

Neurospicy Libraries

Report 3: Recruitment and Selection

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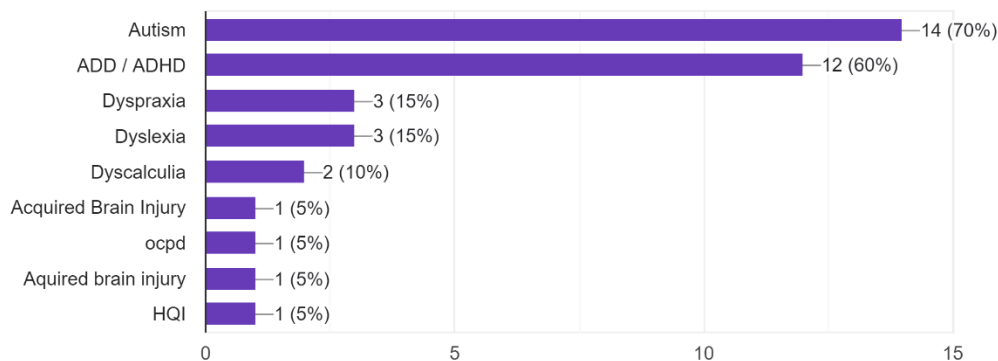
Introduction

This third report, as part of the Neurospicy Libraries project, focusses on issues around recruitment and selection, as experienced by a range of neurodivergent library workers. The data comes from 27 participants in an anonymous open survey, closing August 2023.

The focus of these reports is not to go through a full objective research process with shared data, comprehensive literature reviews and systematic analysis. The approach is much more informal, and can be thought of as a collection of anonymous lived experiences that are communicated through the Neurospicy Project leads who are acting as 'cover' for the respondents who engaged. Participants would not necessarily disclose their neurodivergence publicly or even within a closed workplace, and even further than this would not submit responses of this nature to a formal research project even if anonymity was offered and prefer to offer information to grass roots, practicality focussed projects lead by peers only. Responses do however act as evidence to support communication from the Neurospicy Libraries project leads –this is not just us, this is the voice of many individuals working in libraries now who are struggling in private

Respondents are all self identified neurodivergent individuals working in libraries in the UK, and while the project is affiliated with academic libraries north, they do include individuals working in other areas of the UK and other library sectors outside of academic settings. Participants were asked to respond to a range of multiple choice and free text questions via Google Forms, and were not asked about any contextual information beyond how they would describe their neurodivergency. All responses were anonymous. Participants were not asked about sharing of the full dataset beforehand and so the full responses are not available to be shared.

The mix of neurodiversity (respondents could select multiple options) was similar to our previous surveys, with Autism, ADHD, or a combination of the two, the most common neurodivergences.



Literature Review and Analysis

No formal literature review or analysis methodology has been formulated. Responses were read through in full and the most common themes collated in a subjective manner, with example responses that convey the essence of that theme offered. They are then linked to the most salient advice available across a range of resources and guides in a similarly informal manner.

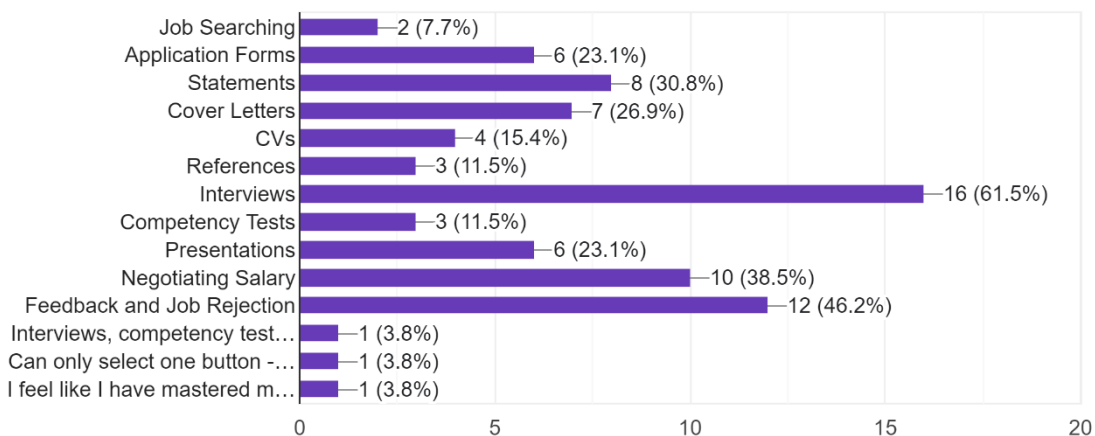
Results

Even with a relatively small cohort of respondents, our survey showed people struggling with multiple aspects of the recruitment and selection process, though “interviews” come out top, with 62% of respondents selecting it. The top five areas of concern were:

- Interviews – 62%
- Feedback and rejection – 46%
- Negotiating salary – 39%
- Personal Statements (application) – 31%
- Cover Letters – 27%

What aspects of the recruitment process do you struggle with (choose all that apply)?

26 responses



Issues around the application process itself included mentions of application forms, “additional information” type cover letters / personal statements (similar with both, though terminology used varies). There is often a struggle to access knowledge about the process that is seen as being implicit, such as what recruitment panels are expecting to see on a form, or in cover letters / statements. The length of time and effort involved in processing the length of some job specifications, before even starting to apply was noted.

Interview issues came through clearly in the qualitative responses, with well known ND issues described such as anxiety, quickly responding verbally to questions (rather than a slower, considered response), finding the subtext of questions difficult to work out, short term memory issues, and the general worry about being perceived in a way that neurotypical people expect.

“I am slow to process verbal communication, and have great difficulty responding verbally when under pressure and being observed. It's not that I lack knowledge or ideas, but rather that I find it incredibly difficult to arrange my thoughts and express them succinctly. I never feel like I'm able to give a good account of myself, my skills and experience, or make a good impression.”

“Eye contact; the pitch of some interviewers' voices; interviews in environments you can't control - lighting, odours, noises. Having fidgety fingers and legs which may be noticed by interviewers; having a serious/blank facial expression which is interpreted as being bored or not interested.”

“I think those complex long winded questions are a pin. if they say them, I think of answer and then I've forgotten what the question was. I have asked on more than one occasion for them to repeat the question when I've been half way through an answer and lost my train of thought. I just know if I had them written down I could answer them better.”

“Dear God, just the whole thing. I have no idea what anyone is saying to me, it's all in allistic language and I can't do the interpreting within the time frame in the interview unless I'm given the questions before, and even then they will want to ask follow up questions. When I ask for clarification or I get it a bit wrong, that is an instant red flag for them. I feel like I'm in the dock having every part of my speech and communication analysed and judged positively or negatively. I feel like I'm supposed to psychically know what they want me to say about my work without them ever directly asking. They never ask for what they want properly, the questions are always too vague, or they always want examples without saying, "Give me an example," and if they did go ahead and have that as a follow up I'm the bad person for making them do that. I just can't even begin to understand why if they want me to talk about something they don't just ask, I feel like an alien on another planet trying to work out what the natives even want from me.”

Our respondents tried to find their own ways around these interview related issues, but clearly struggled to do so effectively. There are some small ways in which they try to cope during an interview, such as repeating questions back to reinforce short term memory, or finding more acceptable ways to mask, but the most significant coping method seemed to be a variation on the theme of spending massive amounts of time and effort in preparing and practicing.

“I have to make a huge list of everything they could possibly ask, write down my answers, and learn them like a script, practicing them over and over. This takes hours and I often find that there isn't a lot of time between the invitation and the interview, so trying to prepare adequately is difficult, particularly if there are other things to prepare like presentations.”

They also mentioned in this question mitigations that they asked interview panels for, such as asking for questions in advance, or asking to go at the start of the day rather than later on. In our question about success in getting accommodations put into place, these are the only ones mentioned as having any success, though more people said these fairly simple requests were ignored than put into place. A common theme under this question was that our respondents were reluctant to request any accommodations, largely in fear that these would count against them in the process.

This went alongside our respondents being reluctant to even declare their neurodivergence – only 11% always disclosing, 30% sometimes, and 59% never disclosing. This is overwhelmingly due to concerns that it would count against them in the process, or in the job itself afterwards, with respondents often explicitly trying to hide it from their current employers too.

Respondents often found it difficult to think of adjustments that would make the application and interview processes easier and more equitable. Some that came out of their answers though, including how they tried to cope themselves, were:

- Clear and explicit instructions about what was expected (applications and interviews)
- Focussed and clear explanations of the process (timescales, what would happen at interview, how / when people would be informed about success or failure at each stage, etc)
- A belief that ND people were wanted, valued, and that interviewees would have a clear understanding and acceptance of what it means to be ND, reducing the need to heavily mask

- Questions in advance (for all candidates) which clear reasons why they are being asked (links to criteria) to reduce short term memory load and give time to process what might be the right examples to give to meet expectations
- Explicit permission and acceptance for candidates to bring notes to help them answer questions

There were broader comments too about interviews being a poor way to recruit and that other options should be explored such as scenario based activities, trial work days, or switching it to a “professional discussion” that is much more two way in nature.

“Changing from an interview to a 'professional discussion' that is longer, much more two way, and has the onus on the panel to get what they want out of me while I'm actually sat there, not the responsibility on me to somehow know in advance of feedback what they're thinking.”

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) is sometimes part of the ND make up, resulting in difficulty in dealing with being rejected as part of the recruitment process. This, combined with poor experiences and the additional mental load in coping with the application and interview process means that ND people are often deterred from applying for jobs at all.

“I usually assume I won't get the role because I know now that I come across badly in interviews. I tend not to apply for any new roles now because the level of exhaustion is not worth it when the result is rejection. I'm so exhausted after the application/interview process and the rejection makes me want to hibernate for a few days. I need to take time off to process the rejection.”

Respondents often described how feedback on interview performance indirectly pointed out ND traits that they were trying to suppress, where neurotypical interviews had read into their body language, their examples, or the general “feel” of them (one described this as the “uncanny valley” of NT vs ND) as reasons not to employ them. Neurodiversity was never described explicitly, but it was felt that this was behind the negative feedback.

“Things like, "not sure if you'd be a good fit", "better suited for other jobs", etc., that describe the ND aspect of not immediately engaging with the interview panel in ways that NT people may do - that sense that NT have that there is something slightly "off" with ND people seems to come strongly through on feedback. The other thing is being told I "don't understand" something (the role, the level of the position, etc) when I'm coming from a very similar position elsewhere, which must be strongly related to how poor at communication NT people are (expecting bullshit and lies over straightforward communication and truth), so they misread answers in interviews.”

Interestingly for a set of people with ND disorders often characterised as “communication disorders”, the question about a hypothetical ideal recruitment experience overwhelmingly resulted in comments about bad neurotypical biased recruitment was at communicating, with the ideal being clear, honest communication!

“Clarity in the advert and job specification around necessary and desirable skills/experience and how to present the application. Capacity to choose an appropriate interview time, with clearly phrased questions up front, to which answers could be submitted in written form in advance, followed by an interview in the form of a conversation around role expectations from both sides and where the panel could ask me to expand upon given answers where they felt more detail would be useful.”

Supporting Resources

This is a summary of the most salient supporting resources that have sections relevant to this area.

1. [University of Salford Inclusive Recruitment Checklist](#)

While focussed on anti-racism, this checklist includes many adjustments that would benefit neurodivergent candidates, for example:

Job description

1. Review use of language and jargon

In the overview, role detail and person specification. Compare with job descriptions from other institutions and from internal vacancies. Check your language for gender bias <http://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/>

4. Consider the layout and use of text

Would this be suitable for a neurodivergent candidate? Are you using numbered lists and breaking up large chunks of information? Would other formats be more accessible – could this be offered (perhaps upon request)?

6. Check with colleagues

Can you get some feedback from someone in your team, from other managers or from someone external? Getting a different opinion may help spot complex language or jargon and provide some different ideas.

Job advert

2. Include relevant information about working practices and benefits

Can you add in details around agile working and what would be required in terms of working from home? What flexibilities are available – can you point to guidance around job shares and reduced/compressed hours? What staff development opportunities are available – can you give specific examples or demonstrate our commitment?

3. Support candidates with their application

Consider sharing an application guide to give some guidance for candidates on how to complete a personal statement that reflects the person specification, how to give STAR examples, and reminds them to upload this to the system alongside their CV.

7. Support candidates with getting familiar with libraries and the campus

Would potential candidates for this role benefit from a virtual or in-person open house? Could they come to the Library and submit an application on the same day?

10. Be clear about possible accommodations

How can you make it clear to potential disabled applicants or who may be neurodiverse, that we have tried to consider their needs but if they have any further requirements, please can they get in touch to discuss? Can you be explicit about what these accommodations might look like? Could further accommodations be made with the role itself, and can you frame this on the job advert too?

Application and Interview

1. Plan your interview questions carefully

What sort of questions are you going to ask – can you keep these short or frame them more as different topics for discussion e.g. rather than a question about communication, have a space for a discussion about

it instead? Can you be explicit about which part of the person specification you are addressing in each question? Can you break up lengthy questions into manageable sections? Ensure your questions are direct and avoid language that could be misinterpreted or uses colloquialisms.

2. Consider follow-up questions

Can you discuss this in advance with the panel to ensure you are using them equitably across each candidate where necessary?

6. Consider sharing the interview questions in advance

Will this be all the questions or a selection? Ensure you can send these out with the interview invitation and be explicit with the candidates as to why you are sharing them and any other information that may help. If you are keeping some questions back to ask on the day, explain this to the candidate.

9. Consider the environment and timing of the interview

Is there a suitable space on the ground floor – and if not, ensure your candidates have the option to use the lift. Are there any other adjustments you could easily make rather than a candidate asking about it? Could you provide any information about the environment when you invite candidates to an interview? Have you considered sensory needs – are there bright lights and distracting noises? Could a wheelchair fit at the table? Are you able to offer any flexibility around timings – some candidates would prefer a morning/afternoon time slot.

10. Provide detail in advance

Can you provide candidates with a clear agenda of what will be expected on the day, rather than just an interview time? Can this be provided in a table or other visual format? Are there any other details that candidates may find reassuring, such as what the room will be like, where you will meet them, what equipment may be available, whether a visit/tour will be available, and how to find the campus.

2. [Fair Library Jobs Manifesto](#)

Fair Library Jobs is a group of library workers aiming to improve recruitment and employment practices in the library sector in the UK. Several aspects of the manifesto are beneficial to neurodivergent candidates, for example:

6.1. Job adverts, job descriptions and person specifications must be clear and concise, avoid unnecessary jargon and be as accessible as possible. Sector specific terms should include or be replaced by non-specific terms wherever possible.

6.5. Criteria must be transparent and must apply to everyone equally within the bounds of the Equality Act 2010. Criteria that focus on personality traits rather than skills/knowledge must be avoided.

6.14. Organisations must not ask for sickness absence reports or previous parental leave periods during the application process.

6.16. Organisations that claim a desire to improve representation and/or diversity within their workforce must outline the work and practices done in this area.

7.3. Reasonable adjustment requests for interviews should be actioned without undue delay.

7.4. Interviewers should consider how they format questions e.g. keep questions short and direct, and ask positively framed questions.

7.5. Fair Library Jobs recommends the sharing of interview questions with all candidates in advance.

8.2. Candidates invited to interview, should they be unsuccessful, must be provided with meaningful feedback about their performance at interview.

8.5. Fair Library Jobs recommends not giving feedback at the same time as giving the recruitment outcome. Allow unsuccessful candidates time to absorb the result of the process before receiving feedback.

8.6. Those giving feedback must ensure as far as possible that it is constructive, actionable and honest.

3. [Employment Autism](#) list of suggested accommodations

Things you could ask for include:

- Extended deadlines for receipt of the application form
- Proposed dates for interviews or assessments
- Directions to the venue
- Names and photos of the interviewers or assessors, with details of their role in the company and what role each will play in the interview
- Reducing the number of interviewers
- Using other communication methods
- A photo of the room in which the interview or assessment is to be held
- A visit to the site of the interview or assessment
- Specific time (avoiding rush hour travel)
- An agenda detailing any exercises that are included in the interview process
- Asking not to shake hands and explaining if eye contact is painful for you, that you may not be able to do that in interview
- Using direct questions, prompts and follow up questions to help you demonstrate what you know
- Questions based on your actual experience, not hypothetical situations, sometimes referred to as competency-based questions
- Letting you know if you have said enough in an answer so you can move onto the next question
- Asking for a supporter to join you in the interview as someone to support communication between you and the employer
- Allowing time for you to write questions down
- Allowing you to bring notes into the interview with you
- Consideration given to the room layout – e.g. not with back to a door, or with a desk or table in front of or beside you to allow you to make or refer to notes
- The date by which all candidates will be notified of the outcome of the interview or assessment
- Written confirmation by email of any arrangements made over the phone or not in writing
- A copy of the interview questions in advance (if you are worried this may be perceived to offer you an unfair advantage, you can suggest that these can be given to all candidates)
- Sending in written responses to questions
- If the process includes multiple interviews or assessments on the same day, for these to be scheduled closer together to minimise waiting time and avoid unnecessary stress
- Ask for a video or phone interview rather than face to face – this avoids travel, and only shows head and shoulders so you could still stim with your hands out of shot if it helps.
- Asking for an alternative to the interview, such as a job trial or work experience

4. [ADHD UK](#) list of suggested accommodations

Being open

It is impossible for someone with any disability to know what accommodations might be reasonably needed if they are kept in the dark of the process. We therefore recommend being open about the detail of the interview and its process. Including:

- What the overall specific interview process will be.
- How many interviewers there are, who they are, and what their role is.
- What the likely questions and/or activities will be. It is acknowledged that some questions will by necessity be ad-hoc, for example in response to answers, so can't be known beforehand. This is not a recommendation for all questions to be known and is more focused on the core questions.

Some adjustments to the interview question process

We recommend the following small adjustments to the process:

- Allowing the candidate to bring notes and be able to refer to them.
- Making questions direct and specific.
- Allowing for additional time. We recommend allowing an additional 50% of time. Please note that this is not specifically about ADHD but more about reducing interview pressure and provide more time for someone to communicate themselves to you.
- Some considerations about the room

For in person meetings:

We recommend a room with as few distractions as possible. Ideally a quiet private room with a door that can shut. A room free from external or internal noise. A room free from visual distractions such as overlooking a corridor, busy working environment or television. Ideally the candidate should face the least distracting direction e.g. facing a wall rather than a window.

Interviews should not be conducted in a public place (e.g. a Coffee Shop or shared meeting space). The should not have other people in the vicinity who are not part of the interview.

For virtual meetings:

We recommend minimising any distractions. Visually this includes not having movement in the interviewers background – ideally a heavily blurred or plain background. Audibly this includes minimising intrusive noise. This includes ensuring the interviewer(s) themselves are in a quiet place and themselves free from distractions and other people. It includes turning off any device or computer noises (for example email received auditory notifications).

5. Amelia Anderson's research outputs

[Anderson \(2018\) Employment and Neurodiverse Librarians](#)

[Anderson \(2021\) Job Seeking and Daily Workforce Experiences of Autistic Librarians](#)

6. [University of Washington's Information School will research the capacity of libraries to recruit, onboard, retain, and advance neurodivergent librarians](#)

7. [Farrer&Co Legal Advice on Interviewing Neurodivergent Candidates](#)

Under the Equality Act 2010, employers must make reasonable adjustments when they know, or could reasonably be expected to know, their employee is disabled. Neurodiversity could meet the legal definition of disability under the EQA 2010. It is however important to remember that not all neurodivergent employees will consider themselves to have a disability – and the old fashioned language of the statute can be unhelpful here.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our respondents found the job application and interview process stressful and often overwhelmingly difficult to navigate. It was normal for them to try and hide their neurodivergency in addition to neglecting to ask for accommodations for fear of additional discrimination, or even being reluctant to apply for jobs at all, effectively reducing the potential pool of applicants.

A small number of adjustments made to the job application and interview process could make a significant difference to this neurodiverse community, without negatively impacting on the neurotypical population. Suggested adjustments include:

- Clear expectations laid out in advance (for applications and interviews), including how any application may be marked.
- Clear details of what to expect from the process, such as what will happen on any interview day, what contact to expect, when they will hear about outcomes, etc.
- An explicit and believable commitment to welcoming neurodiversity in the workplace.
- Interview questions in advance
- Explicit permission to bring notes as memory aids to interviews
- An acknowledgment that stimming, lack of eye contact, or other ND related behaviours in interviews are welcomed as presenting interviewees genuine self and do not need to be suppressed.
- Neurodivergent staff are already within current teams, and as this report highlights, are not revealing this. Many respondents said that they did not know what to ask for and did not want to disclose difficulty, and this report has the potential to inform and empower newly instigated conversations in this area, and to enable neurodivergent staff to make changes that will increase their performance.
- While not a full research study, the above report is comprehensive, and perhaps offers a better understanding of practical solutions with lived experience and summarised evidence to enable leaders and managers to support neurodivergent talent in teams, particularly library teams. Implementing appropriate suggestions from this report and increasing understanding through absorbing the information within it will hopefully lead to the unlocking of skills and talent within existing teams, increasing efficiency and impact.

To engage further with Neurospicy Libraries:

Website

<https://neurospicylibraries.wordpress.com/>

Forum

<https://neurospicylibraries.flarum.cloud/>