



Visual Workflows

Workplace Standards for Clarity, Predictability, and Reduced Cognitive Load

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Important note

This resource is intended to support understanding and good practice in neuro-inclusive workplace design. It provides general guidance and does not constitute legal, medical, or clinical advice. Organisations should apply the principles in line with their own policies, regulatory obligations, and professional judgement.

Visual workflows make work **legible**.

They externalise:

- what needs to happen
- in what order
- who owns what
- when something is finished
- what is blocked

This reduces reliance on memory, interpretation, and constant clarification... all of which disproportionately tax neurodivergent staff.

Why visual workflows matter

Without visual workflows, organisations rely on:

- verbal updates
- implicit sequencing
- status inferred from behaviour
- constant interruption (“Where are we with...?”)

This creates:

- anxiety and over-checking
- duplicated effort
- missed steps
- conflict over “what was agreed”
- burnout from invisible mental tracking

Visual workflows replace **guesswork with shared reality**.

What a visual workflow is (and isn't)

A visual workflow is:

- a shared representation of work stages
- visible to everyone involved
- updated as work progresses
- simple and consistent

It is not:

- a surveillance tool
- a performance scoreboard

- a complex project plan
- a personal task list
- a justification for micromanagement

If it increases pressure, it has been misused.

Core principles (non-negotiable)

1. **Visibility replaces memory**
2. **Stages replace urgency**
3. **Progress replaces performative updates**
4. **Blockers are neutral information**
5. **Simplicity beats completeness**

If people still need to ask “what’s happening?”, the workflow isn’t clear enough.

Required elements of a visual workflow

Every visual workflow should clearly show:

1. **Stages**
 - e.g. To Do → In Progress → Review → Done
 - Keep stages few and stable
 2. **Ownership**
 - Who is responsible at each stage
 - Avoid shared, ambiguous ownership
 3. **Definition of done**
 - What “done” actually means
 - Prevents rework and conflict
 4. **Blockers**
 - A visible way to show work is paused
 - Blocked ≠ failing
 5. **Next action**
 - What moves the work forward from here
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Recommended workflow structures

1. Linear workflows

Best for: predictable, repeatable work

Example stages:

- Not Started
- In Progress
- Review
- Complete

Keep language plain and unambiguous.

2. State-based workflows

Best for: complex or iterative work

Example states:

- Waiting on input
- Actively working
- Needs decision
- Blocked
- Completed

This prevents misreading pauses as disengagement.

3. Role-based workflows

Best for: cross-functional teams

Stages reflect handovers:

- Drafting
- Peer review
- Approval
- Implementation

This reduces friction and clarifies responsibility.

How visual workflows reduce ND burnout

Visual workflows:

- remove the need to hold work “in your head”
- reduce interruption-driven clarification
- make expectations explicit
- allow ND staff to pace themselves
- reduce masking and over-communication

They support **working memory limits**, not motivation.

Manager responsibilities (critical)

Managers must:

- keep workflows updated
- use them instead of chasing updates
- normalise blocked states
- protect staff from micromanagement
- avoid using boards as performance proxies

A visual workflow is a **coordination tool**, not a judgement tool.

What visual workflows should NOT be used for

Avoid using visual workflows to:

- rank people
- measure effort or speed
- justify disciplinary action
- compare productivity
- enforce constant movement

Doing so destroys trust and accuracy.

Integration with other workplace tools

Visual workflows work best when paired with:

- asynchronous communication
- Slack channel norms
- Notion / Confluence documentation
- flexible scheduling
- output-based performance measures

Together, these form a **low-friction operating system**.

Common mistakes to avoid

- Too many stages
- Constantly changing labels
- Hidden work outside the workflow
- Updating boards only for managers
- Treating “blocked” as failure
- Over-customisation

If the system needs explanation every time, it’s too complex.

Indicators visual workflows are working

Organisations typically see:

- fewer status meetings
- fewer interruptions
- clearer handovers
- reduced conflict
- improved delivery quality
- lower cognitive fatigue

These are **system-level gains**.

Policy-ready wording (example)

“The organisation uses visual workflows to make work stages, ownership, and progress explicit. Visual workflows are intended to support coordination and clarity, not performance monitoring. Managers are responsible for ensuring workflows are accurate and used consistently.”

Final workplace framing

Visual workflows are not about control.

They are about **making work visible so people don’t have to carry it invisibly**.

When work is clear, people can focus on doing it...
not on proving that they are.

This is **neuro-inclusive, high-performance design**.
