

Toolbox Talk

Neurodiversity on Site



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help workers understand that people can process information, instructions and their surroundings differently and encourage simple ways of communicating and working that can make site life easier, safer and more inclusive for everyone.

Imagine a supervisor gives five people exactly the same instruction. Four of them remember it straight away. One person understands the job perfectly but forgets the order things need doing. Another would find it much easier if they could see the drawing while the job was being explained. Someone else might struggle to take in what is being said because there's drilling, radios and people talking around them. That doesn't necessarily mean anybody isn't listening or isn't capable of doing the job. People's brains simply don't all process information in exactly the same way. You may have heard words like ADHD, autism and dyslexia more often in recent years. These are all different and everybody's experience is individual but they sit within a broader conversation about neurodiversity: recognising that there are different ways people's brains can think, learn, concentrate, communicate and process what's happening around them.

Why It Matters

Construction can be a challenging environment for anyone. Sites can be noisy, busy and constantly changing. Instructions are sometimes given quickly, several things might need doing at once and priorities can change halfway through the day. We work from drawings, measurements, written information and verbal instructions, often while other trades and machinery are operating around us. For some people, certain parts of that environment can be harder to manage. Someone might struggle to remember several verbal instructions given at once but work brilliantly when they're written down. Another person might find sudden changes difficult but perform extremely well when they know the plan. Someone may lose concentration when there are lots of distractions around them, while another might find reading large amounts of written information takes longer.



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None of that tells you whether somebody is good at their trade. Construction is full of people who think differently, solve problems differently and learn differently. The important thing is finding ways of communicating that allow people to do their job safely and properly.

Signs To Look Out For

There isn't a checklist that tells you somebody is neurodivergent and we shouldn't try to diagnose people on site. What we can notice is when someone might benefit from information being given differently. Perhaps somebody regularly asks you to repeat instructions or writes everything down so they don't forget it. They might understand something much more quickly when you physically show them rather than explain it verbally. Someone may find paperwork or reading drawings more difficult but be excellent when carrying out the practical work. You might notice someone becoming distracted when several conversations are happening around them, struggling when priorities keep changing or needing a little longer to process a question before answering. Others may be very organised about certain things but struggle with timekeeping, planning or remembering where they've put equipment. The important thing is not to jump to conclusions. Instead of thinking, "Why can't they just do it the way everyone else does?", it can be more useful to ask, "Is there another way we could explain or organise this?"

What Can Help

One of the easiest things we can improve is how we give instructions. If something is important, be clear about what needs doing and what order it needs doing in. Giving somebody six instructions in one go and then getting frustrated when they remember four of them isn't helping anyone. Break things down where needed and give people the chance to ask questions. Where practical, use more than one way of explaining something.



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Talk through the job, show the drawing or demonstrate what you mean. Some people remember what they hear, others find it much easier when they can see it. That's useful for everyone, whether somebody is neurodivergent or not.

If someone wants to write instructions down, make notes or double-check what you've asked them to do, don't make them feel stupid for it. They're making sure the job gets done correctly. Likewise, if you've given an important instruction in the middle of a noisy site and someone hasn't understood you, move somewhere quieter and explain it again rather than assuming they weren't paying attention.

Clear priorities can help as well. If five things need doing, tell people which one matters first. If the plan changes, explain what's changed rather than expecting everyone to automatically know. Small changes in communication can prevent frustration, mistakes and misunderstandings and if you know that you personally work better in a particular way, say so. You might simply say, "Can you write that down for me?", "Can you show me what you mean?" or "Give me one job at a time and I'll get through them." That's not asking for an easier job. It's understanding how you work best.

Discussion Questions

- What different ways do people on site prefer to receive instructions: being told, being shown or having something written down?
- What parts of a busy construction site could make concentration or communication more difficult?
- What simple changes could we make as a team to help people understand what is expected of them?



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Takeaway Message

People don't all think, learn or process information in the same way and that's not necessarily a problem that needs fixing. What matters is whether people have the information and environment they need to work safely and do their job properly. Clear instructions, patience and being willing to explain something differently can help everyone on site. Sometimes a very small adjustment can remove a frustration that somebody has been dealing with every working day.

Action

Today, pay attention to how you communicate with the people around you. If someone doesn't understand an instruction the first time, don't automatically assume they weren't listening. Try explaining it differently, show them what you mean or break the task down and if there's something that would genuinely help you work more effectively, speak up about it. Understanding how we each work best can make the job easier, safer and less frustrating for everyone.



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