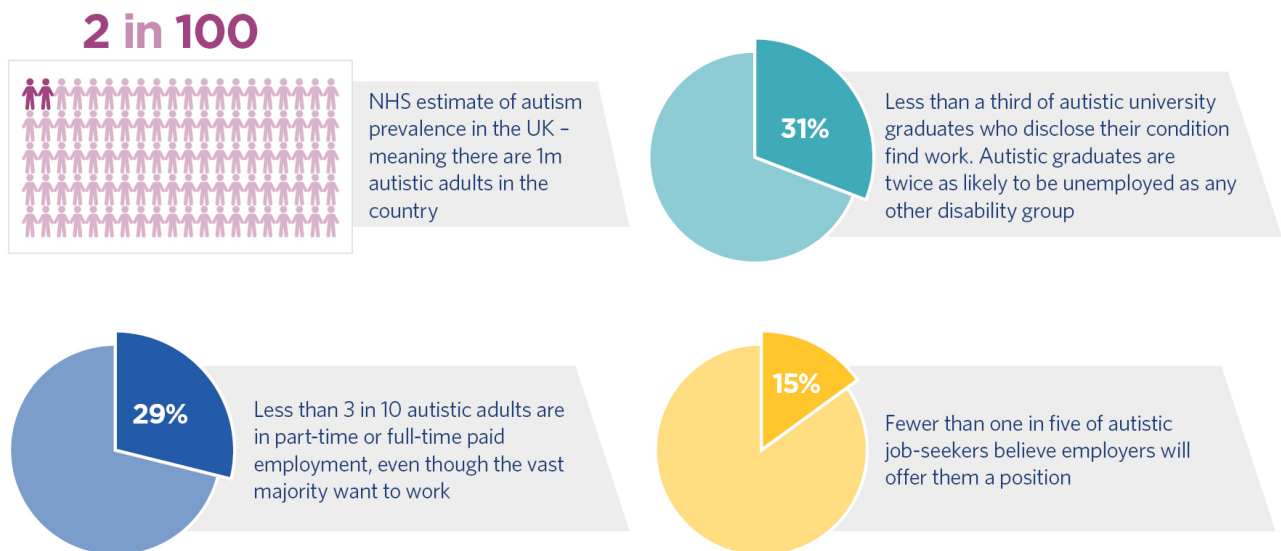


# EMBRACING NEURODIVERSITY

05 October 2022

**Neurodiversity - the recognition that brain differences are normal - is well accepted. However, those who have conditions that fall under this definition often face discrimination. That is particularly the case for those with autism:**

## NEURODIVERSITY CHART.JPG



At Herbert Smith Freehills, we are taking practical steps to help address this unsatisfactory situation. A group of colleagues in the firm's London and Belfast offices, under the supportive umbrella of the firm's [Ability Network](#), has formed a group to make autistic people feel as welcome as possible. This is aimed both at new recruits and those already working at the firm.

The group is driven by a belief that not only is there a moral imperative to be more inclusive of autistic people but also because it makes good business sense - individuals who think differently are intrinsically valuable, and that teams that better reflect wider society will be happier and higher-performing.

## **What We Are Doing**

The first and perhaps most critical aspect of this initiative involves our recruitment framework. Here we have:

- Delivered specialist training for the full Human Resources team, as well as others who conduct interviews for the firm.
- Developed a guide on how to interview autistic candidates.
- Asked external experts to look at some of our standard job advertisements and descriptions to ensure the language they use is as inclusive as possible.
- Made adjustments to the assessment process, such as providing questions in advance.
- Hosted annual open days for university students with all types of disabilities.
- Opened dialogue with our executive search providers to ensure neurodivergent candidates are not filtered out before we receive their applications.

## **Working environment**

Ensuring a supportive and inclusive working environment for autistic people inside HSF is the second pillar. As laid down in the firm's global workplace adjustments commitment, which was launched in December 2021, we aim to ensure that our disabled people receive the right physical and non-physical support to make sure they can perform their jobs easily and without obstacles.

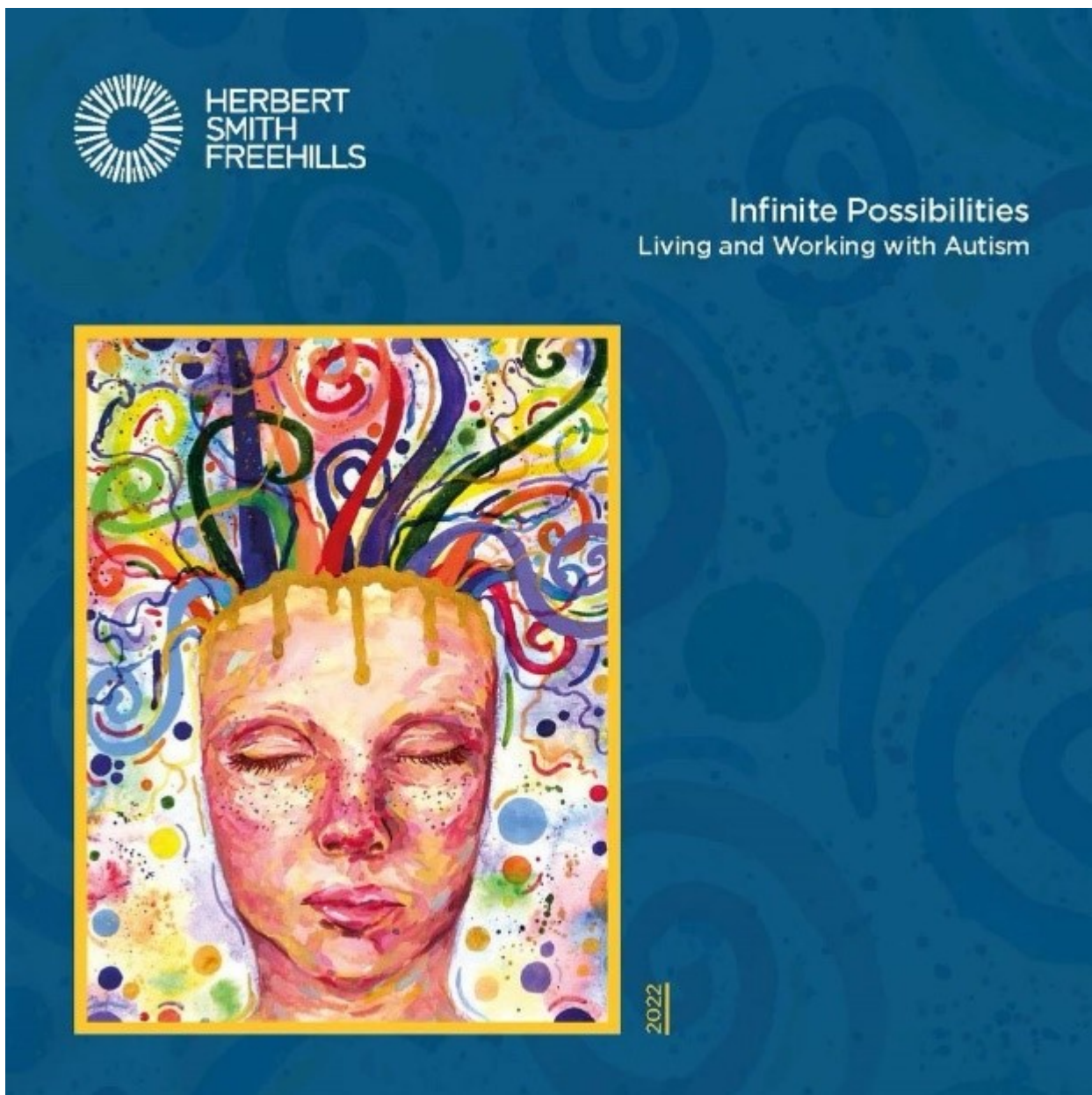
We work with a specialist neurodiversity consultancy to conduct assessments and provide ongoing mentoring to ensure this commitment is fully delivered to autistic and other neurodivergent colleagues.

Over recent years, we have put on a number of awareness-raising events to help people understand autism, including lunchtime seminars and a "stories from the spectrum" feature on the global intranet about people's lived experiences. Many of these feature members of a support group for autistic people and carers of autistic relatives, from which a number of the members of the autism employment working group are also drawn.

## Talent attraction

Attracting autistic people to join us is, perhaps unsurprisingly, proving the most difficult of our challenges and objectives. We have nevertheless run a number of internships for autistic individuals into different parts of the business in recent years. These sessions have shown beyond doubt the advantages on both sides – for those with autism gaining valuable paid work experience and for the teams hosting them, who have not only relished the experience but have also had their stereotypes and preconceptions shattered.

# INFINITE POSSIBILITIES.JPG



*'Infinite Possibilities' - a recent HSF publication celebrating autism and autistic inclusion; [click here](#) for your copy*

## Next steps

Although we firmly believe that embracing neurodiversity and making our firm a better place to work for people who think differently does confer commercial benefits, we are not looking to secure a competitive advantage over other firms with our autism inclusion initiative. We are seeking to broaden the conversation.

On 14th September, together with The Law Society, we hosted a successful event to raise autism on the agenda across the legal services sector ([watch the event recording here](#)). More than 20 other large law firms attended, which was very gratifying. The plan is to continue this conversation to identify and share best practices, including with clients. We are always interested to hear from others who want to learn more or share their own perspective and experiences.

While one of our internships has already happily translated into a full-time role with our Legal Operations function, all of these initiatives remain a work in progress. We stay humble: not everything we have tried has worked, and we have a long way to go. The next stage is to finalise and implement a firm-wide neurodiversity strategy, on which consultation (and collaboration with a separate working group focused on dyslexia and dyscalculia) has already commenced. We want this to be global, and it is heartening to hear from colleagues in other offices outside the UK who are already doing great work in this same area.

Please contact [ability@hsf.com](mailto:ability@hsf.com) to learn more.