

Leading change: how OT entrepreneurs are championing neurodiversity at work



With government focus on return-to-work strategies growing, **Catherine Hurley** shares how OTs – especially those breaking new ground as independent practitioners – are uniquely placed to drive systemic change, support authentic participation, and build inclusive workplaces where everyone can thrive.

As the UK government places increased focus on employment, workforce participation, and return-to-work strategies, occupational therapists must be visible and vocal advocates for neurodivergent individuals – particularly autistic people – who continue to face some of the greatest barriers to sustained employment.

Occupational therapy, grounded in holistic, client-centred practice, and deeply informed by the concept of meaningful occupation, is uniquely

positioned to support neurodivergent adults not just to find work, but to thrive in it.

At the same time, a growing number of OTs, including myself, are setting up their own businesses and independent practices, creating new, innovative and person-led approaches that better meet the needs of those historically excluded from traditional employment pathways.

This article explores why occupational therapists must take an active role in shaping neuroinclusive workplaces and employment supports, and how the entrepreneurial

occupational therapy movement can drive real change in the lives of autistic and neurodivergent individuals.

The employment gap: a call for action

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2021), only 22% of autistic adults in the UK are in any kind of paid employment. Fewer still are in roles that are full time, stable, or aligned with their strengths and interests.

Many face environments that are inaccessible, recruitment processes that are exclusionary, and employers who lack understanding of neurodivergent communication, sensory needs and work styles.

These statistics don't reflect a lack of capability. They reflect a lack of systemic inclusion.

In parallel, the neurodiversity movement – led by autistic and neurodivergent advocates – is challenging deficit-based approaches. Instead of focusing on diagnosis and remediation, it promotes understanding, acceptance and structural change.

It recognises neurodivergence as a natural part of human diversity – not something to be cured or hidden. As occupational therapists, we are not only well placed to support this paradigm shift, we are professionally and ethically aligned with it.

OTs as neurodiversity allies

Occupational therapy is guided by the belief that health and wellbeing are deeply connected to the ability to participate in meaningful occupations. For many, paid work is a vital part of that. Work provides not just income, but structure, identity, purpose and community.

Occupational therapists bring a unique skill set to the conversation about inclusive employment.

Holistic assessments: considering the person, environment, and occupation to understand barriers to engagement.

Specialist assessments: AHP reports that provide more information to the individual's employer and the client on the effects and impact of reported work-related difficulties and suggest and highlight bespoke recommendations; options that would facilitate remaining in or returning to work.

Occupational profiling: the Model of Human Occupation (MOHO) is a model specific to our profession that describes how humans generate and modify their occupations in interaction with the environment, which presents a dynamic open cycle system of human actions.

Specialist occupation centered assessment tools, such as OCAIRS (the Occupational Circumstances Assessment Interview and Rating Scale) focus upon a person's occupational

participation and can be used as an outcome measure to demonstrate efficacy and value.

Executive functioning support: supporting (through neuro-affirming practices, such as co-regulation and body doubling techniques) individuals to develop routines, time management, and self-regulation strategies.

Sensory profiling and adaptation: Creating or advocating for workplaces that accommodate sensory processing needs.

Self-advocacy and identity: Supporting clients to understand and express their neurodivergent identities confidently.

Systemic advocacy: working with employers and policymakers to challenge ableism and embed equity into work culture.

These skills are particularly vital in the current climate. With policy shifting toward return-to-work initiatives post-pandemic and amid rising economic pressures, there is a risk that neurodivergent needs will be overlooked in the drive for workforce participation.

Occupational therapists are the right professionals to ensure that inclusion is not an afterthought.

Independent practice and innovation

A growing number of occupational therapists are choosing to step outside of traditional service settings and launch their own businesses. This shift is allowing for more flexibility, creativity and responsiveness to unmet community needs – particularly among neurodivergent adults seeking support that is affirming, collaborative and strengths based.

An independent occupational therapy businesses focused on neurodiversity might include:

- Coaching and mentoring services for neurodivergent jobseekers.
- Workplace consultancy and training for employers.
- Community-based employment support programmes.
- Virtual or in-person coworking spaces designed for sensory and cognitive inclusion.
- Advocacy and policy consultancy from an occupational therapy lens.

These models allow occupational therapists to work differently, centred on autonomy, relationships and justice. They also create space for occupational therapists with lived experience of neurodivergence to lead and innovate in ways traditional roles may not allow.

Setting up as an independent practitioner or business owner is not without its challenges, but



it also opens doors for greater impact, deeper connection with service users, and sustainable, value-driven work.

Embedding OT in 2025 government priorities

As government and policy conversations in 2025 increasingly focus on workforce participation, there is an opportunity for occupational therapy to shape the direction of employment-related services. Occupational therapy should be recognised as central to:

- Return-to-work schemes for disabled and long-term unemployed adults.
- Development of inclusive recruitment frameworks.
- Employer education and workplace design consultation.
- Vocational rehabilitation that acknowledges identity, sensory needs, and mental health.
- Supporting the self-employed and neurodivergent entrepreneurs.

Yet occupational therapy remains underrepresented in many of these initiatives. To change this, we need to engage strategically – with policymakers, commissioners, employers, and neurodivergent communities – to ensure occupational therapy is not seen as peripheral, but essential.

Being a neurodiversity ally as an OT

To truly empower neurodiversity, we must reflect critically on our own practice and actively work to become allies. This includes:

- Understanding the neurodiversity paradigm: moving beyond clinical models of 'impairment' to recognise and respect neurodivergent experiences.
- Challenging internalised ableism: reflecting on how our goals, assessments, or interventions might promote masking or conformity over authenticity.
- Centering lived experience: involving neurodivergent people in co-designing services, evaluations and research.
- Reframing 'independence': recognising that interdependence, community and choice are equally valid goals.
- Using our influence: As OTs, we work across systems – health, education, social care, employment. This positions us to create change at multiple systemic levels.

Occupational therapy, at its best, is not just a clinical role, it is a social justice profession. Our work must go beyond supporting people to

changing the environments and systems that exclude them in the first place.

Building a future where everyone thrives at work

The employment landscape in 2025 offers both risk and opportunity. For neurodivergent individuals, the right to work in a way that honours their strengths, needs and identities is still too often out of reach.

Occupational therapists are ideally placed to change that. Whether through frontline practice, policy advocacy, or new business models, Occupational therapists have the tools to lead the charge for inclusive, meaningful employment.

By becoming neurodiversity allies and by embracing innovative, independent pathways, we can build services and systems that reflect our deepest professional values; inclusion, autonomy, dignity and occupational justice.

The future of work must include everyone. And occupational therapists must be part of shaping it. ●

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Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2021). *Outcomes for disabled people in the UK: 2021*. Available at www.ons.gov.uk [accessed 1 July 2025].

Further reading

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Milton D (2012) On the ontological status of autism: The 'double empathy problem'. *Disability and Society*, 27(6): 883–887.

Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) (2022) *Occupational therapy and neurodiversity: Position Statement*.

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To respect the range of preferences among autistic individuals and their families, we use both identity-first and person-first language in OTnews.