thinker.
- **Communication and language** - clarity, consistency, and whether information is delivered in ways that work for different processing styles.
- **Physical and sensory environment** - the conditions in which work actually happens day to day.

Each pillar is assessed against observable practice rather than stated intention. Training completion rates count for less than whether managers use what they were taught.

From concept to structured methodology

Together, these elements create a practical framework for organisations. A structured diagnostic identifies where they are today. A defined standard sets out what good looks like. And a recognition framework acknowledges organisations that can demonstrate that standard in practice, with accreditation renewed annually rather than awarded once and forgotten.

The Design Gap Assessment™ is a structured organisational diagnostic that evaluates how workplace design aligns with the needs of a cognitively diverse workforce. Rather than measuring awareness alone, it examines organisational systems, management practice and employee experience across the five pillars, enabling organisations to identify where barriers are unintentionally being created and where the greatest opportunities for improvement exist.

The Neuroinclusion By Design Standard™ defines what good workplace design looks like in practice. It provides a consistent measure of organisational maturity across four levels:

- **Bronze**: awarded on completion of a Design Gap Assessment™ and a credible action plan against the areas that scored lowest.

- **Silver**: consistent, observable practice across at least three of the five pillars.
- **Gold**: embedded practice across all five pillars, with measurable improvement in disclosure, retention and manager confidence.
- **Platinum**: organisations contributing to wider sector standards year on year.

At the heart of the methodology is a simple principle: what gets measured gets improved. This framework encourages organisations to move beyond asking have we delivered neurodiversity training, and instead ask how effectively have we designed work for different ways of thinking, processing information and contributing. It is not intended to identify fault. It is designed to identify opportunity.

5. From Behaviour to Barrier

The Design Gap rarely appears as a single obvious barrier. It is experienced through hundreds of small interactions that shape everyday working life: a recruitment process that rewards confidence over competence, a meeting where the fastest thinker is assumed to be the most engaged, feedback vague enough to leave someone uncertain what success looks like.

Reading behaviour differently

Nowhere is this more visible than in how organisations interpret behaviour. A colleague who appears resistant to a last-minute change may be responding to the uncertainty created by insufficient information. An employee who contributes little in meetings may simply process information more effectively after reflection than in fast-moving discussion.

When organisations focus solely on behaviour, they risk responding to the symptom rather than the cause.

What aspects of our environment might be influencing this behaviour?

This is a question of the nervous system and environment. Every workplace places demands on employees: deadlines, change, sensory stimulation. When those demands exceed an individual's capacity, the nervous system shifts into a protective state: anxiety, withdrawal, frustration, reduced concentration.

These are not unique to neurodivergent people. They are human responses to perceived threats. But neurodivergent employees encounter environments that trigger these responses more frequently, because the workplace was not designed with their needs in mind.

The organisations making the most progress are not necessarily those with the largest training budgets. They are the ones that consistently ask: what in our environment might be contributing to this experience?

6. What Changes When the Gap Closes

Organisations that begin closing their design gap report changes that go beyond what awareness training alone has produced for them.

- **Disclosure increases** - not because employees are told it is safe, but because the experience of the organisation tells them it is.
- **Retention improves** - neurodivergent employees leave because the environment is wrong for them, not because the work is.
- **Legal exposure reduces** - organisations that can demonstrate a structured, assessed approach to adjustments are in a materially different position under the Equality Act 2010 than those relying on a policy document alone.
- **Team performance shifts** - the pattern recognition, deep focus and creative problem-solving that neurodivergent employees disproportionately bring become accessible once energy is no longer spent on masking.

What this looks like in practice

Case study - engineering and technology consultancy, ~450 people

The organisation had experienced two tribunal claims involving neurodivergent employees, a pattern of high attrition among technical specialists, and a senior HR team exhausted by the volume of individual cases they were managing. They had delivered neurodiversity awareness training to all staff eighteen months earlier. In their own assessment, they had done the right things.

The assessment told a different story. Manager capability scored in the lowest quartile: not because managers were unwilling, but because the organisation had no structured disclosure process, no adjustment review cycle, and no consistent approach to performance conversations involving neurodivergent employees.

The physical environment was a secondary finding: an open-plan office designed for collaboration that was functioning as a sensory barrier for a significant proportion of the technical team, contributing to presenteeism and reduced output that had been attributed to individual performance issues rather than environmental design.

Over the following nine months, the organisation restructured its adjustment process, trained its management population in disclosure and needs-based conversations, introduced a quiet working

protocol, and established a six-monthly review cycle for all active adjustments. They did not write a neurodiversity policy.

At the twelve-month mark

No further tribunal claims.

Voluntary disclosure among technical staff increased noticeably.

Two senior engineers were removed from performance improvement plans following needs assessments that identified environmental and communication barriers rather than capability issues.

Attrition in the technical team reduced significantly.

We thought we had a neurodiversity problem. We had a design problem. Once we understood that, we knew what to fix.

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7. Culture, Talent and the Skills of the Future

The compliance framing, while accurate, undersells the argument significantly. The organisations that will thrive in the next decade are not the ones that have managed their legal risk most carefully. They are the ones that have built cultures where different kinds of minds can do their best work, and that distinction is becoming commercially urgent in ways that go well beyond inclusion.

The skills organisations will need

Where neurodivergent talent already leads

170 million new jobs will be created by 2030, while 92 million are displaced; resilience, creativity, analytical thinking, curiosity and flexibility are the fastest-growing in-demand skills. *World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2025 [7]*

An estimated 30% of neurodivergent professionals have specialist or expert proficiency in AI and big data - two of the WEF's ten fastest-growing skill areas. *[7]*

Neurodivergent employees are faster and more skilled at adopting AI tools than their neurotypical counterparts. *EY, 2025 [8]*

A Microsoft innovation sprint involving neurodivergent team members produced 60 to 80 process improvement suggestions, surprising even the programme's organisers. *Microsoft, 2024 [9]*

This is not an inclusion argument dressed up in commercial language. As Hiren Shukla, founder of EY's global neurodiversity programme, has described it: it is not just AI helping neurodivergent professionals. It is neurodivergent professionals maximising what AI can do [10].

The organisations building the right cultures now are the ones that will have access to this talent. The ones that do not are already screening it out: through interview processes that reward performance over capability, through environments that make masking the only viable strategy, through management cultures that interpret difference as difficulty.

The market is already moving

- A February 2024 Gartner study projected that by 2027, 20% of Fortune 500 sales organisations will actively recruit neurodivergent talent to improve business performance [11]
- Palantir launched a dedicated neurodivergent hiring fellowship in late 2025, compensation ranging from 110,000 to 200,000 US dollars, final interviews conducted by the CEO personally, and framed explicitly as a talent strategy rather than a diversity initiative [12]

- MIT Sloan Management Review describes neurodivergent cognition as positively correlated with enhanced creativity and innovative thinking, and notes autistic people are less prone to cognitive biases and more consistent in making rational decisions than the general population [13]

The culture question is therefore also the talent question. Organisations that cannot retain neurodivergent employees, or that never attract them in the first place, are not simply missing an inclusion metric. They are building a workforce that is structurally less equipped for the work that will matter most.

8. The Cost of the Design Gap

Discussions about neuroinclusion often begin with legal compliance. That is only a fraction of the true cost. The greatest cost is often the talent organisations never fully access: employees spending significant energy masking rather than contributing, leaving less capacity for creativity, problem solving and collaboration.

The cost to managers

The cost also falls on managers themselves. Most want to support their teams but describe feeling anxious about saying the wrong thing or unclear about their responsibilities. Some avoid difficult conversations altogether.

None of this reflects poor leadership. It reflects systems that have failed to equip managers with the confidence and frameworks they need.

Organisations do not incur the cost of the Design Gap because neurodivergent people think differently. They incur it because workplaces continue to assume that everyone thinks the same.

Conclusion: Where to Start

For many years, what conversation there has been around workplace neuroinclusion has focused on increasing awareness. But awareness alone cannot remove barriers that have been designed into the everyday experience of work.

Not how do we support neurodivergent employees, but how well has our workplace been designed for human difference.

This shift moves the conversation beyond diagnosis and towards design. Beyond accommodation and towards accessibility. Beyond compliance and towards capability.

Before anything else: psychological safety

Before any of the steps below is possible, one thing has to be true: people need to feel safe enough to tell you what is actually happening. Without psychological safety, disclosure does not happen, and without disclosure, there is nothing to measure or design around. This is not a separate workstream from neuroinclusion. It is the precondition for all of it.

Four places to start

- **Psychological safety first.** Without it, disclosure does not happen, and without disclosure there is nothing to design around.
- **Honest diagnosis.** A clear view of where your organisation's design gap actually sits, rather than an assumption based on what training has been delivered. If psychological safety is low, this diagnosis will be incomplete by definition.
- **Manager capability.** The single highest-leverage investment, because managers are where neuroinclusion happens or does not, every day.
- **Build for review, not resolution.** Adjustments are not set and forget. Sustainable progress comes from checking in, not from a one-off fix.

The return on getting this right

Neurodivergent talent, by the numbers

An estimated 1 in 5 of the population is neurodivergent.

JPMorgan Chase's Autism at Work programme reports employees 90–140% more productive than neurotypical peers in comparable roles. *[14]*

EY's Neurodiverse Centres of Excellence have generated close to $1 billion in value across 25 centres, with retention rates above 92%. *[10]*

SAP, Microsoft and several major UK employers report similar patterns: lower turnover, stronger output, faster problem-solving.

The cost of not doing this

The UK autism employment gap alone costs the economy approximately £14.5 billion a year. *Buckland Review of Autism Employment [16]*

Replacing a single employee earning above £25,000 costs an average of £30,614. *Irwin Mitchell [17]*

Neurodiversity-related tribunal cases have risen 95% over the past five years. *[2]*

This is no longer a moral case made alongside a commercial one. For most organisations, it is now the same case.

A shift in thinking

For decades, organisations have invested significant effort in helping individuals adapt to work. The next stage of organisational maturity may be the reverse: redesigning work so a broader range of people can thrive within it.

Whether organisations choose to adopt this framework or another approach entirely, the central challenge remains the same. Awareness has begun the conversation. Workplace design will determine whether that conversation leads to meaningful change.

That is the Design Gap. And that is where the next chapter of workplace inclusion begins.

To explore what closing your design gap looks like in practice, visit **neurodconsultancy.com**

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Ready to find out where your Design Gap sits?

Book a free 30-minute strategy call to talk through what this paper means for your organisation, and where to start.

Book a strategy call

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