



**Informing Progress - Shaping the Future**

## **FOIL Update 8<sup>th</sup> May 2025**



## **Unlocking the Potential of Neurodiversity**

FOIL was delighted to welcome members to its recent discussion on *Unlocking the Potential of Neurodiversity*, a thought-provoking event hosted by DAC Beachcroft at their offices in London. The morning brought together experts to explore and highlight the rich opportunities a truly diverse workforce can offer.

Guest speakers shared personal experiences and professional insights, shedding light on the challenges neurodivergent individuals face in the workplace and how organisations can better understand, support, and benefit from neurodivergent talent and foster environments where everyone can thrive.

The morning began with a welcome from Sean McGahan of DAC Beachcroft, who reminded us that every individual is unique and that rather than seeking to correct perceived deficiencies, progress lies in recognising and optimising the differences between people.

The point was illustrated with a compelling example: only around 10% of the global population is left-handed, something often stigmatised and associated with negative connotations in the past. However, research suggests that left-handed individuals often have more developed right-brain hemispheres, a trait linked with enhanced creativity and artistic ability. History highlights a list of extraordinary 'lefties', among them Albert Einstein, Alan Turing, and Leonardo da Vinci, each characterised by diverse ways of thinking which have helped shape the world.

Sean went on to highlight how embracing neurodiversity can significantly enhance organisational capability. For instance, in the context of risk management, a team composed

entirely of highly risk-averse individuals may stifle innovation and slow strategic growth. In contrast, a diverse group that embraces a range of thinking styles, perspectives, and attitudes toward risk is perhaps better positioned to assess challenges and leverage opportunities.

Sean's words set a powerful tone for the morning, framing neurodiversity not as a challenge to be managed but as a strength to be harnessed.

- The first guest speaker, Sir Robert Buckland, brought his extensive experience in law and politics to the fore in discussing ***Achieving True Diversity in an Age of Culture Wars***. With a distinguished career as a criminal barrister, a Conservative MP, and a member of the Government, Sir Robert has long been a vocal advocate for diversity, particularly within the legal system and judiciary. This commitment is evident in his leadership of a recent independent review examining the workplace barriers faced by individuals with autism.

Published in 2024, the review highlighted several persistent challenges, which are especially significant at a time when global attitudes towards D&I are shifting, and some global multinational organisations are scaling back programmes in response to new legislation in the US.

Sir Robert underscored the importance of advocacy in creating meaningful opportunities across the neurodiverse spectrum. Acknowledging the protective framework of the Equality Act in the UK, which prevents discrimination based on specific protected characteristics, he indicated that legal safeguards alone are not enough. Meaningful progress requires organisations to look beyond simply meeting compliance standards and recognise the real value and strength diversity brings.

We must cross the frontier of what is considered 'normal' and shift focus from avoiding discrimination to actively identifying and leveraging the benefits of diversity. Recognising the value of diverse perspectives opens the potential for enhanced organisational performance, a more dynamic economy and a more inclusive society.

The reality, however, is that neurodiverse people of all ages face barriers in education and at work, such as unfair hiring practices, ambiguous processes, and outdated attitudes. For example, only 3 in 10 working-age autistic adults are employed in the UK, compared to 8 in 10 for non-disabled people. Additionally, the disability pay gap means autistic adults are paid less and therefore can be dependent on benefits such as the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Universal Credit. These economic factors can overshadow the positive steps taken to address neurodiversity and exacerbate existing employment disparities.

As part of the government's Plan for Change, Professor Amanda Kirby will chair an independent panel of leading neurodiversity academics in 2025. The objective is to develop recommendations for employers to foster more inclusive workplaces and for

the government to erode the barriers to opportunity for people with neurodiverse conditions. Ministers keenly await the findings, but any inclusivity targets set should involve neurodivergent individuals to ensure they are at the centre of any policy changes.

Quiet, effective action is needed to drive change, and the risk is that if targets are too wide, they miss the chance to increase opportunities for specific neurodiverse groups. The private sector can support initiatives by continuing to share best practices on recruiting neurodiverse staff and helping avoid culture wars; neurodivergence is often accompanied by additional physical and socioeconomic impairment, and we strive for the day where the individual is seen and not the protected characteristic. Estimates place the total of undiagnosed neurodivergent adults in the UK at 2.5 million, meaning many with the same needs are not able to access the community and support often available with the right diagnosis. Recruitment processes should therefore focus on demonstrating practical skills that allow individuals to showcase their abilities.

Sir Robert concluded by highlighting the capacity AI has to transform workplaces for neurodiverse people. By supporting efficiencies and multi-tasking through automation, AI can remove some of the anxiety and fears many neurodivergent people have in the workplace by helping them to prioritise and focus on core tasks.

The pace, culture, and technology of modern workplaces have changed, and developments in AI will accelerate this change as we move forward. Our minds are central to driving successful change, and D&I is therefore key to continuing the development of neurodiversity acceptance and our ability to embrace the change ahead.

- The next guest speaker was Robert Annis from the charity Neurodiversity in Business, who spoke on ***How the future of ideation and innovation is best achieved by the most diverse mindsets***. Robert volunteers for the charity and is a neurodiverse business psychologist specialising in organisational psychology, enterprise transformation, and executive leadership development.

Robert has been diagnosed with ASD, ADHD, Prosopagnosia, Aphantasia, Dyslexia, and episodic memory loss and combines his business psychology expertise with his distinctive cognitive perspective to identify creative, evidence-based solutions to complex organisational challenges. He shared an insight into the challenges he has faced as a neurodivergent individual and how these have contributed to anxiety, depression, and social challenges.

In a professional context, Robert shared experiencing panic attacks and difficulties with maintaining relationships and client recognition that have at times been debilitating. There can sometimes be the assumption that others feel the same, but

are just better at masking to help people feel at ease. However, it is important to understand that neurodivergent people experience life in a different way.

Each neurodivergent condition brings its own strengths and challenges, so the neurodiversity spectrum is therefore not about placing individuals on a scale of 'normal'. The human brain is the greatest ever creation, featuring an average of 86 billion neurons and 100 trillion synapses. Neurons are the brain's building blocks that process and transmit information, and their number is largely consistent. Synapses, however, which are the junctions where neurons communicate with each other, vary in number due to factors such as age and activity. Neurodivergence is characterised by differences in brain development and function, which include how synapses evolve and the impact this has on learning and behaviour.

To be effective, neurodiversity strategies must be financially enriching for organisations. Strategies with ethical considerations as a foundation can be seen as virtue signalling; inclusive language and practices are not just about being politically correct, they create an innovative and productive environment where neurodiverse colleagues feel understood, respected, and valued.

Businesses are fundamentally built in the same way, but often still follow an outdated manufacturing mindset centred on meeting deadlines rather than embracing a service-based model more reflective of modern practices. Organisations thrive on ideas and therefore need to think differently and redesign their approach so they can bring diverse workforces closer to clients to share innovations and gain a competitive edge. Robert highlighted that Microsoft engaged psychologists to help find talent and subsequently increased efforts to recruit individuals from diverse backgrounds, including those from homeless communities.

Diversity requires a change in culture and starts with leaders, be they governments or CEOs. Cultures have become all about individuals fitting in, when they should fit around staff to help unlock thoughts and ideas. Frédéric Laloux's book *Reinventing Organisations* explores the stages of organisational structure, advocating for self-management, decentralised decision making, and a deeper sense of purpose among the practices that indicate that an organisation is 'evolved'. It has become an influential text on management principles for people who recognise that organisations should be run differently and in a more 'soulful' way.

The presentation finished by touching on self-actualisation and how individuals and businesses exploring how they can become better can be transformational and help build organisations to attract the best people. As more people are diagnosed or self-diagnosed as neurodivergent, to do so, they must embrace neurodiverse people.

- The event's final speaker was Maeve Monaghan, Chief Executive of NOW Group, an award-winning social enterprise based in Belfast that supports neurodiverse individuals and those with a learning disability into work. Maeve's presentation

introduced the JAM (Just a Minute) Card and App, practical and empowering tools designed to support people with invisible disabilities, of which there are estimated to be more than 1 billion worldwide.

Maeve explained that the JAM Card offers a discreet and effective way for neurodivergent individuals, as well as those with other invisible disabilities, to communicate their needs in potentially stressful situations, whether socially or at work. For instance, when travelling on public transport, showing the JAM Card can signal to staff that the cardholder may need a little extra time or assistance, helping communication and reducing anxiety.

The JAM Card concept was born from the lived experiences of a small group of individuals with invisible disabilities, for others facing similar challenges. This authentic, user-led approach has been maintained, with the JAM Card proudly retaining its original design.

Raising awareness of invisible disabilities is critical to increasing understanding and acceptance; leveraging the principle *"You show it, they know it"*, the JAM Card and App have grown to 190,000 registered users, with 3,500 businesses using the tools to support their staff and customers. The vision is to grow the number of users to over 1 million in 10 years while expanding the community of JAM-friendly organisations looking to make their workplaces more inclusive.

Existing supporters include private and public sector organisations, such as Transport for Ireland, Northern Ireland Civil Service, Food Standards Agency, and Citibank UK, with adoption growing in Europe and beyond. Staff can benefit from an e-learning module that takes just 20 minutes to complete and helps enhance the understanding of invisible disabilities and how they impact the workplace, with examples given.

Organisations must understand their current position regarding neurodiversity before mandating new initiatives. The NOW Group has recorded an impressive 93% retention rate after 6 months for people it has placed, and the JAM Card is an effective tool in building inclusive workforces through attracting and retaining neurodiverse talent by growing awareness and supporting people with invisible disabilities to thrive.

Maeve's presentation highlighted the importance of practical solutions such as the JAM Card and underscored the power of listening to and empowering the voices of neurodiverse people. Her insights served as a reminder that inclusion begins with understanding and that even simple tools can make a world of difference.

The event concluded with a panel discussion featuring all the speakers, facilitated by Mark Huxley, who offers a wealth of experience within the insurance sector and is a passionate advocate of social change. The conversation was open, honest and energising, reinforcing the message that neurodiversity is not only a matter of inclusion but a strategic advantage.

The discussion began by exploring the current state of the so-called 'culture war' surrounding neurodiversity, with the panel unanimous in their criticism of recent comments made by US Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy regarding autism. Such statements perpetuate harmful stereotypes and ignore the rich diversity and potential of neurodivergent individuals. It was stressed that misinformation, particularly from authority figures, can reinforce misconceptions and hinder progress. Instead, an approach rooted in evidence and data that offers early intervention can make a profound difference in empowering neurodivergent people to thrive.

These issues also question perceptions of 'normality'. As one panellist noted, everyone considers themselves 'normal' based on their own thoughts and experiences. Rather than allowing fear or ignorance to shape attitudes, society should seek greater understanding to appreciate the diverse ways in which people think, communicate, and contribute.

Attitudes will perhaps change as decision-making transitions to younger generations and as late-stage diagnoses continue to rise. Self-actualisation resonates more with younger people, and while individual rights have improved in some areas, many are still in the early stages, and recent events in the US demonstrate how easily they can be undermined. Progress is not linear, and while the UK is quite progressive in attitudes towards neurodiversity, perhaps elsewhere in Europe, focus remains on visible disabilities. However, we have come a long way since the Great Man Theory of leadership was developed in the 1840s!

The next topic touched on allyship and what it means to support neurodivergent individuals in the workplace and beyond. The speakers emphasised that being a good ally starts with something simple: listening. Neurodiverse people, like everyone else, want to be heard, and this means asking standard, respectful questions rather than making assumptions.

While everyone 'masks' certain aspects of themselves to fit in socially, neurodivergent individuals often feel pressured to mask their true selves to a greater extent. This can be exhausting and counter-productive, so being a supportive ally doesn't mean always having the perfect answer or solution; it means recognising that not knowing what to do is perfectly fine and a willingness to listen and learn is far more valuable.

There was a caution against the 'superpower' narrative, which, while well-intentioned, framing neurodivergent traits as 'superpowers' may lead individuals to mask their challenges, feeling they must constantly meet unrealistic expectations. Worse, it can pigeonhole them into specific roles or industries, rather than allowing them the freedom to explore their full potential.

The conversation extended to highlight that inclusion is not just about finding jobs for neurodivergent individuals; it is also about embracing their entrepreneurial spirit. Neurodiverse people can be outstanding innovators and business owners, yet the focus of processes, such as Access to Work, is often placed on what they cannot do rather than the

unique talents they bring. This often stifles innovation and prevents organisations and society from realising their full potential.

An audience member referenced The Lilac Review, an independent review launched in February 2024 to address inequality among disabled business founders. Estimates suggest that improving opportunities could release an additional £230 billion for the UK economy; currently, disabled entrepreneurs represent 25% of the UK's 5.5 million small businesses, yet they account for just 8.6% of turnover. The review aims to identify and eliminate the obstacles that prevent these entrepreneurs from thriving to promote a more inclusive and prosperous economy.

The session ended with the speakers stressing the need for ongoing support and transparency in neurodiversity discussions. Greater emphasis at an early stage will create better opportunities as people grow. Traditional education pathways can be daunting for neurodiverse people, and supported internships have been shown to be effective in leading to full-time careers.

There must be the will to fight for change and to protect the structures put in place when the risk of rights being eradicated exists. The Equality Act has protected characteristics embedded and is here to stay – to scale back D&I initiatives is counter-productive and makes no commercial sense.