**Why Neurodiversity Works for Creativity**

We know creativity works. We know innovation works. We know that purpose works. In this essay, I will demonstrate that neurodiversity works, for creativity, innovation, purpose – and for everyone.

In *Why Should Anyone Work Here?*, by Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, published by Harvard Business Review, the authors reflect on organisational cultures of the 50s and 60s. The old goal was to mould ourselves to fit into a company: to trim off any of the eccentricities that make us who we are, so that we fit in better with others.

We know that this strategy does not produce satisfied employees. Conformist organisations aren’t just constraining and boring, they also don’t produce great work. In fact, diversity of thought and experience – the differences between us all – is essential to creating excellent work. We need disagreements to create and innovate. But we also need inclusive cultures, so that we can disagree safely and move on with our workplace relationships, without any bad blood.

At WPP, a creative transformation company, we need our workforce to be the most creative and innovative.

As AI begins to threaten jobs, when industries of all kinds are naming creativity and problem solving as key skills for the future, we see the importance within the education system on these skills dropping off. We see traditional talent pools drying up, as the competition for talent from elite universities becomes even more intense.

We know we must appeal to all demographics, as talent is spread among all. We know we must work harder to reach out to those from ethnic minorities and less privileged socio-economic backgrounds, to women, LGBTQ+ and people from all generations. We must develop those who don’t fit the traditional mould by giving them opportunities to thrive and magnify their strengths. We must provide flexibility for parents, carers and older people and recognise that life happens around work. All this diversity and inclusion work takes time and deep thinking, but more importantly it requires empathy.

How do we build empathy into our culture? How do we create the psychological safety for people to bring their whole self to work? How do we let people know that difference is valued, and that their individual needs are taken seriously by their employer?

**The Untapped Revolutionaries**

There is a huge pool of talent, making up 20% of the population here in the UK. This pool was shown to outperform their peers in the [IPA Diagonal Thinking study](http://www.diagonalthinking.co.uk/), a measure of both lateral and linear thinking, which is crucial to success in our industry. They are problem solvers, because their everyday life is beset by obstacles to overcome. And the race to attract these people has already begun. [The Valuable 500](https://www.thevaluable500.com/) launched earlier this year at The World Economic Forum, challenging companies to take the full breadth of diversity seriously – by putting disability on board’s agendas. I am very proud to say that WPP has signed that pledge.

One in five of us lives with a disability. Scope, the disability charity, estimates that there are 13.9 million people in the UK who are disabled. And an estimated 80% of those disabilities are hidden – just 10% of disabled people are wheelchair users, despite our common conception of disability being all about mobility.

[Disabled people are often thought of as the final group to be included in the workplace.](https://youtu.be/We0sqgHAZKI) And it’s true, with only 52% of disabled people who could work finding a suitable role. This represents a huge cost to society in the form of out of work benefits, but more importantly, it is a massive waste of talent. So many disabled people are naturally creative but are stuck at home. We know that disabled people are far more likely to have ‘neurodivergent’ brains – minds that perceive and work differently than the norm. And when neurodiversity has been harnessed – such as in the cases of Steve Jobs, who was dyslexic, and Greta Thunberg, who is autistic – there have been revolutionary leaps in thinking. As we make the adjustments necessary for an inclusive and accessible workplace, we will be enhancing our work, our culture, and the representation and quality of life of all disabled people.

**New Systems Solidify Old Obstacles**

The creative and tech industries have been building a brave new world online for the past 30 years. This world bypasses the barriers that so many disabled people face when trying to get involved in society. Unfortunately, this new world isn’t the utopian vision of disability inclusion that we hoped for. We see new accessibility challenges as designs haven’t been tested with disabled people, making recruitment unnavigable for many. Increasingly, it’s becoming impossible to apply for a job without using the internet, and the tests you find online are difficult to adjust.

Talent acquisition software has promised to take the pain out of recruitment. But does that also mean it is removing this pool of creatives?

Out of all disabled people, the group least likely to gain employment is autistic people. I should know, as I myself have a diagnosis of autism, and found it incredibly difficult to access employment, despite my abilities and experience.

Autistic people have a unique, analytical cognitive style, which can afford talents in areas such as systems thinking, attention to detail, ability to hyper focus, comfort with repetitive tasks and visualising problems. These talents can lend themselves to data analysis, AI and statistics, software design and development, exactly the areas in which we are desperate for talent. But beyond those stereotypical autism-friendly roles, autistic people can also spot inefficiencies in systems and solutions for complex problems ahead of their neurotypical peers.

So why is it that [only 16%](https://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/media-centre/news/2016-10-27-employment-gap.aspx) of autistic people who want to work are in work, when we know that the jobs and skills of the future are exactly the kinds of things autistic people excel in?

Autistic people are simply too ‘different’ for systems designed for neurotypical people. We know that of all the skills interviews test candidates on, social and communication skills matter most to a hiring manager’s impression, which is exactly the area in which autistic people are most disadvantaged. The autistic candidates’ strengths may lie in the extra productivity and alternative perspectives they bring. Their unusual education and work histories can be a barrier, and job applications might not give room to detail self-taught skills and experience.

Today, new talent acquisition software that uses AI to analyse your body language during a video interview have the exact same biases as humans against the behavioural differences that autistic people display, but the oversight to correct for those biases has been removed. The same effects are seen for people who have had a stroke or have a facial disfigurement. When presented with these differences, the computer says no.

**Hacking Systems for Difference**

Creativity involves hacking – finding new routes through a problem, bringing together different strategies, trying lots of things until something sticks. Because of our systemic thinking, autistic people make natural hackers. We see flaws and inefficiencies in systems quickly and know how to exploit them.

This skill can be applied by autistic people to any system. It’s fundamentally the same problem-solving ability you see in disabled people who find ways to do the things that they struggle with, finding workarounds in a world which simply isn’t designed for them.

It’s the same ability you see in dyslexic people, who rely on their brain’s visual system, rather than the language systems that neurotypical people use. If spelling mistakes and putting words the wrong way around is something we might reject an employee’s application on, we may well be rejecting someone with a brilliant visual and creative mind. Just as symbols get mixed up in the dyslexic person’s head, so do images, in the same way that puns exploit the bringing together of two disparate concepts that might sound similar.

[Dyslexic](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/education-the-art-of-being-dyslexic-1280776.html), [bipolar and schizophrenic](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/scientists-find-that-schizophrenia-and-bipolar-disorder-are-linked-to-creativity-10305708.html) people show this extraordinary ability to make links, allowing them to excel in creative roles such as art, comedy and writing. These are the creatives we need, but without the support and right connections, end up unemployed or in low paying work which neglects their abilities.

Game theorists point out that in any competitive system, there is a value to using unconventional rules. In recruitment, an advantage can be gained by finding talent that is undervalued by everyone else. We have seen autistic people being employed as developers, despite having poor qualifications – perhaps they dropped out of school or could only focus on a few subjects – compared to their colleagues, but outperforming them three-fold on productivity.

What if we could hack our recruitment systems, just as disabled people use different strategies and systems to get around their impairments and societie’s barriers?

**The Recipe for Success**

Before we can start hacking, we need two things: motivation – the business case, and allies – the people who can make the case and drive the change.

Last week, I spoke to a room full of executives from top corporations at an ideathon event, run by Ambitious about Autism, a charity that specialises in helping autistic young people in education and work. These execs were tasked with looking at the problem of autistic underemployment from all angles. As I have discussed, like all diversity issues, this is a complex systemic issue.

But to even begin on making the changes necessary, we need the motivation. We need to make the case for why neurodiversity works, which is exactly the business case I presented. The advertising world has been benefiting from neurodiversity for years, without realising it. Our industry is known for celebrating eccentricity. In my speech to the ideathon I spoke about how many leaders in our industry have diagnosis of dyslexia, or children who are on the autism spectrum. Some recognise those traits in themselves and talk about how crucial those skills have been to their success. These are the allies we need to be loudly making the case, which is exactly what I saw at [Diverse Minds](https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/creative-industries-embrace-diverseminds/1523015), the creative industry's annual neurodiversity conference where we saw [Facebook VP Steve Hatch talk about his dyslexia](https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/facebooks-steve-hatch-why-leaders-need-vulnerable/1579006), and at events such as [The Future is ND](https://thefutureisnd.com/).

**Seeking Strengths**

So now that we are aware of some of the systems and practices that disadvantage disabled people, and the ingredients we need to make a change, what gets the best out of them? How do we move from a system that looks for reasons to reject, to one that is strengths based?

In the UK, employers are required to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to application processes, interviews and jobs themselves, so that disabled people can do them. This system works when a few conditions are met. First, the job seeker or employee must understand their entitlement, and know what adjustment they can ask for that an employer will deem reasonable. Then they need to have the confidence to ask for it. Next, the employer, represented through recruiters, HR and the hiring manager, needs to know what is reasonable and be able to implement the adjustment. So quite a few hurdles, which are certainly not guaranteed.

I certainly didn’t know the adjustments I was entitled to until I was given the opportunity to turn my life around on the Autism Exchange programme.

Like many autistic people, my path to employment was winding and messy – I dropped out of school aged 12, despite being academically able. Around this time, I got my diagnosis. I’d suffered years of bullying, I had two undiagnosed autistic parents with their own mental health challenges, and I’d developed and lost my first close friendship in the space of a year.

I was always creative, especially when it came to my “special interests”, a term used in the autism world for our deep knowledge of certain subjects. I was coding my fan site for Christina Aguilera and Mis-Teeq, copying my favourite musicians by writing lyrics and poems – but photography seemed to stick. By the time my peers were leaving secondary school, I had a full portfolio of wild fashion images, which got me onto an arts college course.

Creativity was my saving grace, my route back into education, and eventually I achieved a first-class degree. But my social skills and confidence levels still presented a barrier to employment. I’d often hear that I’d aced cognitive tests in the recruitment process, but not hear back from the in-person interview.

In a [Guardian article](https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2016/oct/17/autistic-employees-can-give-companies-an-edge-in-innovative-thinking) about the innovative edge autistic people lend businesses, Jeanette Purkis, an autistic advocate points out that “autistic people often do much better in recruitment processes which enable them to demonstrate their skills over time and not in a high stress situation like an interview.”

So how do we get people with different brains, such as autistic people, into organisations so they can demonstrate their ability?

**Autism Internships**

Supported internships and job trials are the solution many organisations are turning to.

By recognising that all disabled people, neurodivergent or not, have unique individual needs, we begin to see that our current one-size-fits-all recruitment systems can never truly be adjusted for all needs. Recruiters feel nervous when they realise it’s impossible to pre-empt adjustments. By working with advocates, whether from external charity partners, or from within the business, we create a safe environment to express needs, and a support system for recruiters and hiring managers to learn about how to accept and meet needs.

By trialling someone’s ability at work, we can learn about what we need to do better for accessibility, and we give the opportunity to see the true ability of the candidate.

At m/SIX, a GroupM media agency part owned by WPP, the recipe was perfect: strong allies in leadership roles making the case for an accessible employment option for autistic people. Last year they piloted their Autism Exchange programme, in partnership with Ambitious about Autism, the charity partner of m/SIX client TalkTalk. Now into its second year, the programme has been massively successful. Three interns, including myself, came in for three months – fully paid, with full access to all the training employees enjoy.

All three of us were offered full time roles. All three of us had struggled to fit into the usual recruitment process, but all three of us were recognised for our talent and productivity in the roles.

The Autism Exchange programme is pitched as an exchange of knowledge – autistic people get the opportunity to experience working in an office role, and to see if a line of work suits their skills. And employers can find out about the experience of someone with complex needs in their organisation, with the safety and support of the programme.

Crucially, m/SIX was supported by Ambitious about Autism with training before we came into the workplace, and us interns were supported by the staff there with what to expect and what reasonable adjustments we could ask for. Before this internship, I hadn’t any idea that I could ask for adjustments for my autism. Coming in and leaving a little later made all the difference in avoiding the busy rush hour, which represents a sensory nightmare for me.

But what effect does having autistic people in the company have?

During a [podcast GroupM produced after the internship](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvQMavtoMJI), m/SIX CEO Alistair MacCallum spoke about one of the motivations for running the programme – giving managers the challenge of managing people with complex needs. Arguably the biggest barrier to employing any neurodivergent, or disabled person, or someone with mental health problems, is the worry about managing those needs.

Tech companies and hedge funds have been aware of the benefits of employing autistic people and have provided job trials in place of interviews. Microsoft, SAP and IBM all have widely publicised successful programmes, but less heard about is Google, HP, Deutsche Bank and J P Morgan. The results of those schemes have led to greater number of places being provided each year, and interest from their competitors.

The Harvard Business Review article, [Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage](https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage), looks at SAP’s Autism at Work programme, which aims to employ 650 autistic people by 2020. “It’s made me a better manager, without a doubt,” says Silvio Bessa, the Senior Vice President of Digital Business Services. Managers thought more about maximising the talents of all employees, neurotypical or neurodivergent, through greater sensitivity to individual needs.

As soon as m/SIX began their Autism Exchange internship programme, people came forward to disclose their dyslexia. They had been hiding it, and not getting the adjustments they need to be their most productive. MacCallum explained during the podcast about the effect on the culture of the agency, with a new sense of psychological safety and tolerance of difference. This was achieved by including just three autistic interns, with unique needs, in a few teams of a few people. Through role modelling, a sense of purpose was created, which the entire agency felt.

We are now seeing neurodiversity networks and employee resource groups springing up across our agencies, advocating for greater inclusion of disabled and neurodivergent people in their campaigns and in their organisations. These groups provide the opportunity to influence, but also to support each other individually, and to celebrate their achievements. At GroupM we have been using the Neurodiversity Champions group to raise awareness [through video interviews with autistic employees](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLnNXpckWL2oHu8SKllg0nQWU16Zn0zpPB), to clarify some of the questions fellow employees have around how best to include them.

By modelling inclusion of those on the fringes, we develop the psychological safety to be different. When we allow flexibility in a system - such as talent acquisition, or the floor plan of our office - for those on the margins, we model empathy. It doesn’t matter if someone finds it difficult to spell or use a wheelchair. We create a workplace which responds to individual need, rather than conformist groups who feel the need to ‘mask’, ‘code switch’, cover and pretend to be someone they are not.

**Innovating Work**

As Rory Sutherland points out in his book, *Alchemy*, “innovation happens at the extremes”. You are more likely to come up with a great idea by focusing on one outlier than ten average users. We’ve been focusing on the majority, the non-disabled, when designing our recruitment programmes and our workplaces, when designing for people with the most needs provides benefit for all.

[SAP reports that changing corporate communications to be more direct have improved communication over all, and that neurotypical people who took part felt their work is more meaningful and their morale greater.](https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage)

We are increasingly hearing in HR surveys that feeling your work is purposeful is hugely attractive factor for employees, young and old. People want their organisation to display values that they can identify with – and what better value could there be for creative transformation companies than magnifying their strengths, celebrating difference and championing flexibility to the needs of the individual.

**Divergent People with Diverse Talents**

It’s not just data and software where the skills of autistic people can be applied. Although I loved my time at m/SIX, when a role in Diversity and Inclusion came up with the Talent team at GroupM, I jumped at the chance. I had already had the opportunity to influence on job descriptions and policy, by working with the Neurodiversity Champions employee resource group and the Talent team. I had developed both the understanding of media agencies and a network within the business, and I had already demonstrated my ability to those who were hiring. This month I celebrate a year in my role.

We also see autistic people in our creative agencies. Gabriella Field, Junior Strategic Planner at Ogilvy, launched ReWired, a neurodiversity employee resource group, and has been named by [Campaign as a Face to Watch.](https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/faces-watch-2019-passionate-curious-restless/1661291) At a junior level, Gabriella has shown leadership and drive - she spoke in a blog about her desire to [open the door for others](https://ogilvy.co.uk/news/faces-watch-close-gabi-field), and her impact on the industry within just a year demonstrates the impact autistic people can have when their creativity is unleashed.

**Complimentary Talent**

One objection that can heard around employing neurodivergent people is the perceived risk that we are not ‘well rounded’ – that while we excel in certain areas, far outperforming peers, we struggle in areas that others take for granted.

But as Rory Sutherland says in *Alchemy*, “complementary talent is worth more than conformist talent”. And neurodivergent people do complement each other, with patterns of abilities being exactly inverse to one another.

In fact, in their friendships and love lives, neurodivergent people tend to attract each other. They can cancel out each other difficulties. My partner and I are both dyspraxic, and although he is not autistic, I can see he has strong ability in understanding systems – he’s an electronic musician. But he’s hopelessly disorganised. On the other hand, I am obsessively organised but have a hard time socially. He is a natural social butterfly, adapting his communication style to others effortlessly. We benefit from complementary cognition, and work with other neurodivergent people on his record label.

Pairing neurodivergent people with different conditions up on inclusive employment programmes, allowing them to assist and mentor one another, as well as working together creatively, is a recipe for supercharged creative partnerships.

And we will avoid [design that isn’t accessible](https://www.marketingweek.com/brands-risk-billions-failing-accessibility-standards/?cmpid=em~newsletter~breaking_news~n~n&utm_medium=em&utm_source=newsletter&utm_campaign=breaking_news&eid=9728410&sid=MW0001&adg=E3798D96-1515-43DF-9AA3-6D3DA171046B), risking billions of revenue for our clients, when the experience of disabled colleagues is raised up the agenda and advocates exist in all parts of the business. We’ve seen the innovative [campaigns](https://betterconsidered.org/stealourstaff) and [products](https://www.wpp.com/featured/work/possible---tommy-hilfiger-tommy-adaptive) developed for and about disabled people – but this is just the beginning. Soon we will see workplaces become truly accessible for all.

By developing these programmes, we create accessible routes for exceptional minds. We enable managers to harness the unique abilities of all our people, as well as understanding their needs. By fostering ally ship, we create Neurodiversity Champions, who can model that tolerance that creates psychological safety. And by setting up employee resource groups for disability and neurodiversity, we create the safe spaces for neurodivergent people and allies to support one another, spreading the benefits of complementary cognition and purpose across our businesses, allowing us to develop the innovative work that benefits our clients and includes all their customers. In this way, we hack our recruitment systems by designing for the extremes of human cognition, paving the way for new creativity and empathy to enhance our work.

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