

'Neurodiversity should never be a barrier in the workplace'

Neurodiversity Celebration Week provides the chance for us to celebrate the strengths of neurodiverse individuals, and to showcase the strengths they can bring to the workplace

At 10.30 on a Wednesday morning, James Montgomery is on the pavement outside his St Helier office because the fire alarm is due to go off.

'Fire alarms give me a complete sensory overload, I get tinnitus and spots in my sight, and I can't focus on the rest of the day,' he said. 'I am grateful that this is one of the reasonable adjustments put in place for me by my employer.'

'Instead of the test going off randomly, it is now at a set time, allowing me to block it out in my diary and get outside so I can avoid it. It makes no difference to anyone else, but I can come back after a five-minute break, and I can carry on focusing on my work.'

James, who is assistant manager of Learning and Development at Crestbridge, has been raising awareness of neurodiversity and has organised a series of talks for colleagues for Neurodiversity Celebration Week.

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term for many conditions which includes, but is not limited to autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, OCD, as well as other neurological injuries. The term describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world in many ways, there being no 'right' way of thinking, learning or behaving. Differences should not be seen as deficits.

Regardless of the official definition, James says he summarises it as thinking differently.

'Certainly as a kid I wore it as a badge of honour. I let it define me. Now it's more like a tool to kickstart the conversation,' he said. 'Telling someone I'm autistic helps identify ways to support me best, particularly if I'm working with someone who has a curious mindset.'

Emma Burns is the Neurodiversity Champion at JET. Emma, a senior Employment Co-ordinator, has been with JET for 13 years. She is passionate about equality, inclusion and diversity.

'As a neurodiversity champion my aim will be to raise awareness of neurodiversity and encourage and support employers to be a neuroinclusive workplace, where talking about neurodiversity is a safe and everyday occurrence. I am keen to challenge stigma and the assumptions about how a neurodivergent person can be and promote the positive side of neurodiversity.'



Emma Burns and James Montgomery

neurodiversity.

'Embracing it in the workplace is essential for creating an inclusive and productive working environment. Over the years, I have seen how much potential neurodiverse individuals have.'

She said that what is important is that employers have open and honest conversations about how to support someone. And that is different in every case.

'I'd especially like to see employers making more reasonable adjustments in the recruitment process. In my experience, many neurodiverse clients won't sell themselves

properly at interview. It can be the trickiest part because you don't get to see the real person. Successes I have had come from employers who are willing to think outside the box and ask what they can do. You can take the pressure off by being more informal, less staged, and allowing sight of interview questions beforehand. For the job applicant, anxiety levels are already high. There is no need to raise them further if you want the best from them.'

Neurodiversity can be a huge advantage once individuals can play to their strengths. For example, some people who have autism can have great attention to detail and offer a consistent level in their quality of work, especially on repetitive tasks. Someone with ADHD may have the ability to problem-solve creatively and quickly due to thinking things through dynamically.

Employers should be asking what they can do to get the best out of the person. It's very much a two-way conversation, with the person being able to express their needs and the employer making those adjustments.

Reasonable adjustments might be sitting in a space away from bright lights or loud noises, allowing flexible hours to work from home, allowing wearing headphones at your desk or taking fidget toys to a meeting.

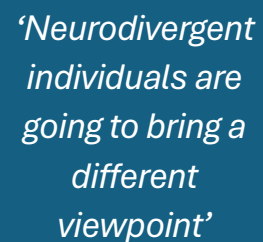
James said: 'I have certainly said in the past, look, I need somewhere quieter because I can't focus here. An employer might fear that there's going to be a need for an expensive customised "neuro-pod" with sponges on the wall. No, my adjustments include a £9 pair of headphones so I can block out the noise – this was only achieved by my line manager asking "what do you need?", listening to my needs and then actioning them.'

He added: 'What is the point in being protected under discrimination laws if you're not being supported? Curiosity is not a discrimination so I would encourage employers and managers to be asking these types of questions, especially if a colleague brings up the subject. Reward the trust they have just put in you because that might be your only chance.

Employers shouldn't fear the conversations they need to have. You've got to start somewhere and you're not necessarily going to get it right first time, but that's okay because the language is evolving all the time. It's 25 years since my diagnosis of "high functioning Aspergers Syndrome". We don't use those words any more, but a person's "want" to help remains timeless. Actions will always speak louder than words.

'In my case, I work in an environment with four different generations and 43 different nationalities. That's a lot of different definitions of "normal" going on there, so of course it's going to be "not right" in someone else's eyes but if you're willing to have the conversation and approach curiously, with a mindset willing to be proven wrong, you'll be amazed how quickly the conversation will evolve past that and reach the crucial point of "How can I help you?", which is what we want ultimately.'

Emma agreed: 'It's important to have neurodivergent individuals on your team. They are going to bring a different viewpoint. People who think differently can be brilliant. There is still a lot of untapped potential.'



'Neurodivergent individuals are going to bring a different viewpoint'

*If you are an employer who requires support to help an employee who has a disability or long-term health condition meet their full potential, please get in touch with Emma by emailing emma.burns@jet.co.je

**Written for an article which appeared in the Jersey Evening Post in March 2024.*