

Neurodiversity

[UNBOXED]

by

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Reframing neurodiversity: Your guide to *inclusive communication*

November 2023

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「*We're ThirtyThree –
one of the UK's
leading employer
branding agencies.*

As *visual creators and storytellers* for the world's biggest employer brands, our creative choices matter – they shape perceptions, enable conversations, and inspire change. And for years, we've helped our clients create communications that drive their diversity and inclusion efforts forward.

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*Find out
more*
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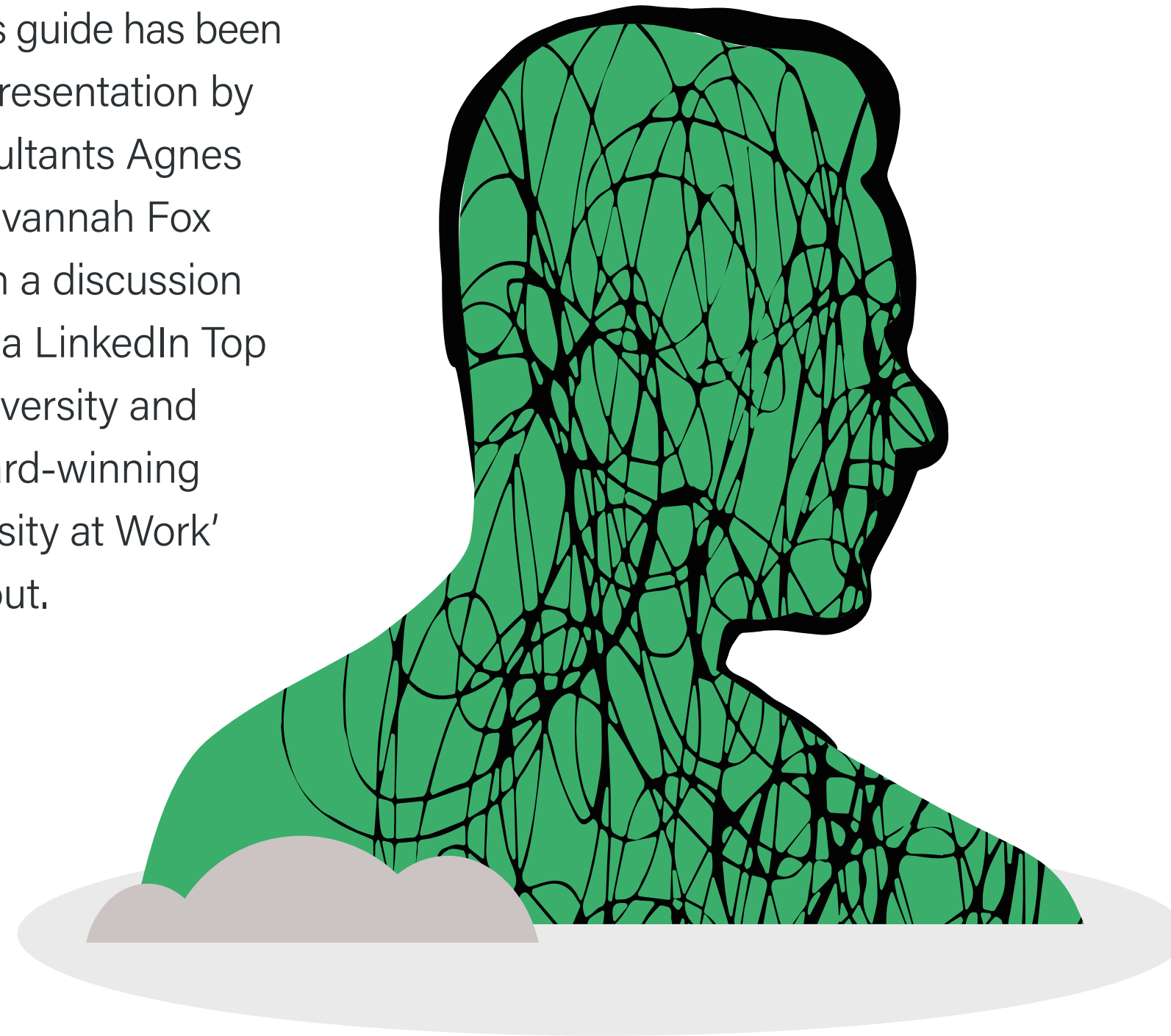
Welcome to **UNBOXED**

This guide forms part of UNBOXED, ThirtyThree's inclusive employer branding series.

By bringing together forward-thinking companies, we're exploring how DE&I is essential for an authentic and powerful employer brand.

In our fourth event on the 17th October, we explored the topic of neurodiversity and why workplaces are not designed with the neurodiverse in mind, with practical suggestions on what companies can do to create more inclusive environments.

The content in this guide has been adapted from a presentation by ThirtyThree consultants Agnes Meadows and Savannah Fox with aspects from a discussion with Theo Smith, a LinkedIn Top Voice on Neurodiversity and author of the award-winning book 'Neurodiversity at Work' weaved throughout.



Watch
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here

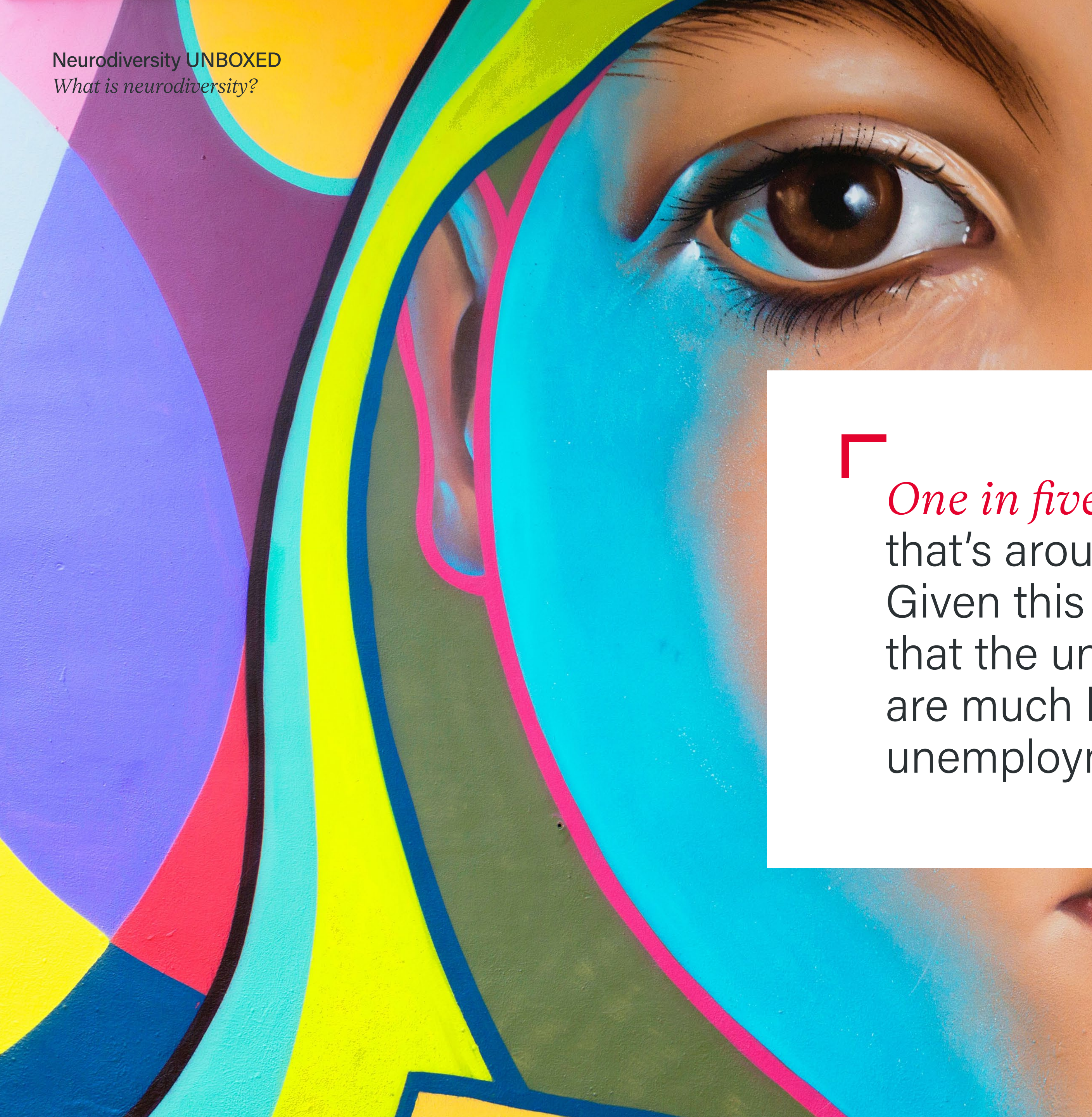
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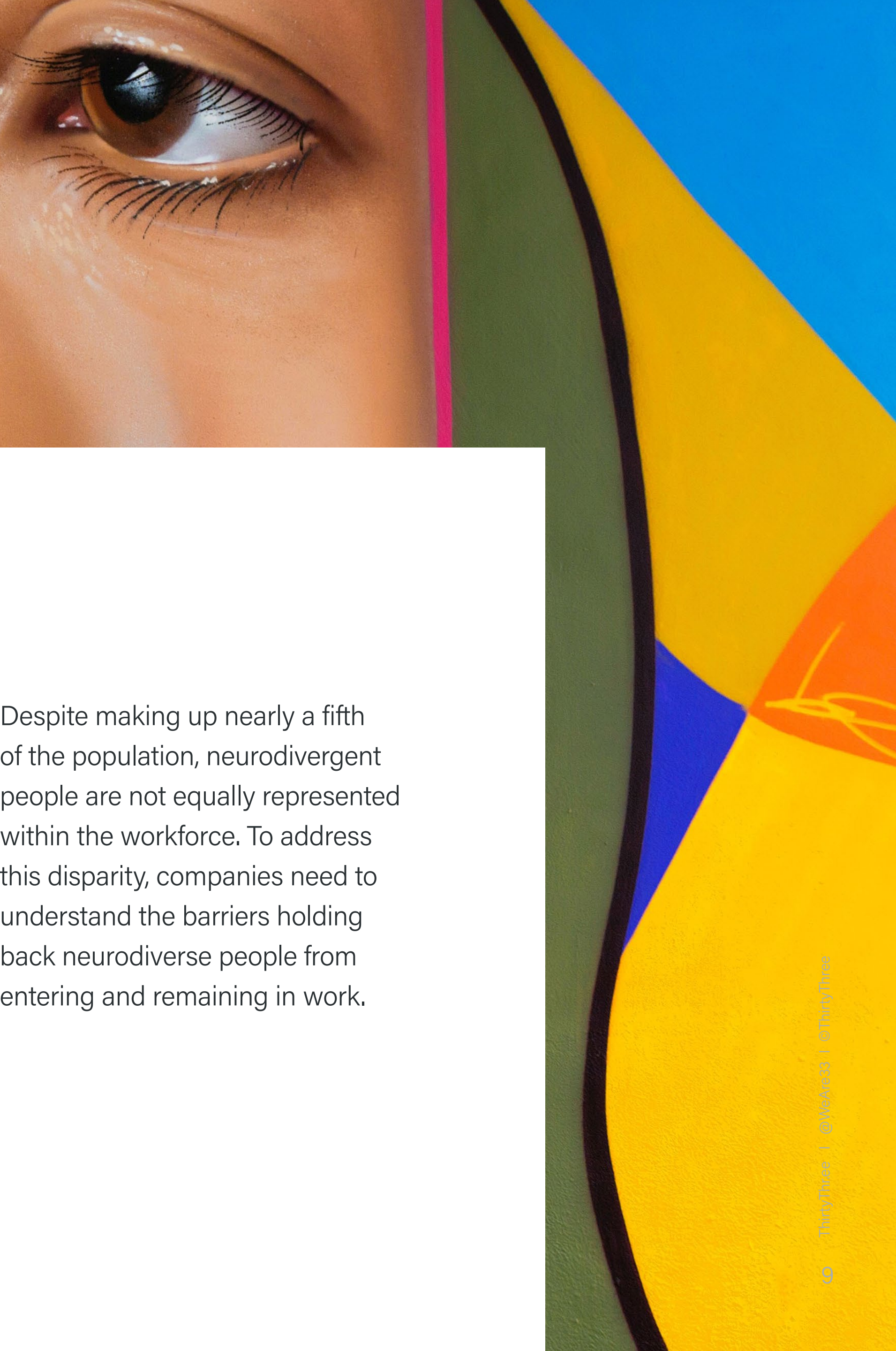
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*What is
neurodiversity?*

Neurodiversity refers to the different ways a person's brain processes information

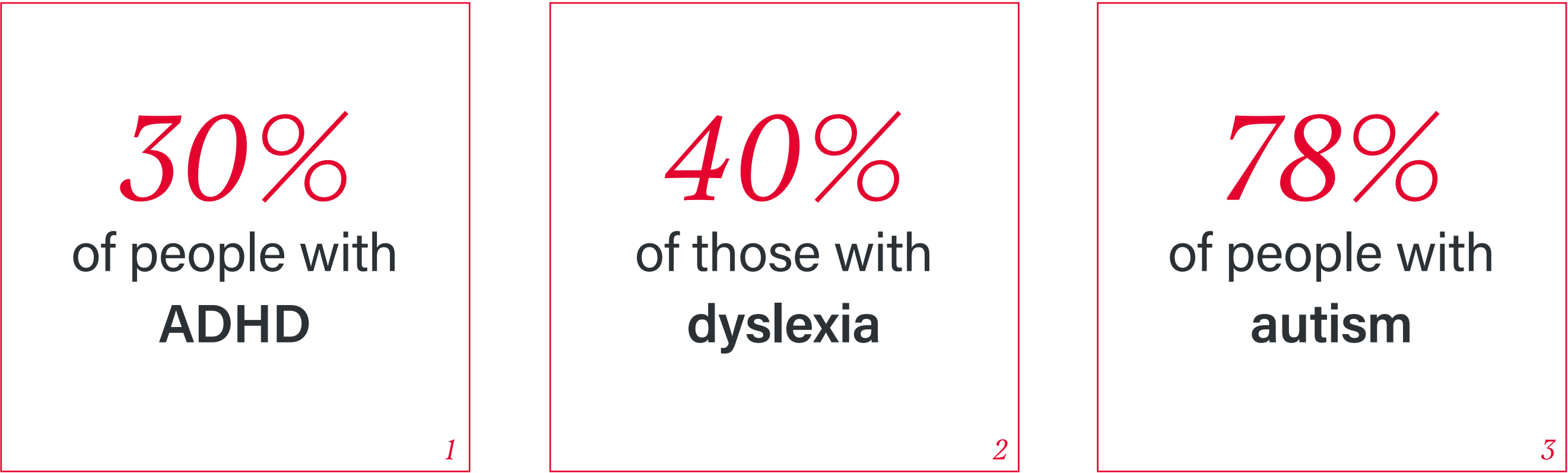
Neurodiversity is an umbrella term used to describe the differences in human cognition. Typically, it's used when referring to diagnoses such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, or dyspraxia. There are many more, but these are the most commonly used terms.



┌ *One in five people are neurodiverse* –
that's around 15-20% of the global population.
Given this significant number, it's surprising
that the unemployment rates of this group
are much higher than the 24% average
unemployment for the UK.



Neurodiversity unemployment rates:




Despite making up nearly a fifth of the population, neurodivergent people are not equally represented within the workforce. To address this disparity, companies need to understand the barriers holding back neurodiverse people from entering and remaining in work.

Sources: 1 Exceptional Individuals 2 Plos One Journal 3 National Autistic Society

3




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*Why workplaces
aren't neurodiverse*



"Employers still don't fundamentally understand what neurodiversity is. The human brain is incredible, brilliant, and adaptable. Yet, in 200 years, think about what we've created at work: noisy environments with bright lights and too many people in a single room.

Why did we think this is wonderful?

The reality is that the human brain has not had enough time to adapt. And these changes damage and create significant pain and barriers to certain brains."

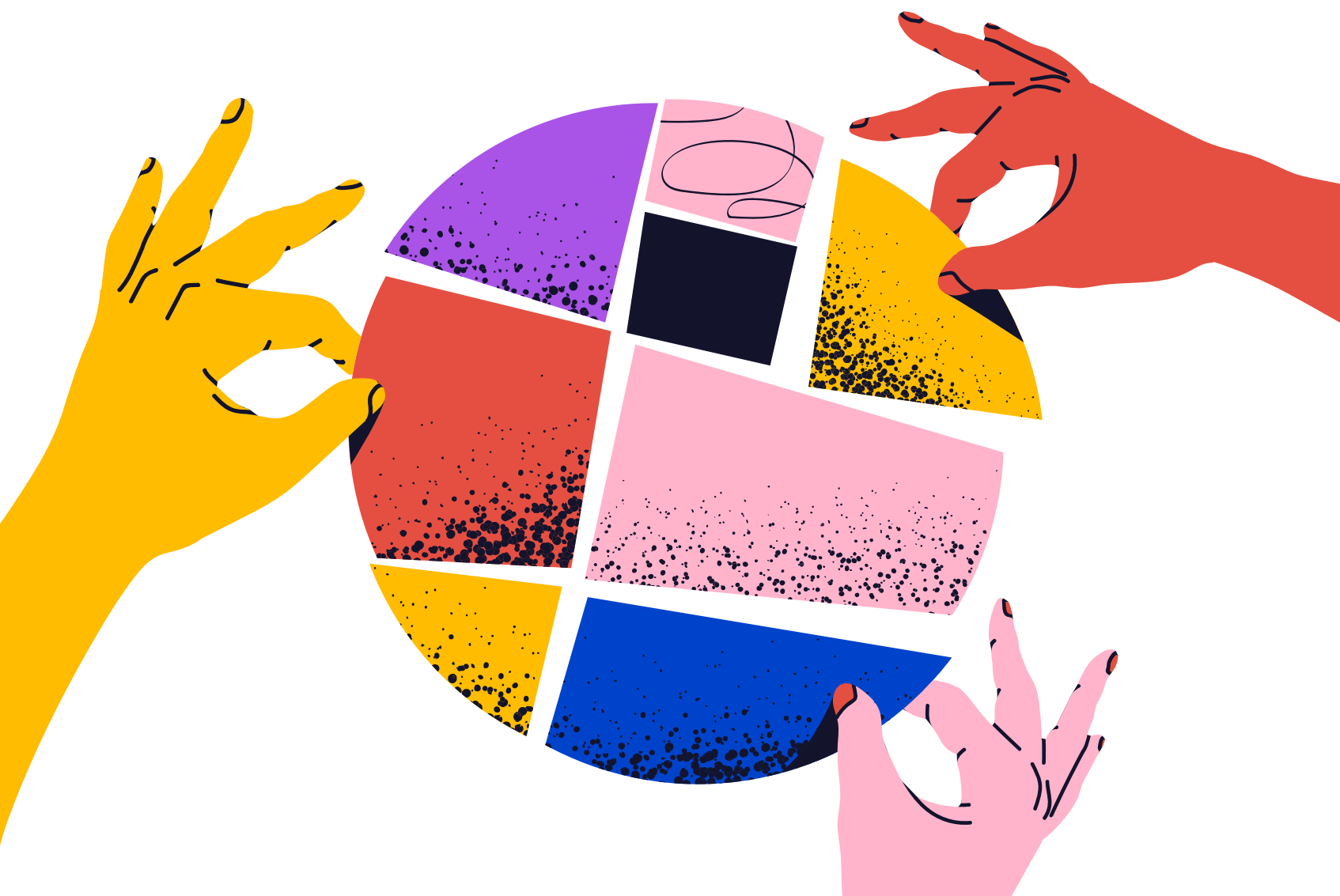


Theo Smith, founder of
Neurodiversity at Work

#1

Work isn't set up with neurodiverse people in mind

We all think and work in different ways, yet workplaces will often adopt a one-size-fits all approach leaving little room for differentiation.



#2

Neurodiverse people need the right support

Not allowing for difference means that neurodiverse people will then often need more support or adjustments to be successful in an environment that is not designed for them. For example, flexible working or work from home options, distraction free or low stimulus spaces within the office or noise cancelling headphones to help reduce overstimulation.

#3

Support doesn't come easy

However, access to this support or adjustments are either not available, poorly communicated (if at all) or in some cases, based on misconceptions around neurodiversity itself.



"Unemployment rates are not due to a lack of capability but an *institutional lack of awareness*."

People Management Magazine



Despite some companies now looking at the neurodiverse talent pool and beginning to understand the benefits of this group, *many are still having cold feet.*

There are anxieties around hiring neurodiverse individuals and uncertainty in how to implement support within the workplace. A YouGov survey of 601 senior decision makers found that *68% of them were worried about getting it wrong* when it came to supporting neurodiverse employees.

This anxiety is not one-sided. A study by Made by Dyslexia revealed that *73% of respondents hid their dyslexia from their employers.* This indicates that alongside employer hesitation and barriers to entering the workforce, there is also a lack of psychological safety for neurodiverse colleagues, so they feel they need to hide their diagnosis. This prevents them from seeking and getting the support they need to thrive within the workplace.



“Organisations need to pick apart their systems and processes and look in detail at where or how they could be hurting or harming people. *Starting with communications.* There’s too much information, too much content. Copy in adverts or emails need to be clear, concise, and to the point, so that the reader knows what's required of them.”

Theo Smith

It needs to come from the *top*.

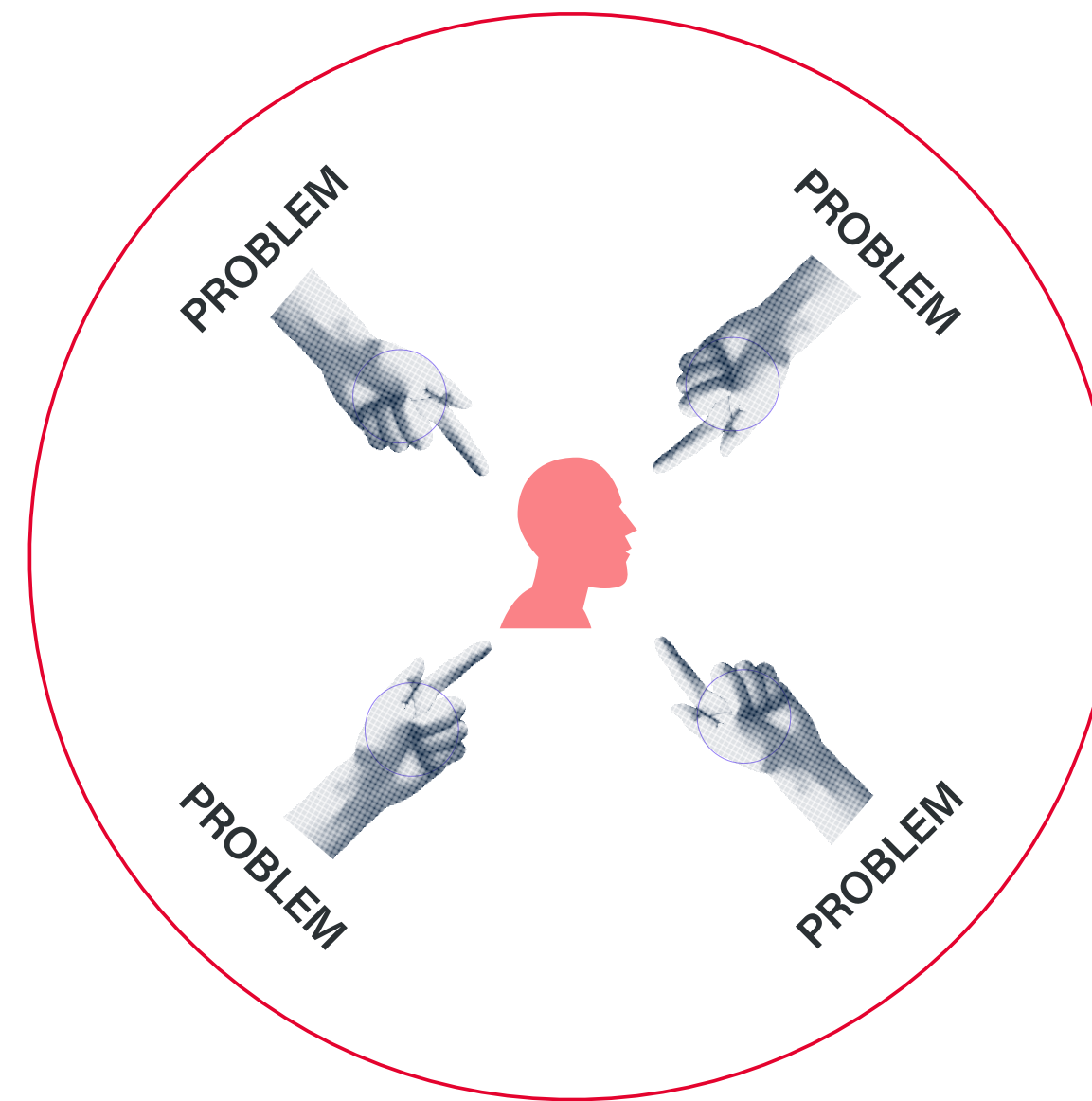
It is down to leaders and managers to have active and effective communications around neurodiversity. It is not enough to only be reactive and just wait for neurodiverse people to ask for the support during the application process or as an employee.

Changing communication to be *active* over reactive is a step towards operating within a social model of disability rather than a medical model.

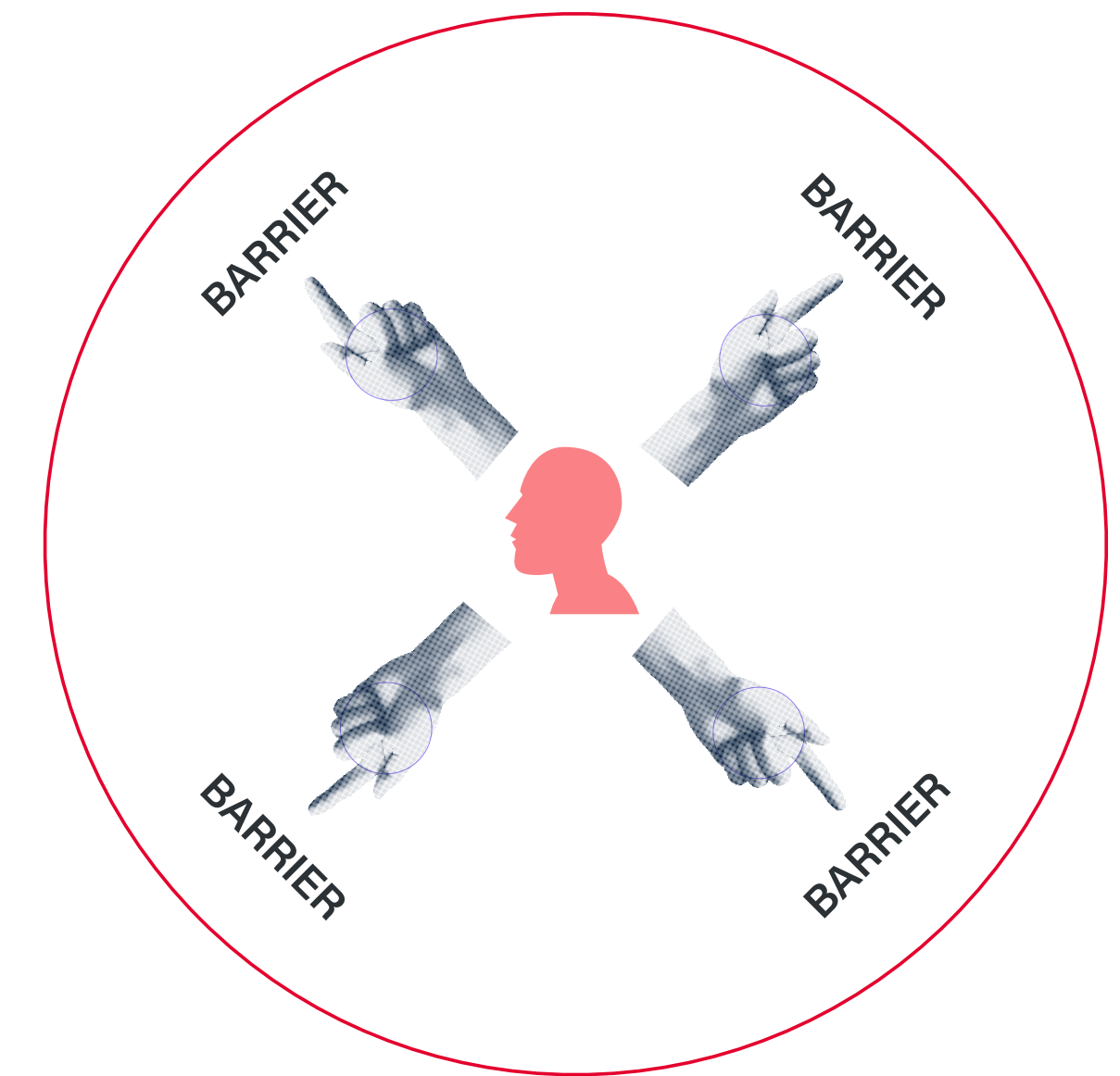
A medical model suggests that it is the symptoms of a person's condition that hold them back and create barriers. Operating within this model creates barriers such as requiring an individual to prove a diagnosis to access support, despite the 5-10 year-long waiting lists depending on diagnosis. And it doesn't allow for the individual variation or the complexity of having more than one neurodivergence, something which is common amongst those with neurodiversity.

A social model focuses on external factors, explaining that it is not the person but societal or social limitations that inhibit and 'disable' a person – in this instance, a workplace that is refusing to make accommodation.

The *medical* model



The *social* model



It's like throwing the Mexican tetra fish,
which usually lives in deep-sea caves, out
into the open waters. They're just going to
struggle to compete in that environment.
But that is what we've done.

Theo Smith



It's the failures to accommodate
and understand difference that
really disable and ostracize
neurodiverse talent.

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What's *different* about a
neurodiverse workplace?



As more organisations do invest time and money to support their employees, it becomes clear that neurodiversity *improves workplaces*, for everyone.

At the base of initiatives and schemes that have been designed to support neurodiverse employees is successful communication and education.

Neurodiversity brings *creativity*

In 2021, EY launched its Neuro-Diverse Centre for Excellence, which hires autistic people with the explicit aim of boosting innovation and creativity. They said the “diversity of thought and creativity” that these employees brought set them apart.

UCL has found that when companies invest in accessible hiring programmes, and provide accessible onboarding and then ongoing support, they are rewarded with increases in *innovation, quality, and productivity*.

JP Morgan found that neurodiverse professionals made fewer errors in their work and were anywhere from 90% to 140% more productive.

There's also evidence that having neurodiverse people on the team leads to better management for *everyone*. Managers become more sensitive to the individual working styles of each employee, and more comfortable offering them nuanced support, instead of assuming that everyone will work in the same way.

This matters, because those already valuable qualities are going to become essential as we look to the future. As AI takes over more of our manual processes at work, our most valuable skills will be the very human ability to think differently and to be creative. That's why these factors are coming together to make 'the next few years,' as Adecco puts it, 'the years of fruition for neurodiverse talent.'



* Source: Autism Speaks



...but only with the *right support*

Clearly, the benefits are big – but we shouldn't forget that neurodiverse people are human, not superhuman. It can sound flattering to focus on superpowers and strengths, but shrinking away from acknowledging difficulties ultimately prevents neurodiverse people from getting that support they need to succeed at work. And it also prevents them from being seen as whole and complex human beings.

Those schemes at EY and JP Morgan are great examples precisely because they backed up their intentions with thoughtful and funded support schemes.

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How to use *communications* for change

Some big and small forms of communication that'll make your organisation *more accessible* to neurodiverse people throughout the hiring process – from job descriptions all the way to employer branding campaigns – and foster a more inclusive culture.

Recruitment Comms

Writing job descriptions

Consider the language you use carefully.

Avoid long blocks of text and use short sentences without metaphors. To be accessible, most online copy should appeal to a reading age of 8-9 years old.

Only list the skills you're actually looking for

For example, request "people skills" only when they're essential to the role. Otherwise, a neurodivergent person that struggles with social skills may be discouraged from applying – and that means that you'll miss out on the other, more important skills they could have brought to the role. It also helps to clarify that candidates should apply even if they don't meet every requirement.

Don't limit the type of roles that neurodiverse people might apply to.

Neurodiverse people can excel in any kind of role, not only analytical or tech-based jobs, as some stereotypes might suggest.

"Often when we ask for too many skills, we exclude neurodiverse people who may have high cognitive skills in some areas – creativity, or incredible maths skills, for example – and struggle in others. We need to allow for that variety, that spiky cognitive profile."

Theo Smith

Advertising the role

Use PascalCase in your hashtags when advertising roles

This means capitalising the first letter of each word, and it's a simple way to make your posts more accessible, particularly to dyslexic people.

Follow the triple A design standard as closely as possible

It's a legal requirement to meet the double A standard, but the triple A is an extra goal to reach wherever possible on your career site. This could be as simple as making your headings 20% larger than the body copy or choosing single-hue colour scales.

Avoid auto-play films

These can make website inaccessible to many neurodiverse people, particularly autistic people, because they can cause sensory overload.



Interviewing your candidates

Interestingly, neurodiverse people often perform less well in job interviews even when they're well-qualified for the job. That means we need to make the interview more accessible.

Think big

We could replace formal interviews entirely with informal problem-solving activities spread over several days, like Microsoft did.

Adjust the traditional interview

This could mean keeping things informal, asking for concrete examples of work, and avoiding hypotheticalal questions.

Keep an open mind

It's fine to be unsure of how to proceed if someone seems different. But the aim is to listen to what they have to say and try to understand them on their own terms. After all, being different or unfamiliar is not the same as being incompatible with your working culture.

Communicating throughout the process

Clear instructions about the onboarding process can help new employees manage their expectations and plan ahead of time. This includes addresses, timings, and any other useful preparation.

Once employees – neurodiverse or not – are on board, regular conversations about how they work and how they could be best supported will benefit you and them equally.

Make sure that managers are well-informed about what support is available to neurodivergent employees and educate managers about useful questions to ask to initiate open conversations.

「*The bigger picture*

To be effective, communications during the hiring process need to be aligned with the overall strategy and brand of your organisation.



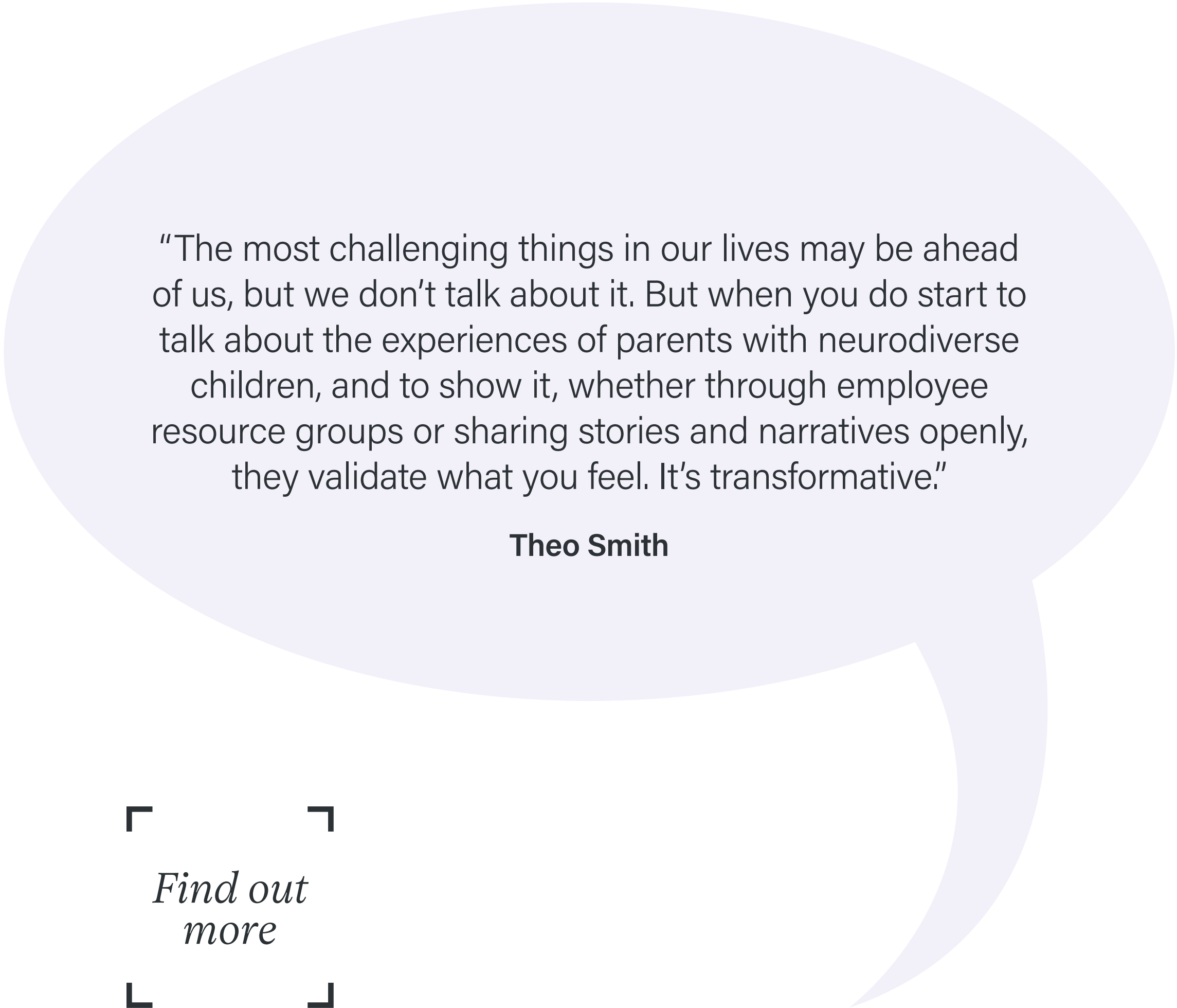


Employer branding campaigns

Employer branding campaigns are your chance to increase visibility around neurodiversity and to make a statement. Neurodiversity is sorely underrepresented in employer branding, and campaigns that tell the stories of neurodiverse employees are rare. By going against the grain, you'll be bringing attention and awareness to experiences that are often made invisible.

But your campaign can make an impact that goes well beyond your individual brand, and even beyond your industry. Campaigns can raise awareness and spread positive, nuanced and humanising stories about neurodiversity. By doing that, you'll be part of combatting societal barriers, stereotyping, and lack of understanding. That's a huge impact to have.

Successful campaigns tell stories about people that are neurodiverse without completely defining anyone by their neurodiversity. You might also consider the many different experiences of neurodiversity that your employees have: whether that's as neurodiverse professionals themselves or as the working parents of neurodiverse children.



"The most challenging things in our lives may be ahead of us, but we don't talk about it. But when you do start to talk about the experiences of parents with neurodiverse children, and to show it, whether through employee resource groups or sharing stories and narratives openly, they validate what you feel. It's transformative."

Theo Smith



*Find out
more*

Values, behaviours and brand

Have a think about the values and behaviours upheld by your company.

- ✓ **Do you think they're based on any assumptions about professionalism or modes of communication that might make a neurodiverse employee feel that they can't succeed there?**
- ✓ **Do your organisation's behaviours rely on an unspoken set of social skills?**

When we join up your values, behaviours, and strategy with the experience of your neurodiverse employees, we can create a more integrated workplace. Integrated because your corporate messaging is reflected in the daily reality of your employees. But also integrated because everyone has the same access to support.

That way, everyone is part of the same conversation: an appreciation that each of us thinks, works, and communicates differently, and we would all benefit from the chance to understand that better. That means a neurodiverse workplace needs top-level buy in, and commitment across the brand.



Three tips for an inclusive future

Communicate in an inclusive way

Make use of these inclusive principles across your communications. Working our guidance into your brand's Tone of Voice guidance and your job description templates will help you to roll out these inclusive principles consistently, making sure that your efforts have a real impact on the culture of your organisation.

Advocate for neurodiverse support in your own organisation

Create an environment that encourages accommodations to be requested and given. Consider flexible working, low sensory spaces within offices, and create space for a variety for individual working styles. And employee groups can also provide neurodiverse colleagues with a platform to advocate for their individual needs allowing them to thrive.

Educate your people about the support that's available

Once you've put support in place, make sure it's really used. Educate your managers about the support that's available to neurodiverse employees and train them in initiating open conversations about what would be most helpful. Empower managers to respond to their colleagues flexibly and as individuals, without the need for a diagnosis and without strict rules to follow.





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The inclusive employer branding series

by

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