Helping people to stay in work in York and North Yorkshire

Brining occupational therapy and business support together

In York and North Yorkshire, a partnership between occupational therapy practice OT4Me and leadership and wellbeing consultancy Curious Edge is helping employers create more inclusive workplaces and support people to stay in work.

Lizzie Huxford, Clinical Director and Specialist Occupational Therapist at OT4Me, joined forces with Elaine Morris, an executive coach and leadership and wellbeing specialist who runs Curious Edge, to develop the Thrive at Work Inclusive Futures programme.

The partnership secured £200,000 through economic inactivity trailblazer funding from York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority, using Department for Work and Pensions funding. This enabled the team to offer free support to local employers facing challenges with recruitment, retention and long-term sickness absence.

The programme combines leadership coaching and HR knowledge with occupational therapy expertise in mental health, neurodiversity and sensory processing. Its focus is on early intervention: helping employers understand people's strengths, recognise barriers and make practical adjustments before difficulties escalate.

Turning workplace inclusion into action

The programme offers different routes to support, tailored to the needs of businesses and individuals.

These include:

- Workshops for micro and small employers, delivered over three full days with four-week gaps so participants can put their learning into practice.
- Bespoke training for larger organisations, including sensory-friendly workplace audits.
- One-to-one coaching and occupational therapy for people returning to work or experiencing health-related or confidence barriers.

Workshop topics include mental health, neurodiversity, sensory processing, inclusive environments and building a coaching culture. Participants use practical tools and case studies, then reflect together on changes they have introduced between sessions.

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Reaching employers also meant building relationships. Lizzie and Elaine attended local business networking events and used a dedicated website page and LinkedIn to explain the support available and how it could help.

Making work environments more inclusive

Occupational therapy brings a focus on the relationship between people, their work and the environments in which they carry it out.

For example, Lizzie supported a young professional with ADHD to explore mental health and sensory and emotional regulation strategies at work. Her employer implemented all the recommendations, which Lizzie reported had supported the employee's wellbeing and improved her executive functioning.

Through workplace walkthroughs, the occupational therapy service identifies strengths and barriers and provided tailored recommendations. These included considering temperature control in workplaces with menopausal employees, alongside wider sensory and environmental needs.

There were challenges too. Lizzie encountered limited awareness of neurodiversity in some workplaces and resistance to some of her recommendations, although she reported that her support was mostly well received.

The approach is strengths-based, helping employers recognise what people can do and identify adjustments that support participation. Alongside changes to the physical environment, the programme encourages early, supportive conversations about what employees need to remain well at work.

Demonstrating the impact

In its first year, the programme reached 42 businesses, with 171 managers and team members taking part in workshops, audits and one-to-one support.

The team reported that:

- 31 businesses changed their policies, procedures or ways of working.
- Five employees identified as at risk of leaving work stayed in employment.
- 29 workshops, 26 hours of one-to-one support and five workplace audits were delivered.
- The training received a recommendation rating of 8.9 out of 10.

Evidence collected included before-and-after questionnaires about managers' mental health knowledge, follow-up feedback on workplace adjustments and employer video testimonials.

Building on the learning

After presenting their results to York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority, the partnership

secured a second year of funding.

Alongside the existing programme, the team introduced 90-minute online sessions covering topics such as bereavement, stress and anxiety, men’s mental health, menopause awareness and imposter syndrome.

These smaller sessions also create opportunities for peer support, giving participants space to share experiences and explore challenges together.

What an occupational therapists learn from this approach?

This example shows how occupational therapists can contribute to neighbourhood health through employment support, extending their role beyond individual clinical interventions to prevention and workplace inclusion.

It highlights opportunities to build partnerships outside traditional health and care settings, explore local funding and apply occupational therapy skills to the everyday challenges facing employers and employees.

Lizzie also encourages occupational therapists who are employers to apply this learning within their own teams, reflecting on how their workplace and business culture support inclusion.

Creating psychologically safe spaces for shared learning is another important part of the approach. Bringing employers together can help them discuss difficult situations, learn from one another and develop practical solutions.

> **“Early intervention is the key; it's all about having those workplace conversations early so problems don't escalate.”**

Lizzie Huxford, Clinical Director and Specialist Occupational Therapist, OT4Me.