

Neurodiversity and Performance Management

Building Inclusive and Effective Performance
Systems



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Executive Summary

This white paper explores the intersection of neurodiversity and performance management, offering an expert, evidence-informed framework to help organisations build systems that are fair, effective and legally compliant. As awareness of neurodivergence increases, employers are recognising the value that neurodivergent employees can bring, such as innovation, creativity and focused attention (1). When these strengths are understood and supported, they can enhance organisational performance, culture and retention.

Traditional performance management systems often fail to reflect the diversity of cognitive styles, communication preferences, and sensory needs across the workforce, influencing how performance is interpreted, especially where co-occurring conditions are present (2).



Neuro-inclusive performance management focuses on removing workplace barriers to support retention, unlock innovation, and meet obligations under the Equality Act (2010). We will outline practical strategies for embedding neuro-inclusion into performance frameworks, including inclusive objective setting, strengths-based approaches and accessible communication and manager capability building.

Measuring impact helps organisations move beyond compliance towards systems that recognise diverse talent and support sustainable growth (3, 16). Our expertise lies in helping organisations realise these benefits while confidently navigating any challenges that arise.



Introduction to Neurodiversity and Performance Management

Performance management is a structured process that involves setting expectations, monitoring progress, providing feedback, and supporting individuals to meet organisational goals. Traditionally, these systems have relied on standardised metrics, linear progression models, and uniform review cycles designed around assumed norms of productivity, communication, time management and executive functioning. These assumptions rarely reflect the lived realities of neurodivergent employees (1).

Neurodiversity encompasses a wide range of cognitive styles and conditions, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia (1). Neurodivergence can relate to sensory sensitivities, information processing, communication preferences, time management, and executive functioning. These differences can affect how performance is assessed and supported (2).

Without appropriate consideration, these factors can mask capability and lead to misinterpretation of underperformance. (2).

As organisations increasingly value neurodivergent talent, there is a growing need to rethink performance management through an inclusive lens. A neuro-inclusive approach moves away from deficit-based checklists and towards flexible, outcome-focused systems. These systems measure individualised success, highlight strengths, and recognise diverse working styles. (3).

Evidence from reports and pilot programmes demonstrates that neuro-inclusive practices can enhance innovation, problem-solving, accuracy, and productivity, while also strengthening employee engagement and retention (2, 4). Framing neurodiversity as a strategic talent advantage expands the available talent pool, mitigates recruitment and turnover costs, and fosters more resilient and adaptive teams (14).

Legal and ethical considerations further reinforce the need for inclusive performance management. Under the Equality Act (2010), employers must make reasonable adjustments and avoid practices that place employees at a substantial disadvantage. It's important to embed these obligations into everyday policy rather than treating them as exceptional accommodations (4).

Traditional KPIs often prioritise speed, multitasking, verbal participation, or rigid timelines, which can disadvantage neurodivergent employees and underestimate specialist contributions delivered through different work patterns or creative outputs (1,2,14). Differences in communication and sensory needs can amplify these issues, increasing the risk that performance is undervalued (1,2).

To mitigate this, organisations should redesign KPIs and review cycles to focus on outcomes, quality, creativity, and impact rather than conformity to process, incorporating strengths-based, contextual and multi-model evidence of performance (15).

Adapting workplace design, meeting processes, and contribution formats, such as enabling written or asynchronous input, reduces cognitive load and improves accessibility. This enables organisations to gain clearer insight into capability, strengthen engagement, and unlock innovation (16).

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Grievances and Conflict Resolution

Grievances and conflict resolution are critical areas for organisations to get right because concerns raised by neurodivergent employees signal systemic issues rather than individual failings. Escalation typically occurs when early warning signs are missed, communication differences are misinterpreted, or adjustments are inconsistently applied. Addressing these issues early is essential for maintaining trust and ensuring that performance processes remain fair and defensible.

Grievances for neurodivergent employees commonly arise from experiences of bullying, inadequate support or accommodations, perceived unfairness in performance evaluations, and exclusion from development and promotion opportunities (3, 4). Recent analyses show a sharp increase in employment tribunal decisions referencing neurodivergent conditions, reflecting greater disclosure and growing legal scrutiny of employer practices (6).

A contemporary factor contributing to this trend is the increasing use of generative AI by claimants to draft grievance materials, map timelines, and organise evidence. Legal commentary and industry analysis highlight AI-assisted case preparation as one factor in employment claims, adding pressure on investigatory and evidential practices (7, 8).

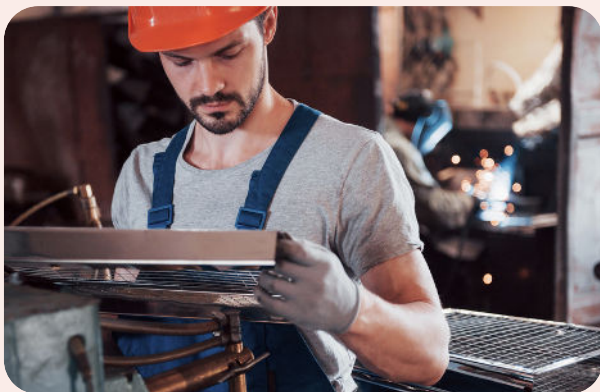
Overlooking the role of unaddressed barriers or applying formal processes prematurely undermines psychological safety, damages trust, and increases the likelihood of grievances or tribunal claims (1, 2). To mitigate these risks, grievance and conflict resolution processes must be predictable, accessible, and psychologically safe.



You may be at increased risk of grievance or tribunal if:

- Performance concerns escalate before adjustments are trialled
- Communication differences are framed as conduct issues
- Employees feel forced to formalise concerns to be heard
- Managers lack confidence in documenting adjustment decisions

Where concerns arise despite adjustments being in place, resolution processes should be co-productive and remediation focused (5, 10). Managers should be supported to distinguish between conduct or capability issues and ensure that any decisions reflect the role of workplace barriers rather than defaulting to deficit-based interpretations of behaviour.



Performance Improvement Plans and Neuro-Inclusion

Performance Improvement Plans (PIPs) are intended to support employees by providing structure, clarity and regular monitoring. When applied to neurodivergent employees without first identifying, implementing, and reviewing appropriate adjustments, they can quickly shift from supportive to punitive. This exposes individuals to harm and organisations to significant legal and reputational risk (5, 6).

Neurodivergence is likely to meet the Equality Act (2010) definition of disability, placing a legal duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments before initiating formal performance, conduct or capability procedures (11). ACAS guidance is explicit that formal action should only occur once all reasonable steps have been taken to support the employee, and failure to do so can undermine both fairness and legal defensibility (12).

Despite this, many organisations still escalate to formal procedures prematurely.

This often occurs because managers misinterpret neurodivergent traits as performance failings or because adjustments have not been meaningfully implemented or evaluated.

Recent tribunal decisions illustrate the risks of this approach.

In *Khorram v Capgemini UK plc* (2025), the Tribunal found that the employer breached its duty under the Equality Act by initiating performance procedures during probation without implementing recommended adjustments. The judgment highlighted that managers cannot attribute performance shortfalls solely to individual failings when workplace processes or missing adjustments may be causal contributors (11).

Similarly, *Aylott v BPP University Ltd* (2020) demonstrated how rigid, standardised performance management can be discriminatory when communication styles, sensory needs, or workload adjustments are ignored, establishing that failure to adapt procedures can amount to disability discrimination (12).

In *Shevlin v John Wiley & Sons Ltd* (2024), although the claim was dismissed because the employer had no knowledge of the disability, the case serves as a reminder that penalising errors related to an expression like ADHD without adjustments risks breaching the Equality Act if the employer is on notice (13)

A more effective and legally robust approach requires adjustments to be identified early, implemented fully, and reviewed before any formal performance process is

considered. This includes collaboratively clarifying expectations, documenting how adjustments are intended to support performance, and allowing sufficient time for those adjustments to take effect. Managers should be equipped to recognise when performance concerns may be linked to unmet needs.

Where concerns persist, any subsequent performance process should be co-productive and remediation-focused, with clear documentation of how adjustments were tailored and how they informed decision-making.

This approach strengthens procedural fairness, reduces escalation, and ensures alignment with the Equality Act (2010), while supporting retention, employee well-being, and sustainable performance (5).



A PIP may be inappropriate or legally vulnerable if:

- Adjustments have not been identified via a needs assessment
- Adjustments are newly introduced and not yet embedded
- Success criteria rely on speed, verbal participation, or multitasking
- There is no written record of how adjustments were considered
- The PIP is used to “create a paper trail” rather than support improvement

Rethinking Objective Setting for Neurodivergent Employees

Objective setting is one of the most influential levers organisations have for shaping performance, development, and retention. When objectives are designed without considering cognitive diversity, organisations risk misjudging capability, overlooking strengths, and unintentionally creating barriers that suppress performance.

To avoid this, objective setting must move away from one-size-fits-all processes and towards flexible, evidence-informed systems that foreground individual strengths, contextualised goals, and appropriate accommodations (15).

Flexible goal-setting and individualised success metrics are central to this approach. Rather than privileging traditional KPIs, managers should negotiate outcome-focused targets that allow different routes to value creation and demonstrable contributions (14, 16).

In this model, performance frameworks prioritise outputs and impact over conformity to standardised process markers, enabling goals to be renegotiated in recognition of neurodiversity, cognitive load, and strengths (12, 20).

Traditional KPIs often fail to capture specialist contributions delivered through different working patterns, increasing the risk that neurodivergent employees appear to be underperforming when performance measures are misaligned with how they work best. This misalignment can drive disengagement, inaccurate performance ratings, and unnecessary escalation into formal processes.

To counter this, organisations can embed reasonable adjustments directly into objective setting, review, and appraisal processes rather than treating them as exceptional concessions. This may involve offering alternative formats, extending timelines for self-assessment and response, reframing criteria to emphasise strengths and outcomes, and, where appropriate, the involvement of a trusted advocate or support (10, 15).

A more effective approach involves co-creating objectives that focus on outcomes, quality, and impact, supported by clear written expectations, predictable stages, and structured conversations.

Agreeing on effective communication channels, breaking complex goals into manageable components, and embedding adjustments directly into the performance cycle help ensure that goals are both stretching and sustainable. **Managers should draw on strength-based discussions and Workplace Needs Assessments to align expectations with individual working styles.**

When objective setting is approached in this way, organisations gain a more accurate understanding of performance, unlock higher-quality outputs, and strengthen engagement. This reduces the likelihood of conflict or grievance, supports compliance and enhances retention of highly skilled neurodivergent talent.



Tools and Strategies for Inclusive Practice

Embedding neuro-inclusive performance management requires practical tools and strategies that support consistent application in day-to-day performance conversations. Even well-designed objectives can be undermined if the review process relies on narrow behavioural markers, verbal communication or manager interpretation.

Challenges arise because traditional appraisal systems prioritise process over impact, and because managers often lack confidence in supporting neurodivergent employees. Research shows that line managers feel underprepared to implement adjustments, monitor their effectiveness, or adapt communication styles appropriately.

Targeted, ongoing training significantly improves capability and reduces inconsistency and legal vulnerability in performance decision-making (3, 15).

To address this, frameworks should include prompts for documenting Workplace Needs Assessments, agreeing on reasonable adjustments, reviewing workload, and recording evidence of adjustment effectiveness (3, 10). Standardising these elements supports consistency, defensibility, and fairness across teams.

Alongside this, manager training and neurodiversity awareness programmes are essential to translate policy into practice. Training that focuses on accessible communication, strengths-based goal-setting, feedback clarity, and recognising unconscious bias helps managers navigate conversations with confidence and reduces the likelihood of misinterpretation or escalation.



Managers are more effective when they can:

- Identify unmet needs
- Use strengths-based, structured conversations
- Agree and document reasonable adjustments
- Review and refine adjustments
- Apply performance processes consistently and fairly

At Thriver, we have supported organisations to:

- Audit performance management processes
- Identify process biases
- Support the co-design of inclusive review templates and communication materials
- Deliver targeted workshops for managers and HR professionals


These interventions have demonstrated that inclusive performance systems are effective in improving employee experience and organisational outcomes.

Measuring Impact

Measuring the impact of neuro-inclusive performance management is key, as organisations cannot improve what they do not effectively monitor. Without clear indicators, organisations lack visibility over consistent application of adjustments, their effect on performance, and whether employees experience the system as fair and accessible.

Many organisations rely on headline metrics that mask inequities or fail to capture the lived experience of neurodivergent employees, which can lead to misplaced confidence in processes that are not working as intended.

Quantitative measures provide essential visibility into implementation and consistency. These include accessibility audits of systems and workflows, rates of reasonable adjustment requests and completion, comparative retention and promotion rates for neurodivergent employees, and changes in performance-related outcomes in roles where adjustments have been introduced (3, 5, 10).



Organisations that track both adjustment effectiveness and employee experience are better positioned to reduce escalation, improve retention and strengthen legal defensibility

However, organisational metrics alone cannot capture employee experience, including psychological safety, clarity of expectations, or whether adjustments are genuinely enabling success. Regular, anonymised surveys, pulse checks, and structured feedback mechanisms can surface perceptions of fairness, accessibility of performance conversations, and confidence in complaint and appeal routes.

Benchmarks should focus on improvement trajectories and equity gaps rather than parity thresholds to demonstrate sustainable change over time (3, 4, 16).

By combining organisational indicators with employee experience data, leaders gain a more accurate and actionable picture of how performance systems are functioning. This enables targeted improvements, reduces the risk of grievances, strengthens trust, and ensures that adjustments are not only implemented but effective. Measuring impact this way creates a continuous feedback loop that embeds neuro-inclusion into organisational culture and decision-making.

The following case studies illustrate the real-world examples of misalignment, intervention and support, and the transformative potential of getting it right.



Case Study One

Background

Luke is an autistic data analyst whose work is consistently high quality. He is known for exceptional accuracy and attention to detail, but finds verbal communication in meetings challenging and struggles to retain verbal instructions.

Managerial Response

Luke's manager interpreted these expressions as signs of disengagement and poor communication. Without exploring workplace adjustments, the manager placed Luke on a PIP focused on increasing verbal participation in meetings and responding more quickly to verbal instructions.

Areas of Concern

- Autistic communication traits were misinterpreted as performance issues
- The PIP targeted behaviours directly linked to neurodivergence
- Alternative communication methods were not explored
- The process increased stress and negatively impacted performance



Impact

Luke felt penalised rather than supported, damaging trust and placing the organisation at risk of losing a highly skilled employee.

Key Insight

Performance management must distinguish between genuine performance concerns and neurodivergent traits.

What the Organisation Could Have Done Differently

The organisation could have explored Luke's communication preferences before initiating formal measures. Written instructions, structured agendas, and predictable meeting formats would have reduced the barriers. A strengths-based discussion, supported by an Inclusion Passport, could have clarified effective working practices and enabled Luke to continue delivering high-quality analytical work.

Case Study Two

Background

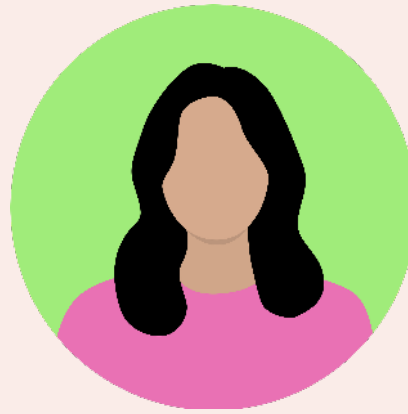
Amaya is a project coordinator with ADHD who demonstrates creativity and strong interpersonal skills but struggles with deadlines and task organisation. She requested a Workplace Needs Assessment. It recommended project management software, regular check-ins with her manager, and flexibility to take short breaks.

Managerial Response

The recommended adjustments were approved and implemented. However, Amaya was placed on a PIP only three weeks later due to continued deadline issues.

Areas of Concern

- Adjustments were not given sufficient time to embed
- Immediate improvement was expected without a review period
- Formal escalation undermined the purpose of the adjustments
- Amaya felt punished for requesting support



Impact

The premature PIP created stress, reduced confidence and damaged the manager-employee relationship, increasing legal and reputational risk.

Key Insight

Workplace adjustments must be given adequate time to take effect before performance management processes are considered.

What the Organisation Could Have Done Differently

The organisation could have allowed sufficient time for adjustments to embed and provided structured support to help Amaya integrate new tools. Regular check-ins and collaborative problem-solving would have supported performance improvement and demonstrated good practice under the Equality Act 2010.

Case Study Three

Background

Maria is a trainee at a law firm. She is autistic and has ADHD. She brings strong creative and analytical skills but struggles with rigid deadlines, multitasking, and sensory overload in an open-plan office.

Managerial Response

Maria was initially assessed using uniform metrics such as speed of output, meeting attendance, and verbal participation. Following a Workplace Needs Assessment, adjustments were introduced, including flexible deadlines, written agendas, noise-cancelling headphones, and outcome-focused objectives aligned with her strengths.

Areas of Concern

- Initial performance metrics did not reflect Maria's strengths
- Speed and verbal participation were overemphasised
- Adjustments were introduced only after disengagement emerged



Impact

Once adjustments and outcome-focused targets were introduced, Maria's performance improved significantly, and the organisation benefited from higher-quality outputs.

Key Insight

Flexible, outcome-focused performance measures enable neurodivergent employees to perform at their best.

What the Organisation Could Have Done Differently

An earlier review of performance metrics and proactive adjustments could have reduced cognitive load and enabled Maria to contribute more consistently from the outset.

Case Study Four

Background

James is a graphic designer with dyslexia and ADHD. He excels in visual storytelling and creative problem-solving but struggles with rigid administrative processes, short turnaround times, and verbal-only feedback.

Managerial Response

James was assessed using metrics focused on draft volume, speed, and verbal participation. A Workplace Needs Assessment later identified cognitive overload and communication barriers, leading to adjustments such as extended timelines, multimodal instructions, structured written feedback, and outcome-focused targets.

Areas of Concern

- Performance measurers prioritised speed and volume over quality
- James's strengths were undervalued
- His challenges were not recognised as linked to neurodivergence until the needs assessment
- Accessible communication methods were not initially provided



Impact

With adjustments in place, James' performance was assessed more accurately, confidence improved, and the organisation benefited from higher-quality creative output.

Key Insight

When performance expectations are aligned with strengths and supported by appropriate adjustments, neurodivergent employees can deliver exceptional value.

What the Organisation Could Have Done Differently

The organisation could have evaluated James' performance based on the impact and quality of his work rather than the volume or speed of draft production. By introducing adjustments, it could have been used to support sustainable performance and retention.

These examples demonstrate how flexible goal setting, individualised success metrics, and adjustments identified through Workplace Needs Assessments enable neurodivergent employees to demonstrate value. Shifting performance management away from rigid processes and towards outcomes, impact, and negotiated pathways to success aligns with evidence-informed best practice (15).

In addition, strengths-based feedback further supports this shift by replacing deficit-focused appraisals with development-centred conversations that build on what individuals do well (14, 15). When embedded within performance systems, this approach has been shown to increase engagement, improve retention, and make performance conversations constructive rather than anxiety-provoking (13, 16).

Summary

To conclude, neuro-inclusive performance management offers clear ethical and strategic advantages, including improved retention, talent development, increased innovation, and reduced legal risk. It is recommended that organisations should move beyond process systems toward flexible, strengths-focused approaches and proactive support.

Training for HR and line managers, as well as regular policy reviews and updates to identify and embed adjustment reviews into routine practice. Additionally, it involves the use of outcome-focused goal frameworks and formats that are accessible. These steps create fairer performance systems, reduce grievance risk, and enable organisations to effectively support employees to thrive.



How Thriviver Can Help

At Thriviver, we partner with organisations to embed neuro-inclusive performance management practices that are practical, strategic, and sustainable.

Our expertise encompasses consultancy, training, and systems design, enabling employers to audit, redesign, and implement performance frameworks that support diverse talent.

We conduct comprehensive audits of existing performance management processes to identify where traditional systems may disadvantage neurodivergent employees. This includes reviewing templates, feedback mechanisms, and goal-setting structures to uncover bias and misalignment, followed by tailored recommendations for inclusive redesign.

A core part of our approach is the delivery of Workplace Needs Assessments, carried out by highly qualified professionals.

These assessments identify task-related barriers that may affect performance and guide the development of reasonable adjustments that are specific, actionable, and measurable. We ensure these adjustments are trialled and reviewed before any formal performance procedures are considered, aligning with best practice and legal obligations under the Equality Act (2010).

We also provide training and neurodiversity awareness programmes for HR teams, managers, and leadership.

These sessions build confidence in recognising neurodivergent traits, applying strengths-based support and managing performance conversations in inclusive and legally compliant ways.

In summary, we help organisations move beyond compliance to build performance cultures that are equitable, innovative, and growth-oriented. Whether you're just beginning your neurodiversity journey or refining existing practices, we provide the expertise and partnership to make meaningful change.

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