

# How not-for-profits can lead the way to more accessible board rooms



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# Executive summary

Creating fully accessible board rooms should be a strategic priority for any not-for-profit board.

Accessibility plays a critical role in an organisation's ability to secure expertise from a diverse range of backgrounds, and as organisations strive to mitigate more of their own risks and weak points, they must ensure that all their processes and communications are fully accessible, end-to-end.

Following conversations and surveys over the course of 2022, we in the Not-for-Profit practice at Odgers Berndtson have produced a paper investigating the causes of, and some of the remedies to, hidden inaccessibilities in not-for-profit board work. With more than a hundred survey responses and a dozen follow-up interviews, we have found that conversations about accessibility and adjustments can reach significantly more people if framed with broader language than just the word 'disability', and that proactive initiation of these conversations would greatly ease the burden individuals currently face to getting the adjustments they need. This is true for both the board work itself as well as during the recruitment process, and means that search firms have a unique opportunity to facilitate stronger and more equitable board relationships between individuals placed on boards and the organisations they partner with.



# Introduction

Non-executive directorships and board work can already be difficult for candidates to access, with typical job descriptions often stipulating previous track records of significant leadership experience and extensively tested accountability, whatever the sector.

Non-executive work also typically goes unpaid in the not-for-profit sector; the Charity Commission annual returns show that only **1.6% of charities pay their non-executive directors**. Unremunerated non-executive work creates even more barriers for candidates, as it requires potential applicants to have spare time and financial resource to fund their non-executive commitments. Many obstacles exist from the outset, further compounded by the systemic exclusion from organisational leadership experienced by many different populations, who are likely as a result to be underrepresented in boards.

Here at Odgers Berndtson, where we are routinely placing chairs and non-executive directors for charities and public bodies, we know that running fully inclusive processes is a fundamental part of responsible and inclusive board recruitment. When done right, these must produce lists diverse by every definition of the word, which justifiably require devoted time and attention. Recruitment firms in the charity sector can **sometimes exacerbate inequalities in commonly measured diversity statistics** if processes are not run with self-awareness and a genuine dedication to looking beyond the obvious people, places, and profiles. This is only possible when firms maintain an active commitment to constantly re-evaluate and improve their policies for inclusive processes.

As part of this commitment to inclusion at all stages, and to our own processes being run in fully inclusive ways, we conducted a survey and interview series throughout 2022 across the charities, culture, and social impact sectors – which we will refer to with the collective not-for-profit term – to better understand how disability status is currently represented on not-for-profit boards. The project produced both a helpful baseline of where we are as a sector, highlighted specific spaces for improvement, and presented actionable gaps that the search industry can make a meaningful contribution to closing.



# Methods

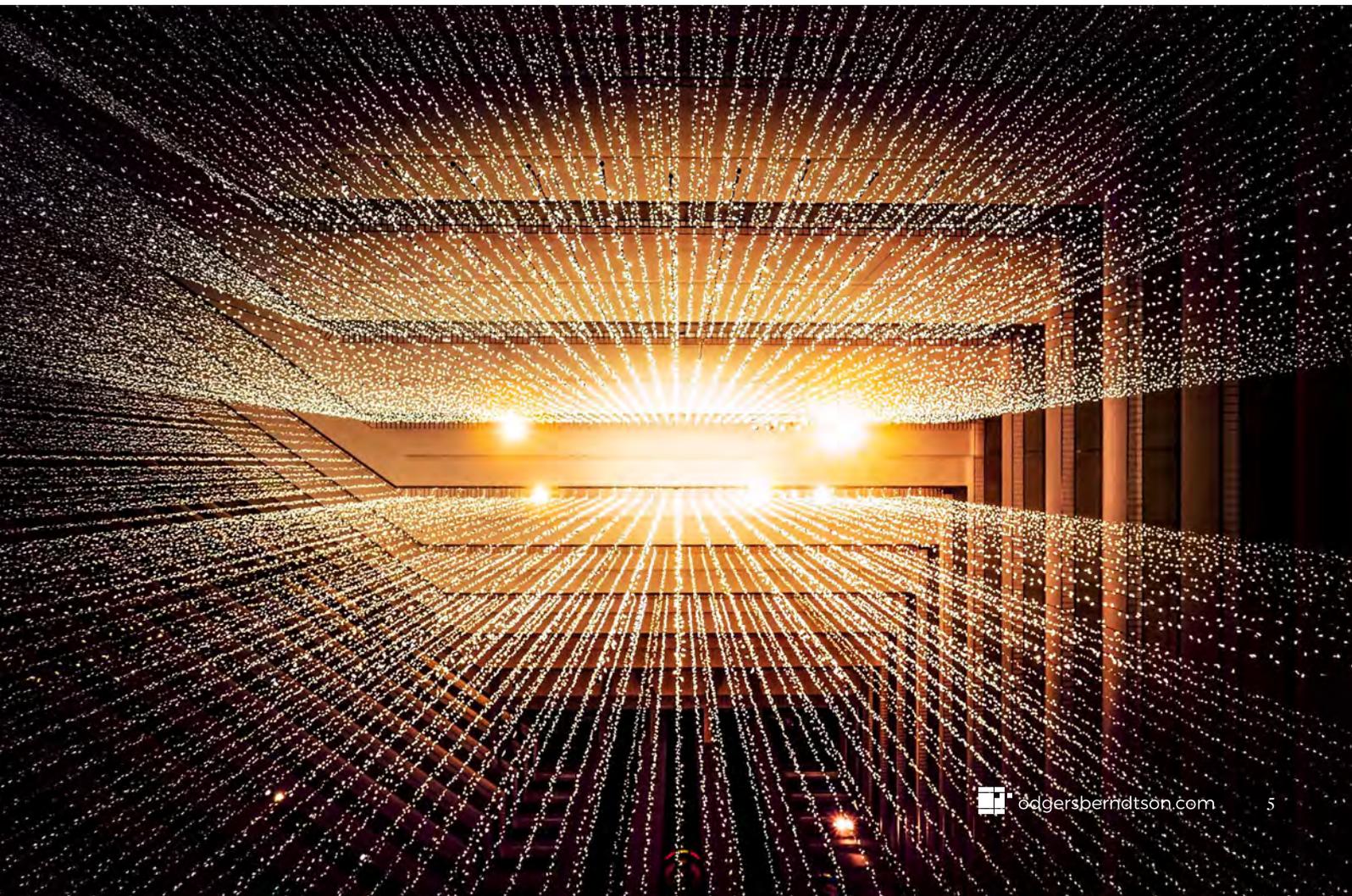
For the first stage of our work, hundreds of board members across the social impact and cultural sectors were contacted with a short questionnaire about their background, preferred language relating to their health and ability statuses, and how open they have been with colleagues about their disability.

We received over 150 responses, with self-reported identities in all the different backgrounds our survey captured (across gender assignment, gender identification, ethnicity, social mobility, and disability status).

Following the initial quantitative survey stage, we conducted follow-up interviews with individuals who self-identified as having a disability, having a long-term impairment or health condition, or being neurodivergent. These were detailed discussions where we looked to answer more qualitative questions, like *what are some of the sector's biggest barriers right now?*, *how much has the sector improved?*, and *what would you like to see from the sector's non-executive work environment?*

Through this two-stage process, we were able to gain valuable insights in statistical evidence around language and disability status openness, rooted in the lived experiences of individuals that shone further light on how to progress. We felt the second stage to be an essential part of this process to ensure the voices and experiences of people most affected by this discussion remain at the centre of this report.

Participation in every stage of this process was voluntary, so results should be understood in the context of voluntary response bias that may affect the applicability of specific findings to the broader population.



# Survey and statistics

Our initial quantitative survey has established a solid foundation for understanding where the not-for-profit sector currently is.

We found that just under 12% of our surveyed non-executives self-identified as having a disability, neurodivergent identity, or long-term impairment affecting their daily lives. This is in comparison with **22% of the population** in the United Kingdom that self-identify as having a disability or long-term impairment in the census - nearly twice as much. There remains a substantial gap between self-reported representation on not-for-profit boards and in the general population.

This can be further contextualised by the disability employment gap, which **currently sits at 28.4%**, representing the increased likelihood of disabled people to be out of work compared to non-disabled people. Exclusion from full-time executive work also means exclusion from the chance to build the experience and skillsets ultimately required in board work later.

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## How language widens the gate

The identities with which people reported themselves to us as part of this vast umbrella most often did not actually include the word ‘disability’ at all. Only 5% of respondents identified themselves as disabled.

However, 11% of respondents identified themselves as having a long-term impairment or health condition affecting their daily lives. This included all the respondents that identified as disabled, with the adjusted phrasing resonating with an additional 6%, more than doubling the initial self-reported population. Half of the surveyed individuals whose conditions meet the 2010 Equality Act’s legal definition of a protected disability – **having a physical or mental condition with substantial and long-term effect on your daily life** – would not have been captured if we had asked only about ‘disability’.

An additional 1% of respondents also self-reported when asked about neurodivergent identity. Whilst this increase in self-reporting is marginal, definitions of neurodiversity **typically include conditions like dyslexia and dyspraxia**, which – depending on the unique impact they have on different individuals – often meet the 2010 Equality Act’s legal definition of a disability as well. This supports the case for neurodivergent accessibility being a distinct piece of the disability conversation, not a separate one, in order to ensure as many people as possible have the tools and adjustments they are entitled to, regardless of what language they feel best fits their experiences.

# Disclosure at work

When it comes to discussing impairments, health conditions, disability status and neurodivergence in their board work settings, 47% of respondents with one of these identities have felt comfortable disclosing their status generally.



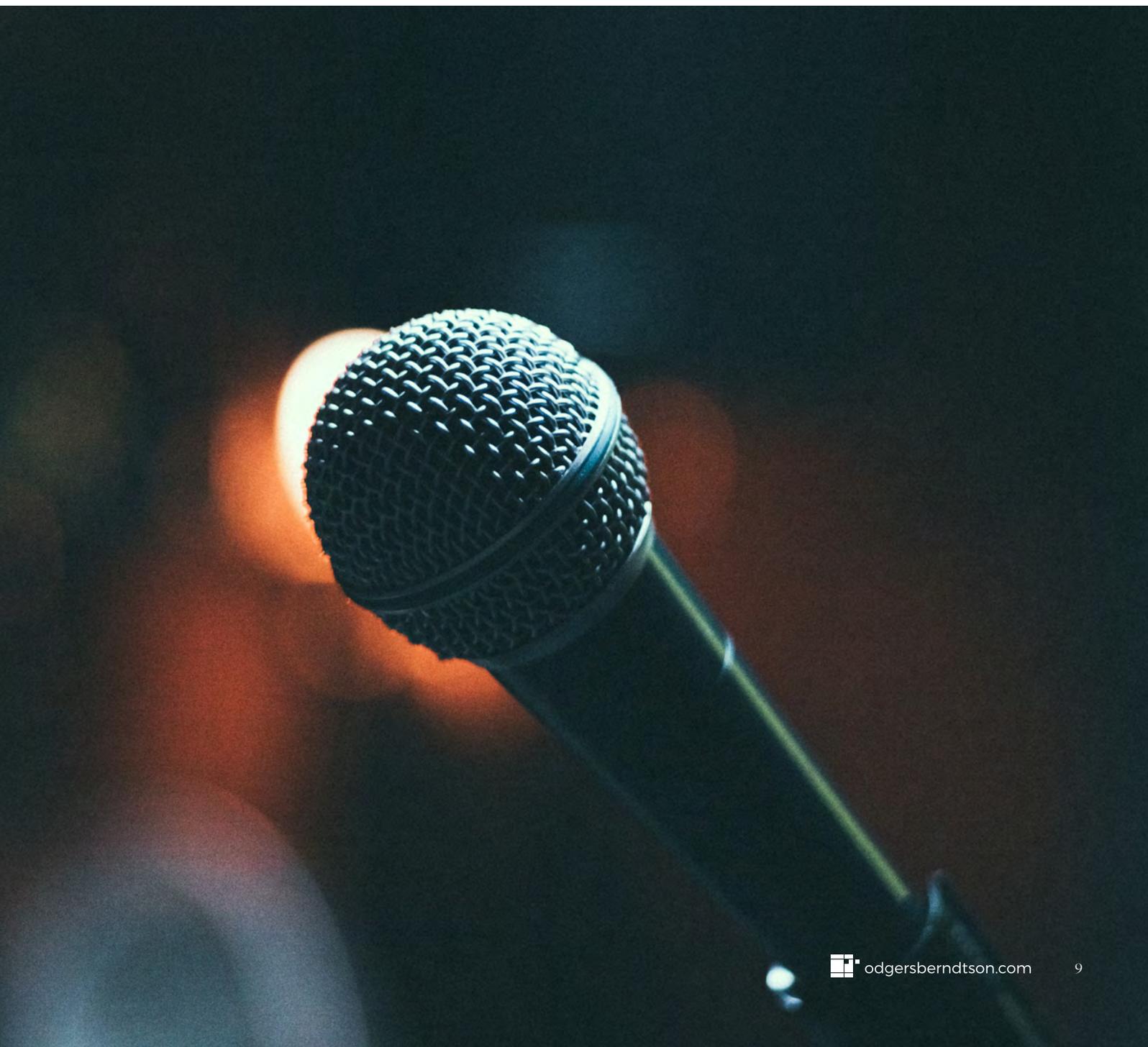
While that is the most common response we received, it is not a majority, and remaining respondents are split evenly between disclosing their identities only with specific colleagues and not disclosing them at all (27% in each case). Not-for-profit boards lack a majority of their disabled, impaired, or neurodivergent non-executives feeling comfortable being generally open about these identities, and more than a quarter remain uncomfortable disclosing them to anybody.

# Interviews and lived experiences

Numerical evidence in discussions about exclusion are best used when rooted in real experiences, and statistical meaningfulness fully contextualised.

We undertook further qualitative interviews following the completion of our initial survey, receiving valuable insights into both the improvements and circumstances behind some of the numbers in this report. We were heartened to find that all interviewees felt there had been progress on accessibility across the United Kingdom as a whole

in recent years. Gaps emerged between respondents on just how much was left to do in the not-for-profit sector, but consistent – and actionable – themes came up in the majority of the interviews on how to do better.



## Where we are – better than where we were

A consensus formed from all interviews that the overall UK working environment, whether non-executive or executive, not-for-profit or commercial, has become more accepting of disabilities, long-term health conditions, and neurodivergence over the last few decades.

Some interviewees voiced that this part of their lives “certainly affected [their] career,” and that in previous generations, there was an expectation that “one got on with life” without barriers ever being removed. Others described originally seeing the term ‘disabled’ as a “stigma” and “a label that held you back”. More recently, however, they expressed beliefs that they could be more “open” and “transparent,” as “it’s the rest of the world that has a problem” if they receive bad reactions.

Furthermore, no one that we spoke to indicated that they found not-for-profit boards to be actively hostile environments to anyone with a disability or long-term health condition. None of them said that they felt their not-for-profit boards were spaces where they felt at risk for active discrimination based on their disability status. Multiple interviewees contrasted this to commercial board work, particularly those who had spent their entire executive careers in commercial businesses. They cited what

they saw as a corporate “lack of awareness” that still remains about disability and health statuses, which they no longer encounter in the not-for-profit world. In their experiences, commercial companies see someone with a disability or long-term health condition and “don’t see you as on the board of multi-million pound businesses, they see you on a board for epilepsy.” This attitude reductively stereotypes individuals, both stigmatising their health status based on assumptions about their capacity to work, and excludes their candidacies from getting the full consideration deserved. Other respondent comments on the divide include, “I would love to work in the corporate sector, I’ve always worked in the corporate world... I’d love to be on the board in the corporate world and drive them,” and “I can perform well on that board like everybody else.” No respondents voiced perceptions that this type of negative, active stereotyping at board level is shared by the not-for-profit sector.

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## Where we are going

While all respondents agreed the not-for-profit sector had made progress on the accessibility overall of their board work, respondents agreed less how much progress not-for-profit boards have made, as well as the sector's necessary priorities for progress.

A few consistent themes did still emerge: the role of proactivity in removing barriers, the benefits of virtual board work, and the relationship between this conversation and the broader, intersectional conversations around diversity.

# Support is more than stock statements

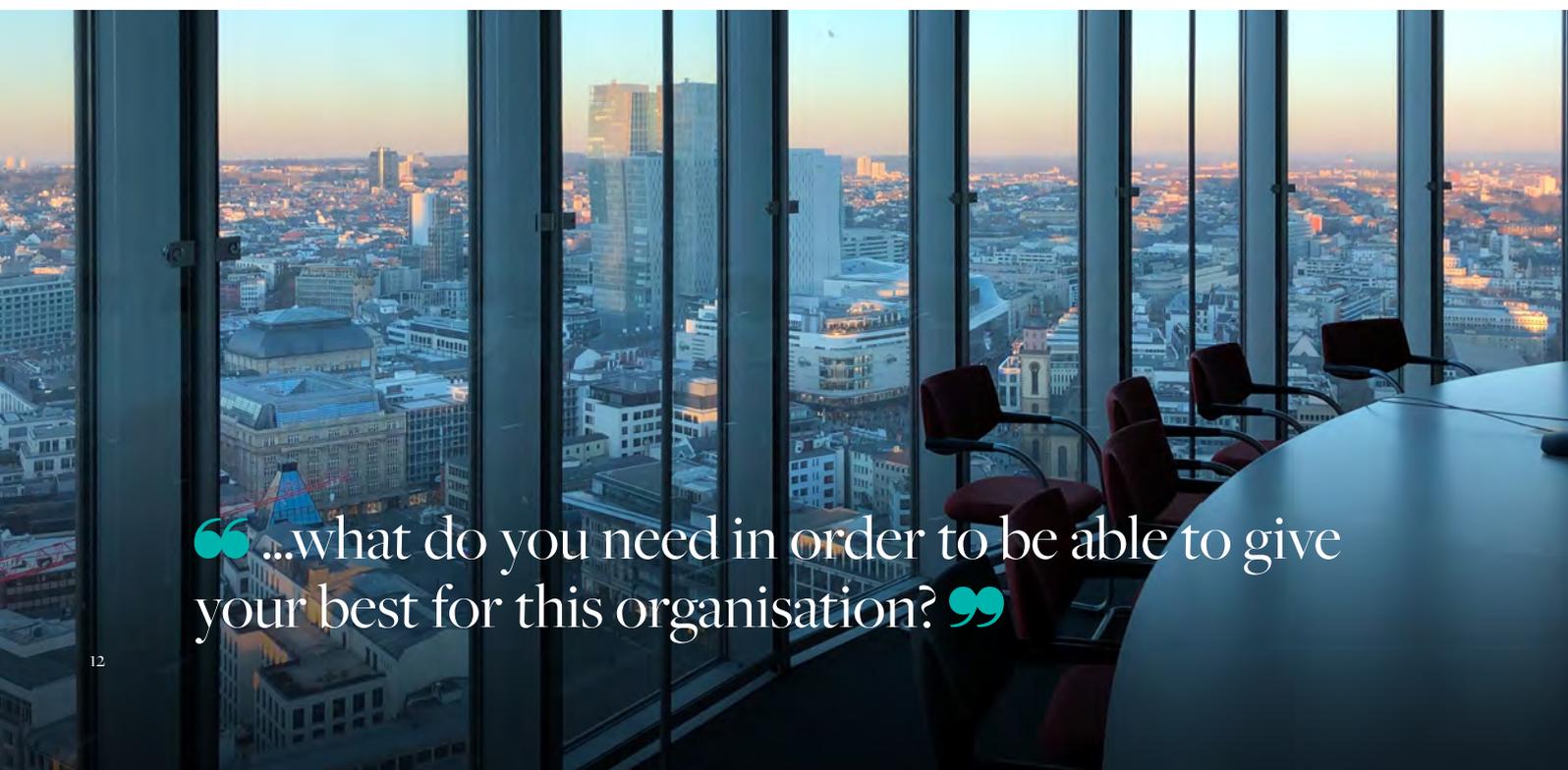
Proactive approaches to conversations about adjustments starting with the recruitment process can both normalise adjustment requests as well as lessen the disproportionate burden still placed on people who need them.

As it stood, most interviewees had indeed encountered “stock statements,” asking individuals to come forward to request adjustments in their not-for-profit board roles, which “in the corporate market, [is] just not there.” However, these statements are not the same as a clear, protected invitation for a conversation about adjustments, extended as an open question to all candidates. Stock statements mean that conversations with individuals needing adjustments are only reactive, by waiting for a request to respond to, rather than taking the initiative to start the conversation. Interviewees distinguished between a one-line closed statement at the end of an email or document and proactive action on the part of recruiters and organisations alike to offer adjustments and discussion.

This distinction ultimately gets to the root of a vital question when it comes to effectively removing accessibility barriers: should the burden to initiate the conversation for accommodations be solely on individual candidates, or should it be shared with the employers and search firms? As one participant described their ongoing efforts to get accommodation across their board work, “I have to do all of that, everything.

It would be so nice just to turn up and they have someone providing me [adjustments].” Rather than facing active discrimination or hostility to accommodation requests, barriers that arise in not-for-profit boards are “more about people not welcoming disability, and not raising it.”

This places the burden squarely on the individual, rather than the inaccessible organisation or recruitment process, and may consequently discourage conversations altogether. Not-for-profit boards and their recruitment firms need to be “[asking] all employees: ‘what do you need in order to be able to give your best for this organisation?’” This expands on and offers additional support for the holistic approach to disability status suggested in the initial survey results, that broad approaches to language, identity, and accommodation are vital to increasing board work accessibility. Proactively initiating conversations directly with individuals, and asking what they need in their recruitment process and work to get the opportunity to present their expertise in full and without barriers, acknowledges the “responsibility of any organisation and employer for taking care of everyone”.



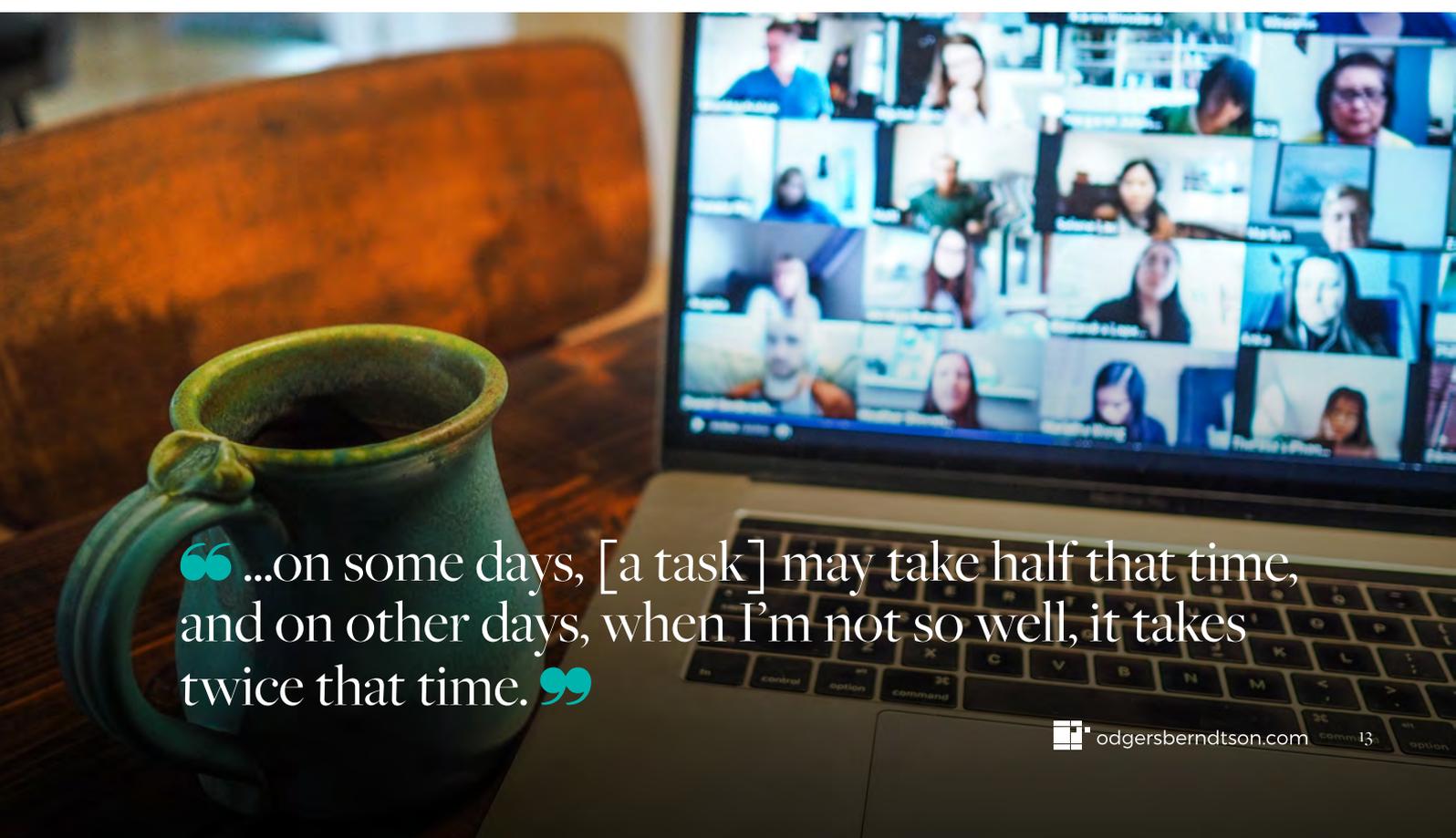
“...what do you need in order to be able to give your best for this organisation?”

# A spectrum, not tick boxes – and how virtual working has helped

This sort of proactivity is part of a bigger, societal conversation about how disability, health conditions, and adjustments are framed.

All but one interviewee raised the fact that disability status is less of a static, binary state, and more one that is in flux. Furthermore, all of the interviewed respondents that identified as having a long-term impairment but not as disabled described their own impairments in the interviews as situated on a spectrum. One said that boards and their organisations needed to understand that “on some days, [a task] may take half that time, and on other days, when I’m not so well, it takes twice that time.” Another described this spectrum as making them more aware that “everyone’s physical and mental state and happiness” exists on a spectrum. A more nuanced conversation, rather than yes/no tick-boxes, is needed in both organisations and recruitment firms to remove existing barriers. In the words of one interviewee, “there’s some point at which we’re going to make a jump from an on/off switch, you either have a protected characteristic or you don’t.... We’ll make the same jump we’ve now made with mental health, we now see it as a spectrum, a continuum from day to day.”

As we shift away from this binary frame of disability status, virtual and hybrid working patterns can help to lay a level starting point across ability, health, and neurodivergence spectrums. Remote working has offered lessons on accessibility that could be taken back to in-person work as well as integrated into long-term hybrid models that seem to be here to stay. Whether it is strengthening automatic captioning from its pre-pandemic “terrible quality,” turning hard-copy handouts into text-to-speech compatible documents so those with reading impairments “can follow more easily,” or simply the nature of Zoom encouraging Chairs to be “more organised in [their] soliciting of opinions” with board members that might take longer to respond, the pandemic’s new ways of working introduced and underscored some strong accessibility tools. Not-for-profit organisations now have the opportunity to embed many of these tools in remote processes, and to think what remote working lessons can build the foundation of new in-person solutions.



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## What this means for diversity conversations

All of the interviews held following the survey ultimately landed on the more general question of diversity, both how to achieve it and how to maintain it with truly inclusive practices.

Some emphasised how their disabilities and long-term impairments have “increased one’s empathy” across other forms of marginalisation they do not experience, with an increased recognition of privilege in other areas of their lives underscored by the challenges of inaccessibility. Others voiced feeling “left behind” in comparison to more consistently and easily visible forms of diversity, like ethnicity and gender – though it is important to note that no forms of diversity are ever universally identifiable at first glance. This pits marginalised groups against each other in organisations’ diversity and inclusion priorities, and asks people to either segment overlapping identities or disown one to focus on another. One participant said they believed that the not-for-profit world has “got a bit seduced by what’s easy – and what’s easy is looking at a photograph,” adding that “disability needs a greater focus” than it currently has on boards “because of the unique challenges facing someone with a disability” which fundamentally change an individual’s ways of working. Another noted that, for those with disabilities and health conditions, “the Equality Act creates a level playing field, but with strong wind blowing in my face.” Addressing this will require not-for-profit boards to “work hard for [equality], and aim for a situation where it isn’t so because it’s an issue, it’s so because it’s right, and we all agree with it.”

“...the Equality Act creates a level playing field, but with strong wind blowing in my face.”



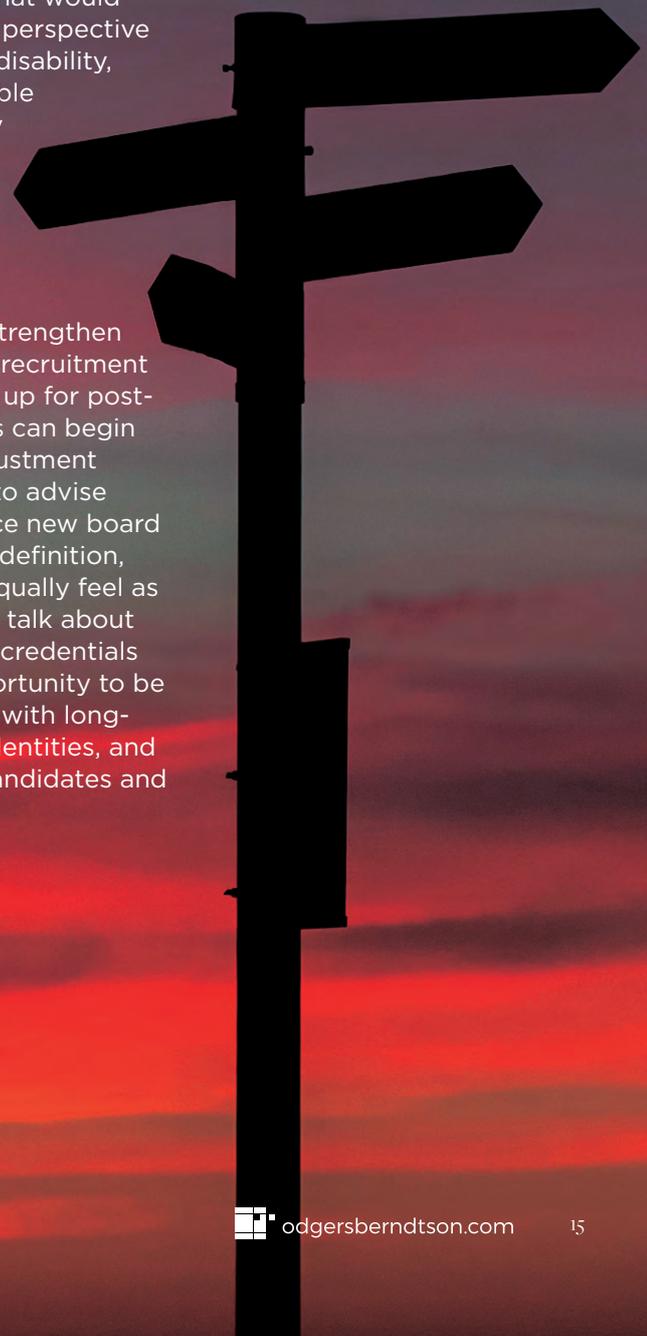
# Conclusion

With a high disability employment gap remaining in the United Kingdom, diversifying perspectives from across ability, health, and neurodivergence spectrums on boards will remain difficult.

Increased focus from not-for-profit organisations and their recruiters on broadening the pool is needed. Nurturing wider, more nuanced, and more complete conversations about closing diversity gaps and fostering inclusive boards will take time. So will finding the new balance of hybrid working, and how we can take accessibility lessons from virtual working forward, both in continued remote work and in the return to in-person work. Much of this will require dedication, long-term planning, transparency, and continuous internal discussions to examine how to make ways of board workings most accessible as the era of the so-called new normal sets in. However, there are immediate changes that not-for-profit organisations and their recruiting firms can take starting today to help lay the foundation.

Not-for-profit organisations, and their boards, need to begin to share the responsibility of identifying adjustments for their board members, rather than just implementing them on a purely reactive basis. Proactively inviting new board members to engage on adjustments that would permit them to give the full scale of their experience and perspective uninhibited, with broader language than just referring to disability, could reach more individuals than are currently comfortable disclosing their statuses and requesting adjustments they are entitled to. This also resists falling into the trap of segmented conversations that exclude people whose conditions and identities are rightfully protected by the 2010 Equality Act, but with whom the term 'disability' does not resonate.

Equally, for those organisations that use search firms to strengthen their boards, these conversations must begin early in the recruitment stage to prevent candidates from exclusion and set them up for post-appointment success. Search firms of all shapes and sizes can begin developing best practices for engaging candidates in adjustment conversations, both for their own inclusive searches and to advise their partners on how to support these conversations once new board members are in post. Adjustments should, by nature and definition, be personalised and tailored, so each candidate should equally feel as though they have been offered a personal opportunity to talk about what they need in order to most effectively present their credentials for board appointments. Search firms have a unique opportunity to be facilitators of stronger board relationships for individuals with long-term health conditions, disabilities, and neurodivergent identities, and remove the hurdle of initiating conversations that both candidates and organisations face.



Additionally, while these recommendations apply specifically to not-for-profit organisations, they are steps that the commercial world can also mirror. None are restricted to the unique governance and structures of not-for-profit organisations, and our conversations suggest that commercial sectors have a long way to go as well. Progress in comparison to decades of stigmatisation and discrimination prior does not mean we have reached a fully equal field, and equitable approaches to board work are essential across all sectors until that point is reached.

Training ourselves to become comfortable with these conversations sooner rather than later will also help us reach the longer-term goals which will take more time. Many interviewees described these conversations as ones that “increase empathy” across all identities whenever barriers can be brought into collective view for removal, and strengthen collective commitment to remove barriers of all forms. The working world as a whole, both organisations and their boards, commercial organisations and not-for-profits alike, remain on the long path towards true inclusivity and accessibility in all working environments, and need to renew their efforts to “give people the chance to show they’re outstanding.” We hope that this report may be useful in that journey, and in sparking further conversation around making non-executive work, and all work, fully accessible on all fronts.



“...these conversations  
‘increase empathy’, across  
all identities...”

# About the authors

Odgers Berndtson's specialist Not-for-Profit Practice concentrates on board and senior executive level appointments across charitable organisations, multilateral organisations, arts and heritage organisations, membership bodies, research organisations, institutions, philanthropic foundations, NGOs and other socially impactful organisations to secure and develop world-class leaders. Working with international and UK organisations, we utilise our broad public and private sector reach to identify and secure candidates with the skills to develop and professionalise their organisations, in pursuit of a greater impact on their cause. With a significant track record in recruiting Chief Executives, Directors, Chairs, and Trustees, our UK practice combines cross-sector networks with worldwide networks to access candidates for both national and international assignments.

# Special thanks

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# More information

For over 50 years, Odgers Berndtson has helped some of the world's biggest and best organisations find the senior talent to drive their agendas. We deliver executive search, assessment and development to businesses and organisations varying in size, structure and maturity. We do that across over 50 sectors, whether commercial, public or not-for-profit and draw on the experience of more than 250 Partners and their teams in 64 offices in 32 countries.





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