

City of Milwaukee Employee Assistance Program

Managing a Neurodivergent Workforce

Managing a neurodiverse workforce means moving from a one-size-fits-all approach to prioritizing flexibility. Neurodivergent employees—including those with autism, ADHD, and dyslexia—often face barriers in traditional workplaces. Instead of forcing conformity, managers should foster an environment where different thinking styles thrive. Recognize neurodivergence as a natural variation, not a deficit, and adapt leadership to unlock each team member's strengths.

Focus on communication and the physical work environment.

Neurodivergent employees may process information differently, so clarity is paramount. Instead of vague instructions or last-minute meeting invites, provide agendas in advance and offer materials in multiple formats (written summaries following verbal discussions). For example, an employee with dyslexia might struggle with a dense email but excel in visual presentations. Environmentally, be mindful of sensory input. Offer quiet zones or allow the use of noise-canceling headphones to mitigate auditory overload. Simple changes, like moving a desk away from a loud HVAC unit or installing dimmer switches in certain areas to soften harsh fluorescent lighting, can drastically reduce anxiety and improve focus for those with sensory processing sensitivities.

When it comes to task management and performance reviews, **the focus**

should be on strengths and clear structures rather than forcing neurotypical social norms.

Many neurodivergent individuals do well in roles that require deep focus or detailed analysis, but may struggle with open-ended tasks or spontaneous interruptions. Implement strategies like "deep work" blocks on calendars to prevent distractions, or use project management tools that break large projects into concrete, sequential steps. During reviews, avoid vague feedback like "be a better team player." Instead, use specific, actionable examples. If an employee with autism is great with data analysis but avoids team lunches, focus praise on their analytical wins and provide explicit guidance on collaboration expectations, perhaps suggesting they join a specific project meeting rather than a vague social gathering.

Ultimately, **successful management of neurodivergent employees hinges on creating a culture of psychological safety.** Help employees feel comfortable disclosing their needs. Not everyone will require the same accommodations, so an individualized approach is key. Consider implementing a mentorship or "buddy" system to help navigate unwritten office norms, or offer flexibility in work hours to accommodate different energy levels and focus rhythms. By viewing these adjustments not as burdensome accommodations but as universal design principles that benefit everyone, you cultivate a more innovative, loyal, and high-performing team.

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City of Milwaukee EAP

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Take 5: Work Breaks

Taking a break is often mistakenly viewed as a sign of low productivity. However, research in cognitive psychology consistently shows that the brain is not designed for sustained, intense focus for hours on end. This is due to a phenomenon known as "*ultradian rhythms*", natural cycles in which our brains can only focus intently for about 90 to 120 minutes before needing a rest.

When we ignore these rhythms and push through mental fatigue, we experience diminishing returns, making more errors, and suffering from decision fatigue. Stepping away, even for five minutes to stretch or walk to the water cooler, acts as a "reset" button for the brain.

Regular breaks are a critical pillar of mental health maintenance. When we are glued to our work without a break, our stress response systems remain activated. **A brief pause to practice deep breathing can shift the nervous system from "fight or flight" to "rest and digest," lowering heart rate and improving mood.**

Simply stepping outside for natural light or engaging in a non-work-related conversation allows us to return to work feeling a bit more refreshed rather than depleted. By normalizing breaks, we are valuing our long-term well-being over short-term output, creating a healthier, more resilient, and ultimately more sustainable work.

EAP Mission Statement

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) assists employees who develop behavioral/emotional problems that may directly affect their work performance, and provides Key Personnel with policy and procedural guidelines for the management of these problems.

Wellness Resources

- For information about current Wellness programs and services: Visit www.milwaukee.gov/WYCM
- The City's Workplace Clinic provides free, convenient, onsite and virtual health care services for employees and spouses regardless of enrollment in the City's health insurance and dependents (18 months and older) on the City's health insurance. Call **414-777-3413** to schedule an in-person or virtual visit.
- The City of Milwaukee Employee Assistance Program web page houses topical information and resources on a wide range of work-life issues. Visit: <https://city.milwaukee.gov/DER/EAP>
- The City of Milwaukee offers a free Care.com membership through Care@Work to employees. A Care.com membership provides unlimited access to a platform employees can use to find and manage care for children, seniors, pets, and their homes. Visit www.milwaukee.gov/careatwork to learn more.

Time Management

Effective time management is less about cramming more hours into the work-day and more about aligning your energy with your priorities. **The most common pitfall is confusing "being busy" with "being productive."** To counter this, implement a prioritization framework like the **Eisenhower Matrix**, which divides tasks into four quadrants: *urgent and important*, *important but not urgent*, *urgent but not important*, and *neither*. For example, crafting a strategic report due in two days (important, urgent) takes precedence over answering a low-priority email that can be addressed later.

Managing attention requires protecting your focus from internal and external distractions. **Parkinson's Law** states that work expands to fill the time available. If you give yourself a week to complete a task that realistically takes three hours, it will likely take the entire week. Instead, set artificial, tighter deadlines to force efficiency.

Lastly, practice **Task Batching** to reduce "context switching", the mental cost of jumping between different types of work. For instance, schedule two specific times, say 10:30 AM and 3:30 PM, to process your inbox in one focused burst. Similarly, batch all your meetings in the afternoon if possible, and reserve your mornings for deep and creative work.