

# Why National Security Needs Neurodiversity

## Drawing on a Wider Range of Cognitive Talents to Tackle National Security Challenges

**N**ational security organizations need highly skilled and intellectually creative individuals who are eager to apply their talents to address the nation's most pressing challenges. Government officials and industry representatives have described the high stakes of the national security threats facing the United States; the demand for a STEM-skilled<sup>1</sup> and technology-savvy workforce; and the need to fill jobs that require enormous attention to detail, precision, and a low tolerance for errors. In public and private discussions, many officials and experts have addressed the need for *neurodiversity* in the national security community. They describe missions that are too important and too difficult to be left solely to the portion of the population who think in *typical* ways.<sup>2</sup>

*Neurodivergent* is an umbrella term that covers a variety of cognitive diagnoses, including autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, and Tourette's

### KEY FINDINGS

- Neurodiversity can strengthen a national security organization.
- Fundamental strengths that are common among members of the neurodivergent population include problem-solving, pattern recognition, visualization, and other skills that benefit many national security fields.
- Workplace practices in national security organizations can serve as barriers to the hiring and retention of neurodivergent individuals. Within the U.S. government, neurodivergence is treated as a disability, which means that employees must declare themselves disabled in order to thrive in workplaces designed for neurotypical workforces.
- The size of the neurodivergent population in U.S. national security organizations is unknown. This can lead to two unproven assumptions:
  - (1) that neurodivergence is not prevalent in the national security workforce and (2) that this lack of visible prevalence is not due to any systemic discrimination.
- Several aspects of the recruitment and hiring process, including unclear or confusing job descriptions, complex application processes, and job interviews that focus on social and behavioral norms, can pose barriers to a neurodiverse workforce.
- Once on board, neurodivergent employees can face challenges navigating careers in workplaces that are not designed for them.
- Keys to creating a neurodiverse national security workplace include adopting design principles that benefit everyone in the workplace, focusing hiring procedures on the job itself, and preparing the workplace to support neurodiversity.

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# Neurodivergent individuals are already part of the national security workforce.

syndrome (Figure 1). Neurodivergent individuals are already part of the national security workforce, serving as intelligence officers, engineers, security clearance investigators, military service members, and lawyers, among other positions. However, the size of the neurodivergent population is not known, as many of these individuals do not openly acknowledge their neurodivergence for fear of discrimination and bias.

In a 2023 RAND report, researchers sought to understand the benefits that neurodivergent people bring to national security; identify challenges in recruiting, working with, and managing a neurodiverse workforce; and recommend options to support a more neurodiverse national security workforce. To carry out the study, the researchers conducted a review of primary, secondary, and commercial literature and

held interviews and discussions with government officials, researchers, and advocates for the interests of neurodivergent populations, as well as representatives from organizations with neurodiversity employment programs.

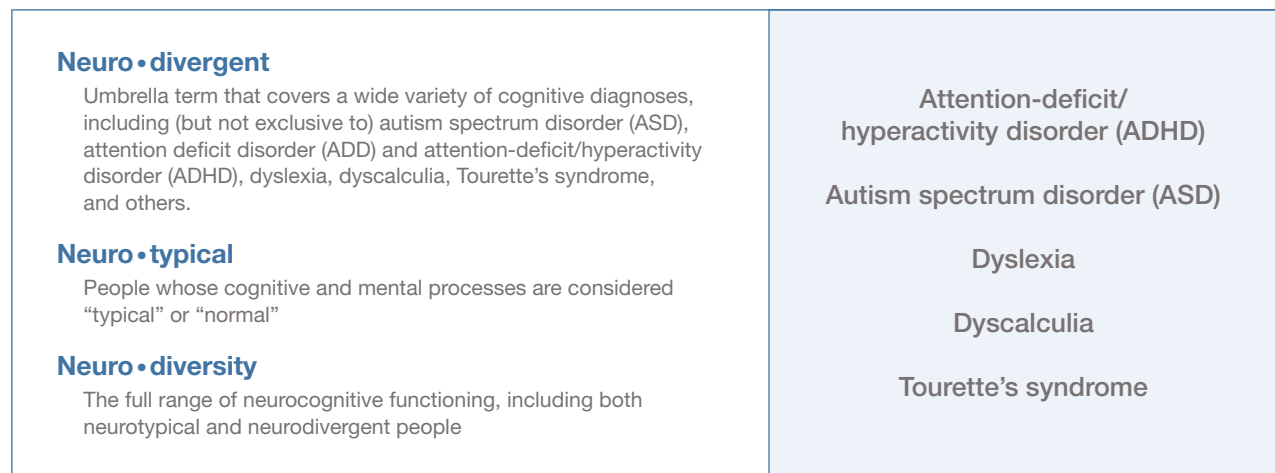
## Advantages of Neurodivergent Employees

**Neurodiversity can strengthen a national security organization.** Multiple studies conducted across various groups of people with different diagnoses have found that neurodivergent people may excel at

- constructing and recognizing patterns
- visualization and nonverbal intelligence tests
- problem-solving and systematizing skills
- attention to detail and achieving a state of hyperfocus to complete a task
- memory skills
- repetitive tasks (such as quality-checking software or large datasets).

For national security organizations, these fundamental strengths that are common among the neurodivergent population can translate into job strengths, particularly in certain career fields. Much national security work, including intelligence analysis, requires

FIGURE 1  
Defining Neurodiversity



SOURCE: Definitions are adapted from Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion, "Neurodiversity in the Workplace," webpage, undated. As of April 15, 2022: <https://askearn.org/page/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace>

keen attention to detail and skill in identifying patterns in vast amounts of data, along with an ability to excel while performing repetitive tasks while gathering and analyzing information. Employees with ASD may be more motivated by repetitive tasks, and autism is associated with rules-based behavior, which is well aligned with work in a classified environment.

## **Challenges in Recruiting, Working with, and Managing a Neurodiverse Workforce**

Despite the advantages associated with a neurodiverse workforce, workplace practices in national security organizations can serve as barriers to the hiring and retention of neurodivergent individuals.

**Within the U.S. government, neurodivergent diagnoses are treated as a disability.** Employees who hide—or *mask*—their neurodivergence at work to avoid the professional and social stigma attached to being considered disabled must forgo accommodations at the cost of their own stress, mental exhaustion, and job performance. Some neurodivergent employees hide or downplay their diagnosis by masking to appear neurotypical for employers who do not know how to value the benefits of a cognitively diverse workforce, or for coworkers who might harass and bully them. Research shows that their worries about discrimination and bias are not unfounded.

**The size of the neurodivergent population in U.S. national security organizations is unknown.** During interviews, government officials explained that, when data are reported, all disabilities are lumped together, such that employees who report cognitive diagnoses are grouped with amputees, deaf and vision-impaired employees, employees with psychological accommodations, and so on. The lack of information about the size of the neurodivergent population can lead government officials to make two unproven assumptions: (1) that neurodivergence is *not* prevalent in the workforce and (2) that there are no systemic barriers to hiring neurodivergent employees.

**Several aspects of the recruitment and hiring process can pose barriers to a neurodiverse workforce.** These include unclear or confusing job descriptions, complex application processes, and job interviews

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that focus more on social and behavioral norms than on technical knowledge and skills.

One area of particular concern is the security clearance process, which can represent an obstacle course to candidates with poor executive functioning, atypical verbal communication, irregular body movements, sensory sensitivities, and other common attributes of neurodivergence. The clearance process is designed for neurotypical candidates who can complete large amounts of complex paperwork, answer questions directly and promptly, make eye contact, and communicate without fidgeting. Interview participants in the study—including a former polygraph examiner—said they worried about how many candidates do not pass the process because their behavior is considered “suspicious and untrustworthy” simply because it does not fall within the range of expected behavior.

Military service members who are neurodivergent also face challenges. Each service has its own policy, and all services allow recruits to prove that their diagnosis will not interfere with their ability to serve, although strict policies can make it difficult to qualify or might limit a recruit’s opportunities. For example, service members who effectively manage their ADHD using prescription medications said they were told to choose whether to abstain from using treatments that have been effective for them or be declared “not deployable.” In an era when U.S. children with ADHD are likely to be medicated, and the military services are facing critical recruitment shortfalls, such policies can have direct effects on military recruitment and readiness.

**Once on board, neurodivergent employees can face challenges navigating careers in workplaces that are not designed with them in mind.** Such challenges

include sensory overload, rigid and tightly packed time schedules, unspoken social mores, unclear career progression paths, and lack of clarity in instructions. Stereotypes depicting neurodivergent people as poor communicators can be misplaced and misinformed because neurodivergent people might communicate *differently* from neurotypical people and from each other. Communication challenges can also occur among neurotypical staff; yet, when neurotypical staff misinterpret signals from neurodivergent colleagues, the neurodivergent colleagues might end up bearing the ramifications.

## Keys to Creating a Neurodiverse National Security Workplace

The researchers identified several principles for overcoming the challenges just described and creating a workplace environment that supports neurodiversity.

**Adopting universal design principles.** In recent years, the diversity, equity, and inclusion community has recommended a focus on universal design as an alternative to individual accommodations. The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design defines *universal design* as “the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regard-

less of their age, size, ability or disability.”<sup>3</sup> Universal design negates the need to make special accommodations only for certain employees after they are hired.

**Focusing the hiring process on the job itself.** A key to hiring neurodivergent talent is to ensure that the process does not get in the way of the desired outcome: to attract and recruit a highly skilled, diverse workforce. A common theme of such efforts is to *keep the hiring assessment process focused on the nature of the job itself* rather than on a candidate’s ability to quickly build rapport with a stranger or fit in at a business dinner.

This may mean that it is necessary to revise or eliminate features of traditional job descriptions and interviews that do not address the actual requirements of the job. Table 1 provides some examples of how traditional job descriptions and procedures might be modified to support the hiring of neurodivergent talent.

**Preparing the neurodiverse workplace.** Another important principle is to create a workplace that gives *all* employees a sense of belonging. Although affinity groups can provide support for neurodivergent employees, they are not sufficient to create a supportive workplace. Evidence suggests that training, mentorship, and technological solutions can help onboard new employees successfully. Employers should also train neurotypical workers, including managers, to understand the needs and behaviors of neurodivergent

TABLE 1  
Writing Effective Job Descriptions

Position Title	Traditional Phrasing	Neurodivergence-Friendly Phrasing
Contracting Officer Representative	Serves as liaison between contractors and the government contracting officer to identify and resolve issues.	Identifies, documents, communicates, and negotiates points of agreement and disagreement between contractors and the government contracting officer. Works with parties to resolve differences and identify solutions.
Cyber Operations Analyst	Prepares oral and written correspondence and other documentation.	Explains ongoing cyber operations to military leaders who do not have cyber expertise. Explains the significance of new cyber threats in terms of how previously unknown vulnerabilities are being exploited by adversaries. Documents results for use by future analysts.
Accountant	Minimum qualifications: <i>Demonstrated excellent:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Interpersonal skills</i></li> <li>• <i>Verbal and written communication skills</i></li> <li>• <i>Customer service</i></li> <li>• Analytic and problem-solving abilities</li> <li>• Team and independent work ethic</li> </ul>	[Delete italicized section and replace with a practical exercise. Three business days before the interview, provide the candidate with fake financial data and request that the candidate conduct an accounting analysis and present their findings to the interview committee. Evaluate the candidate on technical accuracy of the analysis and ability to effectively communicate key findings.]

colleagues, including how behaviors by neurotypical employees can have detrimental effects on neurodivergent employees.

## Recommendations

The researchers recommend that national security organizations embrace *neurodiverse inclusivity*, and the following low-cost or no-cost solutions could be implemented immediately, along with longer-term solutions that could lead to systemic change across the national security enterprise:

- **Provide all employees equally with accommodations that mitigate the effects of sensory stimulation.** These accommodations might include, among others, the ability to choose a desk location or to change or remove light bulbs to reduce brightness, access to noise-canceling headphones, and periods of minimal or no interruptions.
- **Modify job vacancies and hiring practices to attract neurodivergent candidates.** Changes to hiring practices could include using concrete, jargon-free language in job descriptions; eliminating unnecessary “requirements”; and updating the interview process to align with practices from other organizations that recruit neurodivergent candidates.

- **Help all employees understand neurodiversity.** Opportunities to build understanding include inviting experts to present on the topic of neurodiversity, requiring empathy and psychological safety training for managers, and supporting agency affinity groups that are not tied to disability.
- **Support systemic change across the organization.** Organizations can also pursue broader systemic change. This might include incorporating neurodivergent people into major policy decisions, making changes to the security clearance process, examining military recruitment processes that can exclude qualified candidates, and revising policies that limit deployment and overseas travel for neurodivergent individuals.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *STEM* stands for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

<sup>2</sup> Intelligence and National Security Alliance, K2Workforce Neurodiversity NatSec Network Kick-Off Event, May 23, 2022; and interviews with government officials.

<sup>3</sup> Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, “What Is Universal Design,” webpage, undated. As of September 14, 2022: <https://universaldesign.ie/what-is-universal-design>

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This brief describes work done in the RAND National Security Research Division and documented in *Neurodiversity and National Security: How to Tackle National Security Challenges with a Wider Range of Cognitive Talents*, by Courtney Weinbaum, Omair Khan, Teresa D. Thomas, and Bradley D. Stein, RR-A1875-1, 2023 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR-A1875-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A1875-1)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RBA1875-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RBA1875-1). The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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