

# LEVEL THE FIELD

Working for a more equitable farming industry

APRIL 2025

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A comprehensive guide to

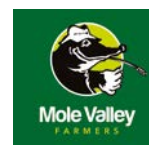
## Neurodiversity-friendly recruitment

*Practical ways to ensure your hiring processes take a skills-based approach*

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# The business case for neuroinclusive teams

It is no secret that the agriculture industry is struggling to recruit and retain staff. Over 70% of respondents to a **2023 NFU survey** said they had difficulty retaining workers and 41% said they had reduced the amount of food produced due to being unable to recruit the essential workforce required. Using more inclusive approaches to recruitment could be a step towards filling this growing skills gap and improving productivity.

In a recent **Farmers Weekly neurodiversity survey**, the neurodivergent skills that are helpful in agriculture identified by respondents were:

- Problem solving
- Creativity
- Attention to detail
- Big picture thinking
- Visual thinking
- Resilience under pressure
- Hyperfocus
- Pattern recognition
- Empathy
- Innovation
- Entrepreneurialism

Other sectors have already realised the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce. Companies such as Microsoft and Virgin actively recruit people with autism, ADHD and other neurodivergent conditions for the skills, talents and different perspectives they can bring to a role.

They are adjusting their recruitment strategies to reduce the barriers that might exclude people with neurodiverse conditions from applying for jobs that are perfect for their skill set.

But until now, despite the high prevalence of neurodivergence in the farming industry, as shown by the *Farmers Weekly* survey, very few farming businesses have actively sought to recruit neurodivergent talent.

Many jobs in agriculture would benefit from the skills neurodivergent people may have. These include exceptional attention to detail that could help with early detection of illness in animals, the ability to work well in a highly structured dairy role where rigid routines and protocols in the milking parlour are essential, strong maths skills to calculate fertiliser applications, or teamwork and communication for managers.

Agricultural recruitment agency De Lacy Executive Recruitment recommends:

- Focusing on capabilities rather than limitations
- Seeing neurodivergent individuals as assets, with skills such as problem-solving and meticulous attention to detail
- Considering productivity gains – businesses that accommodate neurodiversity often notice a boost in output and innovation.



WE'RE HIRING





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## CASE STUDY: SUNPORK FARMS, AUSTRALIA

SunPork is Australia's biggest pig integrator, producing over 1m pigs a year and 20% of Australia's pork.

The company identified a skills shortage for the specialised and important but relatively low-paid and unglamorous task of pig care. They wanted workers who could build a good rapport with the pigs, had high attention to detail, were good learners and could handle repetitive tasks.

After recognising that autistic people could tick these boxes, and acknowledging that this group often struggles to find work using traditional recruitment pathways, they teamed up with charity Autism CRC. Together they researched neurodiversity hiring programmes and designed an employment scheme that could tap into their talents and skill sets.



### A different application process

Rather than using the rigid CV and interview route, which can be a barrier to autistic adults finding work, SunPork asked possible candidates to send photographs showing why they wanted to work with animals. They then sent videos to invite them to a model farm in the town hall for what was pitched as a training opportunity, not an interview.

At the model pig farm, candidates tried out wearing overalls and learned the skills they would need in different areas of the real farm – from climbing gates safely to giving injections (using fruit) and learning about biosecurity. This allowed both sides to assess whether they were suited to the job before progressing to the next stage, with the option to leave at any time.

The next stage was a two-week training programme on farm with the pigs, learning the core skills of pig farming in small groups. This allowed the candidates' skills to grow and gave them a chance to show what sort of job they would be most suited to – be it handling data, vaccinating pigs or managing feeds.

When interviewed by Australian TV, candidates said they revelled in the opportunity to show their strengths and weaknesses and what they could offer the company.

### Friendships and life skills

They also benefited by developing life skills and friendships. Having met people on the scheme and experienced more independence, one candidate said: "I feel as though I actually exist." Project lead Kirsty Richards said the scheme would offer a skill set, employment history and independent living skills that could help them transition to whatever they wanted to do in life.

About 90% of the trainees were given jobs in Queensland and South Australia and are now fully integrated into the wider team. It prompted a revamp of the company's work instructions and training for all staff, and autism awareness training is now given to every employee.

It was the first – and possibly only – programme in the world to target autistic adults for employment in agriculture, and candidates travelled hundreds of miles for the opportunities. It has been deemed a success and provides a strong example of a positive, neuroinclusive recruitment initiative.

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## How to make recruitment practices neuroinclusive

Of the 495 people who identified as neurodivergent in the [Farmers Weekly survey](#), around half said they have faced barriers getting a job or with career progression in agriculture because of their neurodivergence, and one in 10 reported being severely affected by this.

Given the advantages that diverse teams bring, it is worth looking at the way your business recruits staff. You could be missing out on untapped talent if your job ad or interview process are too difficult to engage with.

According to De Lacy Executive Recruitment, employers often miss out on exceptional talent by adhering to conventional hiring standards. For candidates with conditions such as dyslexia, articulating skills and experience on paper may be a real struggle, and spelling errors are often misinterpreted as a lack of attention to detail. But the value placed on CVs can mean that they won't be considered for roles, even where advanced written communication isn't essential.

Embracing innovative ways of recruiting, taking a personalised approach, offering trial shifts, using a recruiter, or just by approaching interviews with a more open mind, can open up the





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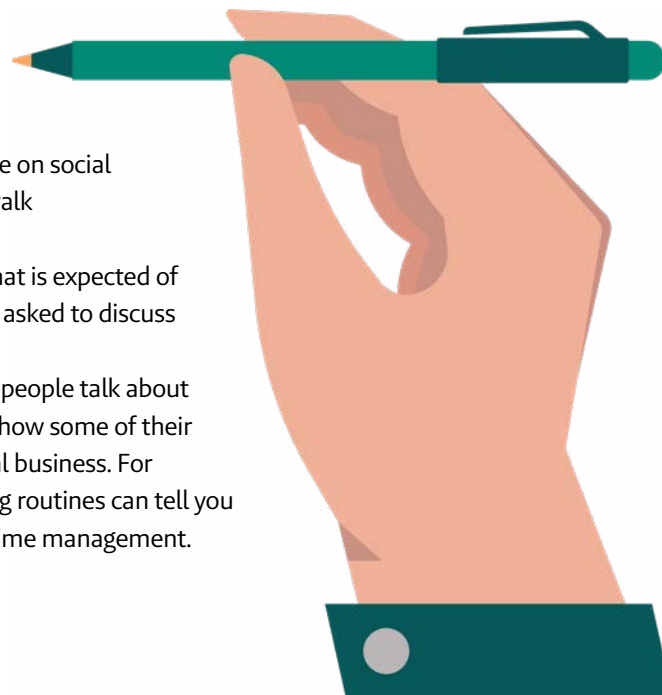
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field to a wider group of candidates with a wider range of talents, perspectives and skills – and your team will be better for it. Making your workplace inclusive and supportive of different ways of thinking will also put you in a better position to retain staff.

- Rethink how you assess CVs – neurodivergent people may have struggled with the rigid education system, so exam results are not always a good representation of their abilities
- Focus on practical skills such as great rapport with animals, a good understanding of mechanics, or precise organisational skills that would make someone well suited to record-keeping
- Consider more informal interviews that reduce pressure on social communication – perhaps a walk around the site and a chat.
- Share a clear description of what is expected of the role, and what they will be asked to discuss at the interview
- Ask questions that might help people talk about the way their brain works and how some of their traits would suit an agricultural business. For example, asking about morning routines can tell you a lot about their approach to time management.



## TIPS FOR WRITING A NEUROINCLUSIVE JOB AD

- The use of language in a job ad is important as you don't want exclude people who might be perfect for the role. Communication must be straightforward and direct; be clear about exactly what you want from a new employee.
- Use plain English without idioms or subjective language that could be misunderstood. Theo Smith, co-author of **Neurodiversity at Work**, recommends aiming an ad at the reading level of an average 10-year-old for clarity and ease of comprehension.
- If you are advertising for an entry-level job, avoid complex agricultural terminology and acronyms such as AYR and TMR. Write out "all-year-round calving" or "total mix ration" in full.
- Be specific about the skills required for the job and focus on the essentials. For example, are you adding "communication skills" as a convention or are they integral to the role?
- Consider mentioning that the workplace is neuroinclusive – or wants to be – and that applications from neurodivergent people are welcome.
- Use a clear font and layout and add alt tags to any pictures for ads that will appear online.
- Make the application more flexible by considering novel ways for applicants to showcase their talents. Videos, reels, photos, WhatsApp messages or voice notes could all be used.
- Be very clear about timelines – the deadline for applications to be submitted, and when interviews will take place.
- Invite applicants to request any necessary accommodations for interviews, trials and assessments.



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## CASE STUDY: NELIUS ROBBERTZE, AGRICULTURAL CENTRAL TRADING

South African-born Nelius Robbertze was determined to get a job in agriculture when he moved to the UK with his wife and two sons after the Covid restrictions were dropped.

He grew up on a farm in the Letsitele area and his passion for agriculture grew as he worked alongside his father and grandfather in fruit, vegetable and cattle farming.

His first job in the UK wasn't a perfect fit so he engaged with De Lacy Executive Recruitment to find somewhere he would be happier.

They had lots of conversations with him to get to know his personality and what sort of job he was looking for – and he discussed his neurodivergence. “I am dyslexic and if there are tools that make it easier for me, and the company is willing, that's great. I have always been up front – if employers know about it, there's nothing to hide.”



### Tech support

As a strong face-to-face communicator, his first interview with Agricultural Central Trading went brilliantly. He was asked about his dyslexia and what he would need to be able to do the job well. When he landed the role of area salesman, he was given screen readers and typing apps on his tablet, mobile phone and computer.

Ongoing support from boss Richard Hopwood includes the development of a colour-coded map showing clients' locations, which reads out information about them when highlighted. This suits Nelius's need to process information visually, and will also benefit others in the team.

A previous employer gave Nelius a written warning for spelling mistakes, so he wanted people to know that his emails may have typos or appear abrupt because the app sometimes misinterprets his accent. His boss was supportive and sent an email round to tell people this may happen. Nelius also told his clients he is dyslexic and his emails may have spelling errors so he prefers to use voice notes. “Not one of them had an issue,” he says.

### Break with convention

Nelius thinks that conventional recruitment methods are outdated and that CVs are not really able to show what a person is like. For people who might be worried about disclosing any neurodivergence during the interview process, he recommends being open. “Don't be scared. It is what you are. You may be different but it can be a very good different.”



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# What a neuroinclusive interview process looks like

Small adjustments to your interview process could make things easier for all applicants. Look at each stage of the process and see where you can make improvements.

## Before the interview

- Give enough time for candidates to prepare – offer as much detail about what will be expected as possible.
- Use very clear instructions about what an interview will entail and don't spring any surprises. If the interview will be a 10-minute chat, say so.
- Send out an itinerary for the interview day, including details of any tests or try-outs. If there are stages in the interview, give details with approximate timings and say what the purpose of each stage will be.
- Give clear directions of where to meet on the site, ideally providing a map and images. Also be clear about any biosecurity rules and what to wear – for example, signing a visitor's book and wearing clean wellies that will be disinfected on arrival.
- Think about sending the applicant a list of questions you intend to ask beforehand. While you may miss out on spontaneity, it will allow people who may process information in a different way time to prepare the answers that do justice to their talents. It is also a way to reassure them that the questions are not designed to trip them up.
- Consider using a standardised set of questions and scoring system for all candidates so they can be compared fairly.
- Encourage candidates to bring notes or photos, or anything they think might help to illustrate that they have the skills/attributes for the job.
- Have a contact within the team who can deal with any pre-interview queries about what the job entails or about the business and its work culture.
- Humanise the process by providing photos or perhaps a short video – even if it is just saying hello to introduce the interviewer. This will help people prepare by having a clearer picture in their head about what to expect.
- Consider any reasonable requests from the applicant for adjustments to the interview process.





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## During the interview

- Think about the location of the interview – if it will be in an office, make sure the lighting is not too bright. Also avoid holding it in a place where there are conflicting or ambient noises that could cause someone to lose focus.
- Think about the backdrop behind the interviewer – a busy background or blinds can be distracting and disorienting, causing it to appear that the interviewee is not paying attention.
- Avoid overwhelming environments to conduct any assessments.
- Try not to be overly influenced by first impressions such as unusual mannerisms or “stimming” (repetitive actions which are calming).
- Focus more on job skills than social and interaction skills. Don’t put too much weight on neurotypical standards – eye contact and small talk might be difficult for some candidates, but it doesn’t mean they would not be perfect in the role.
- Allow longer for any tests to give enough processing time.
- Be prepared for different communication styles and take cues from the interviewee. Sometimes people will need space to think about their answer, and other times they may need the question to be rephrased or broken down and explained.
- Try to avoid jargon or abbreviations that may be specific to your workplace, or explain what you mean by them.
- Avoid hypothetical questions and instead ask about relevant experiences.
- If you need to talk about statistics or percentages, have them written down for candidates who process information visually.

## What to ask in the interview: ideas for employers

Recruitment and people management expert Paul Harris of Real Success offers some examples of interview questions that can help explore how neurodivergent traits can be capitalised on by matching the right person to the right job, and how accommodations can be made once someone has been hired.

## Work style and organisation

- How do you like to organise your tasks and priorities in a typical work day?
- How do you stay focused and on track when working on long or complex tasks?
- Do you work better with structure and clear routines, or do you prefer a more flexible, dynamic environment?



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## Attention and focus

- How do you handle situations where you need to switch between multiple tasks quickly?
- When working on a project, do you tend to hyper-focus on details, or do you prefer to see the bigger picture?
- What helps you stay engaged in tasks that may not immediately capture your interest?

## Communication and social interaction

- How do you prefer to receive instructions – written, verbal or visual?
- Do you find certain types of communication, such as emails, face-to-face conversations or phone calls, easier or more challenging than others?
- How do you typically process feedback – do you prefer immediate, detailed or structured responses?

## Problem-solving and creativity

- Can you share an example of a time when you approached a problem in a unique or unconventional way?
- Do you prefer working on tasks that require logical, methodical thinking or creative, out-of-the-box solutions?
- When facing a challenge, do you tend to rely more on intuition, pattern recognition, or trial-and-error problem-solving?

## Sensory sensitivities and workplace environment

- Do you find noise levels, lighting or open-plan spaces affect your ability to work effectively?
- What types of adjustments or accommodations (if any) have helped you perform at your best in previous roles?
- Are there particular distractions that you find more challenging to manage in a work setting?

## Memory and learning style

- How do you typically retain new information best – through repetition, visual aids, hands-on practice or another method?
- Do you learn best by focusing on one concept at a time or do you prefer to see how everything connects as a whole?
- Have you developed any personal strategies to help remember important details or instructions?

## Executive functioning and decision-making

- How do you handle deadlines – do you prefer working ahead, or are you best under pressure?
- Can you describe how you approach making decisions – do you rely more on logic, instinct or structured frameworks?
- How do you manage unexpected changes or disruptions in your work routine?



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## ADVICE FOR CANDIDATES: WHAT TO ASK IN AN INTERVIEW

An interview is a two-way process and it is important that neurodivergent candidates are able to ask questions to find out if the work environment, tasks and expectations will be suitable and whether they can be adapted if necessary.

Paul Harris gives some pointers for questions that might be useful to ask employers during interviews or work trials. Employers could think about what answer they would give to get an idea of the adjustments the candidate might need or what role they could be most suited to.

### Work environment and sensory considerations

- Can you describe the working environment on the farm? Are there quieter areas available for breaks?
- Are there any high-noise environments where hearing protection is recommended?
- Is the farm flexible in providing adjustments such as clear signage, structured routines, flexible working or additional training?

### Task management and productivity

- How are daily tasks assigned – are they written, verbal or demonstrated?
- Does the farm have a clear routine or do tasks vary significantly day to day?
- How does the team handle training and onboarding?

### Communication and social expectations

- What is the preferred method of communication on farm — radios, in-person instructions or written notes?
- Are team meetings structured with clear agendas or are they more informal?
- How is feedback given on the farm – regular check-ins, informal discussions or structured reviews?

### Support and adjustments

- Do the managers have experience working with neurodivergent employees, and have they provided any specific adjustments?
- Are there specific health and safety considerations for neurodivergent workers, such as clearer visual cues or structured workflows?
- If needed, is there an option to have a mentor or buddy system for support?
- Work expectations and flexibility
  - What are the working hours, and is there any flexibility in start or finish times?
  - Are tasks repetitive or varied, and how much notice is given for changes in routine?
  - How does the farm handle emergencies or unexpected disruptions – are there clear protocols in place?





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## Tips to prepare a new recruit for their first day

Creating a good foundation in the first few weeks can be crucial to retaining staff and ensuring that the person you hire is happy and supported in their new job. You can begin to lay the groundwork during the recruitment period and before they start at work to make the transition into the new role as smooth as possible.

Ideally, every new worker – neurodivergent or not – should have the opportunity to discuss what working arrangements would play to their strengths as this would remove stigma and ensure that everyone feels well supported at work.

- Start by clarifying the new employee's communication preference – texts, emails, WhatsApp messages, phone calls or voice notes.
- Provide as much information as you can about the job, the workplace and the team before the employee arrives for their first day. This could include information about the culture of the team and the unspoken rules at work regarding breaks, WhatsApp groups, the structure of the team and any jargon/abbreviations that are used among the team members.
- Compile an induction pack detailing what is expected from them, including hours, goals, how work will be assessed, and the timescales for any appraisals or trial periods. A clear outline of processes and procedures should be given in as simple a form as possible.
- Match up the new employee with a peer mentor or buddy who will be doing a similar job, or a team member – ideally someone who has had neurodiversity training or has awareness or experience of neurodivergence – who can address any problems or queries.
- Set up any training that might be needed, considering any additional needs.



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## CASE STUDY: IFAN ROBERTS, CHESHIRE

Ifan Roberts (pictured between colleagues James Taylor, left, and Oliver Friswell) owns a contract farming company in Cheshire, and started his career as a general farmworker. As a Nuffield scholar who is investigating entrepreneurship in dairy farming, he is well aware of the difficulties in recruiting and developing careers in the sector.

As a manager he sees the benefits of having a diverse team. While he doesn't specifically seek out neurodivergent people when recruiting, he has a neuroinclusive team. He looks beyond CVs to see an individual's merits and, while he says that interviews are an essential part of his recruitment process, he stresses to applicants that they are informal and more of a "get to know you" exercise. He likes to interview as many people as he can, and is happy to give someone a chance.



### The right skills for the job

Being a good fit for the team and having enthusiasm for the job are the things he prizes most. He says job trials are a good way to find out who will have the skills for which roles. They are ideal for neurodivergent people who might find interviews – even informal ones – overly stressful.

Ifan's instinctive style of management has involved making reasonable adjustments by looking at each person's needs. "I manage every person individually. I get to know what makes people tick: which buttons you can press, which buttons you can't, and what people respond positively to," he says.

He uses videos on WhatsApp team chats to give detailed task instructions for team members who need visual prompts – for example a two-minute video on electric fencing – and makes sure members of his team with ADHD have a written task list.

He likes team members to be committed to improving the farm and wants them all to experience personal growth during their employment. He goes by the maxim "criticise by category, praise by name" so if there is a problem, it will be addressed to the team, but praise will be personal.

### Making adjustments

It is rare for people to disclose their neurodivergence at an interview, says Ifan. It is usually during the first few months that this is established, and any necessary adjustments can be made. A recent adjustment has been for 18-year-old herdsman James Taylor, who has ADHD. He has been allowed to build a kennel complex for his seven dogs on site in acknowledgment of his commitment to the job in the past six months.

"Before I had the dogs with me, I would just keep on working and find it difficult to stop – and I was feeling a bit burnt out," says James. "The dogs help me structure my day better, and I can spend my breaks with them. They have made me a lot happier at work."

This is the kind of creative neuroinclusion that is making a positive difference and building teams where people with different ways of thinking can happily work alongside each other while sharing a common goal.



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## The role of personality profiling

By exploring the personality types of job applicants to see how their brains are wired, specialist agricultural recruitment and people management company Real Success is helping employers identify what sort of role a person will thrive in and how they will fit into a team.

Vita profiling, designed by company founder Paul Harris, is a simpler version of more in-depth psychological profiling. A short test results in a one-page personality description focusing on four primary styles. Each style offers insights into communication preferences, behavioural tendencies, problem-solving approaches, and the way information is processed.

While Vita profiling does not use neurodivergent labels, its four primary character types include neurodivergent traits that may overlap and even contradict each other – as can happen in people with autism and ADHD or other neurodiverse combinations.

The four personality types are Visionary, Investigator, Team Maker and Adventurer (Vita). People can have elements of each, but will have a dominant type.

Paul says the Vita terms are an accessible introduction to people who are first starting to consider different thinking, learning and communication styles, particularly in agriculture where people may be used to working alongside others with neurodifferences, but may be less familiar with the language of neurodiversity.

So, the system might show that an Investigator is likely to excel in precision-based roles requiring methodical thinking such as record-keeping or machine calibration. An Adventurer may love spontaneity and rapid decision-making and excel in dynamic environments such as livestock handling and logistics co-ordination.

The benefits of being aware of a candidate's profile mean that interview questions can be tailored to their type. It can also highlight how they can be managed and supported, anticipating when adjustments might be needed, such as flexible schedules, written instructions or a quiet work environment.

“A more nuanced approach to recruitment – one that considers not just skills and experience but also thinking styles and behavioural preferences – can help farms create more inclusive, productive workplaces while meaningfully addressing labour shortages,” says Paul.





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## CASE STUDY: WILL SANDERS, STAFFORDSHIRE

Will Sanders, dairy farm manager at Castle Hayes Farm in Burton-on-Trent, uses Vita profiling day to day and when recruiting new team members. It has helped him adapt the way he communicates with his team and accommodate different approaches to work using insights from the profiles.

Will's main focus when recruiting is that the candidate is a good fit for the team. The work on the farm is very structured, with standard procedures that people with autistic traits may find particularly appealing.

His typical recruitment process involves a brief phone call with a candidate, then a sit-down interview followed by a tour of the farm. The candidate is then asked to answer the profiling questions before a day's trial is offered.

The profiles provide practical information about the different ways information might be processed at work. "We know if they like things written down, or they like pictures and prefer to see things when they are learning. If they are a high Team Maker, we know they will need more reassurance; if they are a Visionary, they will just want to get on with the job and not be micromanaged."



### A stronger, more resilient team

Using personality profiling has improved the retention of staff, and made the team stronger and more resilient. Everyone gets to see each other's profiles, which has made it easier for team members to talk about what would help them thrive at work.

"It opens up an honest conversation about strengths and weaknesses without putting people down," says Will. "It builds confidence in the team, it acknowledges different ways of learning and communicating. It's about accepting people for who they are."

Will believes that being positive about neurodiversity is an important part of the move to attract people to the industry and retain them.

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### SOURCES AND EXPERT INPUT PROVIDED BY

- De Lacy Executive Recruitment
- Real Success
- NFU response to Defra's Independent Review into Labour Shortages
- Neurodiversity at Work by Theo Smith

