



# Universiteit Utrecht

## **Experiences of neurodivergent employees with requesting adjustments at work and the perceived impact on their sustainable employment: A qualitative study**

*Social Challenges, Policies and Interventions (SCPI)*

*Master Thesis (202300018)*

*“This thesis has been written as a study assignment under the supervision of an Utrecht University teacher. Ethical permission has been granted for this thesis project by the ethics board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Utrecht University, and the thesis has been assessed by two university teachers. However, the thesis has not undergone a thorough peer-review process so conclusions and findings should be read as such.”*

**Name:** Mohamed Talhi (4598687)

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**Department of ISW Supervisor:** Janna Besamusca

**Internship Organisation:** HRD Groep

**Internship Supervisor:** Jolien van den Nieuwendijk

## **Abstract**

This study examined the experiences of seventeen neurodivergent employees and experts about the barriers to request adjustments at work and the perceived impact on the sustainable employability of neurodivergent employees in the Netherlands. By using semi-structured interviews, I collected qualitative data about their experiences. Most participants experienced that understanding about their neurodiversity and using a person-centered approach were more important than adjustments themselves but that these were also important factors that influenced requesting adjustments. Disclosure was perceived as most crucial factor as disclosing participants reported to disclose to increase understanding among their manager and colleagues and in order to request adjustments. Participants that did not disclose mentioned stigmatization and a low-self-esteem as main reasons and reported to not have requested adjustments because of this. Other factors that were perceived as important included self-knowledge and understanding about neurodiversity, organizational culture, and the employers' knowledge about neurodiversity. The majority of disclosing participants had requested adjustments reported to mainly feel a perceived positive impact on different dimensions of their sustainable employability while non-disclosing participants reported to mainly perceive a negative impact on their sustainable employability. These findings provide a better understanding of how neurodivergent employees experience to feel included at work and how this effects their employment.

**Key words:** neurodiversity, requesting adjustments, disclosure, knowledge and understanding, sustainable employability

# Introduction

## Problem Statement

Neurodiversity at work is a topic that has gained more attention (Doyle, 2020). Neurodiversity refers to the concept that humans have different neurological abilities, strengths and weaknesses which should be respected and recognized (*Neurodiversity*, n.d.; Doyle, 2020) and conceptualizes them as human variation (Krzeminska et al., 2019). The neurodiversity movement mainly focuses on the qualities of neurodivergent individuals while neurotypes such as autism, AD(H)D, and dyslexia are still classified as disorders by society in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.).

The way society perceives neurodivergent individuals can create many different challenges in society and at work. For example, neurodivergent employees have experienced a high rate of unemployment spells in recent decades (Krzeminska et al., 2019). With the tightness of the Dutch labor market (CBS, 2023), it would be interesting for Dutch employers to employ neurodivergent individuals. A solution to counter challenges faced by neurodivergent employees at work is to have reasonable adjustments to their workplace (CIPD, 2018; Parris Consulting, n.d.; Davies et al., 2022). However, literature suggests that many neurodivergent employees do not request adjustments (Davies et al., 2022; McDowall et al., 2023) which could have detrimental consequences for their sustainable employability (North, 2023; Tromans et al., 2023).

This research aims to examine the experiences of neurodivergent employees with the barriers they face in order to request adjustments and also examines how neurodivergent employees experience the perceived impact of these experiences on their sustainable employability. By examining the experiences of neurodivergent employees on these topics, this research wants to contribute to better understand when a neurodivergent employee feels included at work and how these experiences can influence their employment. Furthermore, by gathering the experiences of neurodivergent employees, this research seeks to address the gap of assessing the impact of inclusive employment (Krzeminska et al., 2019). Moreover, this research also wants to contribute to a better understanding of the unique disclosure experiences and challenges from different neurominorities as mentioned by LeFevre-Levy et al. (2023). Ultimately, by examining their experiences and addressing these gaps in the literature this research can contribute in gaining insights in the support employers could provide to their neurodivergent employees.

# Theoretical Framework

## Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity refers to the concept that humans have different neurological abilities which should be respected and recognized (*Neurodiversity*, n.d.; Doyle, 2020) and conceptualizes them as human variation (Krzeminska et al., 2019). International estimates state that around 15%-20% of the world population is neurodivergent (DCEG Staff, 2022; Krzeminska et al., 2019). In this research, the focus will be on the neurotypes of autism, AD(H)D, and dyslexia as these are the most described in the literature.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (further referred to as autism) is a developmental condition that affects social interaction, social communication and presence of repetitive patterns of behavior (Tromans et al., 2023). Autistic employees can find it challenging to engage in social interactions, pick up cues, and interpret nuanced communications (Seitz & Smith, 2016; Parris Consulting, n.d.).

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is characterized by issues with paying attention, impulsivity, and organization (Tromans et al., 2023). ADHD is the term used when referring to both ADD/ADHD as they are considered to be subsets of the same condition (Katz, 2003; Parris Consulting, n.d.). Employees with AD(H)D can face issues with time management, concentration and attention (Tromans et al., 2023; Doyle, 2020).

Dyslexia is defined as a lifelong specific learning difficulty that mainly affects development of language-related skills (CIPD, 2018). Dyslexia is characterized by challenges with short-term memory, visual processing skills, and patterns of sounds (CIPD, 2018; Parris Consulting, n.d.). Dyslexic employees can face challenges with having to read and/or write quickly and with personal organization (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023; Doyle, 2020).

## Requesting Workplace Adjustments

According to article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), neurodivergent employees have the right to request and receive reasonable adjustments.

Reasonable adjustments are defined as necessary and appropriate adjustments to ensure persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others (Oliver, 2004; United Nations, 2006). Adjustments can be classified in to three different categories: physical, social, and job role adjustments (Davies et al., 2022) Examples of physical adjustments include access to equipment (e.g. noise-cancelling headphones) and quiet spaces

at the office. Social adjustments include changes to communication such as clear communication and written instructions. Job role adjustments include flexible working hours and remote working (Davies et al., 2022; Katz, 2003). Employers cannot deny reasonable adjustments as this is seen as discrimination on the basis of disability (United Nations, 2006). Most policies targeting neurodivergent employees, like the CRPD, use the medical model which conceptualizes neurotypes as disabilities while the neurodiversity movement is focused on the Social Model of Disability (Krzeminska et al., 2019; Haney, 2018).

The Social Model of Disability conceptualizes the different barriers that people with impairments experience with their participation to society (Welsh Government, n.d.; Shakespeare, 2016; Oliver, 2004). The model argues for inclusion of disabled individuals in society and for their acceptance as people with equal rights and responsibilities (Terzi, 2004). One of the key dichotomies of the model is that disability is referred to as disadvantageous circumstances for individuals with impairments caused by social organization and excludes them from participation (Oliver, 2004; Terzi, 2004). Thus, disability is seen as something structural and public (Shakespeare, 2016; Terzi, 2004). Although the neurodiversity paradigm does not use terms like ‘disability’ as it opposes the perspective that neurodiversity is a natural form of human diversity (Walker, 2014), the concept of disability as used in this model aligns with the neurodiversity model.

There are several barriers described in the literature such as attitudinal, economic, social, communicational, cultural, institutional and environmental barriers (Welsh Government, n.d.; Oliver, 2004; Terzi, 2004; Shakespeare, 2016). As there are several different terms used in the literature to distinguish the barriers of the model that overlap one another, this research will be focused on two of the main barriers: attitudinal and environmental barriers as they allow me to get a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ experiences and answer the research questions.

### **Attitudinal Barriers**

The attitudes of employers, supervisors, and co-workers can create barriers that neurodivergent employees have to face (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Seitz & Smith, 2016). Decisions, language, and behavior can all be contributing factors in either creating or removing these barriers (Welsh Government, n.d.). Consequently, these barriers can affect all aspects of the participation of neurodivergent employees in the workplace. A very common attitudinal barrier in order to request adjustments described in the literature is the stigma

associated with the disclosure of an employees' neurodiversity (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Davies et al., 2022).

Neurodivergent employees are faced with the decision whether to disclose their neurodiversity (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; North, 2023). Many neurodivergent employees do not disclose their neurodiversity as they fear stigmatization (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). Stigma refers to the social discrediting of individual or group attributes which results in feeling rejected and unaccepted (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). Several minority populations face barriers to request adjustments due to stigmatization of co-workers and managers (Krzeminska et al., 2019; Romualdez et al., 2021). Paul et al. (2016) included a quote in their article of an autistic participant that did not disclose because of the associated stereotypes: ***“I do not want to be perceived as what I feel is a stereotype of — I think people think they are rude and mentally slow — I do not want to be perceived as a stereotype.”*** Disclosure can be divided in two types of disclosure: proactive and reactive disclosure (McIntosh, 2016). Proactive disclosure refers to disclosure before work-related issues appear and reactive disclosure refers to disclosure after work-related issues appear (McIntosh, 2016). Neurodivergent employees that do disclose mention increasing understanding among colleagues and managers and gaining reasonable adjustments as their main reasons (Romualdez et al., 2021). Based on this, disclosure and stigma are expected to be important factors in the experiences of employees with requesting adjustments.

Many neurodivergent employees have developed a strategy of masking as a result of non-disclosure (North, 2023; Krzeminska et al., 2019). Masking, also known as camouflaging, refers to hiding personal traits in social interactions (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). Shaw et al. (2023) reported in their research that autistic doctors used masking during their employment to avoid stigmatization. An important factor that influences non-disclosure and masking is lack of knowledge and awareness about neurodiversity within an organization (CIPD, 2018; Parris Consulting, n.d.; Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). Due to a lack of awareness, many organizations do not have policies or procedures in place for proactive and reactive disclosure (CIPD, 2018; Parris Consulting, n.d.). Furthermore, some employers and managers might prescribe adjustments without consulting employees (North, 2023). Studies conducted by Seitz and Smith (2016) and Davies et al. (2022) reported that employees felt like they would benefit from knowledgeable and understanding employers and managers that could help them through the process of requesting adjustments. Knowledge, awareness and understanding among employers and managers is expected to be an influential factor in order to request adjustments and the decision to mask.

## **Environmental Barriers**

Environmental barriers refer to the environmental factors that create challenges for individuals with impairments such as policies, social support and information access (Shakespeare, 2016; Hammel et al., 2015). Literature suggests that creating an inclusive organizational culture is important in preventing masking, encourage disclosure and feeling comfortable with requesting adjustments (CIPD, 2018; Davies et al., 2022; Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). In practice, many neurodivergent employees experience the organizational culture as an environmental barrier (Davies et al., 2022; McDowall et al., 2023). Based on this literature, I expect that the organizational culture is a critical factor in order to request adjustments.

Social support refers to the availability of informational, instrumental and emotional support (Hammel et al., 2015). Sietz and Smith (2016) found in their research that a manager plays an important factor in social support. Literature suggests that the previous mentioned attitudinal barriers are factors that influence social support and requesting adjustments (McDowall et al., 2023; Davies et al., 2022; Tromans et al., 2023). Furthermore, McDowall et al. (2023) suggested that policies are important as they stimulate employees to request adjustments. Other studies suggested that policies are influential for successful employment situations of neurodivergent employees (Colella & Bruyère, 2011; Seitz & Smith, 2016). Based on this, it is expected that employees perceive social support and policies as important factors for requesting adjustments.

## **Sustainable Employability**

Sustainable employability refers to the possibilities and conditions employees have in order to perform their work in a healthy way, now and in the future (Kluijtmans & Kampermann, 2016). As neurodivergent employees could face different challenges at work (CIPD, 2018), it is important to study how their sustainable employability can be affected by the experienced barriers and the adjustments themselves (Davies et al. 2022). Fleuren et al. (2020) stated that sustainable employability can be conceptualized through different dimensions, this research focuses on five of them. (1) Work satisfaction is the degree to which an individual is satisfied about their work, (2) productivity is a measure of the efficiency with which goods and services are produced, (3) perceived health status describes how healthy an individual feels, (4) development refers to the opportunities to develop personal knowledge and skills, and (5)

retention refers to an employer's ability to keep their employees over a long period of time (Fleuren et al., 2020; Kluijtmans & Kampermann, 2016; van der Klink et al., 2016).

McDowall et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of organizational factors on certain dimensions of the sustainable employability of neurodivergent employees while Davies et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of individual factors on sustainable employability. The person-environment fit theory focuses on the fit of both the individual and environmental factors (Fleuren et al., 2020; van Vianen, 2018) and can be used as antecedent to study the impact on sustainable employability. The person-environment fit theory believes that individuals have a need to fit their environments and want these environments to match their characteristics (van Vianen, 2018). Pryke-Hobbes et al. (2023) reported that employees viewed masking as important in order to gain development opportunities and maintain employment. However, as masking requires a continuous effort from an individual, it can contribute to discontinuing employment, burnouts, and other serious mental health issues (Shaw et al., 2023). Romualdez et al. (2021) reported that neurodivergent employees perceived disclosure and social support as important in order to request adjustments that could help them to maintain employment. Furthermore, as anxiety and stigmatization could prevent neurodivergent employees from requesting adjustments it is important to have policies in place that encourage to request them as this could increase their productivity (Davies et al., 2022; High Lantern Group, 2024). Based on this, it is expected that attitudinal and environmental barriers are important factors that influence sustainable employability.

Studies have shown that employees reported to perceive positive impact on their sustainable employability because of adjustments (Weber et al., 2022; Doyle, 2020). Neurodivergent employees that did not request or receive adjustments reported to perceive implications on their health and wellbeing (Davies, et al., 2022; McDowall et al., 2023). Furthermore, literature suggests that poorly implemented adjustments could have a negative impact on the sustainable employability of neurodivergent employees (Davies et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2022). Therefore, I expect that adjustments have a perceived impact on the sustainable employability of neurodivergent employees.



## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

In order to conduct this research, a qualitative research approach was used. Qualitative research allowed me to obtain in depth data about the feelings, emotions, and subjective experiences of participants (Gill, 2020) by using in-depth interviews. Within the qualitative approach, I used grounded theory with a deductive approach. Grounded theory is a qualitative research method in which data are collected, analyzed and a theory is developed grounded in the data (Creswell et al., 2007). A deductive approach begins with a literature review, deriving a theory and expectations based on the review, testing these by conducting empirical research, and finally drawing conclusions whether the applicability of the theory and expectations are supported by the data (Doorewaard, 2019). This design allowed to make evidence-based analysis and empirical observations while testing existing theories (Armat et al., 2018).

For this research, I used two different theories that have their routes in different disciplinarity's. The Social Model of Disability stems from the field of disability studies which is an interdisciplinary field that draws from sociology, anthropology, and public health (Oliver, 2004). The person-environment fit theory originates from psychology but also incorporates insights from HRM and occupational health (van Vianen, 2018). Furthermore, I used sources from different fields such as psychology, sociology, and HRM and combined them to create a comprehensive theoretical framework and interview guide.

Qualitative research is characterized by a high internal validity and low external validity (Plochg & van Zwieten, 2007). Intern validity refers to the extent to which a study can demonstrate a causal relationship and external validity refers to the extent to which the results of a study can be generalized or applied to other settings (Rosenbaum, 1987). Plochg & Van Zwieten (2007) mentioned that reflexivity on your role as researcher and searching for counterexamples are methods to increase the internal validity. I have applied these two methods in order to increase the internal validity of the research.

### **Data Collection**

Convenience sampling was used as the main sampling method because this is an easy and efficient method to use and my time to conduct this research is limited. With a convenience sample, potential participants that want to volunteer are approached (Gill, 2020). In order to recruit participants, I asked family members, friends, and colleagues whether they knew

potential participants. Furthermore, I shared two posts on my LinkedIn-profile to look for participants. The internship organization also looked inside their network for potential participants. Another sampling method that was used during the research was snowball sampling. This sampling method allowed to ask participants of the first sample if they knew people that would be willing to participate (Gill, 2020). Moreover, I used purposive sampling as this allowed me to also interview experts that could provide valuable information about this topic (Gill, 2020). There were certain eligibility criteria in place to be considered for participation in this research. I included self-identified, diagnosed or people with expertise (e.g. coaches, managers, etc.) with one of the neurotypes of autism, AD(H)D or dyslexia into the research. Participants had to have a minimal working experience of one year inside the Dutch labor market and had to be between the age of 18-67.

## **Research Method**

The research method that was used to collect the data were semi-structured interviews. All interviews lasted between 30-90 minutes and were conducted in Dutch. Most interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and two were conducted physically. Participants chose the research setting themselves. The main subjects that were covered during the interviews were disclosure, stigma, knowledge and understanding, workplace adjustments, and sustainable employability. In order to create and phrase the questions, the Clean Language Interview method was used because this method eliminates assumptions introduced in words and concepts and facilitate the participant to explain on answers of the phenomenon under study (Nehyba & Lawley, 2020).

Based on insights from the literature (Ellestad et al., 2023; Richards et al., 2019; Griffin & Pollak, 2009; Dempsey, et al., 2016), multiple measures were taken in place to ensure that the interviews were conducted ethically. Before I searched for participants I applied for ethical approval from the Faculty Ethics Review Committee (FETC) from the University of Utrecht through the FERB-procedure. Through this way, I made sure that I had the ethical approval to conduct the research in the first place. After approval was granted, I searched for participants. Participants that showed interest in participating were provided an information letter in order to inform them about all the details involving the research process. When participants were willing to participate voluntarily, they were asked to sign an informed consent form. Before the interviews, participants were provided the interview guide so they could prepare for the interview. Before the interview took place, participants were reminded

of the aim and procedure of the research and their rights during the research process. Furthermore, permission was asked to record the interview.

## **Reflection**

The most difficult aspect of this research for me was to conduct the interviews. As I am not neurodivergent myself, I could have had certain perceptions that were wrong. Therefore, I had to consider the influence my own perceptions had before, during and after conducting and analyzing the interviews. Throughout the research I tried to continuously reflect upon my biases in order to minimize them as much as possible. My communication style and non-verbal cues during the interviews might have affected the answers from participants. Generally speaking, neurodivergent individuals find social interactions challenging, prefer direct communication, and can perceive non-verbal cues as judgmental. Some questions I asked were not specific and certain non-verbal cues I made during the interviews could have made participants uncomfortable which might have influenced their answers. Another difficult aspect of conducting the interviews was how much I should let the participants talk before I interrupted them. The dilemma I faced was whether to interrupt them to ask another question or not because interruption can be perceived negatively.

## **Data Analysis**

The Interactive Model of Content Analysis of Miles and Huberman (1994) was used during the analysis. This model consists of three different stages, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Annabi & Lebovitz, 2018). In order to analyze the data, recordings of the interviews have been transcribed using Microsoft Word. After an interview was transcribed, I checked if there were any errors made in the initial transcription process. Errors that were checked and corrected were spelling errors and inclusion of personal information of the participants. By removing the personal information of participants and providing them with pseudonyms, I tried to protect their anonymity. After this was completed, the analysis began by applying predefined codes based of the theoretical framework to the data. Beforehand, I created a content analytic coding scheme in Microsoft Excel using predefined codes derived from the theoretical framework and literature. As coding is an iterative process and the Interactive Model allows different coding methods (Miles & Hubermann, 1994), inductive coding was used after completion of the deductive coding process in order to create new codes that emerged from the data. These codes where later

added to the content analytic coding scheme. A coding tree was created to provide an overview of the citations that were connected to the different codes.

## **Results**

A total of seventeen participants were interviewed for this research. Seven participants were interviewed about dyslexia, five about autism, and five about AD(H)D. Most of the participants were neurodivergent employees that were diagnose. Six participants that I interviewed were experts about this topic with four of them being neurodivergent themselves. Experts in this research are defined as individuals that have multiple years of experience with working with multiple neurodivergent employees. Appendix A provides a more detailed overview from all participants.

### **Requesting Adjustments**

Most participants acknowledged that the question whether to disclose is relevant among neurodivergent employees. Many participants shared that neurodivergent employees are increasingly disclosing but that there are also many that do not disclose. The interviews showed that the main reason for non-disclosure was because neurodivergent employees encountered stigma at school or work. Stigma from school which affected the work experience was mostly prevalent among dyslectic participants. A few participants also mentioned that some neurodivergent employees perceive themselves negatively because of the challenges they face with how society is organized which results in a lower self-esteem, non disclosure, masking and not requesting adjustments. Some participants shared that some neurodivergent employees do not disclose and request adjustments because they are able to adapt to society through self-knowledge and understanding about their needs. As a result, some neurodivergent employees will not engage in certain jobs and tasks, use coping mechanisms or will leave work and be self-employed.

The interviews showed that the majority of participants disclosed at work right away. Most of them stated that the main reason for their disclosure was to increase understanding from their employer, manager, and/or colleagues. Most participants wanted to increase understanding so their manager and colleagues could understand that certain behaviour is explainable and their need for certain adjustments. Therefore, requesting adjustments was a second reason mentioned by most participants for their disclosure. Kevin works as a chef and had requested adjustments in communication at his current and former employer. He stated the following:

***“Well, for example at my previous company, for example, they did not know everything and stuff. Yes, they did know, but they did not know how to handle it very well, so you always had to kind of watch how it went. But now I can always assume that it is just explained clearly, that it is explained well. And if I ask if they can repeat it again, I do not have to feel afraid of that either, so to speak.”***

As evident from this quote, the participant experienced a difference between how his former and current employer handled the situation and how this influenced his feeling to request the adjustment. This quote highlights the importance of feeling comfortable in order to request an adjustment. Many participants shared similar statements and mentioned that an inclusive organizational culture and support from their manager were crucial for this feeling.

Another important condition in order to request adjustments was the employers' knowledge and understanding about neurodiversity. A few participants expressed that they would like to have support from their employer with selecting adjustments because they had difficulties with identifying adjustments that could work. However, most participants expressed the opposite. Some participants stated to receive support from their employer but had no say in choosing adjustments because their manager had some knowledge about neurodiversity and thought they knew what the participants needed. As a result, the participants could only choose a limited number of adjustments which did not work for them.

They explained that the reason why these adjustments did not work was because every neurodivergent employee is unique and has different needs, therefore not every adjustment works for everyone. Karen, who works as an ADHD coach, stated the following about this:

***“But when it comes to adjustments, then, then I am much more concerned with seeing what is behind it all. [...] But doing that without knowing with what intention or from what desire or what you think it is going to get you, is like putting a band-aid all over your body and hoping you have caught the wound.”***

As evident from this quote, before requesting adjustments it is also important to identify your needs by looking at the reason why you think a certain adjustment could help you and how it will help you. Karen later explained that self-knowledge and understanding about your neurodiversity is important in order to identify these needs. The majority of participants shared similar experiences.

However, some participants also shared that self-knowledge and understanding was the reason why they felt like they needed to request less adjustments. Another reason participants mentioned to request less adjustments was because their work environment did not confront them with (all) their challenges. Furthermore, one participant did not request adjustments at all. He stated the following as the reason why the participant does not want an adjustment based on his neurodiversity and does not want to be pitied. Other participants made similar statements, but this did not influence their request of adjustments.

Although there were differences between participants about the reasons to (not) request adjustments, most participants did agree on one thing:

***“What matters is that that threshold is lowered and that you, as an employer, provide the space for employees to just tell you a story that you can listen to and that you can say like: Hey, we can come up with something on that. That's it! You know, we do super difficult about, yeah neurodiversity is great, cool. But if you really look at the core, it is just an employer telling you like: Okay, for a moment not time is money, for a moment not targets, I am just going to sit down with my employee. I am just going to listen to his or her story and if something comes out of that, then I am going to think about: Okay, what can we do about that? That's it!”*** - Toby (Autism ambassador)

As evident from this quote, Toby expresses that the best thing an employer and manager could do is to use a person-centered approach where you engage in a conversation and listen to the needs of a neurodivergent employee. A majority of participants expressed the same and stated that this was more important than receiving adjustments. The interviews also showed that policies and procedures did not play an important role. Although a few participants mentioned that it could be difficult to receive certain adjustments at some organizations due to inflexible work policies, the majority of participants did not mention policies and procedures as an important factor.

The interviews showed that some older participants discovered to be neurodivergent after encountering work-related issues and disclosed to their employer immediately after. A few participants explained that this phenomenon occurs mostly among older neurodivergent employees, and this is caused due to poor ability for diagnosis in the previous decades. Participants shared mixed statements about the influence of this on the request of adjustments.

A few stated to have requested adjustments such as working from home and others stated they did not request adjustments because they felt no need.

## **Sustainable Employability**

### **Perceived Impact of Barriers**

Most participants that shared experiences about non-disclosure reported mainly about negative perceived impact experiences. Pam is a recruiter that has spoken to many non-disclosing autistic employees, and she shared the following: *“Often someone then goes so far beyond his limits just to be able to 'fit in', while he is actually so overstimulated that it takes too much energy. And we often see that people end up in what we call autistic burnout.”* As evident from this quote, many non-disclosing autistic employees develop masking strategies in order to fit in at work which often results in a burn-out. Similar statements were shared by dyslectic experts and employees with AD(H)D. The interviews showed that masking also had a perceived impact on work satisfaction and productivity. The perceived impact on retention was mixed as experts mentioned that some neurodivergent employees could leave work, but some are also hesitant to leave as they are afraid of their chances for employment elsewhere. This was most prevalent among dyslectic employees. A few participants shared that non-disclosure did not have to have negative impact on sustainable employability as self-knowledge and understanding about one’s neurodiversity could result in avoiding challenges at work and prevent masking.

Disclosing participants also experienced a perceived positive impact on their work satisfaction, productivity, and health because of self-knowledge and understanding. The majority of participants stated that this helped them to know more about their qualities which allowed them to focus on these qualities and has resulted in a perceived impact on productivity, health, and development. Some participants also expressed that employers should focus more on the qualities of neurodivergent employees rather than their challenges as this would improve their sustainable employability in general. Furthermore, participants explained that this also would benefit their employer and colleagues as neurodivergent employees have another way of thinking which could complement their non-diverse counterparts. However, some participants expressed that society, and most organizations are not organized in a way that fits their way of thinking and qualities which had a negative perceived impact on their productivity, work satisfaction, and development.



Micheal, a civil servant, shared the following about his experience with requesting a development opportunity:

*“And then you say I want something new and then it is: Yes, you cannot, because you have this or that or so or.... this is it. And if you want more, yes, we do not offer that. But we are also going to make sure that you cannot grow because of who you are and what you do. So yes, if you then say you want something new, well, we do not have anything. That's what happened with me within the [name of organization].”*

This quote shows that his manager did not provide development opportunities to the participant based on stigmatization of his neurodiversity. A few participants shared similar experiences and stated that stigmatization also had a negative perceived impact on their work satisfaction and health. Participants mentioned that the organizational culture, manager, and lack of knowledge and understanding were important factors for this.

However, the majority of disclosing participants reported to experience a positive perceived impact on different dimensions of their sustainable employability. Participants perceived the most positive impact on their work satisfaction and productivity. They stated that the understanding of their manager and colleagues was the main factor for an increased perceived impact. Other important factors participants mentioned were feeling safe and receiving support. Moreover, some participants also reported to feel a perceived impact on their health and retention. Only a few participants mentioned a perceived impact on their development opportunities.

### **Perceived Impact of Adjustments**

The majority of participants reported to perceive impact of adjustments on different dimensions of their sustainable employability. For example, Oscar stated the following:

*“I, let me put it this way, I can focus a little bit and productivity increases. On the other hand, and this is what I noticed especially with my earplugs, is because I work, say, in an open-plan office and I put the earplugs in then I have a less full head at the end of the day. So I noticed to myself that, the moment I kind of feel like my head is getting a little full, then I put the earplugs in. And I had, say later on, in the*

***evening, just less or no problems with that, while I also realized that that is a function... I put them in mainly to focus.”***

As evident from this quote, Oscar originally put his earplugs in to avoid the noise around him and increase his focus but also found out that it helped to have a clearer head at the end of the workday. He perceived impact on both his productivity and health. Most participants perceived impact on work satisfaction, productivity, and health due to adjustments. A few participants also expressed to perceive impact on all dimensions of their sustainable employability as they explained that one dimension influenced the other resulting in a perceived impact on all dimensions. Participants perceived lesser impact on their development and retention.

There were also a few participants that perceived a negative impact from adjustments. Dwight stated the following about using noise-cancelling headphones at his former employer:

***“But then again, the counter side is ... I was at my last internship, so then you sit in your corner with your headphones on, but then you have no social interaction with your colleagues. And then after a year and a half you think: Well, let’s go find another employer. So it cuts both ways. It gives you peace of mind, so that makes it nice. But on the other hand, it might also make it a bit more boring.”***

Evident from this experience is that Dwight perceived positive impact from his headphones but at the same time perceived a negative impact because he felt isolated which made him want to leave his internship. A few participants had similar experiences of which one participant did not consider leaving his work. The experts that talked about non-disclosure experiences also reported about the perceived positive impact neurodivergent employees missed because of not requesting adjustments. They reported that neurodivergent employees perceived that adjustments could positively impact their work satisfaction, productivity, health, and retention as this would help them to regulate challenges at work. Furthermore, the negative perceived impact of masking would be reduced which would make a positive perceived impact on health, work satisfaction, and productivity.

## Discussion

This study aimed to explore the barriers experienced by neurodivergent employees when requesting adjustments and to understand how these experiences impacted their sustainable employability. Additionally, the study wanted to gain insights into how neurodivergent employees felt more included at work. The findings suggest a complex interplay of factors influencing disclosure, the request for workplace adjustments, and the perceived impact on sustainable employability.

Most participants disclosed at the beginning of their employment. This decision was driven by a desire to increase understanding among their managers and colleagues and to request adjustments, aligning with the study by Romualdez et al. (2021). Participants reported that when employers and managers adopted a person-centered approach that focused on their qualities, the need for requesting adjustments diminished. This approach not only created a sense of support but also made participants more comfortable in requesting adjustments, positively impacting their sustainable employability. These findings corroborate the importance of understanding, organizational culture, and social support, as highlighted by Seitz and Smith (2016), Romualdez et al. (2021), and Shaw et al. (2023).

A barrier to request adjustments mentioned by some participants was stigma. This stigma often led to low self-esteem, resulting in some employees choosing not to disclose or request adjustments, which is in line with findings from Romualdez et al. (2021). Instead, these employees engaged in masking or focused on their strengths to reduce the perceived necessity for adjustments. However, masking and stigma were noted to have a detrimental effect on sustainable employability, as they can lead to increased stress and burnout. While stigma and understanding were expected to be influential factors for requesting adjustments and sustainable employability (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023), the finding that focusing on strengths could reduce the need for adjustments was not expected.

The findings suggest that knowledge among managers and employers influenced the likelihood of requesting adjustments. Participants with knowledgeable and understanding managers were more likely to request adjustments, as these managers asked the neurodivergent employees about their needs and made them feel comfortable. This supportive environment encouraged disclosure and requesting adjustments, enhancing sustainable employability by reducing the need for masking. These findings are in line with the findings of Pryke-Hobbes et al. (2023) and Romualdez et al. (2021), which emphasize the importance of knowledge and understanding.

Participants highlighted the importance of self-knowledge and understanding their own neurodiversity before requesting adjustments. This self-knowledge helped them identify their specific needs and choose useful adjustments, as supported by Davies et al. (2022). Additionally, self-knowledge enabled participants to proactively avoid certain workplace challenges, reducing the necessity for adjustments and positively affecting their sustainable employability. This finding highlights the role of self-knowledge in managing your work environment effectively.

Some older participants found out to be neurodiverse after encountering work-related issues and disclosed immediately after, leading to mixed experiences regarding the impact on adjustment requests. While some found that late disclosure helped in addressing their needs, others faced challenges due to established workplace dynamics. This variability suggests that the timing and context of disclosure play critical roles in the effectiveness of subsequent adjustments and support. These findings align with the expectations that disclosure is a significant factor, as highlighted by Davies et al. (2022).

The majority of participants perceived a positive impact from adjustments on different dimensions of their sustainable employability. Those who had not requested adjustments also believed that such adjustments could positively impact their sustainable employability. However, a few participants reported that adjustments had a perceived negative impact on their retention, which aligns with the expectations discussed by Weber et al. (2022). This highlights the importance of tailoring adjustments to individual needs to maximize their effectiveness.

Overall, this research highlights the influence of multiple attitudinal, environmental, and personal factors on requesting adjustments and sustainable employability for neurodivergent employees. Key factors such as disclosure, stigma, knowledge and understanding, organizational culture, and self-knowledge significantly influence these processes. By creating a supportive and understanding work environment, organizations can improve the inclusion and sustainable employability of neurodivergent employees.

## **Strengths & Limitations**

Both theories from the theoretical framework were helpful in increasing the internal validity as it allowed me to construct a interview guide that obtained a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of neurodivergent employees. However, the theories also have limitations that impacted the internal validity. The Social Model of Disability neglects impairment as an important aspect of neurodivergent employees' lives and also includes the idea of an environment that removes all barriers which is not realistic (Shakespeare, 2016). Furthermore, the operationalization of concepts using the person environment-fit theory could limit the effects of fit when interpreting results which could lead to data manipulation (Armitage & Amar, 2021)

External validity refers to the extent to which the results of a study can be generalized or applied to other settings. Plochg & Van Zwieten (2007) stated that with external validity it is important to look at the sample of your participants, your sampling strategy, and the reasons for this. Convenience and snowball sampling allowed me to find participants quickly which was needed with the time I had to conduct this research, but there is a chance that the quality of information could be limited by this (Gill, 2020). Due to purposive sampling I selected experts that had valuable knowledge about this topic which increased the external validity of the findings. However, as the sample size of this research is small, only includes certain neurotypes, and no participants with a migration background, the external validity of the findings is low. Furthermore, the majority from the seventeen participants that I interviewed shared to have disclosed their neurodiversity while literature suggests that most neurodivergent employees do not disclose (Pryke-Hobbes, et al., 2023). Moreover, as the non-disclosure experiences I used were primarily reported by experts the findings of this research might be affected.

Ecological validity is a factor within external validity which refers to the extent to which findings can be generalized to real-world settings (Schmuckler, 2010), and therefore impacts the external validity. There are three dimensions to determine the ecological validity, namely the setting of the research, if the observer encountered natural behaviour, and the authenticity of the task. As I interviewed a majority of my participants online, the ecological validity of this research is low.

## **Implications & Future Research**

The sample of this research may not represent the neurodivergent population in the Netherlands in three major ways. First of all, of all, my sample of participants only included neurodivergent employees with conditions of autism, AD(H)D, and dyslexia which has led to the exclusion of the experiences of neurodivergent employees with other neurodivergent conditions. Therefore, future research should include the experiences of neurodivergent employees with other conditions. Second of all, my sample of participants did not include participants that were currently not disclosing. Therefore, future research should purposively recruit participants that are not disclosing. Furthermore, as the sample of participants in this research only included Dutch neurodivergent employees without a migration-background, another avenue for future research could be to focus on recruiting participants with a migration-background in order to compare the experiences of Dutch employees with and without a migration-background.

Findings of this research suggest that neurodivergent employees perceived less need for adjustments and impact on their sustainable employability if they focused on their strengths. Future research should continue to explore the role of focusing on strengths on these topics. Furthermore, the findings also suggest that older neurodivergent employees are more likely to reactively disclose to their employer because they discover later on in life to be neurodivergent after work-related issues appear which possibly could influence their experiences with requesting adjustments and their sustainable employability. Therefore, an avenue for future research could be to compare the disclosure experiences of younger and older generations of neurodivergent employees to study this phenomenon further. Furthermore, as the literature about reactively disclosure does not make a clear distinction between a conscious and unconscious decision to reactively disclosure, I suggest that future literature should make a difference between the two.

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# Appendix

## Appendix A: Description of Participants

Name	Status	Diagnosis	Occupation	Age Range	Gender	Nationality
<b>Jim</b>	Employee	Autism	IT-Advisor	50-59	Male	Dutch
<b>Angela</b>	Dyslexia expert	Dyslexia	Dyslexia Advisor	40-49	Female	Dutch
<b>Kelly</b>	Dyslexia expert	Dyslexia	Dyslexia Coach	50-59	Female	Dutch
<b>Michael</b>	Employee	Autism	Civil Servant	30-39	Male	Dutch
<b>Kevin</b>	Employee	ADHD	Chef	18-29	Male	Dutch
<b>Dwight</b>	Employee	ADD	Intern	18-29	Male	Dutch
<b>Pam</b>	Autism expert	Not applicable	Recruiter	50-59	Female	Dutch
<b>Ryan</b>	Employee	ADHD	Disability Support Worker	18-29	Male	Dutch
<b>Phyllis</b>	Dyslexia expert	Not applicable	Dyslexia Coach/Trainer	60-67	Female	Dutch
<b>Toby</b>	Employee	Autism	Autismambassador/ Student Counselor	30-39	Male	Dutch
<b>Creed</b>	Employee	Autism	Consultancy Advisor	60-67	Male	Dutch
<b>Oscar</b>	Employee	Dyslexia	Civil Engineer	50-59	Male	Dutch
<b>Karen</b>	Employee	ADHD	ADHD Coach/Trainer	30-39	Female	Dutch
<b>Meredith</b>	Expert	Dyslexia/ ADD	Dyslexia Coach/Domestic Helper	50-59	Female	Dutch
<b>Mose</b>	Employee	Dyslexia	Manager	40-49	Male	Dutch
<b>Gabe</b>	Expert	Dyslexia/ ADHD	Coach/Lawyer	60-67	Male	Dutch
<b>Erin</b>	Employee	Dyslexia	Civil Servant	30-39	Female	Dutch

## Appendix B: Code Tree

Category	Code	Subcodes
Attitudinal Barrier	Disclosure	Disclosure experiences and non-disclosure experiences
	Masking	
	Stigma	'Positive' experiences and negative experiences
	Knowledge and understanding	Lack of knowledge and understanding, knowledge and understanding, employer fills in for employee
	Own perceptions and shame	Personal perceptions and shame linked to school
	Identifying needs	Self-knowledge and understanding and identified needs
	Focus on limitations	
Environmental Barrier	Organizational Culture	Person-centred approach and inclusive environment
	Support	Lack of support and receiving support
	Manager	
	Policies and Procedures	Lack of policies, bureaucratic processes and inflexible work policies
	Communication	
Sustainable Employability	Health	Mental health and physical health
	Development	Stuck at work
	Employment	Turnover and retention
	Job satisfaction	
	Productivity	
	Focus on qualities	

## Appendix C: Interview Guide for Employees

### Experiences as a neurodivergent employee

1. Could you tell me more about your career?
2. Have you told your (former) employer that you have **\*neurotype\***?
3. Why did you choose to share or not share this information with your (former) employer?
4. What are your experiences with prejudices about **\*neurotype\*** at work?
5. What role do prejudices play in requesting workplace adjustments?
  - The term 'workplace adjustments' refers to both physical and non-physical modifications to the workplace. Examples include things like noise-cancelling headphones, a quiet room, flexible working hours, adjustments in communication, and help with planning.

### Workplace adjustments

6. Are there any adjustments your employer/boss could make that would enable you to do your job better?
7. Can you provide examples of workplace adjustments that would improve your job performance?
8. Have you ever asked your current/former manager for such adjustments? How did that go, or why not?
9. How important is the employer's knowledge about **\*neurotype\*** in requesting adjustments?

### Sustainable employability

10. What effect does not obtaining workplace adjustments have on your productivity?
11. How important are workplace adjustments to your job satisfaction?
12. If you could not get workplace adjustments, would that be a reason for you to leave an employer?

# Appendix D: Interview Guide for Employees

## Experiences of Neurodivergent Employees

1. To what extent do people share that they are *neurotype* with their employer (in your experience)?
2. Can you tell me about the reasons why employees choose to share or not share their neurodivergence?
3. What influence do prejudices have on the decision of employees to disclose their neurodivergence?

## Workplace Adjustments

- The term ‘workplace adjustments’ refers to both physical and non-physical modifications to the workplace. Examples include things like noise-cancelling headphones, a quiet room, flexible working hours, adjustments in communication, and help with planning.
4. How do you think fear of negative reactions affects the request for workplace adjustments?
  5. How important is it to have knowledge about your neurodiversity when requesting workplace adjustments?
  6. What are the potential consequences of obtaining or not obtaining workplace adjustments?

## Organizational Culture

7. What could an organization do to make employees feel comfortable requesting adjustments?
8. How important is the employer's knowledge and attention regarding neurodiversity when requesting adjustments?

9. How important is the relationship with the supervisor in requesting workplace adjustments?

### **Sustainable Employability**

10. How can workplace adjustments affect the sustainable employability of neurodivergent employees?
11. Can you provide an example of how a workplace adjustment has contributed to the sustainable employability of an employee?