



Diversity Task Force

Disability Inclusive Workplace Quick Guide for Employers

PERSONAL STORY

Karen Cole FIMI, Director of Safety & Training, Motorcycle Industry Association (MCIA)



I'm Karen Cole, I've been with MCIA for almost 23 years, and I am currently Director of Safety and Training. I have ADHD, although this is only something I found out by chance a few years ago. My grandson is autistic and also has ADHD. So, we went through a diagnostic process with a practitioner, and during that process they also recognised that as well as my grandson, both my daughter and I have ADHD.

I am also a Trustee of Mental Health Motorbike, a charity whose primary aim is suicide prevention, specifically supporting motorcyclists. Depression and anxiety amongst many other conditions, often run hand in hand with ADHD and other neurodivergent conditions. I am a Mental Health First Aider.

Workplace adjustments

Looking back over the course of my career, I can see where I've mitigated issues and made changes, most of which have been organic and driven by myself. With non-visible disabilities it is especially important that changes are led by the individual, because every individual will have different needs. You can't prepare a workplace to help a person with ADHD or Autism in the same way you might prepare for a wheelchair user, where logic and common-sense will help you get most (but not all) of the necessary changes right.

As a Senior Manager, I've engineered changes that have helped me to manage (and to some extent mask) my condition, rather than conscious decisions being made by MCIA to help me. This is to be expected as I received my diagnosis later in life, and I have only recently chosen to share that with work colleagues. I have been surprised to find out that when I have mentioned ADHD, several long term colleagues from other organisations have it too.

I tend to get easily distracted and appreciate having my own office space. Background noise really irritates and distracts me, and makes it impossible to concentrate. I cannot resist listening to other people's conversations, even when I don't want to, I can't escape the noise!

I have my own way of working, which might look chaotic to others, but it works for me. I usually have numerous notebooks on the go. Paper is very satisfying, writing up the task then once it's done, screwing up the paper and throwing it away is very satisfying. Solutions aren't always difficult or expensive.

I struggle with having a whole task handed over, I like to discuss the individual components that make up a project and several short term objectives work better for me than one overall long term objective which can feel overwhelming. Written rather than verbal instructions help me immensely, and I tend to use email to ask questions for this reason. Quick responses to emails help to keep me on track as my brain will be processing information so quickly it can be hard to get back on track, and delays in receiving important information can cause things to be forgotten.

Email also helps me to express my thoughts, and to slow down. During conversations my brain often works faster than my mouth and I struggle to get my point across. The option to reread has sometimes kept me out of trouble too, when you speak fast it's all too easy to say the wrong thing and your meaning is misinterpreted.

Teams meetings work well for me, having to raise my virtual hand before speaking, stops me interrupting and gives me time to think and consider before I speak, as I often feel the need to blurt out my thoughts or talk over people, which I try very hard to avoid. This waiting isn't always positive, I can sometimes forget the finer points I wanted to make as my brain has moved on, listening to other people.

Goals & wishes

In relation to my own diagnosis, better appreciation of the needs of those with non-visible disabilities would definitely help. The delay in my realising that I had ADHD has meant that I learned to mask very effectively. Because I appear relatively 'normal', when I suggest changes or say that 'it would help me if' my comment is easy to disregard if others can't understand why. Whereas colleagues can easily understand the reason why if for example a wheelchair user asks for wider spaces between desks. I appreciate it is much more difficult to understand the reason for my requests, and to compound this there are so many different non visible disabilities and individuals all potentially needing different assistance. Learning and understanding takes time, but studying the particular conditions that affect your workforce is a great investment which will pay off in the longer term.

Frustrations

Many people seem to believe that ADHD is a made up diagnosis for naughty, disruptive children and impatient, difficult adults. Whilst some understand the drawbacks of ADHD, very few indeed understand the positives and know how to use them to their best advantage. I'm sure this is equally true of most non visible disabilities.

The anxiety that sits alongside ADHD for many, brings low self-esteem too. Casual negative comments that may seem unimportant, can have a far bigger effect than intended on the individual. It is frustrating when part of you knows that comments were only made in passing, yet the message is taken in and its importance exaggerated, replayed over and over causing stress and anxiety.

Making things work for me

Colleagues having an understanding of neurodivergent conditions will help the organisation as a whole. There are many with undiagnosed conditions, in fact around 1 in 100 people are thought to have an autism spectrum disorder. Helping everyone to fully contribute within the workplace can only be beneficial, and a diverse workforce can bring many positive benefits. Its easy to forget that someone is neurodivergent as there are no physical reminders, so building a tolerant and understanding workplace may take time, but will bring its rewards for all. Understanding that, and taking into account the needs of the individual are probably the most important considerations.

I am also a Trustee of Mental Health Motorbike, a safe non-judgmental space for riders, many of whom have non visible disabilities. This relatively new charity but very successful charity has been built around support, tolerance and understanding for all, which is a source of strength to many. We also provide Mental Health First Aid training (accredited by Mental Health First Aid England) for our supporters and businesses within the motorcycle industry.

I feel very strongly that ALL organisations should have a qualified Mental Health First Aider available to support employees.



INSTITUTE
OF THE **MOTOR**
INDUSTRY

Registered office

Fanshaws, Brickendon, Hertford, Hertfordshire, SG13 8PQ

theimi.org.uk

+44(0)1992 511 521

hello@theimi.org.uk

