

# Unlocking neurodiversity: A creative advantage



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A growing body of scientific literature highlights the unique strengths and cognitive advantages associated with neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, and dyslexia, and their links to creativity, productivity, and innovation. Throughout evolution, neurodivergence has shown up as a strength that enables people to uniquely combine and process information.

**This study presents new insights on how creativity is fueled in the creative industry (advertising, marketing, public relations, and media), and what we can glean from the experiences of its neurodivergent talent.** Learning from an industry survey and employee interviews, we explore the barriers and facilitators driving this creative advantage, which ultimately fuels business growth. We discuss how agencies and brands can better support and harness neurodivergent talent to foster a more innovative, creative, and inclusive future that can lead to better business outcomes for all.

## Key takeaways

### The creative industry is overlooking neurodivergent talent.

- Nearly 1 in 2 people in the industry identify as neurodivergent — and they bring unique strengths and value to business.
- But stigma, “neurotypical” ways of working, and lack of flexibility present major challenges. 1 in 3 neurodivergent employees are not satisfied in their roles.
- The industry’s race for productivity is compromising creative potential.

### Employers can fuel creativity by nurturing divergent thinking.

- Start with leadership and be bolstered by allyship.
- Lean into drivers that fuel both creativity and productivity: flexibility, autonomy, and teamwork.
- Shift from reactive to proactive accommodations models so all employees can thrive.

# Insights

Nearly 1 in 2 people in the industry identify as neurodivergent — and they bring unique strengths and value to business.



Nearly half (48%) of the industry identify with some level of neurodivergence. This includes people with formal diagnoses, self-diagnoses, and self-perceptions of neurodivergence. In the general population, only [31% identify as neurodivergent](#).

Neurodivergent individuals frequently bring a unique creative perspective to their work. It often manifests in different ways, including pattern recognition, lateral thinking, or intuitive insight. The top strengths that neurodivergent employees report are problem-solving, connecting the dots, resourcefulness, and thinking outside the box. These are all associated with creativity.

Further, research has found that teams with neurodivergent professionals in some roles can be [30% more productive](#) than those without them. Having cognitively diverse and inclusive decision-making teams leads to [increased innovation for 75% of organizations](#). These insights are more valuable than ever as [more than 50% of Gen Z identify as neurodivergent](#). This generation now [outnumbers baby boomers](#) in the workforce.

Looking at market potential, it's estimated that neurodivergent consumers have almost [\\$2 trillion in global spending power](#). Brands wanting to tap into this market need people with lived experience to inform and shape the work authentically.



The future of creativity belongs to those who think, market, and build differently. **Neuroverse: Powered by Havas** was built to help close the gap this research exposes, empowering brands to harness neurodivergent talent as a creative catalyst for stronger ideas, deeper connection, and long-term growth.

—Donna Murphy, Global CEO, Havas Creative and Health Networks



# Half of all neurodivergent creatives don't talk about their neurodivergence at work due to stigma.

This is a staggering statistic on its own. But it's also 56% higher than neurodivergent individuals in other industries. That means neurodivergent creatives feel the need to hide their neurodivergence significantly more than people in other lines of work. At least 1 in 4 neurodivergent employees have faced discrimination or bias in their workplace due to their neurodivergence.

Around 90% of neurodivergent employees in the industry experience masking (presenting in a way that hides their true self), imposter syndrome, and overcompensating. That's a significantly higher rate than their neurotypical counterparts. In fact, neurodivergent creatives are twice as likely to mask compared to neurotypical creatives.

Many interview participants described "masking" as a daily necessity. This includes feeling pressure to manage tone, suppress natural movements, or "act normal" in social situations. While masking helps avoid judgment or misunderstanding, it comes at the cost of energy, authenticity, and well-being. Over time, this constant self-monitoring leads to emotional exhaustion and burnout.

**“** Nothing is worse than going into a meeting thinking you have the perfect mask on and then I flub or they misinterpret what I say. It's so demoralizing and sends me into a spiral.

*—Male with ADHD and autism*

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# Workplaces are designed around neurotypical assumptions — and are stifling creativity for 3 in 4 employees.

About 3 in 4 employees — both neurodivergent and neurotypical — reported feeling “held back” creatively. Across the board, employees indicated that current processes overvalue speed and real-time performance, undervaluing depth and divergent thinking.

Within agencies, clients may unknowingly suppress the most creative ideas by requiring constant and quick iterative approvals. A consistent finding was that industry practices and expectations around how people communicate, process information, and focus are centered in neurotypical experiences. Workplace structures — especially in creative agencies — often demand conformity to streamline processes and accelerate pace. This limits neurodivergent people’s ability to fully contribute and think outside the box.

For neurodivergent employees, standard practices and environments can be overwhelming. This includes back-to-back meetings that leave little time to process and switch context, real-time messaging, and open office plans. Real-time brainstorms, rigid briefs, and reactive timelines were also frequently cited as blockers to creativity. Without adjusting norms, neurodivergent employees have to work harder just to operate at baseline. As a result, nearly 1 in 3 neurodivergent employees are not satisfied in their roles.

**“** I got into this field because I wanted to do something creative every day ... so when that is not nurtured, that can really take the wind out of my sails.

*—Female with ADHD*

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It’s important to consider that the same systems that burn out neurodivergent individuals may also hurt neurotypical individuals, perhaps just at a different pace. This is a broader issue of sustainable work design.

# The industry's race for productivity is compromising creative potential.



It's no surprise that there's a tension between the drivers that fuel productivity versus those that fuel creativity. Nearly 90% of employees find that working against a deadline does not fuel their creativity. Yet, most of them (85%) find that it does fuel their productivity.

More than half of neurodivergent creatives have trouble with time management and organization. These are two big components of [executive function](#), an area many neurodivergent people struggle with — but that can be improved with the right support.

“ It's just always about time. I know there are deadlines, time is money, but there's gotta be some designated time where you get to join something without worrying that your day is going to be screwed, because you allowed yourself one hour to be creative or do something different.

—Female with ADHD

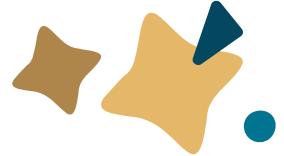
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Brands and agencies need to recognize that processing time isn't a luxury. It's essential for deep creative output for neurodivergent individuals. In interviews, participants frequently referenced the breakneck pace of agency work — urgent client requests, tight deadlines, real-time brainstorms, and rapidly shifting priorities. This is a demanding work environment for everyone. But for neurodivergent individuals who need more processing time, clarity, or structure, it can be untenable. The pressure to move fast often short-circuits creativity and causes anxiety. Some also noted that timelines often feel artificial or seem driven more by internal chaos than by actual necessity.

The demand for immediate response and quick-turn thinking taxes all employees, but it disproportionately impacts neurodivergent employees. When urgency is constant, nothing feels prioritized and burnout accelerates.

Neurodivergent creativity is an untapped asset, and it must be nurtured intentionally.

# The creative industry is up to 85% more likely to use AI — a potential solution to bolster both creativity and productivity.



Over half of the employees in this study report using AI as a tool to help them with their work. This is significantly higher than general population [estimates of 20–40% of people using AI in the workplace](#). Our study also found that neurodivergent employees use AI as much as neurotypical employees, if not more.

When harnessed correctly, AI can be an enabler of both productivity and creativity. Through Understood's own application of AI tools, including Google Gemini, both neurodivergent and neurotypical employees have saved time by automating tasks, transcribing meeting notes and summarizing next steps, and synthesizing large volumes of research. Further, AI can be an asset for creative work — developing prompts and exercises to kick-start copy development, social concepts, and even experiential ideas.

The study found that creatives are eager to use AI. Most employees in this study (both neurodivergent and neurotypical) who use AI are using free, open-access tools like ChatGPT. This is an opportunity for companies to create and offer custom AI-based support tools — and to provide education around targeted tools that enable both productivity and creativity.

## Next steps

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How can the industry support and amplify neurodivergent thinking and creativity?

### Start with leadership and be bolstered by allyship.

Neurodivergence impacts 1 in 2 industry employees. The need for a fundamental shift in perceptions and expectations is the immediate insight from these findings. But this change needs to start at the leadership level. Leaders need to:

- Understand that neurodivergence is present in every team.
- Model vulnerability by sharing that there are diverse working styles at the top.
- Reevaluate how leadership potential is defined and recognized.
- Reward outcomes over appearance.
- Promote neurodivergent-friendly creative processes and outcomes.

Leaders can feel confident that their employees will support them in taking a stance on neurodivergence. Over 80% of neurotypical employees are eager to support their neurodivergent

counterparts and would commit to engaging in company initiatives. Leaders have an opportunity to formalize initiatives centered in allyship. Peer support groups, employee resource groups that encourage inclusive participation, and ally-led awareness campaigns are potential ways to activate an allyship approach.

**“** This research underscores the unique challenges neurodivergent creatives face on a daily basis. 4As is committed to advocating for all categories of individuals, including neurodivergent talent. Agencies that embrace diverse minds don't just do what's right – they unlock new levels of creativity and innovation and inspire some of the powerful work that our industry creates.

*—Justin Thomas-Copeland, CEO, 4As*

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The industry as a whole can benefit by seeing clear examples of neurodivergent-friendly creative processes and outcomes that are promoted by leaders. Action areas for other teams are noted below.

## HR and people ops

- Normalize exploration of neurodivergence in onboarding and benefits education; offer resources without requiring disclosure.
- Standardize a “How to work with me” questionnaire for all employees, normalizing differences in communication, processing, planning, pacing, and focus.
- Conduct an inclusion audit focused on neurodivergent experience.
- Train all employees, especially people managers, on neurodivergence.

## Creative and account teams

- Allow space between client feedback and next steps to regroup and re-approach creatively.
- Advocate for strategic timelines that protect thinking time, not just deliverables.
- Provide asynchronous options for ideation (e.g., pre-read briefs, solo brainstorm time).

## Operations and facilities

- Create quiet zones and normalize noise-canceling tools.
- Offer flexible desk options or options to work remotely.
- Provide zones where people can take breaks and fuel creative energy via games, Legos, etc.

## Team culture

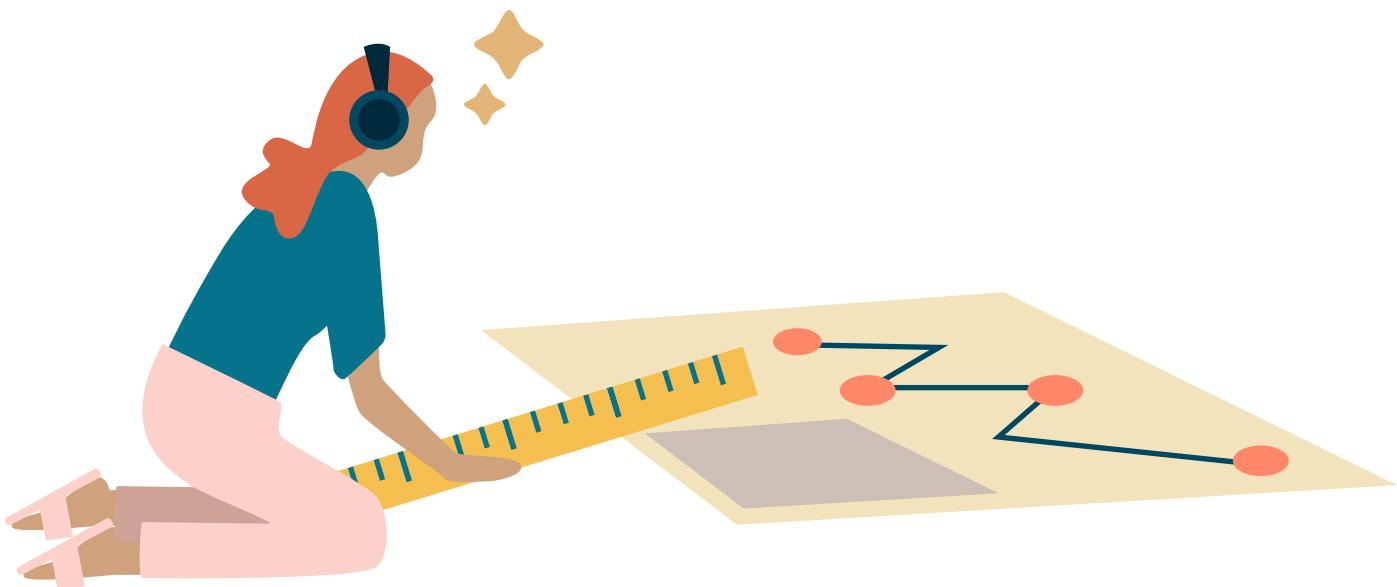
- Encourage flexibility in how updates are shared – voice notes, written reports, etc. Check in with individuals to understand how they best receive feedback, updates, and other communication.
- Normalize nontraditional behavior – fidgeting, non-eye contact, bluntness – as valid expressions of engagement.
- Normalize slower contributions as equally valuable – not late, just differently timed.
- Distinguish true deadlines from perceived urgency. Build in “quiet zones” on calendars.

## Managers

- Learn how to spot masking and burnout; create space for check-ins that don't require diagnosis disclosure.
- Ask about preferred communication and collaboration styles in 1:1s; avoid overvaluing extroversion.
- Schedule fewer meetings to reduce cognitive load; protect focus time.
- Encourage structured formats for team feedback (e.g., 360 reviews, rubric-based evaluations) to reduce subjective interpretation.

## Career development and mentorship

- Build advancement tracks that accommodate different presentation styles and personalities.
- Pair neurodivergent employees with diverse leaders who succeeded outside the mold.



# Shift from reactive to proactive accommodations models so all employees can thrive.

Most employees are aware of accommodations being offered. They just don't ask for them — only 18% of neurodivergent employees ask. In the interviews, neurodivergent employees shared that they fear being seen as "needy" if they ask for accommodations. Or they don't understand how they can use what's available. As a result, companies likely underestimate how many people need accommodations. Some good news, though: Among those who do ask, almost all (80%) are satisfied with the outcome.

While more companies have started to include neurodivergence in inclusivity and accessibility efforts, these findings reveal a need for a more proactive model for offering supports and enabling individuals to use them. Most often, accommodations are simple, low-cost, or even free — for example, noise-canceling headphones, meeting-free calendar blocks, or access to a quiet space. Employers should regularly make sure all employees know how to ask for what they need to do their job. Instead of a reactive model that presents opportunities only when issues arise, employers must think: "What can we offer as a support before someone even asks?" Employers should enable and empower neurodivergent individuals to manage their symptoms through accommodations and support, so they can optimize their creative output.

## From [Understood.org's 2025 Neurodiversity at Work Survey](#)

- Most U.S. adults (70%) agree that there is a stigma around asking for workplace accommodation. This is up from 60% in 2024.
- More than 4 in 5 (82%) agree that employers need better education on workplace accommodations, specifically for neurodivergent employees.
- More than half of all neurodivergent adults (53%) feel that workplace neurodiversity programs are mostly for optics.

**“** I try to really steer away from the taboo of [my neurodivergence] and really explain to [others].... And usually it builds this trust because they'll see the work get done, or they'll see me online early in the morning, or they'll see me leave my desk and go to a section that's not as busy. And they understand it.

*—Male with ADHD*

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# Lean into drivers that fuel both creativity and productivity: flexibility, autonomy, and teamwork.

We know that some factors that drive productivity may compromise creativity and vice versa. But there are certain approaches that can drive both creativity and productivity among neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. The top three tactical approaches: being able to work outside of regular business hours, opportunities to work analog, and not being micromanaged.

## A winning formula

- 1. Build and enable a flexible team culture.** Understand that people thrive at different hours of the day, and think of ways to leverage this flexibility to be productive and creative.
- 2. Offer individuals autonomy to manage their work.** Creativity can originate from a fleeting moment or a long brainstorm. Let individuals find their own sources of inspiration. And train leaders in management styles that allow individuals to express their unique creativity.
- 3. Foster productive and creative collaboration.** Working collaboratively allows people to bounce off each others' ideas and build creativity, while simultaneously ensuring productivity.

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I always had a creative type of personality or imaginative type personality.... Being able to be an art director or come up with ideas, I get paid for my creativity. I get paid to come up with things – which is fun.

—Female with ADHD

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## Connect with us!

We're always looking to collaborate and partner with others on our research. Reach out to our team at [knowledge@understood.org](mailto:knowledge@understood.org) to learn more.

# About the study

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In early 2025, [Understood.org](#) conducted a multi-phase research study to learn about the experiences of neurodivergent employees in the creative industry — their unique strengths, challenges, and needs. Sponsored by the [American Association of Advertising Agencies](#) (the 4As) and [Havas](#), this study had three distinct phases:

- Review of 100+ peer-reviewed articles around creativity and neurodivergence
- Targeted survey of 300+ employees in advertising, marketing, public relations, and media
- In-depth interviews with 8 neurodivergent employees actively working in the industry

## Other reference materials

The team at Understood referenced a wide range of field literature for this research. Some are linked above. Others, while not cited, were helpful background:

1. Mathuki, E., & Zhang, J. (2024). Cognitive diversity, creativity and team effectiveness: The mediations of inclusion and knowledge sharing. *VINE Journal of Information and Knowledge Management Systems*, 54(6): 1379–1403. <https://doi.org/10.1108/VJIKMS-06-2022-0190>
2. Golden, D., Sniderman, B., Buckley, N., & Holdowsky, J. (2024). The neurodiversity advantage: How neuroinclusion can unleash innovation and create competitive edge. *Deloitte Center for Integrated Research*. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/value-of-diversity-and-inclusion/unleashing-innovation-with-neuroinclusion.html>
3. Hoogman, M., Stolte, M., Baas, M., & Kroesbergen, E. (2020). Creativity and ADHD: A review of behavioral studies, the effect of psychostimulants and neural underpinnings. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 119, 66–85. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2020.09.029>
4. Boot, N., Nevicka, B., & Baas, M. (2020). Creativity in ADHD: Goal-directed motivation and domain specificity. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 24(13): 1857–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1087054717727352>
5. Károlyi, C. (2001). Visual-spatial strength in dyslexia: Rapid discrimination of impossible figures. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 34(4), 380–391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002221940103400413>