

NDnomics, 21 - Why the Neurodiversity Movement is important to me.

Reflections on Neurodiversity Week and Neurodiversity in Business Conference.



Fools Rush In!

I have read, several posts expressing concern about neurodiversity week, and the neurodiversity movement in general. These have provoked me to reflect on my relationship with neurodivergence.

I enjoyed both Neurodiversity Week and the Neurodiversity in Business Conference. I also share the perception the movement, or at least the section of the movement visible on social media has temporally lost its mojo.

During [Neurodiversity Celebration Week](#) I listened to a fascinating interview with [Kofi Josephs](#) facilitated by [Zoe-Jane Littlewood](#) and hosted by [Neurodiverse Sport](#). This was not part of the official programme but took advantage of the momentum the week creates. I also listened to a superb workshop on data and evidence led by [Prof. Amanda Kirby MBBS MRCGP PhD FCGI](#) part of the official programme.

The Neurodiversity In Business Conference is an amazing gathering of the ND community. The research commissioned by [Neurodiversity in Business \(NiB\) - the Neurodiversity Charity](#) is very valuable , so good to see [Almuth McDowall](#) and [Aishwarya Srinivasan](#) present new data on the wellbeing of ND entrepreneurs.

Both the conference and the longitudinal research are huge achievements attributable to [Neurodiversity in Business \(NiB\) - the Neurodiversity Charity](#) and [Dan Harris FRSA](#).

Discussions regarding the loss of energy in the movement which I have noticed, focused on:

- The general backlash against EDI

- The complex relationship between, businesses led by ND people, which promote ND related services and the ND movement. It is sometimes not appropriate to bite the hand that feeds you. Even when that hand distracts from the desire to address the greatest need. ([Tumi Sotire](#) and I have blogged about this NDnomic 19 and 20 <https://charlesfreemanprojects.com/blog/>)

On my way home I reflected on what I have valued about my engagement with the ND movement and what I have found exciting. I would stress these are my personal preferences, everyone will be excited by different things.

- 1) **Self-Discovery and Healing** – When I started to engage with the ND world in 2009, I was on a voyage of self-discovery. I was at a low ebb. I burned out after bumpily landing the public agency I ran, into the bonfire of the quangos. I was coming to terms with being single after an amazing relationship had ended. The kindness and wisdom of [Ruth- Ellen Danquah](#), [Claudette Jacobs](#) and [Sarah Fearn](#), who I worked build an ND network, helped heal me.

I had been originally diagnosed in 1969 (aged 6). I had little understanding, of my neurodivergence, apart it being used as an explanation for my lack of reading ability, poor spelling and clumsiness. I did not understand how it related to my inability to turn up to meetings on time, not find my way to venues, my inability to regulate my temper or my anxiety and depression.

The neurodiversity paradigm offered me new understanding. Intuitively the transdiagnostic perspective, which acknowledged cooccurrence was the norm and traits did not neatly relate to diagnosed conditions made sense. I am hugely grateful [Ross Cooper](#), [Pennie Aston](#), [Amanda Kirby](#), [Nancy](#)

[Doyle](#), and [Ludmila Praslova](#) amongst others for helping me build this understanding.

- 2) **Being part of a rebel army** – When I was sent to a remedial school at the age of 7, the other kids seemed much the same as me. My parents were able to throw money at the problem and I eventually got to Uni. I have enjoyed a reasonable career. So possibly I have some survivor guilt. I am very aware ND people with less support than I received frequently achieve less good outcomes even when they were more able than me.

[Atif Choudhury](#), rang a bell at the NIB conference when he called for a debate about blue collar neurodivergence. Very often within the ND community the discussions are focused on graduates and people who can either afford support or are in position to ask for support, rather than people who have been most disempowered or have the greatest needs.

I have felt most proud to be part of the ND movement when it fights injustice, exclusion and toxicity.

I am immensely proud that [Marcia Brisset Baily](#), [Janet Morgan](#), [Lucita Comwillis-Paul](#), Ruth-Ellen Danquah, [Zoe-Jane Littlewood](#) and [Tumi Sotire](#) as they developed the British Dyslexia Association Cultural perspective committee and BLEND Black Leadership in Neurodiversity. Marcia was right, 10 years ago to call out the sector, for having too few black voices.

It was only when I witnessed Ruth-Ellen relaunch the dyslexia entrepreneurs and professionals network at Google campus, that I understood the importance of Black ND leaders, who were brave enough to overcome stigma and the pervading

culture of charities in the sector and become leaders in the movement.

I also love the work of [Dyspla](#) and [AchievAbility](#) in empowering creative ND voices. Marx's ideas about alienation of labour have always resonated with me. For ND people in particular, I believe it is painful to be separated from control of the fruits of our labour. So interesting to see Birkbeck neurodiversity at work data highlighted the well being levels of ND entrepreneurs.

I have recently been playing with the idea, that much as the arts and crafts movement was a reaction to apparent destruction of creativity caused by the first industrial revolution . The neurodiversity movement expresses a yearning for a new way of working in response to the 4th and 5th industrial revolution.

- 3) **Understanding Neurodivergent People learn and work differently.** - I have been fortunate as a person with special education needs and in some contexts a disability, to have been able to access support both in education and in work.

I was lucky to get access to work support from its very early days in the late 1990s. In most of my life I don't perceive myself to have a disability. I play mainstream tennis. However, like many ND people I have at times felt disabled by my relationship with education and work. My spikey profile means I am very good at somethings and bad at others. When comparing myself with colleagues, I have selective memory and focus on what I am good at and not the chaos I cause, and reasons some colleagues find me insufferable.

What I have learned is to accept I am different, and trying to be the same as everyone else causes me trouble.

The work of Judy Logan opened my eyes to the over representation of ND people among entrepreneurs and the under representation of ND people in corporate management and professional roles. Evidence suggests, particularly as we grow older and become more able to take the risk, that ND people are disproportionately self-employed, and frequently happier when they are their own boss.

Self-Employment may come at a cost. According to the [Institute of Fiscal Studies](#), Average self employed incomes are lower than employed incomes. Many self-employed people do not make the living wage. It is likely that as with employed income, ND self employed income will be lower than the average.

In my view the skills needed to freelance are essential life skills for all ND people. I have hugely enjoyed being part of the [SEEDS](#) team at Ravensbourne. SEEDS is the first University Entrepreneurship programme designed for ND people by ND people.

While ND people are exceling in every employment sector, ND people tend to be overrepresented in some sectors and underrepresented in others. The creative, construction, and land based industries appear to have an over representation of ND people , while the corporate sectors tend to have an under representation.

I am excited by sector led initiatives. In my areas of interest . [The Future is ND](#) led by [lucy Hobbs](#) is amazing. This is a network of ND creatives. It is also a great privilege to be on

the Board of [Neurodiverse Sport](#). Neurodiverse Sport estimate that 40-60% of performance athletes are neurodivergent.

Conclusions

- 1) **Thinking about neurodiversity can be like exposure to kryptonite.** – Neurodivergence made me. However, it has also caused me pain. It has made me confront failure; it has also led to family trauma. Engaging with the neurodivergent world will sometimes naturally make me feel rotten. It is therefore not surprising that I go through periods of disillusion with the ND movement and frustration with the ND community.
- 2) **The things which have most impressed me have been led by people with a passion to make things better.** All the people I have mentioned in this blog, have been driven by a mission to drive change. They have also done their research, identified a need and strived to address the need. Some have developed highly successful organisations eg Genius Within CIC, or Do it solutions. Others like Ruth-Ellen and I when we ran our network, do so on a voluntary basis. Regardless of the business model, what has stood out about the people who have impressed me is the passion. I have felt less comfortable, when the sole motive has appeared to be to make money, even when the service delivered is professional.
- 3) **The ND movement needs to cherish its activists** – As in any good bear hunt, If you can't get over it, can't go under it, you are going to have to find a way through it.

Public services have consistently failed ND people. Schools have too often avoided early intervention. NHS waiting lists

for diagnosis are measured in years. Access to work takes over 6 months to even start an assessment process.

The private sector only serves those who can afford to pay, or those targeted by publicly funded initiatives. Many ND people with the greatest needs fall through the gaps.

Sometimes the only way to get things done is to do it yourself, organise, and campaign. This work will frequently not have financial reward. The neurodiversity movement in my view needs to encourage activism and cherish its activists.

Activism in the neurodiversity movement has a long history. In the 60s and 70s west Indian parents in London set up Saturday schools, when due to institutional racism education authorities wrongly sent their children to "Schools for the educationally subnormal". Many of the children sent to the educationally subnormal would now be labelled neurodiverse.

Mainly middle-class parents set up dyslexia support groups in the 70s when schools refused to recognise the existence of dyslexia. Shockingly the campaign for support for neurodivergent pupils in schools continues. Since the 90s activists have built communities of adults needing support.

I believe to take the next step forward; the ND movement needs to build a stronger better networked community.

We need :

- Local groups, which people can access on their doorstep and get free entry level support and advice.

- We need communities of interest, working with in sectors eg The Law or Sport or planning.
- We need communities of identity, supporting children, the aging ND community, ND people with care responsibilities. We need to recognise ND people have a life outside work and education.
- All these activities will need to be driven by people who freely offer their time and energy. Accessing funding will be challenging. (although some grants may act as catalysts)

The thing that works is people coming together and helping each other. Professionals rightly expect to be paid to deliver a service, run a workshop or speak at event. However, the existence of a market, will often exclude. People can't or won't pay (much) to attend events. While free content may be available online, this is often a poor second best to feeling part of a community (in a locality, or with a common interest, or common identity) It is also important to be able to talk face to face with people who have shared the same experiences.

People prepared to give time as volunteers and share advice without commercial interest are need within the movement more than ever. This should not be seen by those offering professional services in the sector as unfair competition. Instead, it should be welcomed, as a key component needed to make the movement accessible and inclusive.

