

Watercare

INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE

MEDIUM-LARGE ORGANISATION FINALIST



THE STORY

By recognising and celebrating the strengths of neurodiversity within its workforce, Watercare has uncovered a wealth of unique perspectives that have improved the overall performance of its team.

Watercare is New Zealand's largest company in the water and wastewater industry. It supplies more than 400 million litres of water to Auckland every day and collects, treats and disposes of around 409 million litres of wastewater daily. The company is also responsible for building and upgrading infrastructure.

When employee feedback highlighted the need for the company to take action to improve understanding and support for neurodivergent members of its team, Watercare took steps to create a forum for a more open and accepting conversation to begin.

The People and Capability team took part in a workshop with an industry specialist from Cabilities to understand the perspectives of individuals who identify as neurodivergent.

Head of People Partnering Kirsty Cels says, "We learned about the potential that sat in our business in regard to different thinking styles and the needs and workplace challenges for neurodivergent individuals. This set up the foundations for a plan to turn our focus to the wider organisation."

Staff were brought onboard with a lunchtime session to learn about neurodiversity, and a panel discussion was held where employees talked about their personal experiences.

“The session not only raised awareness but also encouraged meaningful discussions on how we could better support neurodivergent individuals in the workplace,” says Kirsty.

“With a newly identified emerging neurodivergent employee network, we shared information regarding communication strategies for people leaders to reference when managing neurodiverse individuals.”

The importance of inclusivity in approaches to learning was highlighted and an external specialist engaged to run a bespoke workshop providing understanding and guidance on how to engage neurodivergent learners in training sessions.

“Focussing on our neurodivergent learners acknowledges that each employee possesses unique learning requirements. Through the changes we made, our learners felt genuine support, were more engaged and information retention significantly increased,” noted Clare Sarney, Head of Learning and Organisational Development.

Additionally, Watercare provided face-to-face courses that offered more than just learning opportunities; they also served as vibrant forums for networking, facilitating cross-departmental collaboration, and creating a platform for diverse perspectives.

A selection of face-to-face courses and eLearning modules were reviewed externally to assess how they could be improved to support neurodivergent learners. Course materials were updated to ensure they were inclusive and accessible.

“To enhance the learning environment, the team invested in sensory resource kits, strategically placed on the tables at each face-to-face session, to cater to the sensory needs of neurodivergent learners,” says Clare.

eLearning modules were reviewed to make sure audio was available alongside on-screen text to cater to a variety of learning preferences and needs.

The Learning and Organisational Development team developed a reference document to give people across the organisation access to key information. The document provides information on various neurodivergent conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia. It also offers strategies tailored for both people leaders and neurodivergent colleagues, equipping them with tools to foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment.

“Ensuring these efforts have been communicated clearly and are fully supported has been key to our success,” says Sarah Phillips, Chief People Officer. “These initiatives had, and continue to have, the full support of the People Leadership Team and the wider executives across the business. The

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People and Capability team liaise with various senior leaders across their portfolios, and we have made a real impact in terms of our commitment to support neurodivergent people.”

THE CHALLENGE

Watercare wanted to improve understanding and support for neurodiversity within its workforce.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- The People and Capability team took part in a workshop with an industry specialist to understand the perspectives of individuals who identify as neurodivergent.
- A session was held with staff to build greater awareness of neurodiversity and to hear the personal experiences of neurodiverse colleagues.
- An emerging neurodivergent employee network was identified and connected with.
- Learning was identified as a key focus area and both face-to-face and eLearning modules were reviewed and updated to cater for a wide variety of learning styles and needs.
- Information was made available across the organisation offering strategies to support team members and colleagues with neurodivergent conditions.
- Learning and Organisational Development team visits sites and departments to discuss learning opportunities that are available and to reinforce the steps taken to support neurodiversity in the workplace.

RESULTS AND BENEFITS

- As a result of the changes made, learners feel better supported, are more engaged, and information retention has increased significantly.
- As of April 2024, a feedback form asking participants how comfortable they felt during learning sessions provided positive results, with an average 4.88 out of five.
- Appreciation of company efforts towards supporting neurodiverse individuals overall, featured in engagement survey employee comments.



KEY LEARNING

Leveraging the strengths of neurodivergent individuals has enriched team collaboration by tapping into a wealth of unique perspectives.