

JR introduction to workshop 9.30-9.45 a.m.

TURN, or to give it its full name, transforming unions to represent the neurodivergent workforce, is largely the culmination of working with the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association, or TSSA, for almost 10 years – a partnership based around two projects: one to scope out the appetite for member support and realities of a new equalities initiative on neurodiversity, and then to look at what union-friendly training could be designed and put in place for line managers who manage neurodiversity. You will hear a lot about this work in the first main session starting in about 15 minutes time.

To be clear from the start, the TSSA, is not the only UK union working on neurodiversity, and in a few moments, you will also hear from two other unions specifically, Prospect and NASUWT, and also from Janine Booth, amongst many other things, an RMT and disability activist, who has been training union reps on neurodiversity for a range of other unions, for several years now.

It is also important to be clear from the start, in terms of what you will hear about and discuss today, represents in one sense a very important and emergent trend in UK employment relations – one that doesn't, unfortunately, grab the headlines as strikes do, but as our research shows, gives rise to very positive and productive relations between unions and employers, something one of our keynotes will speak to in a few moments time. However, despite important, evolving and growing union activity on neurodiversity, the important and emergent issue such work is designed to engage with, is yet to reach its full potential. Unions have limited resources and wider challenges, including developing bargaining expertise on neurodiversity, expertise that needs to be driven by the people it is ultimately designed to benefit, so a big part of today, from about 11 a.m. is to breakout into smaller groups, and discuss what needs to be done to make something like TURN take off, and take off in a manner driven by neurodivergent workers, recognising how gender is an important aspect of neurodiversity, with the aim of producing practices that are both evidence-based and sustainable.

Just a few words now on how TURN emerged in its current prototype form.

Despite working with TSSA for some time, we always felt we wanted to do more, but that time didn't seem to fully arrive until there was a grant call early summer 2021, which spoke to our work on unions and neurodiversity. It is this

grant call where many or most of you here today probably got to hear about TURN, as we used several months over the summer of 2021 to recruit unions, neurodiversity staff networks, employers, neurodiversity practitioners, and a multi-disciplinary team of academics, so as to make the strongest grant application possible – one very much based around the ethos of TURN, but focused in many ways on the three questions that form the basis of the breakout rooms later.

In short, despite excellent buy-in from key stakeholders and excellent grant reviews, in April 2022 we found out we didn't make the cut when announcements were made on which of the 74 applications would get funded. It was about two months ago that we dusted ourselves down from the disappointment of not getting a £500k grant, plus substantial amounts of in-kind contributions from our collaborators, and decided to go about TURN another way, starting with an attempt to build a network around such work, with the next steps about how to get the project started – something today is set around. An extra incentive, if there actually needed to be one, was how we discovered around a month or so ago how our academic work was given the highest rating possible in terms of impact, something we must thank the TSSA, many of its organisers, one of our keynotes and a panellists later today, ACAS and the NASUWT, for.

I think one thing to be clear about, and may be this didn't come through clear enough in our grant application, is being laser-sharp in terms of what the vision for TURN is, and what distinguishes TURN from all the other good work that goes on in relation to increasing the quality of and employment levels and career opportunities for the neurodivergent workforce.

We believe there are three distinct approaches to increasing the quality of, and employment levels and career opportunities for, the neurodivergent workforce.

First, there is the “train” the neurodivergent worker to fit in with the conventional neuro-typical workplace. The medical model of disability underpins such an approach. While this approach may work in certain circumstances, we believe it has many limitations, not least in how it diminishes the ethos of inclusivity, it is individualistic and situational, and there is little potential for work organisations to embed such efforts and expertise into every day practice.

Second, there is the human capital approach, one where neurodivergent workers are seen as untapped “talent”, i.e. the main motivation is building business productivity through the “strengths” and “skills” associated with neurodivergence. Again, while this approach may work or be welcome by all parties in a range of certain situations, we believe in the wider sense, such an approach has the potential to reinforce damaging and stigmatising stereotypes of neurodivergent people, when in reality neurodivergent working people can be found in all industries, all jobs, all professions and occupations, and importantly, should have access to all jobs, professions and industries. It’s damaging because most if not all neurodivergent people don’t fit the stereotypes, and in many industries, as our discussions with unions last year told us more than anything, many very competent neurodivergent workers, some at the top of their professions not associated with stereotypes of neurodivergent people, would fear for their jobs, their careers, their livelihoods, etc. if they were to disclose to their employer their neurodivergence.

The third approach represents the vision of TURN, an approach based on the social model of disability, an approach controversial as many neurodivergent people don’t see themselves as disabled, and an approach criticised for de-emphasising what makes neurodivergent people different from neurotypical people. However, the key and absolutely critical strength of the social model, apart from having origins in disability self-organising and activism, is it shifts attention and burden away from the individual to the institution, the context, the culture, and in this particular instance, employment and the employment relationship. UK unions and the TUC champion the social model. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (or CIPD) support the social model, but probably could do a lot more to promote it in HR and EID practice. The legislative framework, such as the Equality Act 2010, is implicitly rooted in the social model. The social model, as such, unlike the two previous approaches, is consistent and binds together all the key actors in working or employment relationships, that is, employees and their unions, managers and HR professionals and the government as a legislator. So, whatever comes of today, please keep the social model in mind, especially when we enter the breakout sessions, as well as the final part, involving a range of esteemed panellists, where we consider what TURN may look like and how we can get TURN off the ground.

Importantly, our work so far, and that of unions, is evidence-based, and we especially want to build TURN around a tried and trusted basis for understanding the problems faced by neurodivergent workers, that is the social model, what unions do best, i.e. organising and collective bargaining, and from the input of neurodivergent people and their allies.

So, I will bring my part of today to an end with a few final thoughts key to the vision of TURN.

One, TURN is and should be led by the people it seeks to benefit.

Two, unions may well be characterised by long-term decline, face a range of hostility from a range of governments over many decades including the current one, often grossly misrepresented across the popular media, but continue to deliver for working people, and deliver for working people beyond the workplaces where they are recognised and members can be found – unions have been key figures during the pandemic, early advocates and lobbyists of a furlough scheme, as well as drivers of Covid-related H&S initiatives that saved the lives of many working people, and in 2022, seem to be the only recognisable force taking on the challenges of the living standards crisis.

Three, many of you will be aware there is a national strike on Britain's railways today, and government and much of the popular press will be doing their utmost best to continue the many decades long project to misrepresent and undermine unions – yet, ironically, a large part of what you will hear more about today is based on the amazing work of unions operating in the rail industry. We don't want anyone here today to go away thinking unions are some how perfect institutions, but we do want you to go away believing, based on evidence, how a very different working world is possible for neurodivergent workers. We also want you to go away today believing you can play a part in making ideas such as TURN a reality.

Fourth, finally and perhaps of widest but no less importance – we believe the approach advocated by TURN will not only improve working lives across the neurodivergent workforce, we believe if employers work with unions on neurodiversity, through collective bargaining, they can deliver employer-level or even sector-wide HR and EID policies on neurodiversity, as well as adapting a range of policies to recognise neurodiversity. Think of policy related to recruitment, selection, job and workspace design, discipline, performance,

grievance, and capability. Who would not want to work in a place that better reflects how people think and behave?