

Understanding SEND in the Workplace

Moving beyond labels and assumptions

Who this information sheet is for?

This information sheet is designed for employers, managers, HR teams and supervisors who want a clearer, practical understanding of SEND in adult workplaces, but may not have the time to attend lengthy training.

It can be read on its own or alongside the other SEND information sheets (see overleaf for details).

What is SEND in adulthood?

SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) does not end when someone leaves education. Many adults in employment have SEND, whether formally diagnosed or not.

SEND in the workplace may include:

- Learning disability
- Autism
- ADHD
- Dyslexia and dyspraxia

In adults, SEND is often:

- Hidden or misunderstood
- Undisclosed due to fear of stigma
- Managed through personal coping strategies

Many people with SEND are already part of the workforce.

Masking, anxiety and burnout

Many adults with SEND use a strategy known as masking to fit into workplace expectations.

Masking may include:

- Hiding confusion or sensory discomfort
- Copying colleagues' behaviour
- Avoiding asking for clarification
- Suppressing stress responses

While masking can help someone appear to cope in the short term, it often leads to:

- Anxiety
- Exhaustion
- Increased sickness absence
- Burnout

A sudden drop in performance is often the result of long-term coping rather than a lack of commitment.

Common workplace assumptions

SEND is often associated with:

- Children or education settings
- Obvious support needs
- Reduced capability

In reality, SEND in employment often looks like:

- Employees who perform well but are highly anxious
- People who work extremely hard to meet expectations
- Individuals who appear independent but are overwhelmed

Difficulties at work are frequently misinterpreted as issues with attitude, motivation or resilience.

How SEND can show up at work

SEND does not affect intelligence or willingness to work, but it may affect how someone experiences the workplace.

Common impacts include:

- Difficulty processing vague or complex instructions
- Anxiety around change or uncertainty
- Sensory overload (noise, lighting, busy environments)
- Fatigue from social interaction or meetings
- Difficulty managing multiple competing demands

These are workplace design and communication issues, not personal failings.

“You don’t need more labels — you need better systems”

It is usually about fit, not ability

When someone struggles at work, the issue is often:

- How the role is structured
- How expectations are communicated
- The sensory or social environment
- Unwritten workplace rules

It is rarely about motivation, effort or attitude.

Understanding this is the foundation for inclusive recruitment, reasonable adjustments and effective job design.

Strengths-based thinking

People with SEND often bring valuable strengths to organisations, such as:

- Attention to detail
- Honesty and integrity
- Reliability and loyalty
- Strong focus on areas of interest
- Specialist knowledge or skills

SEND involves both strengths and challenges. Performance improves when roles and environments are designed with this in mind.

Links to wider SEND practice

National programmes such as the Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training focus on building awareness and understanding of learning disability and autism.

This information sheet applies those principles specifically to employment, helping organisations understand how SEND impacts people at work and why adjustments and job design matter.

Key Messages to take away

-  **SEND is common in adult workplaces**
-  **Many needs are hidden**
-  **Masking is common and costly**
-  **Strengths and challenges coexist**
-  **Inclusive practice starts with understanding**

This understanding underpins inclusive recruitment, reasonable adjustments, job design and retention.

Next information sheets in this series to explore

- Workplace environments and sensory needs
- Communication and management styles
- Inclusive recruitment and reasonable adjustments
- Job design, job carving and job coaching
- Leadership and organisational culture