



RESEARCH · PRELIMINARY STUDY

Neurodiversity at sea: findings from our 2022 to 2023 survey

What 118 seafarers and maritime professionals told us about neurodivergence, disclosure, fairness and support at work, and what it means for the industry.

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Key findings

- Of the 65 respondents who are diagnosed or believe they are neurodivergent, three in four (75%) say their employer does not know.
- Almost half of all respondents (47%) have seen a colleague's career harmed because of a neurodivergent condition, and a quarter (25%) in the past year alone.
- Only 9% said their company offers any specific support for neurodivergent seafarers.
- Around a third see interviews, promotion, discipline and exams as unfair to neurodivergent people. Pay is the exception.
- A majority (54%) expect more neurodivergent staff to benefit the business overall. Only 13% expect a cost.

1 About this study

Until now there has been no published data on neurodiversity among seafarers. Between October 2022 and January 2023 we ran an online survey to begin filling that gap. It asked about three things: how many respondents are, or believe they are, neurodivergent; the barriers neurodivergent people face at sea and in maritime training; and whether the industry sees value in a more neurodiverse workforce.

The survey was promoted through maritime media, professional bodies and employers across shipping, offshore, fishing, the naval service and leisure sailing. Respondents were given a short, neutral explanation of neurodiversity and told that they did not need to be neurodivergent to take part. After removing three people who did not work in maritime, 118 responses remain.

This is a preliminary study. Its findings describe the people who responded, and should be read with the limitations below in mind.

2 Limitations

The sample is self-selected. People with a personal interest in neurodiversity are more likely to take part in a survey about it. The figures on how many respondents are neurodivergent therefore tell us about this group, not about seafarers as a whole, and cannot be used to estimate prevalence across the industry.

It is not representative of the workforce. Nearly half of respondents (46%) are deck officers and only 3% are deck ratings. Almost a third (31%) are women, far above the share of women working at sea. Nine in ten (92%) describe themselves as white, so we could not look at how ethnicity and neurodivergence interact.

Some things were not asked. The survey did not record nationality, where respondents work or which certificates they hold, so we cannot compare countries, flag states or levels of qualification.

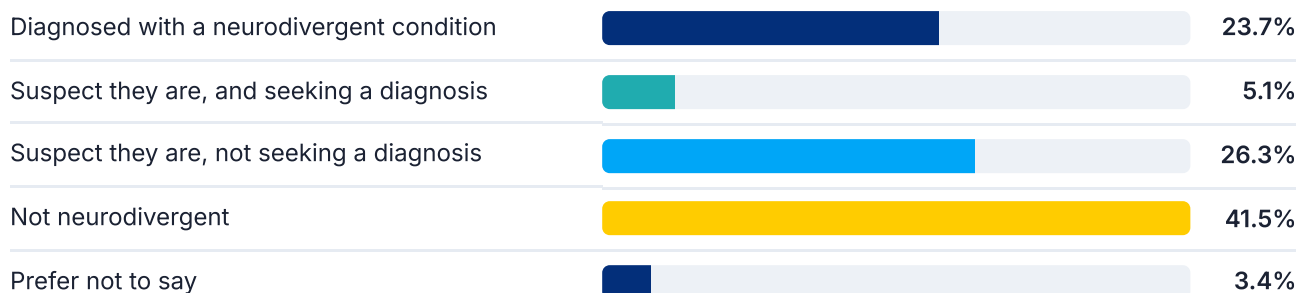
It is small. With 118 responses, differences of a few percentage points between groups are not meaningful, and we have not broken results down by rank, sector or gender.

Answers are perceptions. Questions about fairness, company support and employer knowledge record what respondents believe. For example, a respondent who says their company offers no support may simply not know about it.

3 Who responded

Respondents ranged from cadets to retired masters, with the largest group aged 31 to 40 (29%). Most work at sea or did so: deck officers (46%), engineering officers and ETOs (7%), deck ratings and cadets (6%), with the rest in senior management, pilotage, training, regulation and other maritime roles ashore.

How respondents describe themselves



Source: NeurodiversAtSea survey, October 2022 to January 2023 (118 responses)

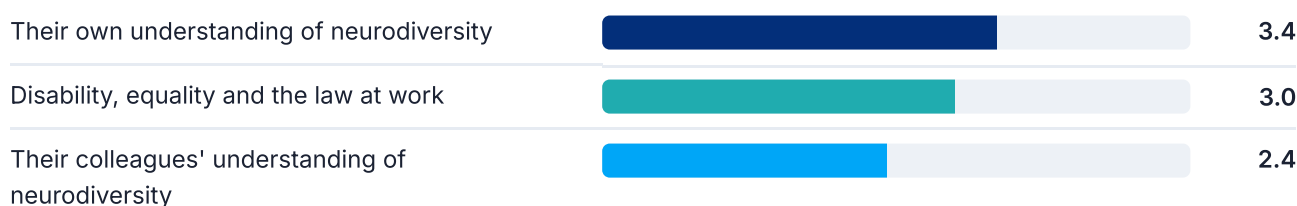
Just over half of respondents (55%) are diagnosed or believe they are neurodivergent. Throughout this paper, "neurodivergent respondents" means these 65 people. The most common diagnoses were dyslexia (15 people), autism (8) and ADHD (7), followed by dyscalculia, dyspraxia and OCD. Seven people reported more than one diagnosis.

Many more people suspect a condition than have a diagnosis. ADHD stands out: 24 respondents (20%) suspect they have ADHD, compared with 7 who have been diagnosed. Suspected autism (18 people) is also more than twice as common as diagnosed autism. This points to a large unmet need for assessment. For seafarers, an ADHD diagnosis also raises questions about medication and medical fitness, which may make some reluctant to seek one.

4 Knowledge of neurodiversity

Most respondents (63%) believe they work alongside neurodivergent colleagues, and a further 30% are not sure. Only 8% think they do not.

Average self-rated knowledge, on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent)



Source: NeurodiversAtSea survey, October 2022 to January 2023 (118 responses)

Respondents rate their own understanding of neurodiversity as moderate, but rate their colleagues' understanding much lower. Only 4 of 117 gave their colleagues the top score. Knowledge of disability and equality law was spread widely, with as many people rating it poor as good, even though seafarers in management roles receive leadership and legal training.

5 Disclosure

75%

of neurodivergent respondents say their employer doesn't know

50%

of those with a formal diagnosis say the same

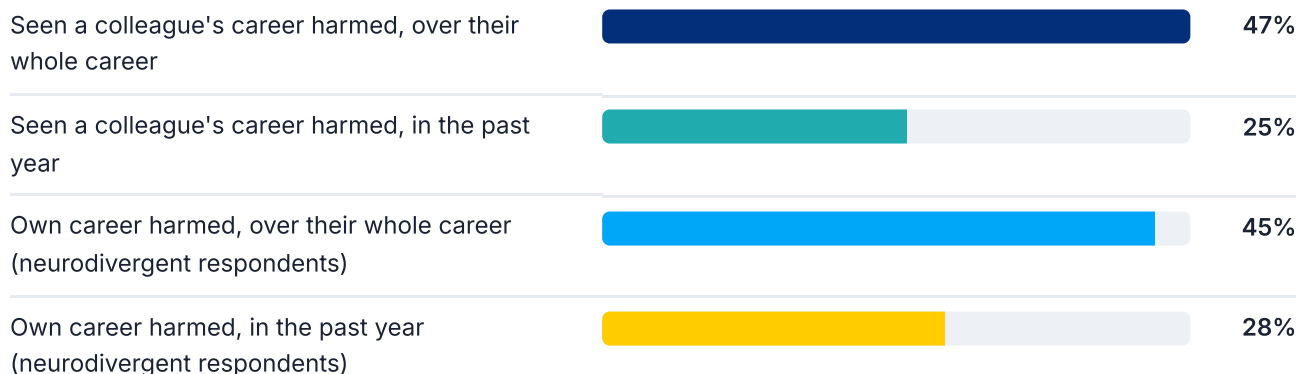
Source: NeurodiversAtSea survey, October 2022 to January 2023 (118 responses)

Of the 65 neurodivergent respondents, 49 say their employer does not know about their condition. Even among the 28 with a formal diagnosis, half have not told their employer. This matters because, in practice, an employer that does not know cannot put adjustments in place. Our data does not tell us why people choose not to disclose, but the findings on career harm below suggest that many have good reason to be cautious.

6 Career harm and exclusion

We asked respondents whether careers had been harmed, or people put at a professional disadvantage, because of a neurodivergent condition, both over their whole career and in the past year.

Respondents answering yes



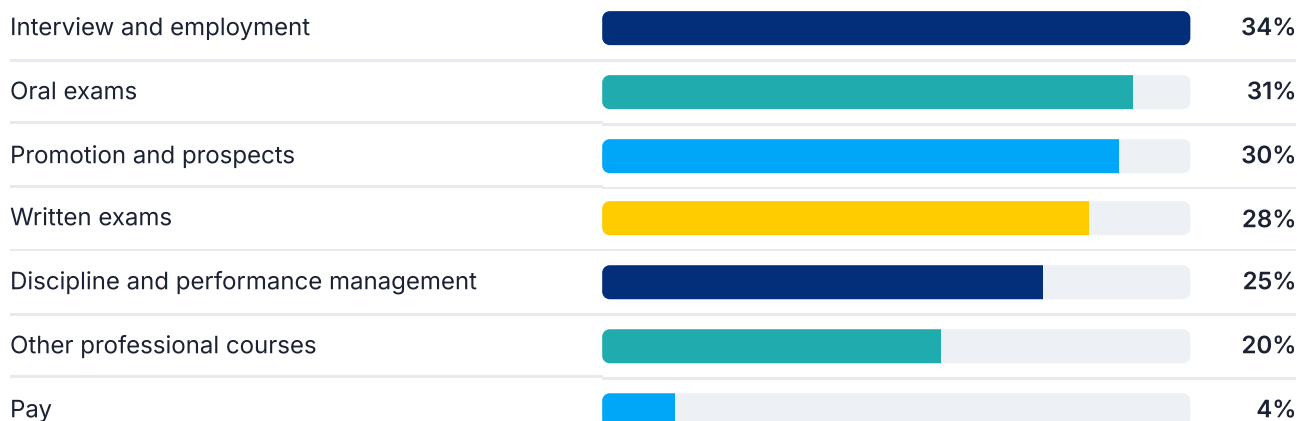
Source: NeurodiversAtSea survey, October 2022 to January 2023 (118 responses)

Nearly half of neurodivergent respondents (29 of 65) say their own career has been harmed, and 18 say this happened in the past year. A quarter of all respondents have seen it happen to a colleague in the past year. This is not a historical problem: it is happening now.

Half of neurodivergent respondents (51%) believe neurodivergent people are socially excluded at work. Across all respondents opinion was more divided, with 42% saying yes and 36% no. At sea this is more than a welfare issue. Crews live and work together for months, and isolation on board is linked to poor mental health and fatigue, both of which are recognised safety risks.

7 Fairness at work and in training

Respondents who think neurodivergent people are treated unfairly



Source: NeurodiversAtSea survey, October 2022 to January 2023 (118 responses)

Between a quarter and a third of respondents think neurodivergent people are treated unfairly at each stage of working life, from getting a job to promotion and discipline. Many more were unsure, often around 40%, which itself suggests these processes are rarely discussed. Pay is the clear exception: 63% think it is fair, possibly because pay at sea usually follows fixed scales by rank.

Written and oral exams were seen as less fair than other professional courses, such as STCW short courses, dynamic positioning and leadership courses. For those courses, 42% said fair and 20% unfair. These courses tend to be more practical and continuously assessed, rather than resting on a single written or oral exam.

8 Support from employers

Does your employer offer...



Source: NeurodiversAtSea survey, October 2022 to January 2023 (118 responses)

Only one in five respondents say their employer funds assessment or academic support for specific learning differences, such as dyslexia. Almost half (48%) say it does not, and the rest are unsure. This matters because exam adjustments, such as extra time, generally depend on a formal assessment, which candidates often have to arrange and pay for themselves.

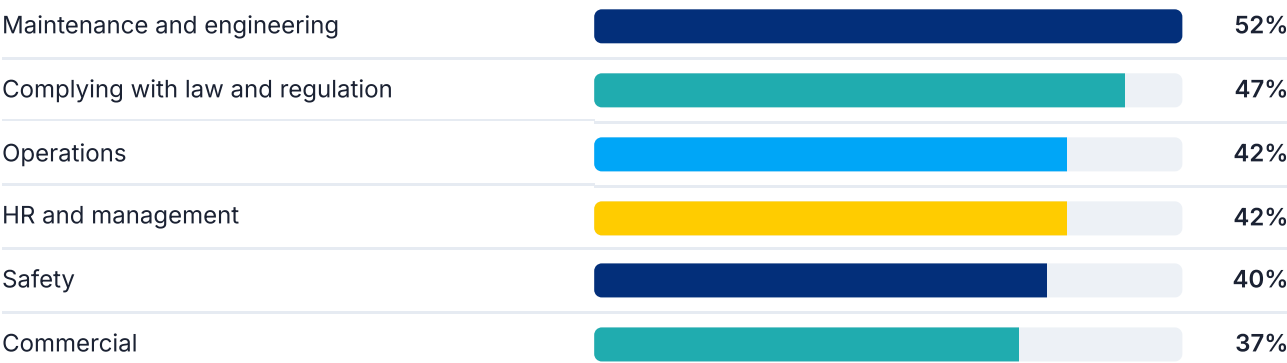
Just 10 respondents said their company offers specific support for neurodivergent seafarers. The examples they gave were mostly general welfare and counselling, occupational health assessments, flexible training and exam arrangements such as extra time or a scribe. Very few described adjustments to how work itself is organised on board.

Many countries require employers to make adjustments for disabled workers. In the UK, for example, the Equality Act 2010 requires employers to make reasonable adjustments for disabled workers, and many neurodivergent people meet its definition of disability. What is reasonable on board depends on the role and on safety: noise-cancelling headphones may suit an engine-room workshop but not a bridge watch. That is exactly why adjustments need to be planned and assessed through the ship's safety management system, rather than left to chance. Guidance that helps companies do this at sea is still scarce.

9 Costs and benefits

We asked respondents whether a more neurodiverse workforce would bring costs or benefits in six areas of the business. In every area, more people expected benefits than costs.

Respondents expecting benefits or significant benefits



Source: NeurodiversAtSea survey, October 2022 to January 2023 (118 responses)

The main concern was HR and management, where 27% expected costs, followed by safety (21%) and operations (20%). These concerns are real and deserve practical answers, such as guidance for managers and a clear process for agreeing adjustments in safety-critical roles.



Source: NeurodiversAtSea survey, October 2022 to January 2023 (118 responses)

Asked for an overall view, 54% expect the employment, fair treatment and promotion of more neurodivergent people to benefit the business, and 13% expect a cost. Neurodivergent respondents were more positive (69% expect a benefit) than those who are not neurodivergent (39%), but even among the latter, more expected a benefit than a cost.

10 Conclusions

This survey cannot tell us how many seafarers are neurodivergent. It does show that neurodivergent people work throughout the industry, that most have not told their employer, and that many have seen or experienced career harm, recently as well as in the past. Support is rare, assessments are often unfunded, and written and oral exams are seen as less fair than other training.

It also shows an industry that is more open than it might appear: most respondents believe a more neurodiverse workforce would be good for business. The gap is in knowledge and in practical tools for managers and crews.

What we recommend

- **Employers:** make it safe to disclose, fund assessments, and agree adjustments through the safety management system.
- **Regulators and training providers:** review how written and oral exams are assessed, and publish guidance on reasonable adjustments at sea.
- **Everyone:** train managers and crews in neurodiversity, so colleagues understand each other better.
- **Researchers:** build on this study with a larger, more representative sample, that records nationality, sector and rank, and includes more ratings.

Our [standards](#), [training](#) and [guidance for employers](#) are designed to help close that gap.

11 About the data

The survey was anonymous and collected no names or contact details. To protect respondents, we do not publish individual responses, free-text answers or any breakdown small enough to identify someone. All figures here are rounded percentages of the 118 responses, unless a smaller group is stated. Researchers who would like to discuss the data can [contact us](#).

About NeurodiversAtSea

NeurodiversAtSea is a charity supporting neurodivergent seafarers, their crewmates and maritime employers, so that every ship is a place where every mind belongs.



Read this study online, and find our guides, tools, training and standards, at neurodiversatsea.org.

For research partnerships, contact hello@neurodiversatsea.org.