



HERBERT
SMITH
FREEHILLS

Infinite Possibilities

Embracing Neurodiversity In The Workplace



2024

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Introduction



As one of the world's leading international law firms, our people are our strength. Diversity and inclusivity are critical to ensure our people can be themselves, contribute

their perspectives and excel in roles which are meaningful and aligned to our shared values.

Neurodiversity is a facet of diversity that is not always obvious – you may not know that the person you are speaking to is neurodivergent. That is why it is important, for us as a firm, for the individuals and for the wider profession that we hear the stories of our neurodiverse talent. With the right support, neurodivergent people can and do make outstanding contributions to the workplace as well as society more broadly.

I am very proud of the work that we have done to become a leader in the legal industry on neurodiversity. Some of that is highlighted in this publication. Neither I, nor any of the authors or editors of this publication want to pretend that we are perfect – to borrow a word from the title of the publication, this is infinite work, and so there is always more that we can do to be truly neuro-inclusive. In addition to showcasing stories of the contributions of our neurodivergent colleagues, I hope that this publication encourages further conversation about how we can better support our colleagues in the future.

The first edition of this publication received heart-warming feedback from colleagues and clients on the stories of how neurodiversity had impacted their lives. The focus of this edition is slightly different – with more focus on the stories of our neurodivergent colleagues themselves – and I have no doubt that it will be an important contribution to the broader conversation on neurodiversity in the workplace.

Lastly, to my colleagues who have made this publication possible. I imagine that it is not always easy to share your stories with the world, and I am very grateful to each of you for taking the time to write in your own words and for letting us in on your journeys. Authenticity and vulnerability are key to being a leader, and I commend each of you for the leadership that you have displayed. I look forward to more conversations in the future both with you and with others whom you have inspired to share their own stories of neurodiversity as we strive for an ever more inclusive environment.

Justin D'Agostino
Chief Executive Officer and Partner

Valuable 500

In 2020, we signed up to the Valuable 500 – a global movement of leading organisations who are committed to putting disability inclusion on the business agenda. As part of our membership, we made a series of commitments.





Introduction to neurodiversity at Herbert Smith Freehills

Ali Grodzki

Senior Associate and Co-Chair of Herbert Smith Freehills' Neurodiversity Working Group in London



I'm delighted to be part of this publication, and to work with so many colleagues who are truly passionate about making our firm a place where neurodivergent employees can achieve their full potential.

I'm particularly grateful for those colleagues because, during my final year of university, I was diagnosed with dyslexia and dyspraxia. At the time, I found the diagnosis hard to grapple with because it knocked my confidence. I thought (overthought is probably more accurate) about how I might be less good than a "neurotypical" candidate joining the workplace. I think that type of worry, and feeling that you need to overcompensate, will be familiar to other neurodivergent thinkers. In retrospect, I really wish I hadn't been as tough on myself (and ignorant about what it means to be neurodivergent). Ultimately, everyone has varying strengths and weaknesses, and those differences are something to be celebrated.

Overall, my diagnosis has helped me to understand my experiences a lot better. I think that type of insight into my own ability and working style has definitely made me into a more effective lawyer. I'm now able to recognise more of my strengths, and how elements of my neurodivergence make me particularly well-suited to my job. Working in an inclusive environment has been essential to that realisation.

I hope that anyone reading this publication is encouraged to have confidence in their ability to pursue whatever career they are interested in, and to seek out support when this is needed.

I'm really looking forward to continuing our initiatives through the Neurodiversity Working Group. A lot has been achieved since our first publication but there is still more to be done!



I hope that anyone reading this publication is encouraged to have confidence in their ability to pursue whatever career they are interested in, and to seek out support when this is needed.

Alison Matthews

Consultant and Co-Chair of Herbert Smith Freehills' Neurodiversity Working Group in London



We received overwhelming support for our earlier publication, *"Infinite Possibilities – Living and Working with Autism"* from both clients and potential applicants to Herbert Smith Freehills. I talked there about my sons, who are both autistic, and some of the challenges they face. Since then, they have both experienced significant life changes, and I am incredibly proud of them both. They were, and are, my reason for supporting our work at the firm on neurodiversity, work which has led to our reaching some significant milestones in the last few years.

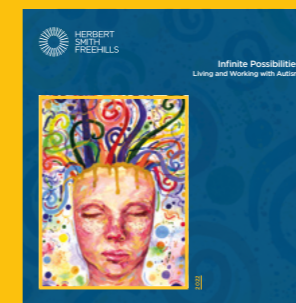
My younger son, William, now aged 21, recently made the transition from home into a residential placement. This was the hardest decision we have had to make as parents, and it was heart-breaking to let him go. However, with regular visits home (he negotiates heavily on the number of sleeps!) and the strong belief that he has moved to a supportive and caring environment, we are slowly coming to terms with our loss. It has undoubtedly helped to see how well William seems to have adapted to his new home and to see the commitment of the carers that surround him.

My older son continues to amaze me. He has had a difficult year undertaking a Masters' but has shown huge determination to keep going despite various challenges. He has many qualities but lacks confidence when it comes to looking at career options. However, with time and with support from a caring employer and colleagues, I am hopeful he will find his place. He deserves to and would be a loyal and willing employee.

It has been a great pleasure to be part of the team working on this publication. There is still a great deal to be done to ensure that all neurodivergent adults can thrive at work. But so many more conversations are taking place now than when I first started to talk about autism, which must be reason enough to be hopeful.



It has been a great pleasure to be part of the team working on this publication. There is still a great deal to be done to ensure that all neurodivergent adults can thrive at work.



Some highlights of our work to date



Given the support we received for *Infinite Possibilities (Part 1)*, it seemed important to highlight here some of what we have been doing across the spectrum of neurodiversity over the past couple of years.

We have established a new Neurodiversity Working Group in London, bringing all of our work in this area within a single strategy, approved by our UK Executive. Other changes include the addition of an ADHD Support Group to our existing support groups covering autism and dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia. Given the number of adults who are now obtaining a diagnosis of ADHD after they begin work, members of this group play a particularly important role in supporting colleagues who are going through, or have recently completed, the process.

Our HR and Graduate Recruitment (GR) teams have also done a huge amount of work. Thanks to our GR team, we have a strong pipeline of future trainees with a range of neurodivergent conditions. Grace Stone, who features in this publication, is just one of our success stories. Our HR team has also provided well targeted support to employees of the firm, including help with adjustments, access to external diagnostic services and access to external coaching.

We are particularly proud of the key role we played in the establishment of the Legal Neurodiversity Network (LNN). With support from the Law Society, and as mentioned by Beth Try below, we invited a number of law firms to a seminar on autism in late 2022. This ultimately led to the formation of the LNN. Our own Luke Poulton (see his story below) yet again demonstrated his abilities as a stand-up comedian at the LNN launch event in March 2023. Alison had the privilege of chairing a panel session on nurturing neurodivergent trainees later in the year.

Other highlights include our participation in the Buckland Review of Autism Employment. Flora Sitwell (also below) represented the firm in discussions with the review team and the inclusion of the LNN as a case study in the report was a great achievement so early in the LNN's life.

Finally, a welcome to Lorraine Gibson from our UK Executive who has agreed to take over as sponsor to the Neurodiversity Working Group. She is passionate about this subject and we look forward to drawing on her considerable experience as we move forward.

Lorraine Gibson

*Business Development Director, UK, US & EMEA
and Sponsor of Herbert Smith Freehills'
Neurodiversity Working Group*



Intellectually, we know that there is a strong business case for having a range of perspectives among employees at our firm. It is this that better equips us to deliver innovative and outstanding work for our clients. Therefore it is unsurprising that the Buckland Review of Autism Employment re-affirms this.

Neurodivergent employees have unique strengths and abilities. Supporting them to succeed is consistent with our commitment to inclusivity, and our desire to stand out as a market leading law firm.

Like many of our clients, we are continuously looking at ways to make our processes more inclusive so we can attract and retain a diverse pool of talent. Our involvement in the LNN and with Beth Try as Co-chair will provide an important level of influence to the wider legal sector and ensure all firms attract, nurture and value neurodivergent talent.

With special thanks to Alison and Ali for bringing together a compelling set of articles for this second publication. It is through their passion, drive and commitment that we are making progress and developing a positive reputation for Herbert Smith Freehills.

Thank you to those who have been open, honest and inspiring in authoring their detailed experiences of working at Herbert Smith Freehills. Without this we would struggle to adapt and move forward. This is required reading for all at the firm – neurotypical more so than neurodivergent – there is something for everyone to take from this.



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Who we are

Flora Sitwell

Paralegal

Since I last wrote for Infinite Possibilities, I feel I have grown a lot, both in terms of professional confidence, and as a neurodivergent employee who is committed to contributing to life at Herbert Smith Freehills.



ADHD AND ADJUSTMENTS

Last year, I received an ADHD diagnosis through the firm's neurodiversity specialist provider.

I have known for a long time that I probably have ADHD, but until now have always been able to "get by". At school, I would never concentrate or follow instructions, preferring to daydream or talk to my classmates. This earned me the title of "disruptive" from a very early age. Looking back, it wasn't because I was inherently naughty, I was just under-stimulated and, quite frankly, bored. I still did well academically because, like a lot of people with ADHD, I had the ability to hyperfocus. This would lead to frantic revising the night before an exam where I would quickly memorise the syllabus, regurgitate it the next day, then promptly forget the entire thing.

Years later during my degree, a similar pattern would occur – I would grimly watch the essay deadline creep gradually nearer and be unable to start writing – if I tried, the stuff I produced was always rubbish. Only within the last two or three days would I be able to sit at my desk and suddenly, inexplicably, be able to write. It is only now, after having got my diagnosis and learnt more about the dopamine-seeking nature of people with ADHD, that this maladaptive working pattern makes sense.



Understanding these characteristics as being a part of my ADHD has allowed me to develop strategies for managing them at work.



Other behaviours that now make sense include my scrambled speech when I am excited or nervous and have too many thoughts going on in my head at once. Or, getting extremely interested in a topic or activity for a few days and then promptly abandoning it. For example, I recently became interested in nails and now I have a huge box overflowing with false tips, gel polish and other toxic-smelling paraphernalia! Understanding these characteristics as being a part of my ADHD has allowed me to develop strategies for managing them at work. This includes adjustments, such as having clear deadlines for pieces of work, noise-cancelling headphones to help me drown out distracting sounds, and the ability to take breaks during the day and make up the time later. The HR team at Herbert Smith Freehills have been excellent at implementing these simple, yet effective, adjustments, and conducting regular check-ins with me to monitor their impact.

D&I

As a way of giving back to Herbert Smith Freehills, I have thrown myself into various neurodiversity initiatives at the firm. This has led me to become the co-lead of a key pillar of the neurodiversity strategy, which focuses on understanding current provisions for neurodivergent employees and looking for opportunities to improve the current system. This role has allowed me to gain a thorough understanding of neurodiversity-related HR and Employee Relations processes at the firm. It has also been a pleasure to work on a team of

neurodivergent people and allies, including lawyers, business services professionals and HR professionals, who are all equally passionate about neuro-inclusion. I always look forward to our meetings as they are a place where we can share our genuine thoughts and ideas for improvement in a non-judgemental and supportive forum.

I also regularly attend our autism and ADHD support groups. The ADHD group, in particular, has been a great source of support for me following my recent diagnosis. Key topics currently being discussed within our group are the nationwide shortage of ADHD medication and the long NHS waiting lists for diagnosis and titration. All of us are incredibly fortunate to have been able to access a diagnosis privately. However, the issue around medication shortages is something that we all feel. Being able to discuss these sorts of things within the support group has been extremely comforting and validating.

EXTERNAL

I have also become involved in external neurodiversity initiatives, notably, the Legal Neurodiversity Network (LNN), of which the firm is a founding member, which takes a sector-wide approach to improving neuro-inclusion. Within my role as Social Media and Communications Lead, I implement our social media campaigns strategy and help to develop new ideas for promotional content. It has been a great pleasure and honour to contribute to the LNN in this way – I believe strongly

The HSF HR team have been excellent at implementing these simple, yet effective, adjustments, and conducting regular check-ins with me to monitor their impact.

in the work that they do, and I have loved getting to know and making friends with other passionate neurodivergent people and allies from a huge variety of firms.

Another achievement is my contribution to the Buckland Review of Autism Employment, a cross-sectoral government review conducted last year which looked at ways to improve the employability of autistic people nationwide. I represented Herbert Smith Freehills, along with other LNN delegates, at a meeting with the Department for Work and Pensions to present our findings from the legal sector. As an autistic person, I spoke about the struggles I'd faced growing up as an undiagnosed autistic child, and how if I had been diagnosed sooner and offered appropriate support whilst at school, my career prospects upon leaving school would have been dramatically different – as well as my early adult life probably a lot less traumatic! It was an incredible privilege to be able to contribute to the Buckland Review and to share my story in a way that I had never done before. Again, this opportunity would not have been offered to me had I not been working at Herbert Smith Freehills and aware of the work of the LNN.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention my receipt of the Jeremy Plank Paralegal Award, which I won in recognition of my contribution to the firm. Winning the award was a very special moment for me, providing me with tangible proof of how far

I've come since I began my journey as an intern at Herbert Smith Freehills over two years ago. It felt particularly heart-warming to have been nominated by my mentor, Alison Matthews, and to have had my nomination supported by the whole insurance team, who I have loved working with and who continue to provide me with amazing opportunities to develop my legal skills. Special thanks too to Beth Try who also supported my application and who has been an incredible support to me since joining the firm.

To conclude, I wish to say a huge thank you to Herbert Smith Freehills for their continued support of me and for all the opportunities they have given me since I started working at the firm. Because of them, I have been able to develop the experience and confidence necessary to pursuing a career in law, a career which would have felt out of reach were it not for the evolving understanding and commitment to neuro-inclusion that is happening right now within the legal industry.

About Flora

I am a paralegal in the Corporate Insurance division at Herbert Smith Freehills. I am the co-lead of one of the firm's neurodiversity strategy pillars and a recent winner of the Jeremy Plank Paralegal Award.

The Buckland review: pioneering change for autism employment

In a significant stride towards autism inclusion, the much-anticipated Buckland Review for Autism Employment in the UK was released in February of this year. Authored by a coalition of experts and advocates, and spearheaded by tireless neurodiversity champion, Sir Robert Buckland KC MP, this seminal publication not only sheds light on the challenges faced by autistic people in the workforce but also presents a roadmap for fostering a more inclusive and supportive workplace culture.

The statistics are stark: despite possessing immense talent and potential, a staggering number of autistic people find themselves marginalised within the job market. The Buckland Review underscores this issue, highlighting the systemic barriers and misconceptions that hinder their employment prospects. From the rigidity of traditional recruitment processes to the lack of understanding surrounding neurodiversity, the report casts a revealing spotlight on the myriad challenges faced by autistic people seeking employment.

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By fostering greater understanding and empathy, workplaces can cultivate an inclusive atmosphere where autistic people feel valued and supported, and empowered to achieve their very best.

This is a huge shame not only for autistic people, but for the employers who overlook them. The Review emphasises the clear business benefit that hiring autistic people represents. Numerous studies have shown that diverse teams outperform homogeneous ones, bringing a wealth of innovation, creativity, and problem-solving skills to the table. By harnessing the talents of autistic people, businesses stand to gain a competitive edge while simultaneously championing social responsibility.

In order to realise this potential, the Review sets out a comprehensive list of recommendations for encouraging the employment and retention of autistic people, including practical steps for hiring more autistic candidates, and adjustment recommendations that will enable them to thrive once they are in the workplace.

As well as practical recommendations, the report emphasises the importance of fostering neuro-inclusive workplace cultures that celebrate the unique strengths and perspectives of every individual. By fostering greater understanding and empathy, workplaces can cultivate an inclusive atmosphere where autistic people feel valued and supported, and empowered to achieve their very best.

The recommendations represent an amalgamation of the views of hundreds of individuals and organisations, including the Legal Neurodiversity Network (LNN), of which Herbert Smith Freehills is a founding member firm. The LNN participated in a roundtable discussion with delegates from the Buckland Review in the summer of 2023. Among the attendees was Flora Sitwell, who represented Herbert Smith Freehills and spoke candidly about her lived experience as an undiagnosed autistic child. As Flora highlighted, if autistic people received more support and career advice whilst at school (as well as earlier diagnoses!), their chances of successfully entering the workforce would dramatically improve.

In the wake of the Review, we are hopeful that industry stakeholders will take the time to process its findings, and look for ways to tailor and implement its recommendations. As the report clearly shows, doing so will not only transform the lives of thousands of autistic people, but it will allow businesses to benefit from their extraordinary talents.

Grace Stone



My journey with Herbert Smith Freehills began in my first year of university with a 'First Year Workshop' and progressed into representing the firm as a Campus Ambassador in my second year. In my third year, I applied for a Summer Vacation Scheme. This February, I started studying for my SQE ahead of my two-year Trainee Associate Programme.

My name is Grace, and I am autistic. I chose the firm for its reputable diversity and active inclusion, and I think my interviewers chose me for my genuine enthusiasm for the firm, the work it does, and its uniquely embracing culture.

For me, being autistic means (among other things) that I experience sensory processing difficulties, which means that ordinary sensory input can cause me discomfort and even pain. I also experience severe anxiety. I explained this to Graduate Recruitment when they offered me a place at an assessment centre by simply replying to an email that they had sent out about arranging Adjustments. They asked no prying questions but were proactive in ensuring that I would not be disadvantaged during the process.

On the day of the assessment centre, I wore my personal earplugs and was given additional time for the written case study to account for time I spent distracted by uncomfortable sensory input. My interviewers were also all made aware of my disability; I wanted them to know that I would initially come across as uncommonly anxious, but that I would quickly settle and proceed in my assessments with confidence.

I phoned my mother after the assessment centre. I told her – truthfully – that I was surprised to find that I had had a lot of fun at the assessment centre.



I am confident that the firm will continue to work with me to identify and put into place adjustments that will prevent me from being disadvantaged compared to my peers.

“I kept forgetting to mask,” I said to her, which she knew to mean that I kept forgetting to suppress my atypical behaviours. “I think that sometimes I was a little too loud, a little too excitable, but I had fun.”

“Well, you do not want to be somewhere that does not accept you as you are,” she replied. The typical words of a mother trying to comfort her insecure child, but she was also making a point: masking is exhausting and makes being around others an unpleasant experience. Unmasked, I can work more efficiently as part of a team and enjoy socialising with my colleagues outside of work.

I phoned her back three hours later to tell her that I had been offered a place on the Vacation Scheme.

After putting my requested Adjustments in place, Graduate Recruitment – and the Trainee Associates and Senior Associates with whom I was paired – checked in regularly for the duration of my Vacation Scheme. I wore my earphones while I worked independently, and my earplugs the rest of the time, limiting uncomfortable or painful sensory input in the office. These Adjustments, and the friendly teams I worked with, allowed me to unmask once more.

During those three weeks, I met Flora and Alison, members of the firm’s Disability Network who are active in their efforts to remove barriers for neurodivergent people at the firm and in the field. They were keen to hear about my experience of the recruitment process and told me a little more about the work they do, making sure that I knew how to reach them if needed.

A couple of weeks after my Vacation Scheme, I received an offer for the Trainee Associate Programme, and I immediately accepted. It was only after this that I began to panic about studying

for the SQE: my university experience had been untypical, and I felt unprepared. However, to someone at the firm who I knew would empathise, I expressed this panic, and my long-term, justified wondering if I might have ADHD. While there is an overlap in traits between ASD and ADHD, they are different, and a diagnosis of ADHD (if present) would make different avenues of management – which may limit or remove some of the additional challenges I would face in my studies – accessible. With my permission, this trusted person took my situation to a meeting, and Rebecca, the Graduate Recruitment manager, quickly got in contact with me to arrange an ADHD assessment and reassure me that we would work together to put adjustments in place post-assessment, regardless of outcome.

Just a couple of months later, I have had my diagnostic assessment and received a diagnosis of ADHD. I am confident that the firm will continue to work with me to identify and put into place adjustments that will prevent me from being disadvantaged compared to my peers.

While disclosure is always an individual’s choice, I do not know that I could have gotten this far if not for being honest about the different challenges I face, and for those at the firm’s continued efforts to ensure that all I do with the firm is only as challenging for me as it is for everyone else. After all, it isn’t easy for anyone.

About Grace

I am a future trainee at Herbert Smith Freehills and I am currently studying for the SQE. I describe myself as AuDHD, a term coined by the neurodivergent community to describe those who are diagnosed with both autism and ADHD.

Luke Poulton and Karin Tracey

About Luke, Audio Visual Technician

Luke was diagnosed with autism at seven years old. Since he appeared in "Infinite Possibilities - Living and Working with Autism", Luke has joined Herbert Smith Freehills on a permanent contract and now works as an Audio Visual Technician in our London office.

About Karin, Audio Visual Team Leader

Karin has been at Herbert Smith Freehills for 7 years in her current role as Audio Visual Team Leader. She has a team of five technicians which Luke is part of, looking after the client floor and client requests, organising webinars for internal and external audiences and preparing and editing recordings.



Please describe what attracted you to working at the firm and how you came to join.

Luke: I had done a talk at Herbert Smith Freehills in 2019 and knowing that there was a specific autism community and support group here really made me want to join, as other places I worked in didn't have anything like that in place. My mum also works at the firm and had told me a job was going, so I applied and had an interview. I didn't get it the first time, but a few months later had a call with Karin and she offered me the job.

How did you prepare for Luke's arrival and what did you find helped most during his first few weeks?

Karin: I read up on autism via the neurodiversity group and forums, which was useful. However, I had come to realise that each person is individual and no one person is the same. It was very difficult to know what to prepare for until Luke arrived and he could let me know what challenges he had.

During Luke's first week we sat down to discuss what we could put in place to make him feel

comfortable. The light above his desk was too bright, this was a simple task to have this turned off (after considering the impact on other members of the team). We also made sure the position of the desk and its surroundings made Luke comfortable.

What were your first impressions of the firm and were you able to request any physical adjustments to help you settle into your role?

Luke: It was a very welcoming place with a wonderful team. I was able to request the light above my desk to be turned off, there were no issues with it being done and it really helped me settle in. The way instructions are given to me also really helps with the way I work.

After Luke had joined, did you make any adjustments to how you work with him and what have you found works particularly well?

Karin: The key is communication. Luke and I had weekly meetings to make sure he could let me know of any challenges he faced and how we could manage them together. I introduced a member of the team as Luke's buddy so he felt that he could

seek support for any challenge he faced. We could then discuss what worked well and where we needed more understanding of a particular task. This worked very well while Luke was able to feel comfortable with each role.

For the team to understand autism, via HR we arranged an e-learning course with the firm's external provider. This proved very successful to the team for them to understand Luke's challenges. Also the team were very open with me on what they felt challenging which we addressed openly. Luke also had external coaching.

What did you find most challenging about settling into your role at Herbert Smith Freehills and how have you and Karin managed those challenges?

Luke: When I first started, even though I have worked at quite a few law firms before, I was very anxious about going into a room to help someone, so during my first few weeks I would have someone from the team come with me and go in before. However, now I'm a lot more confident and I don't worry about going into a room to help. Sometimes I need a little break if things get too much for me. I used to walk away from my desk and walk around and not tell my team, so they worried where I had gone. Now I'm a lot more comfortable and I'm able to tell them.

Please can you summarise your experience of working with Luke and the particular qualities that he brings to the firm.

Karin: I have been inspired by employing Luke. He has taught me as a person that you shouldn't manage everyone the same, each person is individual. Luke loves to investigate to find a solution and is very focused on any project that is given to him. This is his great quality which helps me and other services he works with. His great

personality shines within the team and he has come on leaps and bounds and has settled well within his role.

What would your top tips be for employers who are seeking to attract and nurture neurodivergent talent?

Luke:

- Make sure with interviews you have things in place to make people feel less anxious. This could include sending a photo of the building and interview questions to someone beforehand and telling the person how the interview will be handled.
- If someone asks for a change to something in the office, don't act like they are being difficult when it's something that could help them work better.
- Be understanding that someone may work a little differently than you may have seen before but know that person will be a great asset to your team with their way of working.

What would your top tips be for managers who are seeking to nurture neurodivergent talent?

Karin:

- Get to know the individual, find out what their great points are and focus on that within the job role.
- Communication is the key, make sure you both talk openly about challenges, creating a safe space to share those feelings.
- When providing verbal instructions, follow up with written instructions as this gives the individual focus on the instruction.
- Be nice and calm.

Anuradha Singh

Head of Practice Management, Finance and Real Estate



I am a transactional lawyer, and currently hold the position of Head of Practice Management for two practice groups at Herbert Smith Freehills. In my law firm career of over 25 years, I have held multiple managerial roles since stepping away from active practice. To a large extent, I have been successful both in terms of work performance and making friendships at work. Anyone who met me for the first time would see a confident, successful, commanding professional.

As in so many things, the truth is somewhat different. Until I was diagnosed with autism in October 2023, I suffered from a great deal of internal turmoil. Brought up in India, I was very early made aware that I was 'different' from the norm. 'Different' being an insult in a collectivist society, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, where girls were largely expected to be pretty, docile, and most of all, eager to please. I was none of the above – and drove my poor mother to despair with my desire to be alone, hatred of the loud noises that punctuated every waking moment and being incapable of the polite fictions that oil the wheels of society. I very quickly learnt to accept the notion that I was a failure at the things that really mattered. I would wistfully dream of being someone else, anyone else, but me.

Mercifully, being academically superior represented an escape. I buried myself in performing well and got my validation from my classroom and examination performances and, later, my work. Every A* and encomium from my bosses represented a small victory against my inner sadness. So far, so coping. I got married and had two beloved and gorgeous daughters who transformed my life. Finally, there was a relationship I was successful at: being their mother.

Internally, though, the self-doubt never went away. I would analyse every social interaction and be convinced that I had done something wrong. I was too direct, too opinionated, didn't read the room well ... the list went on. Oftentimes, I felt like there was a glass wall separating me from all the "normal" people. I could see their mouths moving, but had no idea of what they were saying, and hence no idea of how to respond appropriately. It is ironic that all this while, the surface me played her part brilliantly. I was a doting wife and mother, social doyenne, high performing employee. No one could have guessed the truth as masking had become second nature. Not that I knew it was masking. To me, it was 'acting normal'.

Fast forward to 2023. I was now divorced, having moved to the United Kingdom at the age of 48 – never having lived here before but just needing to be near my children. I had worked for Herbert Smith Freehills in Singapore post my marriage ending, in a very junior capacity, as being something to salvage from the rubble of my past life. The firm being what it is, my managers were hugely kind and supportive of my move. I managed

to find myself a job in the London office, thanks to their recommendation of me. Life was stable and stability was all I could hope for.

My girls, however, were now grown up and informed on neurodivergence in a way I certainly wasn't. One day as we ate breakfast, they casually lobbed this bomb into my porridge: "Mum, we think you're autistic. You should get tested". "Autistic? What on earth?" The only autistic person I knew was Dustin Hoffman's character in Rainman. I was pretty sure I couldn't name arcane facts (except of plane crashes and F1 races, but that didn't count) or win at roulette by being a maths genius.

That said, the thought lodged in my head. I have forgotten how I knew, but I knew the firm paid for neurodivergence testing. Gritting my teeth, I wrote to HR. I got a blessedly matter of fact response almost immediately. A month plus and four intense assessments later, my girls' offhand remark was announced as fact.

The firm being what it is, my managers were hugely kind and supportive of my move.



To learn for the first time at the age of 50 that you are not wanting as a person is an experience I cannot put into words. It is like someone cutting chains off you; chains you've long grown used to dragging along. Far from being a life sentence, it became my salvation.

My initial reaction was of tears and shock. Why me? I felt like I had been condemned for a crime I didn't commit. But within a very short while, joyful acceptance and with it, peace. Finally, I had a reason for the way I was and more importantly, there was nothing 'wrong' with the way I was. To learn for the first time at the age of 50 that you are not wanting as a person is an experience I cannot put into words. It is like someone cutting chains off you; chains you've long grown used to dragging along. Far from being a life sentence, it became my salvation.

As a senior manager, I have both direct and dotted lines to a large number of people and teams. It is an interesting aspect for me as being the neurodivergent member of the team and managing relationships. My directness and lack of guile can be a huge asset, but I also need to temper and adjust my reactions to get the best out of my allistic colleagues. I have realised that adjustments go both ways, as it does in any healthy relationship. It is somewhat easier for me in that having masked for five decades, it is difficult to separate the mask from the reality. I sometimes wonder which is the real me. The difference being that any version is now more than acceptable.

Working at Herbert Smith Freehills has, frankly, saved me. The adjustments policy is the tip of the iceberg. What sets this firm apart for me – and engenders my enduring loyalty – is its acceptance of difference in all facets. My children tell me that I live in a bubble and that the outside world is far harsher. I am sure it is. But I am happy to live in the Herbert Smith Freehills bubble, and work to ensure that all of our people are shielded and supported in their differences and needs, no matter what they may be. That to me is how I can repay all that this law firm has given me.

About Anuradha

I am a business service professional and a former intellectual property lawyer. I have worked at Herbert Smith Freehills since 2021, both in Singapore and now London. In Singapore, I was the Co-Chair of the Mental Health Committee. In London, I am a member of the Multicultural and Social Mobility Networks and the Neurodiversity Working Group. I was diagnosed as autistic in 2023.



Ran Sekhon

Service Desk Analyst



While I had completed one undergraduate and two masters' degrees, there was always something missing in terms of concentration, attention, and remembering things.

In 2003 I had started a new job. While waiting for things to settle, I somehow – for reasons that I cannot fully explain to this day – gravitated towards a web page looking at dyslexia. Looking at the components, they seemed all too familiar. This site had a test which, while not conclusive, promised to give a good indication of whether one had dyslexia or not. I was stunned when, having answered the questions, it came back as being highly likely that I was dyslexic.

The question then was: what to do with this? Resources and information on adults with dyslexia were sorely lacking. To do a full assessment at the time was, and remains, very expensive. Not only could I not afford to, things took a turn for the worse when my then employer shed half its workforce. I eventually found work. However, the time on jobseekers' allowance allowed me to do courses locally at a discounted rate. Being affiliated to a university also meant there was the opportunity to be assessed for dyslexia without charge. The waiting list was 9 months, but I eventually managed to get the test from an educational psychologist in 2005. This revealed what I had long suspected. I was in fact dyslexic.

Yet even with a diagnosis, I found that mentioning it in prospective jobs was not a great idea. Interviews that had gone very well, suddenly did a volte-face and rejections came through with scant or no feedback. So I stopped mentioning it, even after I got a job, because it was essential to test the environment first. On more than one occasion,



At the time I did not see the value in talking through issues as I felt this did not deal with the underlying causes. However, with hindsight, this was massively beneficial in 'rewiring' my brain in order to take a different perspective and overcome the lack of confidence which had resulted from years of undiagnosed dyslexia in unsupportive home, school, university and work environments.

sharing that I have dyslexia invited a barrage of anti-disabled comments.

When I started at Herbert Smith Freehills, I therefore kept quiet about my diagnosis and used strategies developed before assessment to cope in the fast-paced environment. My assessment provided recommendations to follow, and these provided the essential framework on which to build. It is for this reason that when the Ability Network (now the Disability Network) was formed soon after I joined the firm, I made sure I could attend that very first meeting. As the network found its feet and started to look into how staff with disabilities found the workplace, things moved rapidly.

It was In 2014 at an evening event to highlight autism that I mentioned to someone from HR that I might have autism in addition to dyslexia. HR immediately offered to have an assessment arranged. An appointment followed which lasted almost 4 hours. In the report produced it turned out there was no autism but a clear case of dyslexia and dyspraxia. This assessment contained clearer guidelines and instructions on how to alleviate any challenges.

I was sent back to the same psychologists for CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy). At the time I did



So, while dyslexia is something you are born with, it is far from being something that cannot be mitigated.

not see the value in talking through issues as I felt this did not deal with the underlying causes. However, with hindsight, this was massively beneficial in 'rewiring' my brain in order to take a different perspective and overcome the lack of confidence which had resulted from years of undiagnosed dyslexia in unsupportive home, school, university and work environments.

The next recommendation was to complete the Cogmed course, which aims to improve the brain systems responsible for working memory and attention, especially addressing the short-term memory issues which afflict those with dyslexia. Cogmed training was even more important than CBT in terms of rewiring my brain. The exercises become progressively more challenging. The tasks get harder because you have overcome the less challenging exercises, but the scores do not necessarily increase. For anyone used to getting dopamine hits by, for example, playing games where you eventually win, this is a reality check. The value of Cogmed was made evident when I took a reassessment for dyslexia in 2021. Due to the long-term effects of brain rewiring using the Cogmed tools, my scores showed an improvement. So, while dyslexia is something you are born with, it is far from being something that cannot be mitigated.



Now, with my recent assessment for ADHD this year, the pieces of my jigsaw are gradually falling into place. Years of frustration, being called lazy and the feeling of failure are being put into perspective.

Now, with my recent assessment for ADHD this year, the pieces of my jigsaw are gradually falling into place. Years of frustration, being called lazy and the feeling of failure are being put into perspective.

Speaking autobiographically, I will admit with relief that in my own instance dyslexia was not uncovered until my thirties, and my ADHD until some time later. By this time, I had more autonomy in changing my social environment. I'm proud of myself for overcoming challenges personally and professionally to reach where I am today.

Unfortunately, the world is designed for those who are neurotypical. Environments often emphasise what the neurodivergent cannot do rather than any abilities. This fast becomes a vicious circle as efforts at improvement are blocked. Unfortunately, this only builds upon a life that has already faced marginalisation. In schools neurodivergence was only recognised as the twentieth century drew to a close. Yet even with this, many children continue to be dismissed as stupid, awkward and disruptive.

The statistics paint a disturbing picture of higher rates of suicide, depression, unemployment, and incarceration.

It is very fortunate that I have been able to work in an environment at Herbert Smith Freehills where these learning differences are understood and supported. I am also proud to have been involved in our Disability network from when it started ten years ago and to have been a part of the work that it has done.

About Ran

I am a Service Desk Analyst and have been a member of Herbert Smith Freehills' Disability Network Committee since the launch of the network in 2014.



Laura Kendrick

Associate



I joined Herbert Smith Freehills as a trainee in September 2019 and qualified into the Corporate Real Estate team in September 2021. I was diagnosed with a dyslexia type learning difficulty during my first year of university (2014/15) as a result of a referral my university made for me.

I previously had some assistance during my A-levels for suspected dyslexia but no formal diagnosis. I was supported by my university with reasonable adjustments for exams (and again when completing my LPC) and was made aware of requesting similar reasonable adjustments for assessment centres when applying to vacation schemes and other graduate opportunities.

I'm aware that some students are apprehensive about declaring a diagnosis or requesting adjustments, sometimes for fear of discrimination. My experience of requesting adjustments during the application process has always been positive (at a number of different law firms) and I would encourage others to ensure they do engage with the relevant people to help them with identifying and implementing suitable adjustments. Herbert Smith Freehills has a number of professionals to assist those who request reasonable adjustments as well as others at the firm who themselves have adjustments in place and are happy to discuss them where it may help someone with a similar adjustment or difficulty.

The Disability Network at Herbert Smith Freehills has, in order to assist with transparency of disabilities within the firm, created a bank of 'who we are' stories where employees have shared details of their disabilities, their adjustments and advice for those with similar difficulties. In my own story I have detailed the different adjustments that have been made for me

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both whilst I was a trainee and now as an associate (such as the use of software and requesting instructions in writing). Herbert Smith Freehills have also created a 'passport' to make recording and communicating requests easier, particularly for trainees who will be moving to new teams every 6 months. The passport can be used by people on a temporary or permanent basis and can flex to the user with the aim of having a written record that can be passed on at the request of the user. Some colleagues have found this avoids them having to discuss what can be emotional or uncomfortable topics and instead have that communicated in a consistent manner in writing.

The workplace needs to be suitable for a diverse range of people, including those with learning difficulties and different learning styles. Achieving this at Herbert Smith Freehills will continue to be an aim of mine in my new role as Co-Chair of the London Disability Network. As a trainee and now as a junior solicitor, most of my learning comes directly from the supervisors I work with, so it is essential that they are aware of my different learning style and are willing to work with me to find a method of learning that works for me. As a trainee in particular, many tasks I did were new

so I needed the guidance of my supervisors to understand how long a task should normally take/ the level of difficulty so I could identify when I was struggling and may need to find a work around. I have found my colleagues (both at Herbert Smith Freehills and when on secondment to a client) to be supportive of adapting to my working style, often without them knowing that I am dyslexic.

Regardless of whether someone has a diagnosis of a neurodivergent condition or not, I believe it is important that we all, as members of a team, support each other to work in the way that is most efficient and comfortable for each person. At a team level, I have found the attitude of them to be the same. If I ask for information in a certain format, they are happy to do so with no justification needed, as I am happy to accommodate their requests to suit their needs. I think this culture is why Herbert Smith Freehills is a great place to work for people of all needs.

About Laura

I am an Associate in the Real Estate Division in London and the Co-Chair of Herbert Smith Freehills' Disability Network.

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Working with others

Beth Try

Senior Diversity & Inclusion Advisor

I was unofficially diagnosed with dyslexia by my mum when I first started primary school. She was a dyslexic specialist but of course, being my mum, it couldn't be an official diagnosis. I muddled through school with average academic ability and only really getting into trouble for not paying attention and talking too much. I refused to get an official diagnosis – secondary school was hard enough without being labelled as different! It was only later, having joined a 'Big 4' professional services firm at 19 years old, that I felt comfortable to seek an official diagnosis.

Fast forward to leaving the structure of management consulting for the world of diversity and inclusion, which was a slight shock to the system. At PwC I juggled multiple commitments and deadlines, but this was multiplied tenfold! I needed new ways of working and strategies. As I was upskilling myself on the remit of diversity, including neurodiversity, I recognised ADHD tendencies in myself. Pursuing a diagnosis provided me with so much clarity. Here are some of the ways it shows up for me:

- I have a very strong moral compass, which contributed to my desire to move into the diversity and inclusion space full time and why I'm so passionate, which is feedback I receive a lot! I feel it in my core when someone has been treated badly or something is unjust.
- My focus during the day can vary – it is true that both difficulty concentrating and hyperfocus co-exist (and it is tricky to turn on hyperfocus on demand!). More time in the office has helped, and when working from home I work in the same room as my housemate to 'body double'.



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Critical thinking, attention to detail and problem solving are typical strengths of individuals who are neurodivergent and they just happen to be key skills in the legal sector!

- As well as the typical impulsivity in meetings and conversations (the strong desire to interject at any given moment), I also suddenly get the strong desire to hyperfocus on a task I've been putting off or on a new idea. Sometimes this is a blessing ... other times not so much!
- I struggle with my memory; I make notes for everything and rely on reminders, which is unfortunately dependent on me remembering to set them!
- Time is also tricky for me as my concept of time just feels warped. I have to set alarms and timers in my personal life and work life. I put placeholders in my calendar for tasks to plan my day, but as I also sometimes underestimate how much focus and thinking time is needed, my 'plan' is often thrown out of the window!

My own neurodivergence, and my day job, is why I am one of five people from peer law firms (and The Law Society) who came together with a shared passion to do something more in relation to neurodiversity. We all have our different reasons for being there and creating the Legal Neurodiversity Network, either because people we love are neurodivergent or due to our own lived experience.

This meeting followed an event we organised at Herbert Smith Freehills focused on autism within the legal profession, led by and featuring individuals from our Neurodiversity Working Group. The event was targeted at our peers, to start the conversation and share our learnings.

Critical thinking, attention to detail and problem solving are typical strengths of individuals who are neurodivergent and they just happen to be key skills in the legal sector! Neurodivergent individuals can come at a problem from a different perspective, and if you bring two people together who think differently, who disagree, who collaborate, they can problem solve innovatively. But we also know that, without inclusion, acceptance and in many cases some adjustments, those benefits cannot be realised, leading to wasted opportunities.

Representation and community are additional elements in enabling neurodivergent individuals to thrive. There is work to be done across our sector and more broadly. There are barriers still standing. As the Legal Neurodiversity Network, we are trying to break these barriers down to improve the experience of neurodivergent employees. We are having the conversations that need to be had, we are amplifying the voices of neurodivergent individuals within the legal sector. Everything we are doing aims to educate others and reduce the stigma that, unfortunately, still exists.



Ultimately, we are stronger together. We have the visibility and weight to attract leaders and managers who might not have engaged with this conversation before, and that is key.

In practical terms, we are:

1. Sharing good practice

We have a workstream focused on sharing practical initiatives and changes which have worked. Being candid with one another regarding the challenges firms have needed to overcome in implementing those initiatives is helping other firms to develop and progress. We are removing competition from these conversations; this is about people and collective change. We are doing this through panel events, roundtables, our upcoming clinic style event and sharing the outputs where relevant.

2. Coming up with new ideas, new initiatives and improvements

Our committee meetings and wider member team meetings bring together people from different roles, firms and backgrounds – allies and neurodivergent individuals alike. The power of collective thought from a diverse group of people is already showing, with new and innovative ideas being shared and taken forward.

3. Creating community

Community building is also a way to provide representation, to be able to see self-progression by speaking to more senior people within member firms. There are benefits to peer-level role models

as they're relatable; building relationships with role models at a peer-level can lead to reciprocal mentoring and support, enabling career progression. In addition, speaking to people who understand and empathise with your own experience can be comforting and empowering, and can have a positive impact on wellbeing. Our members can learn from each other's experiences, what adjustments and strategies might have worked for them, for example. Some adjustments need to be fluid, sometimes things just don't work, so hearing from others can be really helpful. This aspect of our network is particularly beneficial to some of our members who are from smaller firms, and who might not have the representation.

Ultimately, we are stronger together. We have the visibility and weight to attract leaders and managers who might not have engaged with this conversation before, and that is key.

The rate of growth and the sheer amount of people wanting to be a part of it, to follow our progress, just shows how important this network is. And I'm proud of everyone who has played a big or small part in where we are today – you know who you are.

About Beth

I am the Senior Diversity & Inclusion Adviser at Herbert Smith Freehills for the UK, US & EMEA and Co-founder and Co-chair of the Legal Neurodiversity Network.

Sinead Clancy

Assistant General Counsel, Marsh McLennan



I grew up in a close-knit Irish Catholic family. My sister Rebecca has a genetic syndrome causing neurodevelopmental challenges and my cousin has autism. As a child and an adult, I have navigated the world with Rebecca. Accommodating and celebrating neurodiversity isn't optional for me and I have always tried to work for, and with, organisations that share this mindset.

I am an inhouse lawyer at Marsh McLennan and have been a client of Herbert Smith Freehills for almost 10 years. Previously, I worked in the Pensions team at Herbert Smith Freehills. Since 2021, Marsh McLennan has facilitated 22 paid work experience placements for young people with autism in the UK and we recently co-ordinated an 8 week internship in our Legal, Compliance and Public Affairs (LCPA) team.

I was incredibly pleased when I heard that our LCPA team would be running the placement, although I felt a huge sense of responsibility when organising it. During the interview process, we met several well qualified, very strong candidates who spoke of the difficulties they faced in the employment market. Therefore, we knew the placement would be our intern's first experience of an office environment and we wanted to make it a positive one.

As with all placements, we aimed to offer challenging and interesting work in a supportive environment. Fortunately, 238 Marsh McLennan colleagues have gone through specialist training on supporting a person with autism within their teams. This meant we were able to draw from the experience of other colleagues and also from Herbert Smith Freehills, who have organised similar placements.



During the interview process, we met several well qualified, very strong candidates who spoke of the difficulties they faced in the employment market. Therefore, we knew the placement would be our intern's first experience of an office environment and we wanted to make it a positive one.

Our priority was to facilitate any adjustments and accommodations without making our intern feel self-conscious. We tried to engage early, well in advance of the placement start date, to discuss and understand the specific needs of our new colleague. We found that proactively offering a revised start time to avoid peak travel hours, hybrid working, a set working space and various other flexibilities was helpful. Ultimately, some of these proved unnecessary, but by making them available from the outset, we tried to open the lines of communication and create the right environment. Regular catch-ups, particularly at the beginning of the placement, were also important.

We wanted to create space for our new colleague to discuss their experiences with the team, but only if they chose to. Careful thought was given to the type and frequency of team social events. We needed to be inclusive but without creating pressure to attend. Generally, we found that meals with a smaller group worked best but the key here, as with most things, was clear communication and planning in advance.

I know from my sister that inclusive language is crucial to creating a sense of belonging. However, I've also experienced scenarios where well-meaning people fail to engage because they're afraid of saying the wrong thing and causing offence. This is a complex area but I find that neurodiverse friends and colleagues, like most of us, appreciate being asked about their preferences. Our intern was receptive to this and expressed their views with refreshing honesty.



Our priority was to facilitate any adjustments and accommodations without making our intern feel self-conscious.

The placement was ultimately split between our Legal, Compliance and Risk teams. Although we identified potential projects and activities in advance, we found that – as with any colleague – it was easier to assess the work our intern was best suited to once they started. I admired the precision of our new colleague's thinking and expression and was impressed by the incisive questions. The clarity and quality of my instructions when supervising work, and my meeting agendas, improved as a result!

All colleagues have their "superpowers" and we found that our intern produced extraordinarily detailed and accurate attendance notes, even on complex matters, with limited background. Our intern explained that they learned best when transcribing conversations and enjoyed attending calls and reflecting on the notes later. This worked very well and our intern joined us in meetings with colleagues from across our business.

With the benefit of experience, there are things I would do differently. We identified the need to block out quiet "focus time" in the placement schedule, but I would allow more time for this. I would also avoid late diary changes, which can be unsettling for everyone, but particularly for colleagues with autism. Finally, I would try to relax and worry less, since our intern worked best in a calm environment.

Helen Cooke

CEO & Founder



Whenever I am asked which companies are doing well in the disability space, my immediate response is always Herbert Smith Freehills. When I first met with Herbert Smith Freehills over 16 years ago, disability wasn't a focus area for them, however that has changed dramatically. With support from their senior team from the beginning, they have demonstrated unwavering commitment to fostering a truly inclusive workplace and MyPlus has had the privilege of supporting them on their remarkable journey toward creating a culture of openness, understanding, and empowerment.

Although the focus has been across all disabilities and impairments, Herbert Smith Freehills early on recognised the skills that neurodivergent individuals brought to the workplace. Whilst the awareness of neurodiversity has grown significantly in recent years, Herbert Smith Freehills was ahead of the curve when they launched their autism initiative back in 2016, recognising the unique strengths that neurodivergent individuals bring to the workplace. Their foresight and commitment to inclusion has set them apart and enabled them to leverage this talent pool, and their approach has become the benchmark for other employers.

MyPLUS⁺
REALISING NEW
POSSIBILITIES



With support from their senior team from the beginning, they have demonstrated unwavering commitment to fostering a truly inclusive workplace and MyPlus has had the privilege of supporting them on their remarkable journey toward creating a culture of openness, understanding, and empowerment.



It's been a pleasure to watch their engagement with autism – and, more recently, with neurodivergent talent more widely – take root and flourish as part of the firm's culture, to the point where Herbert Smith Freehills has for a couple of years now been widely recognised to be leading this field within the London legal sector.

David Perkins

Director

ASM's first conversation with Herbert Smith Freehills was way back in the summer of 2016, leading subsequently to a number of placements and internships for autistic candidates who we put forward. It's been a pleasure to watch their engagement with autism – and, more recently, with neurodivergent talent more widely – take root and flourish as part of the firm's culture, to the point where Herbert Smith Freehills has for a couple of years now been widely recognised to be leading this field within the London legal sector.

By establishing neurodivergent colleagues as just another aspect of their own culture, their presence no more remarkable than that of any other underrepresented group, this evolving programme has normalised the idea more widely, alongside complementary initiatives such as Neurodiversity within Law, a charity which aims to empower neurodiversity in the legal profession. The necessary adjustments to recruitment processes and communication practices are undemanding and generally constitute good practice for colleagues and managers more widely; and once employers see for themselves the varied skillsets that this talent pool has to offer, the benefits in embracing this are obvious. The guide you're reading now is the next step in this ongoing process of turning all this neurodivergent potential into reality.

Herbert Smith Freehills, Hong Kong Rachael Shek and Matthew Clements

About Rachael

I am a partner in Herbert Smith Freehills' Hong Kong office, specialising in complex commercial litigation including banking litigation, corporate loan recovery, joint venture/shareholder disputes, and private wealth disputes. I'm a longstanding advocate for diversity and inclusion, including neurodiversity and currently a co-lead of the Neurodiversity in Business Working Group in Hong Kong.

About Matthew

I am the Diversity & Inclusion Manager for Herbert Smith Freehills. Based in Hong Kong, I work closely with senior leaders, diversity networks, and the firm's clients to deliver our global diversity and inclusion strategy – Leading for Inclusion, across Asia and Australia. I'm a champion for the role of business in driving change within the communities in which they operate and accelerating progress through cross-industry collaboration.



In Hong Kong, the firm has established a working group of financial services industry leaders to develop neurodiversity strategies appropriate for workplaces in Asia.

Led by partner Rachael Shek and D&I Manager, Asia & Australia, Matthew Clements, the group brings together senior leaders from EY, HSBC, Morgan Stanley, Bloomberg, Standard Chartered and Société Générale. Support is provided by Noelle Sinclair, a leading neurodiversity consultant from DiverseMinds.

“Our clients told us they wanted to do something meaningful to accelerate progress around neurodiversity inclusion that is, importantly, appropriate for Asia workplaces.”

“It is essential to bring neurodiversity into mainstream conversations in this region given the lack of awareness, barriers to diagnosis, and continuing stigma around conditions such as autism, ADHD and dyslexia” – Rachael Shek, Partner.

Working together, the group aims to empower the Asia-Pacific business community to champion cognitive diversity and become a leading voice in promoting and embracing diverse perspectives and ideas.

As well as partnering with firm clients, the strength of a joint approach is allowing the group access to collective insights, tried and tested strategies, and lessons already learned. The group aims to deliver its outcomes in the summer of 2024. A series of activities to share these outcomes and promote neurodiversity across the Hong Kong business community and beyond will follow.

“The concept of neurodiversity, or cognitive diversity, remains poorly understood across the world, especially in Asia. I prefer the broadest formulation of this term, which covers experiences ranging from simple differences in one's cognitive style (that's everyone), all the way to mental conditions that impair daily life in such a way as to constitute a disability. I joined this group in the

hope that we could utilise our collective resources and experiences to raise awareness and acceptance of neurodiversity in our social and business communities, and to develop actionable strategies through which organisations can recruit, utilise, and empower (talented) neurodivergent individuals.”

Xavier Chen, Regional Head of Legal – Affluent Clients (Greater China and North Asia), Standard Chartered Bank

“Collaborating with like-minded businesses to educate and elevate the concept of neurodiversity is an integral part of our inclusion strategy at EY. Together, we can accelerate progress for neurodiversity awareness as diagnosis is on the rise – to change perception and create innovative talent pipelines not only within our organisations – but also within Asian communities. Being part of this roundtable has been inspiring to me as a woman

with ADHD – knowing that we are contributing towards workplaces and communities where neurodivergent talent can thrive”.

Kate Wood, Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness Leader, Asia Pacific Financial Services, EY

Front, L-R: Rachael Shek, Herbert Smith Freehills; Lorraine Tam, Diversity & Inclusion Business Partner, Bloomberg; Kate Wood, Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness Leader EY, Amy Hanly, Diversity & Inclusion Lead, APAC, Morgan Stanley; Joe Jenkinson, Cybersecurity Lead, HSBC.

Back, L-R: Xavier Chen, Regional Head of Legal – Affluent Clients (Greater China and North Asia), Standard Chartered Bank; Maggie Lock, COO Asia-Pacific HR and Head of HR, Taiwan, Société Générale; Noelle Sinclair, Founder, DiverseMinds; Matthew Clements, Herbert Smith Freehills.



How our HR team is supporting us

Q&A with Molly Evans, HR Manager

Molly Evans

What support is available at the firm for someone who is neurodivergent?

As part of our Global Adjustments Commitment at Herbert Smith Freehills, we are seeking to create a culture of openness and a high level of understanding about neurodiversity and workplace practices. This is in order to encourage our people and future joiners to feel comfortable to discuss the support and adjustments they think they may need. The adjustments policy is a key part of this.

ADJUSTMENTS POLICY

Our adjustments policy is designed to ensure that we create an environment where everyone can perform to their full potential. The policy does not seek to define how we will approach every situation, as we recognise that each individual's circumstances will be different, but it is intended as a general statement of the firm's commitment and approach to supporting a diverse and inclusive, high-performance culture.

The policy encourages all employees to discuss potential needs for adjustments with either their line manager or HR representative. It also provides guidance on what an adjustment is, how to request an adjustment and how we as a firm assess adjustments.

WORKPLACE NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

As part of the assessment of adjustments for neurodivergent employees, we use a leading external provider to undertake workplace needs assessments. These are impartial assessments used to identify adjustments specific to the individual's needs, working environment and role.



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The assessment provides HR, the line manager and the individual with in-depth, tailored advice regarding the individual's strengths and challenges and adjustments and support for the individual, their manager, and their team members. Support that the firm has previously implemented includes:

- One-to-one coaching to develop strategies and solutions to overcome workplace challenges.
- Co-coaching, between individuals and their line managers, to improve understanding, communication and collaboration.
- eLearning modules to support neurodivergent individuals to develop their understanding of different ways of working and enable them to understand what strategies could be useful to them.
- Assistive technology and software and training for the individual on how to use the software.
- Training for line managers and colleagues to develop their awareness of strengths and challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals.

Once the assessment results have been received, HR and the relevant line manager will meet with the individual to talk through the report and agree on what adjustments should be implemented. We recognise that adjustments may need to change from time to time, and will arrange regular check ins with the individual to keep the position under review.

ADJUSTMENTS PASSPORTS

At Herbert Smith Freehills we make use of an optional 'passport' system as a way to explore, log and review at different periods, what employees may need by way of adjustments. It aims to make it easier for employees to discuss any adjustments if they wish with their manager and share information that has been provided with anybody involved in implementing adjustments. The aim of the passport is to focus on the positive aspects of what employees can achieve with the appropriate support.

LUNCH AND LEARN SESSIONS

We have organised various Lunch and Learn sessions with external providers regarding ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Dyscalculia, as well as sessions involving our employees. The sessions aim to educate our employees on neurodiversity, the unique strengths that neurodiverse individuals can bring to the firm, and what support and adjustments are available. The sessions have been recorded and uploaded to the Global Diversity and Inclusion Hub for employees and partners to access at any point.

DISABILITY NETWORK AND SUPPORT GROUPS

Our Disability Network focuses on offering support, advice and guidance to staff and increasing knowledge and general awareness of disability across the firm. We also have informal support groups for Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia and Dyspraxia for those who are diagnosed, awaiting or considering a diagnosis, or those who are supporting or close to someone who is.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

- Employee Assistant Programme: Our online EAP portal provides a range of resources about mental health and wellbeing – including information on building resilience, anxiety, depression and panic attacks and mindfulness and access to support and qualified experts.
- Stronger Minds: For those with private medical insurance, AXA's Stronger Minds service includes support such as counselling, treatment with a psychologist, referrals to specialists and guidance on self-help.
- Mental Health Champions: Champions play a critical role in raising awareness of mental health and supporting a culture of inclusion and openness around mental health.
- Global Health and Wellbeing Hub: a go-to place for resources, guidance and support to help our employees to proactively look after their health and wellbeing.

What support is available for someone who thinks they may be neurodivergent, but doesn't have a formal diagnosis?

The firm's adjustments commitment and policy applies to all employees, regardless of whether or not they have a diagnosis. As such, someone without a diagnosis would receive the same level of support as someone who has a diagnosis.

Do you have any learnings from previous experiences of supporting neurodiverse employees?

Absolutely, there's always plenty of learnings! As mentioned, the firm does a lot of work to raise awareness and educate our employees about

neurodiversity in order to foster an environment where individuals feel comfortable to discuss their needs. This has definitely had the desired effect as we have more employees coming to us for support than we have had previously, which is great. However, it has highlighted the fact that some of our internal processes could be further streamlined.

For example, our IT Team is currently working on ensuring that we have all the recommended assistive software ready to be installed and used when needed, rather than having to wait for security clearances before being able to install such software on employee's devices.

In HR, we've recently been working on formalising our adjustments process by creating streamlined process maps to ensure all relevant HR employees fully understand the processes and to ensure that all employees receive the same level of support from onboarding onwards. Our hope is that by formalising this process and giving employees the space to discuss their needs from the outset, we can proactively implement any adjustments and support, providing a better overall employee experience.

We also recognise that we have room to grow and develop our internal capabilities and knowledge. We're keen to upskill our employees to be able to provide some of the services we currently outsource. In addition to this, we're currently looking at further training opportunities for HR, line managers and teams who assist with implementing adjustments to ensure that they have the training and knowledge they require in order to best support our neurodivergent colleagues.

Key terms

Neurodiversity is the concept that all humans vary in terms of our neurocognitive ability. Everyone has talents and things they struggle with. However, for some people the variation between those strengths and weaknesses is more pronounced, which can bring talent but can also bring challenges.

Neurodiverse/neurodivergent people tend to find some things very easy and other things incredibly hard. This usually leads to an inconsistent performance at school or work.

Neurodiversity can be a competitive advantage when individuals are in the right (inclusive) environment, making use of their strengths, instead of constantly trying to overcome challenges.

AUTISM

Autism is a lifelong condition that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them. Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to other people. If you are autistic, you are autistic for life; autism is not an illness or disease and cannot be 'cured'. Often people feel being autistic is a fundamental aspect of their identity.

Autism is a spectrum condition. All autistic people share certain differences and difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in different ways.

ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD) AND ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER (ADD)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a type of neurodiversity characterised by inattentiveness and hyperactivity. People with ADHD display a range of symptoms, including difficulty concentrating, fidgeting, and talking fast, but also a variety of attributes, such as, the ability to multi-task and work well under pressure, and to process new ideas and spot patterns quickly.

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) is similar to ADHD, but without the hyperactivity. This lack of hyperactivity means that it sometimes take longer to spot a person with ADD as they won't have some of the more noticeable characteristics of a person with ADHD.



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There are lots of neurocognitive functions required for literacy, and there are many reasons why this might be a challenge. Dyslexia affects people in different ways and commonly co-occurs with other neurodiverse conditions.

DYSLEXIA

Whilst most people associate dyslexia with difficulties in literacy, they are not aware that it also comes with many skills. Dyslexic people often display standout strengths in areas such as 3D visual thinking, verbal skills and long term memory.

It is a symptom not a cause – dyslexia literally means ‘difficulties with words’; however, modern science has discovered that this is a symptom, not a cause. There are lots of neurocognitive functions required for literacy, and there are many reasons why this might be a challenge. Dyslexia affects people in different ways and commonly co-occurs with other neurodiverse conditions.

DYSPRAXIA

Dyspraxia or Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) is commonly associated with difficulties with movement, when in fact there are many strengths associated with this neurotype. Big picture thinking, problem solving, tenacity, creativity and empathy are all qualities associated with DCD.

DCD affects parts of the brain responsible for processing movement and spatial awareness, which can affect the ability to follow sequences of instructions or learn new processes as well as fine motor control and balance. As with all neurominorities however, DCD/Dyspraxia affects individuals differently and may also co-occur alongside other conditions.

SOURCES CONSULTED

Asperger’s Syndrome Foundation (<https://aspergerfoundation.org.uk/what-is-aspergers-syndrome/>)

Genius Within (<https://geniuswithin.org/what-is-neurodiversity/dyslexia/>) (<https://geniuswithin.org/what-is-neurodiversity/dcd-dyspraxia/>) (<https://geniuswithin.org/what-is-neurodiversity/>)

Mencap (<https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/conditions-linked-learning-disability/autism-and-aspergers-syndrome>)

NAS (<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism/the-history-of-autism/asperger-syndrome>)

NHS (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd/symptoms/>)





About the artwork used in this publication

The artwork used in this publication has been produced especially for Herbert Smith Freehills' neurodiversity initiative by Noah Büyükertaş who is autistic and has ADHD.

In Noah's words: "Following on from my artwork in *"Infinite Possibilities - Living and Working with Autism"*, this painting attempts to capture the complexity and diversity of the neurodivergent experience, as well as the range of thought and ideas present in a neurodiverse workforce."

Noah Büyükertaş (they/them)



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