

Neurodiversity in Libraries: Creating a supportive space for all

The Neurodiverse Library and Information Staff Network (NLISN) is now up and running and here **Caroline Ball**, Academic Librarian at the University of Derby, eBook campaigner, and a member of NLISN's organising committee explains why it is important for individuals and the institutions they work in.

THE library and information sector thrives on the diverse skills, experiences, and perspectives of its workforce. Among this rich tapestry are neurodivergent library workers – individuals whose brains function differently from what is considered “neurotypical.”

Neurodivergence encompasses a wide range of conditions, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, and Tourette's syndrome, among others. While neurodivergent individuals bring unique strengths and talents to the workplace, they can also face challenges due to environments and practices that may not always align with their needs.

Understanding neurodiversity

Neurodivergence is not a single condition but an umbrella term encompassing a variety of neurological differences. These differences can manifest in various ways, affecting how individuals process information, communicate, learn, and interact with the world around them. For example, individuals with ADHD may experience challenges with focus, impulsivity, and time management, while those with autism may have different communication styles and sensory sensitivities.

In the workplace, neurodivergent individuals may encounter barriers due to traditional work structures and expectations. Open-plan offices, strict schedules, and a focus on conformity can be particularly challenging for



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those with sensory sensitivities or who thrive in less structured environments. Additionally, neurodivergent individuals may face stigma and discrimination due to misunderstandings about their neurodivergent traits.

It's important to note that neurodivergence often coexists with other mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression. The stress of navigating a world that isn't always designed for neurodivergent brains can take a toll on mental well-being. This is why creating a supportive and inclusive workplace is crucial for the well-being and success of neurodivergent employees.

The need for a neurodiversity network

Recognising the importance of fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for neu-



neurodivergent library workers, a group of passionate individuals has established the Neurodiverse Library and Information Staff Network (NLISN). Founded by Andrew Walsh and Joanne Fitzpatrick, this network is dedicated to creating a safe and welcoming space where neurodivergent library staff can connect, share experiences, access resources, and advocate for positive change.

NLISN's core mission aims to: Support neurodivergent talent in libraries, information and knowledge sector across the UK.

- Incubate a supportive network that offers mailing lists, networking opportunities, and peer support.
- Provide opportunities for information sharing through meet-ups and events.
- Support neurodivergent professionals to get hired, retain employment, and progress in their careers.
- Assist library leadership to access and support neurodivergent talent.
- Signpost resources and training to help library leadership and potential allies understand and support neurodivergent as colleagues and workers.
- Deliver research outputs, such as conference papers or partnered research projects.

The creation of NLISN was driven

by a shared understanding that neurodivergent individuals often face unique challenges in the workplace. Many have experienced feelings of isolation or lack of support due to their neurodivergent traits. Often, there's a lack of understanding and awareness about neurodiversity, leading to misinterpretations of behaviour and communication styles. The unique strengths and perspectives that neurodivergent individuals bring to the table are often overlooked or misunderstood in traditional work environments. Their ability to think outside the box, hyperfocus on tasks that capture their interest, and attention to detail can be invaluable assets.

The creation of NLISN was driven by a desire to recognise and celebrate these strengths, while also educating employers and colleagues about the value of neurodiversity. It aims to create a space where neurodivergent individuals feel empowered to embrace their unique strengths without fear of judgement or stigma and to advocate for their needs, and to foster a sense of community and belonging.

My personal journey with neurodiversity

As someone who has personal experience of the complexities of being neurodivergent in the workplace, I understand the profound impact that a supportive community can have. For many years, I

unconsciously masked my ADHD traits, attempting to conform to neurotypical expectations. This led to burnout, anxiety, and a persistent sense of not fitting in. It wasn't until I received my diagnosis and connected with other neurodivergent individuals that I began to embrace my neurodiversity as simply another element of myself, rather than a weakness.

Through these connections, I discovered that I wasn't alone in my experiences. Many of my neurodivergent colleagues had faced similar challenges and had developed coping mechanisms and strategies for thriving in the workplace. Sharing our stories and experiences created a sense of solidarity and empowerment.

For much of my life, I joked about having ADHD, hyper-aware of my own shortcomings when it came to attention span, distractibility, and a tendency to flit from one obsession to the next. Yet, I never seriously considered that I might have ADHD. I, like many others, held onto stereotypes of ADHD as something that afflicted "naughty little boys," who were disruptive and struggled in school. That wasn't me. I was a high achiever, excelling in academics without much effort.

However, beneath the surface, I struggled. I battled with impulse control, self-medicated with sugar and caffeine, and found traditional work environments challenging. I constantly sought novelty and variety in my work, taking on more

and more projects, fearing that I would be perceived as lazy if I didn't. This fear stemmed from a childhood filled with accusations of laziness due to my disorganisation and forgetfulness. I would forget where I'd left things, be careless with belongings, and struggle to complete chores or schoolwork that required sustained effort. I'd get frustrated easily when things required intense focus or concentration. I never revised and couldn't take notes. The word "lazy" echoed through my childhood, shaping my self-perception and fuelling a relentless drive to prove my worth through overachieving.

The pandemic brought a significant shift. Working from home allowed me the freedom to work in a way that suited me, without the scrutiny of colleagues. I thrived in this environment, juggling multiple projects and indulging my need for constant stimulation. However, this also led to overwork and burnout. The lack of structure and external accountability, combined with the isolation of lockdown, exacerbated my ADHD tendencies. I worked excessively, blurring the lines between work and personal time, and neglecting my own well-being.

It was during therapy for anxiety and depression, brought on by burnout, that my therapist suggested I might have ADHD. Researching ADHD was like looking in a mirror. Suddenly, everything made sense – my lifelong struggles with focus, time management, impulsivity, and emotional regulation. It was a revelation, both relieving and saddening. Relieving because it wasn't my fault, it was just how my brain worked. Saddening because of the years I had spent blaming myself, believing I was simply lazy or not trying hard enough, and the effect that had on my self-esteem and sense of self.

Receiving an official diagnosis was life-changing. It allowed me to understand myself better, forgive myself for past struggles, and access support and

strategies to manage my ADHD. I became open about my diagnosis, advocating for greater understanding and acceptance of neurodiversity in the workplace. I realised that my ADHD wasn't a character flaw, but a neurological difference that, with the right support and understanding, could be a source of strength.

I learned to embrace my unique way of thinking and working, recognising that my distractibility could also be a source of creativity and innovation. I discovered the power of self-compassion and the importance of setting boundaries to protect my well-being. While the journey of living with ADHD is ongoing, I am grateful for the self-awareness and acceptance that my diagnosis has brought. It has allowed me to build a more fulfilling and authentic life, both personally and professionally.

I was fortunate to have an understanding line manager and a workplace with access to occupational health resources. I never hesitated to be open about my diagnosis because I never feared it would be held against me or hinder my career. However, I know that not everyone is so lucky. Just as I was open about my anxiety and depression because I believe it's important to normalise mental health diagnoses, I feel the same about neurodivergence. My willingness to be open about my ADHD might help someone else who is struggling silently. This is one of the reasons I have become involved in NLISN.

NLISN: A Beacon of Support

The current, extensive backlog for NHS ADHD referrals underscores the pressing need for initiatives like NLISN. The prolonged wait times for diagnosis and support can significantly impact individuals' well-being and professional lives.

By fostering a supportive community and providing resources, NLISN aims to bridge this gap, offering a space for individuals navigating the complexities of neurodiversity, regardless of their formal

diagnostic status. It's a welcoming space for anyone who identifies as neurodivergent, is exploring their neurodiversity or suspects they may be neurodivergent. The journey of self-discovery can be both exciting and challenging, and having a supportive community can make all the difference.

The network offers a variety of resources and initiatives to support neurodivergent library workers:

- **Peer Support:** The buddying scheme pairs individuals with shared experiences, fostering connections and providing a safe space for confidential conversations.

- **Resource Library:** A curated collection of articles, guides, and tools on topics relevant to neurodiversity in the workplace.

- **Community Events:** Regular online and in-person meetups provide opportunities for networking, learning, and socialising.

- **Advocacy:** NLISN actively advocates for more inclusive workplace practices and policies that support neurodivergent individuals.

Embracing neurodiversity: A path to innovation and growth

Neurodiversity is not a deficit; it's a difference. Neurodivergent individuals bring unique strengths and perspectives to the library sector. They often possess exceptional creativity, problem-solving skills, attention to detail, and a passion for knowledge. By embracing neurodiversity, libraries can tap into this rich pool of talent and create a more innovative and dynamic workplace.

NLISN is committed to fostering a culture of acceptance and understanding within the library sector. We believe that by working together, we can create a more inclusive environment where everyone feels valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential.

Join the movement

As a newly established network, NLISN is constantly evolving and growing. We welcome your ideas, feedback, and suggestions for how we can best support the neurodivergent library community. By joining NLISN, you can help to shape the future of the network and contribute to creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for all. Your voice matters, and your involvement can make a real difference.

For more information and to sign up for our mailing list and/or forum, please visit our website. Together, we can build a stronger, more inclusive library community that celebrates the unique contributions of all its members. **IP**

- NLISN – <https://nlisn.org/>

