**Are Workplace Accommodations for Neurodivergent Employees Favoritism?**

**Why Does This Question About Workplace Accommodations Exist?**

Consider these statements overheard by my client at a ‘typical tech company’:

* “Yeah, she gets a cubicle on the quiet side of the floor, but the rest of us have to work in the open-plan area. Must be nice to be the boss’ favorite (forced laughter)!”
* “Yeah, he’s weird and super intense. He comes into the office when he wants and leaves when he wants.”
* “He wears those heavy-metal t-shirts and sweatpants, but management likes him because he’s brilliant and gets things done, you know.”

Comments such as these reflect unconscious biases that often exist in a workplace dominated by neurotypical values.

So, let’s talk about the heavy-metal t-shirt and sweatpants guy. He was an unmasked neurodivergent (ND) person. Yet, the quality of his work made up for the liberties he took with the dress code and work hours. That brilliance is what “won” him the right to create a work situation that was best for him.

Sweatpants Guy had to negotiate these accommodations. He demonstrated a work-ethic that earned him the respect of his supervisors. They were willing to be flexible with him because they saw the return on their investment if they were.

Yet, these same accommodations may be labeled as favoritism if anyone else asks for them. Is it favoritism? Let’s look at the bigger picture.

## **The Difference Between Reasonable Accommodations and Outright Favoritism**

Women in the workplace know all about the guilt (and even shame) that comes with time off to tend to sick kids. Women “know” that they risk the perception that they are less reliable because of this. So, women work twice as hard to make up for it. Workplace accommodations for women, especially women with invisible disabilities, have come a long way. That said, unconscious bias and resulting microaggressions still exist. (Olkin et al., 2019)

Consider the following accommodation examples. We are familiar with and often accommodate a parent’s need to leave work early to pick up a sick child from school. How might we react to:

* An autistic programmer who might need to use noise-canceling headphones in an open-plan office.
* An [autist](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Autist) who may decline invitations for after-work drinks.
* A neurodivergent employee who skips a team-building session because of sensory overload.

[The Balance Careers](https://www.thebalancecareers.com/is-displaying-favoritism-in-the-workplace-illegal-4159736) states “Favoritism in the workplace is when a person (usually a manager) demonstrates preferential treatment to one person over all of the other employees for reasons unrelated to performance.” (Lucas, 2020) This definition leaves the matter open for interpretation when it comes to the needs of neurodivergents in the workplace.

## **Why Are Accommodations Needed?**

There are many ways to be human. Yet, without an understanding neurodevelopmental conditions (\*), accommodations can be misinterpreted as favoritism. For example, on the surface, wearing comfortable attire and being flexible with work hours can look like preferential treatment.

A thought experiment:

*You are about to take a flight for a solo business trip. It’s midsummer, and you board your plane after the usual awkward encounter with airport security. You’ve found your seat, shoved your bag into the overhead, and are sitting in a middle seat — the only one that was available on check-in. Since people are still boarding, you take out your laptop and get a head start on some work. People are streaming in, loud, hot, annoyed, and confused. The seat behind you is occupied by a six-year-old, his baby sister, and their mom.*

*The 6-year old noisily opens a bag of Cheetos and puts his feet up — on the back of your seat. The baby sister wants Cheetos too, so they fight. The baby cries and is inconsolable. The smell of Cheetos overtakes you as you try to focus on your work. The seats on either side of you have filled up now, and the elbow space is a bit cramped for working.*

*You hear a flight attendant announce that the flight will be delayed, but they can’t say for how long. As the plane sits delayed on the runway, you worry about being late for your meeting. But you can’t do anything, so the anxiety builds. Someone starts coughing. You panic quietly but carry on. The plane eventually gets off the runway. You can hear a weird clicking sound and can’t figure out where it’s coming. Also, the seat in front of you smells like spilled soda. You have to ignore this; you say to yourself. The baby behind you bursts into tears now and then. You feel sorry for the mom, but at the same time, it hurts your ears.*

Would this flight exhaust you?

***This airplane analogy is a caricature of the sensory hell that’s daily life for an autistic.***

Possibly, you’re thinking, “If I were in this situation, I’d use headphones. I’d ask for a different seat if that was a remote possibility.” Your request is reasonable. You need to concentrate, and the environment isn’t conducive to it.

For some, having to wear corporate clothing is a sensory nightmare. Belts, heels, ties, and makeup — they hurt and irritate. What might be insignificant to neurotypicals can be intense and overwhelming to an autistic, especially if repeated, day in and day out.

Smells from other people’s desk-lunches, office banter, speaking up in meetings are common in the workplace. These same experiences are challenging for neurodivergents. Autists are painfully aware of how their choice of words, facial expressions, tone of voice, and illiteracy in reading the room can impact their success. As one of my autistic colleagues shared, “So, I mentally rehearse what I want to say. But then, I’m spoken over, or misinterpreted, or worse, ignored.”

Dealing with these microaggressions, knowing that their ability to make a living depends on how they navigate these situations, erodes energy reserves and motivation.

So, what can be done? “I would use headphones and ask for a different seat. “ It’s as simple as that. It’s not favoritism. It’s a change of scenery so that you can work at your best. In an airplane, you have the autonomy to put on your headphones. You have some freedom to create the kind of space you need. This freedom may not exist in the office.

What autistics need to work at their best is not congruent with the standard office dynamic. Thus, flexibility is vital to harness neurodivergent talent and let it shine. Consider making headphones and seating flexibility a norm for all employees?

## **Accommodations that Work for Neurodivergents**

Repeatedly, autistics in work situations mention the same kinds of accommodations. According to an anonymous autistic blogger for [Spectroomz](https://www.spectroomz.com/), an online resource for autistics looking for employment, the following accommodations are what helped them:

* A clearly defined scope of work.
* Solid task management — for example — [a ticketing management hub](https://simplicable.com/new/ticket-management). However, even email would work in a pinch. This prevents misunderstandings that might occur when only verbal instructions are given.
* Predictable social interactions that an autistic employee can mentally prepare for.
* Limited need to mask (Oswald, 2021).
* Clearly defined performance metrics.
* Openness to sensory interventions such as noise-canceling headphones, or a quiet room to work in. Some airport lounges offer quiet spaces for travelers. It provides a reprieve from the constant noise in social environments.
* Flexible work hours
* Flexible work location. For example, partial work-from-home arrangements. Even a private space will work.
* Consider individual communication preferences. For example, communicate in writing or detailed instructions.

# **How to Reduce the Perception of Favoritism**

Anyone who falls under the diversity umbrella will tell you that there are many occasions where their presence feels like an inconvenience to others. An employer can reduce perceived favoritism by doing the following.

* Create awareness of the value of cognitive diversity in the organization. Most people’s understanding of autism comes from how autistic characters are portrayed in the media.
* Corporate values must embrace diversity. Forward thinking organizations with a positive attitude toward diversity and mental health are key to successful initiatives. The C-Suite mindset trickles down to employees. A results-only or profit-only attitude shapes organizational culture. A culture driven by the numbers without regard to employee wellness will fail the test of inclusivity.
* Emphasize the value of team success (as opposed to individual successes). Think of a team as the rag-tag assembly of superheroes who, individually, can’t get much done but all bring something to the party to save the world. Every superhero team has a singular focus on that one goal, not on self-gain. Even the weirdest hero brings something valuable to the table. This is a change from the workplace idea of teamwork, where each person tries to work with others for a vague common goal, but self-gain is still top of mind. Self-serving behavior in a team creates an Us vs. Them dynamic. This makes conditions ripe for the accusation of favoritism.
* Foster respect for neurodivergents by celebrating strengths and supporting areas that need improvement. Encourage curiosity over judgment and dismissal of unconventional ideas.
* Create clear, easily accessible policies for workplace accommodations for neurodivergent employees. Ad-hoc accommodations are generally not well received.

# **To Sum Up — Is it Favoritism?**

No, it isn’t. If we say, “everybody is unique’’ and “just be yourself,” we can’t then say “No, not like that!” With uniqueness comes different strengths. To allow those strengths to shine, accommodations for unique needs are appropriate and necessary. Those accommodations are not one-size-fits-all. The beauty of an inclusive philosophy is that employers, neurotypical and neurodivergent employees’ benefit.

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**Definitions used in this article:**

[**A neurodevelopmental condition**](https://adhdaware.org.uk/what-is-adhd/neurodiversity-and-other-conditions/?): [sic] its symptoms, behaviors and traits are the result of a person’s brain developing differently during the key stages of development before they were born or as a very young child. This differs from mental illness, which refers to patterns of behavior where a person experiences a ‘state of mind’ that is different from their ‘normal self.’ Some examples are: ADHD, ADD, Autism, Tourette’s, and Speech and Language disorders

[**“Masking and camouflaging**](https://opendoorstherapy.com/autism-and-trauma-masking/) are terms used to describe neurodiverse individuals who seek to hide or minimize their autism traits to fit in with the neurotypical world. Individuals with autism, especially ones who have a history of trauma, frequently feel they need to mask their autism traits in order to fit in. It helps them feel safe from further acts of aggression or misunderstandings.”

[**Autist:**](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Autist)Urban dictionary, “Has contemporary usage as a self-identifier and a term of endearment used online by individuals who self-identify as non-neurotypical.”

*The following definitions were created by Nick Walker, of neurocosmopolitanism.com:*

**Neurodiversity** is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.

**Neurodivergent**, sometimes abbreviated as **ND**, means having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

**Neurotypical**, often abbreviated as **NT**, means having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

*You might also see or hear the terms:*

**Neurodivergents,**People who identify as neurodivergent

[**Neurominority,** any group, such as people with autism\*, which differs from the majority of a population in terms of behavioral traits and brain function](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/neurominority)

\*preferred language … such as autistic people, which…

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