

HR insights podcast

Series 9 | Episode 9

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Why neurodiversity awareness isn't enough

Stuart Elliott (00:22)

Hi everyone, welcome back to HR Insights.

Some of our long-term listeners will remember that around two years ago we explored neurodiversity in the workplace with Tanya Martin. We covered a lot of the business case, her own journey and diagnosis, and the adjustments that can make a real difference.

Since then, awareness has continued to grow. There's also been a slight change or shift in terms of DEI or EDI and how it's seen within an organisation. But I think the key thing here is that awareness doesn't always translate into better outcomes. Neurodivergent talent is still being lost at key points in the employee journey, particularly during interviews or when requesting adjustments.

So today we're going to explore that a little further. I'm joined by Claire Gray, who works in the Civil Service and leads neuroinclusion at scale, and also runs NeuroTalent at Work.

Claire has a fascinating story. Her own journey is worth listening to at the very beginning of the show, before we start to explore some of the more practical adjustments organisations can make as we move through the conversation.

I hope you enjoy the show.

Stuart Elliott (01:32)

Hi, Claire. Welcome to the show. How are you today?

Claire Gray (01:35)

I'm very well, thank you.

Stuart Elliott (01:36)

Awesome. For our audience, do you want to give a little introduction to you, your background and your company?

Claire Gray (01:43)

Yeah, sure. My route into this kind of work is very personal, like it is for quite a few of us in this space. I'm late-diagnosed autistic and I also have ADHD. It's very common for people like myself to be going through assessment journeys with our children and then start seeing ourselves in some of the questions that are being asked throughout that process. That was really what happened for me.

It began with my children going through their own assessment journeys. As I supported them, I started to recognise my own experiences in theirs and think, "I hadn't thought about this for me." Things that had never quite made sense suddenly started to have context.

That brought things into view for me, such as recurring cycles of burnout at work, really high levels of anxiety and a persistent feeling that everyone somehow had a different script, or just knew how to do things and fit in, and I'd missed it and didn't quite get it. So I sought my own diagnosis at that point. It was clarifying in many ways, but also quite challenging. I hadn't expected at the time that it would cause quite a huge identity crisis. I needed to relearn myself and who I was, and that took a lot of time and introspection.

As I was doing that, I looked around my workplace in particular and realised I couldn't see or hear anyone really talking openly about neurodiversity or neuroinclusion. I hadn't really felt safe to do that myself because I was still learning a lot about myself, but I knew there had to be other neurodivergent people. I surely wasn't on my own in an entire organisation feeling this way, wanting to understand myself and others, have that community and look for practical support, but having absolutely no idea where to start.

At that time, I was a civil servant and I began by joining a disability network. It was through that that I started to learn from other people and then contribute myself. I designed neurodiversity awareness sessions and tested them at first in much smaller groups within my business area. But the response really surprised me. It was quite remarkable. People started to request these sessions, they were really engaged and they asked me for more information.

Over the next few years, I delivered many sessions inside my organisation, outside my organisation and in my personal life. What I realised throughout all of that was that there was a real appetite for that information. But actually, the most important thing was what happened after each of those sessions. People started to come forward with their own lived experiences. I found that they had the confidence to speak up and to question processes and elements of the culture around them that were making work harder than it really needed to be.

That taught me something really fundamental about what actually matters. Awareness is not the same as inclusion. Awareness starts the conversation, but inclusion is really about what changes as a result of that conversation in the everyday work experience: how people are managed, how decisions are made and how support is actually put into practice. From there, I designed a neuroinclusion programme to really start looking at that system. That work was recognised with a Director General's commendation in the Civil Service, which is something I'm really proud of. More importantly, though, it showed me the scale of the gap that still exists between good intentions and everyday realities. That's really why I started NeuroTalent at Work.

Today, what I do with that is take those lived experiences and help organisations close what I think is the biggest challenge: the line-manager gap between inclusion policy and everyday management practice. Policy only really becomes meaningful in the moment a manager responds well. When somebody discloses, asks for an adjustment or simply needs to work in a different way, a manager needs to be able to convert that policy into: "What do I do? How do I respond? What do I say? What am I allowed to do? How do we get that support and make it happen?"

Stuart Elliott (07:54)

It sounds like you've got your hands full with all of that as well!

But let's go back to the topic. You mentioned earlier that you describe your work as "operational neuroinclusion". What exactly does that mean? It was a phrase that was new to me when we were going through and designing the questions.

Claire Gray (08:22)

To me, operational neuroinclusion is about moving beyond awareness. It's about taking those good intentions and making them into real inclusion in the day-to-day mechanics of work.

For me, awareness is a poster. It's giving you information and telling you things. But capability is a skill, and that's what we need to be moving towards.

It means looking at the moments where people most often struggle: recruitment, onboarding, workload, communication, adjustments, meetings and performance conversations. The practical question is: what does a line manager do differently on a Tuesday morning after the awareness session? Can they take what they've learned and convert that into action?

Too often, someone only really discloses when they're in a performance conversation. That's very common at the moment, when a line manager is already considering things like a performance improvement plan or a capability route. That's not an individual failure. That is a system failure. If people had felt safer to speak up earlier, and managers had known how to notice they were having difficulties, how to ask about them, how to respond and how to provide the support required, then that support could have been in place long before performance became an issue.

The first job is really to pause that process, create psychological safety, get curious about what is getting in the way for that person and not rush straight into a formal route. That's the capability for the manager in practice. Policy is only really useful if managers have the confidence, clarity and tools to apply it consistently. That's what we see missing.

Stuart Elliott (10:25)

That makes sense. Over the years, I've definitely seen awareness get better. It's still not where it needs to be, but it's definitely better than it was. One thing that could potentially hinder this awareness or inclusion going forward, though, is the lack of budget. EDI seems to have come under some pressure over the last two or three years.

How do leaders demonstrate the value of investing in this? Because, in some respects, you're almost looking for an ROI on it, aren't you?

Claire Gray (11:04)

Another list of benefits is not going to save an EDI budget. Your listeners have already heard from a previous podcast with Tanya what that return on investment and business case is: productivity, diversity of thought, retention and attraction. All of that is true, but organisations have accepted that and, for many people, their experiences at work have still not got better. So proving that it's worth doing isn't really the question anymore. The question should be: are we actually doing it?

There are two things I would do. First, I would move the EDI discussion out of that budget frame. That budget can be exposed, but this work doesn't really have to sit there. It belongs in talent. It belongs in legal. It belongs in risk and manager capability. That's where the real value sits.

I wouldn't lead with fear, but we do need to be honest that cases involving neurodivergent conditions are rising. There is a business risk when support comes too late or doesn't happen at all.

From a business perspective – without even going into the moral obligation of doing the right thing, because that should always be there – that's why manager capability matters so much. The legal duty of the business gets done through everyday decisions. It's done in what a manager notices, the questions they ask, whether they try to understand what's getting in the way and whether they provide support before it becomes a formal process.

The strongest argument isn't necessarily benefits or risk. It's that you've already paid to hire us as neurodivergent people, and recruitment is really expensive. Losing someone 18 months into a role and then having to do it all again is a waste. We put a lot of money into that process. Most of what I would recommend costs a conversation and a template.

You don't want to measure how many people attended a training session. That tells you what you spent, not what you changed. You want to measure whether managers actually know what to do, whether people are getting support before they reach crisis point and whether you're actually keeping the talent you've already paid to hire.

Stuart Elliott (13:45)

Retention of talent is always a priority for organisations. If they looked at it through that lens a little bit more, I think it would definitely become a higher priority. You mentioned a couple of areas where we can look at this: interviews, adjustments and performance management. I want to touch on interviews first and compartmentalise the questions a little.

What are organisations still getting wrong when it comes to interviewing neurodivergent candidates?

Claire Gray (14:24)

Businesses are getting three things wrong repeatedly in this space: ambiguity, surprise and making adjustments depend on disclosure. Start with the recruitment advert. You'll often see language like "self-starter", "dynamic" and "excellent communicator", but nobody is really clear about what is actually going to be assessed or what the job involves. They're all written at a very high level.

Then there's the application process. Many of these include things like word counts. You need to ask yourself whether putting a word limit on an application is actually part of the job itself, or whether you've just created a barrier within the application. For some neurodivergent candidates, myself included, a tight word count can make it really difficult to show what they know. At the very least, businesses should make it easy to ask for an extension, whether that's more time to complete the application, an increased word count or an alternative way to demonstrate the capability you need to see.

Then there's the interview. If candidates don't get the questions in advance, you might actually be testing how quickly someone can think on the spot, manage pressure and perform in an unfamiliar room. Unless that's genuinely what the job requires, it's not necessarily a good test of whether they can do the job. For the most part, jobs don't need you to think on the spot that quickly. Sharing questions in advance doesn't lower the bar. It means you get a view of what someone can actually do rather than how quickly they can improvise under pressure.

The other problem is adjustments. Adjustments are technically available, but often only if someone discloses at the point when they're applying for a job and have the least power in that relationship. That can feel like a really big ask. It feels scary and creates vulnerability. A better approach is to build flexibility into the process by default wherever you can, so a candidate doesn't have to explain or justify themselves simply to have a fair chance.

Again, that often comes back to manager capability. It is very rarely hostility. A hiring manager might hesitate because they don't know what adjustments they can offer, they don't know what would help or they might be worried about how they would support someone if they did hire them. That isn't something you can fix with awareness alone. That is the capability gap I was referring to, but it's one businesses can fix.

Stuart Elliott (17:41)

There are a few things there. One thing I can relate to is giving questions upfront. We find clients are quite reluctant to do that. They value that initial thinking on your feet.

If we asked clients, I would say nine out of ten would be very reluctant to give us the questions in advance. What would you say to that?

Claire Gray (18:10)

I would say it's testing someone's ability to do the interview rather than their ability to do the job itself. A traditional interview can reward things like really quick answers. If that's part of the job, you might need someone to have that capability, and that's fine. But for the majority of roles, you don't actually need that ability.

It can reward quick answers, confidence, eye contact and thinking on the spot. Unless that is going to be the difference between being able to do that job and not being able to do it, you might end up hiring the person who is better at interviewing rather than the person who is better at doing the work you actually need them to do.

A useful check is this: if one of your best hires – someone you already have – would struggle with your current interview process on a bad day, then you might actually be measuring the wrong thing.

Stuart Elliott (19:08)

I can completely understand that. It's a tricky one, because a lot of our clients possibly wouldn't see it that way.

On the flip side, though, if someone says that they're neurodivergent, there's a risk of being discriminated against if they declare that at the outset. Is that correct?

Claire Gray (19:28)

Yes, that's certainly how it feels. It may be the case as well, but we mostly assume good intentions on the employer's part. It can definitely feel like a huge risk. If they didn't want to hire you because you made that disclosure, you're not necessarily going to know that as an individual. So you might not want to take the risk.

It's really important for a company to make it clear if they value neurodivergent talent. I would look for that if I were looking for a job. I would be asking: "Is this company going to be a safe place for me to be myself, disclose that and ask for equity in these processes?"

People ask me all the time whether giving some people the questions in advance gives them an unfair advantage over the people who don't get them. It doesn't. There's a difference between equality – everyone getting the same thing – and equity, where somebody is given the tool or support they require for it to be a level playing field for them.

Stuart Elliott (21:44)

How can organisations make recruitment more inclusive without adjusting their standards? How can they keep that standard very high but make the process fairer?

Claire Gray (21:56)

A lot of people worry that inclusive recruitment means lowering the standard, but it doesn't. It just means you need to separate the standard from the test itself. The standard is still: can this person do the job to the level we need them to do it? That stays the same. The challenge is how you find that out, and that can vary by individual.

You can use structured questions and share them in advance. You can use work examples rather than abstract concepts. You can use plain language rather than buzzwords. You can assess what someone produces rather than how smoothly or put together they appear in an interview situation when they're in a room and being asked to respond on the spot. You're not making the test easier; you're making it more accurate. You're measuring their capability, not just their composure on the spot. That benefits every candidate, not just neurodivergent candidates. You're more likely to see the real talent and skills you need them to bring into your business rather than simply how well they perform throughout the recruitment process.

Stuart Elliott (23:24)

If we move the conversation onto the next part – adjustments – this is when someone has started with an organisation. Why can getting the right workplace adjustments still be really difficult?

Claire Gray (23:45)

For most organisations, adjustments still depend on goodwill rather than process. There's usually a policy, but there isn't necessarily a clear list of what somebody can ask for, a named route through which to ask or a clear timeframe for getting an answer. Whether someone gets support can therefore come down to who their line manager is, what that manager knows and how confident they feel managing neurodivergence. It shouldn't be a matter of goodwill. There should be a clear and reliable route – something that works every time.

This is where people give up. I've certainly been there. You might have an excellent manager in this area who has personal experience, experience of managing other colleagues or experience supporting neurodivergent family members. Or you might have a manager who has all the goodwill in the world and the best intentions, but simply doesn't understand how to help. That's where somebody can give up and stop asking, or say, "I've asked, but I still haven't got it."

An unmet need in the workplace can then quietly start to be treated as a performance issue. There's the funding aspect as well. Businesses sometimes wait for things like Access to Work before they do anything, but there can be long queues for that. The same can happen with internal funding barriers. Those delays don't make the need disappear. That person is still struggling while they're waiting for the funding.

We need to start with practice. Many adjustments are free or low-cost changes that you can make now, particularly around the way somebody works. Write down what you've done and then use the funding when it arrives, whether that's internally or externally. Adjust everything you can now and fund later.

Stuart Elliott (25:55)

Do you have a few examples of adjustments companies have made that have made life easier?

Claire Gray (26:02)

There's a lot of discussion around hybrid working at the moment, and for a lot of companies it's moving in the opposite direction. They're saying, "Come back to the office." Neurodivergent people are one demographic within the workforce who have significantly benefited from hybrid working. We've been able to benefit almost informally because that has been the working model for many companies since COVID. Now companies are saying they need people to come back into the office and are slowly increasing that requirement. That will have an impact on many neurodivergent people who work better in environments they can create for themselves. Putting somebody into an open-plan office or another environment where they can't control the things they need to control can create difficulties. Flexibility is therefore one adjustment.

Another is simplifying things that are unsaid. Take meetings. Sometimes we have an agenda, sometimes we don't. Sometimes we know we're going to speak, sometimes we don't. Sometimes we need to prepare for them, but a lot of these things are left unknown. There can be an assumption that you "should know", but things that aren't said explicitly can really trip up neurodivergent people. So look at ways of working, because much of that is free and relatively easy to work through. You don't have to wait for funding.

Other adjustments might involve technical support, such as software or adapting somebody's computer, or something as simple as headphones. There are many different adjustments. It depends on what the individual needs.

Stuart Elliott (29:30)

Out of interest, how much responsibility for this sits with the company, and how much sits with the individual to explain what they need?

Claire Gray (29:44)

We've put a lot of that responsibility on the individual, and that is the wrong way around. To self-advocate, you need to know that you're neurodivergent. Referring back to my story, it's very common currently to be late diagnosed and learning about these things in your 30s, 40s, 50s or beyond. You might pick it up in the workplace. You might attend an awareness session and think, "Wow, that rings bells for me." So you might not know that you're neurodivergent. You need to know what helps, and if you're early in that journey of understanding yourself and how your challenges present themselves in and out of work, you might not know that either. You might not know what you're entitled to. You might not know whether it's safe to ask. And you might not know who to ask. If any one of those things is missing, a request might never happen or it might not follow through into something that is actually helpful.

It isn't an organisation's job to guess, but it isn't their job to sit around and wait either. Start by making asking normal and making it feel low-stakes. Create psychological safety so people know they're going to be met with a positive response. Publish an adjustments menu so nobody feels they have to invent their own request. Name the route and show people exactly where that conversation starts and where it goes. Then ask everybody the same question – and this isn't just about neurodivergence: "How do you work best, and what gets in the way?"

It's diagnosis-free and it works for the whole team. Nobody has to out themselves as neurodivergent simply to get the setup they need at work. There's also a shortcut that people really skip. If you want to know what doesn't work in your business, ask the people it's not working for. Satisfaction surveys can tell you everything is okay right up until the point where somebody burns out, goes off sick or resigns. You need to be asking what is costing them effort and whether they could keep going like that for another year. If the answer is no, something is broken in that process.

Stuart Elliott (35:42)

I want to move us onto the performance management side of things. Is that discussed enough in conversations around neurodiversity? What are companies getting wrong when they're thinking about this?

Claire Gray (36:10)

They tend to get the order wrong. The right order is to notice, explore, adjust, give those adjustments time to work and then assess performance. Quite often, it happens the other way around. A formal performance process starts because of the very difficulties that the right support could have addressed. Sometimes what looks like a sudden drop in performance is actually the point where somebody can no longer keep compensating for something that has been difficult for a long time. You can't really fairly judge somebody's capability while the support they need is still missing. A performance improvement plan should not be the first structured conversation you have with somebody who is struggling. If that's the first thing you put in writing, you've skipped all the earlier, cheaper and more humane steps.

It should start with curiosity: What's getting in the way? What support could help? What should we try first? Once that support has had a proper chance to embed and work, you can then have a fair conversation about performance.

Stuart Elliott (37:39)

How do we make recruitment processes fairer and performance management fairer without lowering the bar in terms of our expectations?

Claire Gray (37:55)

Most of the time, the fear about lowering the bar is actually a fear about inconsistency. If we do something differently for one person, will it become unmanageable?

The answer to that is a system. It isn't about refusing adjustments. We need to be clear about the outcome the role needs to deliver and then be flexible about the route to getting there. Manage the output, not the style. Sitting still, thinking out loud or replying to every email within the hour might be how we're used to working, but they're not always standards the job actually requires. The job can still get done. Make the adjustments first and then assess performance in that adjusted state. If somebody is still falling short, you can absolutely still have a fair and honest conversation, because what you're looking at then is capability rather than a barrier you left in place.

Fairness isn't about lowering the bar. It's about making sure the bar is the job. We need to know what it is we're actually measuring and remember the difference between equity and equality.

Stuart Elliott (40:21)

Thinking about bringing the conversation to a close, I'd love to get your view on what organisations should be doing to support their managers. I feel like this is now more about supporting managers than it is about individuals identifying their neurodivergence. What advice would you give organisations?

Claire Gray (40:57)

Supporting the line manager is the whole point. A policy will tell people what should happen, but the line manager is the person who makes it happen in practice – usually in an ordinary one-to-one with a very well-intentioned manager who hasn't necessarily been given the right tools.

People usually speak to their manager before they go to HR. That's the moment of either the greatest risk or the greatest opportunity, but either way it happens in a room that HR isn't in. Managers don't need more awareness. They need practical support at the moment they need it. They need to know: What do I do? What do I say? What do I write down? When do I ask for help myself? A three-hour webinar or awareness session in March isn't necessarily going to help somebody at four o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon in November.

If HR or businesses take one thing away from this, don't just ask whether your policy is good. Often it is. Ask whether managers can act on it without having to ring HR. There are circumstances and complex cases where they absolutely should involve HR, but for those very first conversations and that basic level of support, can they do it independently? Then, importantly, ask the people the policy is meant to support what isn't working. Because I promise you, we'll tell you.

Stuart Elliott (42:38)

I'm going to throw in one final question. What advice would you give to the managers themselves when it comes to implementing some of these changes? I can imagine a manager sitting there thinking, "I've got the organisation telling me one thing, I've got my employee telling me another thing and I'm stuck in the middle." What advice would you give them?

Claire Gray (43:01)

Be curious. It's okay not to know the answers. It's okay not to have the experience. Be curious about the individual. Learn about what their challenges are. Learn about how they work individually. Learn about what might help them and try things. Also be curious about the organisation. What have they provided you?

For many companies, the separate issue is that they say, "We've provided you with lots of things. It's all here." But a manager finds it difficult to know where those things are when they need them, to have the time to read through them all and to put everything together. Don't wait until that moment lands and you need it. Go out and be curious about what your organisation provides.

If you feel you don't know, ask for support. Say, "I haven't got a member of staff who needs this yet, but if I did, what would I need to know?" With somewhere between one in five and one in seven people expected to be neurodivergent, we're going to come across this as line managers. Ask the questions you might need to know in advance. But you don't need to know everything. You will get support from HR. Be curious, be open-minded, admit when you don't know something and be there to support and help.

Stuart Elliott (44:17)

Really good advice all round.

Claire, I just want to thank you for your time today. It's been a real pleasure to have you on the show and to take this conversation to the next level. As you mentioned, we've discussed this previously, but I think this is a conversation around education and processes that will continue to grow. Maybe it's something we revisit in another year's time and see where we've got to, because I'm hoping the needle will have moved slightly.

Claire Gray (44:43)

Absolutely. We diagnosed a lot of the problems that we've discussed today a couple of years ago with Tanya, but what we've not seen is that conversion. Hopefully, we can start having these conversations and saying, "All of that is great. We've definitely excelled in our awareness. Now we need to convert that and give managers the tools to go and do it."

Stuart Elliott (45:02)

Awesome. Thank you so much for joining us on the show today. I hope our listeners enjoyed that.

Thanks a lot.

Claire Gray (45:07)

Thank you. Thanks.

Stuart Elliott (45:10)

Cheers.