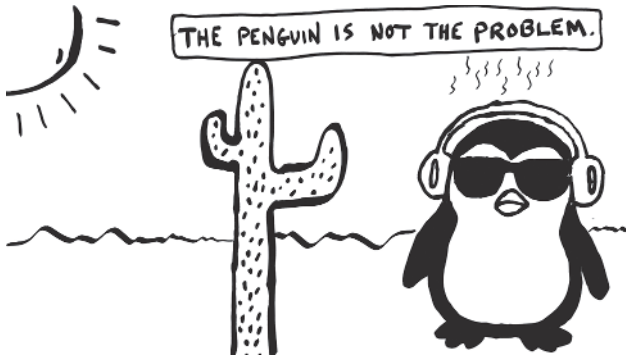
CHAPTER

1

We're Not What's Broken

Understanding Neurodivergence

Why don't we see penguins in the middle of a hot, dry desert? Or elephants on icebergs? Or dolphins in bathtubs? Of course, it's not because of anything wrong with them. Each has evolved to thrive in specific surroundings. A penguin's feathers keep it warm in the cold, not cool in the heat. An elephant's feet are designed to hold up their enormous weight on solid ground. A bathtub, even a big one, lacks the salinity, filtration, oxygenation, and temperature control a dolphin requires. We commonly celebrate each of these creatures' uniqueness as a strength, but they weren't built to thrive just anywhere.



Biodiversity refers to the variety of life, encompassing plants, animals, microbes, and ecosystems. More diversity means more stability and adaptability. Each species plays a different role. When environments shift, some organisms survive, adjust, or adapt. Nature thrives when it's not all the same.[1] When considering a vacation, more of us would likely pick a place that's teeming with life than one that can't sustain more than a few tough critters.

This compares well to neurodiversity, which is a natural, positive biological reality. The wider the variation in how we think, learn, communicate, and perceive the world, the better off we all are. Put simply, nature tells us that more brains *are* better.

So, what's the problem?

In this chapter, we'll challenge the idea that neurodivergent people need fixing and demonstrate how most struggles stem not from the person but from a poor fit between the brain and its environment.

A World Built for Some

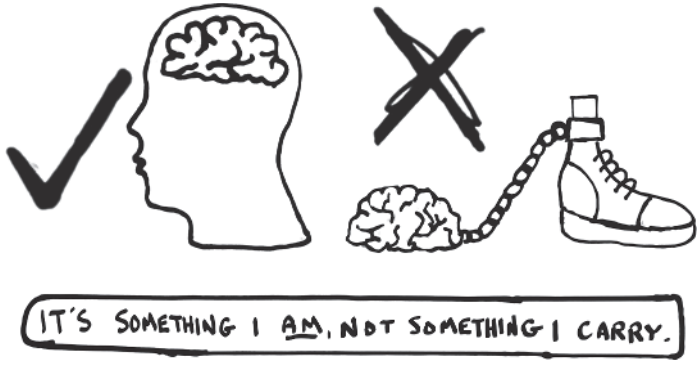
Today's workplace didn't evolve naturally; it was built by imperfect humans to meet immediate human wants and needs. Everything from social norms to math, software, cars, and office buildings: these are fabricated neuronormative frameworks, meaning they're aligned with neurotypical behaviors, communication styles, and learning patterns.[2]

Take reading, for example: While it may seem like it's an essential part of being human, it's one of the newest things we've asked our brains to do. Our species has been around for about 300,000 years, but reading only showed up roughly 7,000 years ago. We weren't built for it but rather reward those who adapt to it.[3]

Billions of brains move through this socially constructed workplace ecosystem, no two alike. For ND thinkers, that can make us feel like penguins in the desert.

When something only fits some of us while others are left floundering or missing, the whole system suffers. But even those who, from an outside perspective, seem tailor-made for these boxes, like a bigshot CEO, are part of neurodiversity. And they can likely name some things that don't quite work for them. Their privilege, autonomy to do things differently, and the resources at their disposal are often the only differences. I've seen the concept as a helpful entry point to fostering broader engagement in building something better for everyone, regardless of whether they identify as ND or not.

Neurodivergent means your brain is different. It's not a diagnosis or disorder, but rather a way of describing natural cognitive variation. The term flips the script from a medical model to a social one, asking, "What needs to change around this person?" instead of, "What's wrong with them?"



The neurodiversity paradigm tells us that the bar should not be set by those who fit the mold. In fact, there shouldn't be a bar *or* a mold. Research tells us that "there is no universally optimal profile of brain functioning—just a wide range of ways brains can work."[4]

Branding matters, and this rebrand has significant real-world benefits. How we talk about cognitive differences shapes how people are treated, as well as how we see ourselves. Research demonstrates that deficit-based language activates stress responses and reinforces stigma, while strength-based language supports emotional resilience and inclusion.[5]

Who We Are

Commonly, the ND identity has been adopted by, and associated with, people with cognitive differences, including ADHD, which is known to affect attention, energy, and impulse control. But ADHD can also fuel drive, spontaneity, and creative problem-solving.[6] JetBlue founder David Neeleman once said that "with the disorganization, procrastination and inability to focus, and all the other bad things that come with ADHD, there also come creativity and the ability to take risks."[7] I spoke with David for this book, and in Chapter 11, you'll hear how those same traits helped him reimagine air travel and lead with purpose.

Autism, which shapes how someone experiences communication, sensory input, and social connection, is also associated with deep focus, attention to detail, and creative problem-solving.[8] John Elder Robison is an engineer, entrepreneur, and renowned autism advocate who designed onstage effects for bands like KISS and Pink Floyd, founded a high-end European car restoration business, and helped pioneer neurodiversity advocacy at universities. He believes that "autistic people have unique

contributions to make to the world because of their difference," and his story illustrates that well.[9]

Dyslexia comes with challenges in reading and spelling, but often brings strengths in visual thinking, pattern recognition, and innovation.[10] Dr. Catherine Drennan, a biochemist and professor at MIT, has said there "is no dyslexia ceiling," emphasizing that her neurodivergent thinking helped unlock breakthroughs in enzyme structure and scientific visualization. Her story is a powerful example of how dyslexia can enhance pattern recognition and creative problem-solving in even the most technical fields.[11]

These *big three* are a great place to start, but they just scratch the surface. We shouldn't consider the concept of ND thinking as anything less than limitless. We'll be hearing from many ND voices throughout the book whose identities span far beyond these descriptors. Let's discuss a few more identities to get us thinking differently about what neurodivergence might mean.

Synesthesia links the senses. For example, some people might see music or hear colors.[12] Pharrell Williams, American musician, songwriter, record producer, and fashion designer, describes "When you're hearing music, you see it in color. . . I know when something is in key because it either matches the same color or it doesn't feel right."[13]

Prosopagnosia is a condition that makes it hard, or impossible, to recognize faces.[14] Brad Pitt has spoken publicly about his suspected prosopagnosia, saying, "It's a mystery to me, man. I can't grasp a face," a challenge that has left others misreading him as distant or rude. "So many people hate me because they think I'm disrespecting them," he explained, highlighting the social strain that often comes with being misunderstood.[15]

People with aphantasia don't visualize things in their minds.[16] Blake Ross, co-creator of Firefox, discovered this identity as an adult, describing his mind as "a computer without a monitor." Yet he built one of the most successful browsers of all time.[17]

Left-handedness might not be a diagnosis, but it *is* a brain difference that requires adapting to a right-handed world. Jimi Hendrix famously flipped and restrung his guitar to suit his left-handed playing style. He didn't adjust to the instrument; he made the instrument adjust to him.[18]

My teachers blamed my left hand for my handwriting struggles, never considering that I was also dyslexic. Desks, scissors, spiral notebooks, guitars, and even chalkboards assume you're right-handed, forcing constant workarounds, adapting, contorting. Experiences like these are a common thread that bonds ND thinkers together.

Neurodivergence is an identity. While *neurodivergent* has gained massive attention since it was coined in 2000, others may refer to themselves using other words, like *neurodistinct* or even *neurospicy*.[19] Many don't align themselves with the neurodiversity movement at all.

What We Aren't

We're not a monolith, and we don't exist in a vacuum. We have different lived experiences. Our brains, experiences, and perspectives are vast. Charlotte Valeur, a corporate governance leader and neurodiversity advocate diagnosed as autistic at 52, put it this way: "We are everywhere in everything, all layers, all cultures, but all marginalised to degrees, which is something that needs to stop."[20]

Even within our brains, we're not just one thing. There's a high degree of co-occurrence of these differences. About 25 to 40 percent of individuals with ADHD also have dyslexia.[21] Many of us also navigate other marginalized identities, including those who are LGBTQIA+, disabled, or from racial and ethnic groups historically excluded from opportunity. These overlapping identities act as margin multipliers, intensifying the social hurdles and power imbalances we face.

Individual support needs vary greatly. Eileen Shaklee, a neurodivergent mother of a son with high support needs, reminds us that no one should need to hide our differences, and we must also make space for those who already don't: "He'll be the employee you know will ask you the same scripted five questions every day in the breakroom, who will know every employee's birthday and names of their pets and he will be the one that might not get all the parts of his job duties correct the first time, but you will never have a more loyal employee than a guy like my son. He values the commitment you made in hiring him, and he will honor it and the job by always showing up."[22]

Some of us, like me, grew up with labels, extra time on tests, and more visits to the guidance counselor. That early identification sometimes brought support, but it also came with assumptions that lowered the bar for success. Others went decades without answers, masking struggles until a diagnosis or moment of clarity shifted the story. In my own experience, as well as that of working with hundreds of early-identified neurodivergent thinkers, this deficit-based lens often imposes more limitations on us than our intrinsic barriers do.

A lot of us, especially those from historically marginalized groups, remain undiagnosed or misdiagnosed due to systemic bias and limited access to appropriate care. While the experience or being raised with labels has its challenges, late identification isn't easy, either. As the saying goes, it's better to know you're a zebra than to think you're just a really weird horse.

Women, in particular, face distinct workplace challenges because of underdiagnosis and ingrained gender bias. ABC Anchor Diane Macedo recently shared her late ADHD diagnosis, reflecting on how it reframed her self-image: "You paint a different picture of yourself and you realize, 'Oh, these aren't character flaws. This isn't that I need to try harder, it's that my brain works differently.'"[23]

Neurodivergent diagnoses, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and others, are on the rise, and it's not just a trend. What was once overlooked is now being forced into the spotlight.

It's common for women not to be diagnosed or otherwise identify their neurodivergence until adulthood, after years of struggling to meet professional expectations.[24] This pattern often leads to burnout, stress, and being misread.[25] Their needs are frequently dismissed as disorganization or lack of professionalism instead of being understood as unmet support needs. Without intentional inclusion efforts, these women are often overlooked or misunderstood in environments that were not built for them.

Rhea Nebgen Dias da Cunha is a queer, trans woman with ADHD who works both in corporate inclusion consulting and as part of an awareness team in Berlin's nightlife scene. Her experiences navigating gender and neurodivergence across these very different professional environments offer an example of how layered identities shape lived experience.

"There's a huge overlap between being neurodivergent and being trans," she explains. "If your brain is already used to breaking conventions in some way, you're more likely to feel comfortable breaking some other conventions, or some conventions are less likely to make sense to you."[26]

She also notes that combining these identities often leads to pressure points. "If you're going to make it in a corporate environment as a trans person or as a neurodivergent person, it's a lot easier if you're not also the other thing. Combining those two identities makes it especially difficult."

Rhea's story underscores how identity intersections can complicate inclusion, especially in workplaces where both neurodivergence and queerness are still misunderstood or seen as incompatible with professionalism.

Those layered identities bring deeper roadblocks. Autistic LGBTQIA+ professionals often face compounded exclusion

because of narrow ideas about what neurodivergence looks like. Misperceptions about identity and neurotype can restrict opportunity and erase belonging.[27]

The same holds true for race. Grant Harris is a late-diagnosed autistic Black man, a military veteran, and a DEI professional. He shares the cost of often being the first, or only, in the room: "That combination of race, age, and disability has meant shouldering student-loan debt at higher rates, battling impostor syndrome while occupying visible leadership seats, and searching for mentors who understand the layered weight of bias and unspoken expectations."[28]

Nathan Chung, a cybersecurity leader who is autistic and has ADHD, shares his experience as a late-identified neurodivergent Asian American: "Being different, strange, or crazy is still seen as shameful in Asian families. Concepts such as honor and saving face put up a cultural wall where mental health is often not discussed and, more often than not, not addressed at all. It is easier for people like me with mental health issues to be written off as stupid and not important in families, even today. So many people like me suffered in silence and often ignored."[29]

What We Have in Common

We can redesign everything but our brains. Even with those changes, the ND experience isn't always easy. Some of us struggle, whether it's noticeable or not. Communication can feel like speaking a different language. Executive functioning challenges might mean we lose track of time or get overwhelmed by details. Sensory overload makes lights, sounds, or smells oppressive. Our bodies carry stress in ways that don't always appear in an observable way, like fatigue, pain, and burnout. The physical experience of thinking differently is often overlooked.

Because of these challenges and others, we tend to hit walls we didn't build. Support is either broken or missing altogether, making resources difficult to access. We work harder to be taken seriously. The overall burden is on us to adjust, rather than adjusting what's around us.

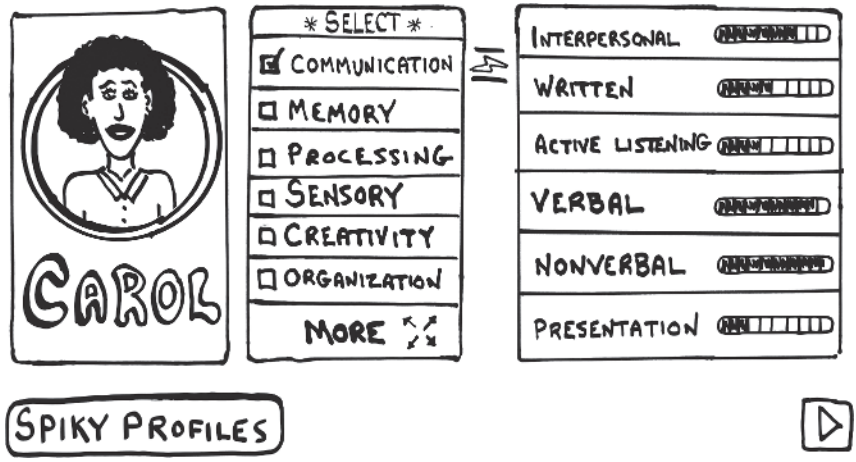
Some of us learn to survive by blending in. Think of your customer service voice, or your Monday morning face, despite your Sunday scaries the night before. We all act differently at work than we do at home. For ND thinkers, it's not a matter of habit or manners, but rather a survival skill. Masking is how we avoid being mocked, punished, or excluded. It doesn't mean we're trying to be neurotypical, but that we're avoiding the consequences of being ourselves. It often starts in childhood, and, over time, it can wear people down.

A lot of us feel like impostors. When you've been told your skills don't count, your insights don't matter, and your needs are too much, it's hard to believe you belong. This feeling, along with rejection sensitivity, anxiety, and depression, makes it easy to see why some of us self-select out of opportunities rather than putting ourselves out there. We've learned the world isn't ready to meet us halfway.

Meanwhile, so much of what we've got remains untapped, and that holds everyone else back as well.

Peaks and Valleys

ND thinkers have what is commonly referred to as a *spiky profile*: a mix of standout strengths in certain areas and challenges in others. In contrast, neurotypical profiles tend to show a flatter, more consistent range of abilities. For ND folks, the peaks and valleys are sharper. Spiky profiles showcase more dramatic peaks and valleys in how we think, learn, and work. Recognizing this spikiness helps us stop mistaking uneven strengths for lack of potential.[30]



When you customize a video game character, you don't get to max out every stat. If you made them lightning fast, their slam dunk might take a hit. The same is true for humans. Sometimes, we overindex in one area, which comes at the cost of another. These aren't static, either: they change over time, and even moment to moment.

Even after zooming in this far, any area can be double-clicked to expose more nuance we often ignore. Understanding this complexity is foundational to neuroinclusion. While we're all different, for those of us with particularly spiky profiles, the differences are more pronounced. Take communication, for example. You can't just check a box that says "good" or "bad." You have to double-click to see what's underneath: interpersonal skills, written expression, active listening, presentation comfort, and more.

My spiky profile means my brain is busy, fast, and full of ideas. I have 1,000 tabs open in my head. Sometimes they're all working together in sync toward a shared goal, and sometimes I'm not sure where the music is coming from.

I've learned to work with it, not against it. I often work best on several tasks at once. Sometimes I need total silence to get

through one thing. I get jumbled up with numbers and verbal directions. I talk a lot, but I'm not very comfortable on the phone. My desk looks chaotic to others, but it works for me.

I'm extroverted, detail-oriented, and results-driven when the topic interests me, which fortunately lines up with my field of work. I operate on two speeds: stop and go. I need to budget my mental energy carefully, which can come off as rigid at times. I've learned I benefit from someone with a knack for managing operations and projects, and they tend to like having me around, too. For all the complications, I now understand I wouldn't trade it for anything.

This is why neuroinclusion takes more than empathy. Brains aren't simple, and inclusion can't be either. We're not talking about just one thing, so we're not offering a single answer for all. There *is* a path forward, and we've never been more ready.

Brainstorm Break

Use these questions for self-reflection or with your team:

1. When have I felt like a penguin in the desert, entirely out of place in a system not built for how I think or work?
2. What's something I do differently that helps me succeed, even if others don't understand it?
3. Who helped me feel like I didn't need fixing?
4. What's one so-called normal expectation that has never made sense to me?
5. If I could redesign one everyday system to better support my brain, where would I start?