



Neurodiverse Founders – Plain text version

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Note

Getting the language right when discussing sensitive topics such as neurodiversity isn't always easy. Moreover, almost by definition, neurodiversity is a broad label – covering an array of different and sometimes overlapping conditions. Everyone is an individual, and two otherwise similar people won't necessarily experience neurodiversity in the same way.

In this report, we've tried to make sure that the language we use is as sensitive and appropriate as possible. However, we accept that there may be instances where people disagree with the precise phrasing we've used. We ask that readers understand the complexity of the research in question, take what we have written in good faith, and acknowledge the motivation of this research is, first and foremost, to shed light on and raise awareness about neurodiversity in entrepreneurship for the better.



Forewords

As a neurodiverse founder, I've been forced to navigate a unique and often bumpy path through the entrepreneurial landscape. My journey – with a diagnosis of dyslexia at six years old, and ADHD at 13, when I was on the brink of being expelled from school – has been both a challenging and empowering one. Throughout this journey my neurodiversity has shaped my success, allowing me to view the world differently from others and harness the hyper-focus and passion to drive me forward.

After my previous start-up was acquired, I began investing and launched Connectd to bring together founders with investors and advisors. Through this, I've seen first-hand the untapped potential that exists within the neurodiverse community in the early-stage ecosystem. There is a crucial need for robust support networks and platforms that not only recognise but also champion the inherent strengths across all forms of neurodiversity.

This report provides critical insights into the experiences of neurodiverse entrepreneurs, highlighting the discrimination and obstacles faced, whilst also demonstrating the resilience and unique advantages that our community brings to the business world. The data is sobering – a significant portion of neurodiverse founders have felt compelled to mask their true selves to evade prejudice. However, it's totally heartening to see a growing acknowledgement of neurodiversity as a business asset, with many founders, like myself, viewing their neurodiversity as a superpower that fosters creativity, innovation, and unparalleled problem-solving abilities.

The report resonates deeply with me – it's a call to action for greater understanding, support, and inclusion. The insights into the challenges of discrimination and the journey towards self-acceptance are critical, for building an environment where diversity can thrive.

As we reflect on the report – let's commit to embracing diversity in all its forms. We must build and support networks that empower diversity, ensuring people have the resources and



representation needed to succeed. With collective effort, we can shift perceptions and create a more inclusive and innovative ecosystem.

Roei Samuel – Founder, Connectd

I'm the founder of Own Your Flair which is my ADHD coaching and neurodiversity consulting company. I run this company as a solo entrepreneur and set it up when I was diagnosed with ADHD during the pandemic, having previously been diagnosed with dyslexia back at university. My late diagnoses were challenging but helped explain why I struggled to thrive in neurotypical workplaces. Post my ADHD diagnosis, I learned how to lean into my strengths and now I spend the majority of my time coaching individuals with ADHD to recognise their strengths and run training workshops for organisations who want to become more neuroinclusive.

I'm grateful for this piece of research since it confirms what I have suspected from my own experiences navigating entrepreneurship with no support for my neurodiversity. This report substantiates the high levels of entrepreneurship amongst the neurodiverse community but also shows how there is more to be done on raising awareness and understanding of what neurodiverse entrepreneurs need. Hopefully, it will be the first step in opening up conversations and support for the neurodiverse entrepreneur community – most accelerators or entrepreneurship-focused programs, for instance, don't focus on neurodiversity or disability, which is a missed opportunity.

As this research has shown, and from my own experience, entrepreneurship is one of the routes to my community's economic survival. The workplace will not change overnight to start accommodating neurodiverse people, and I believe the entrepreneurship community is the space where we can see the fastest progress towards inclusivity for neurodivergent founders.

Kim To – Founder, Own Your Flair



Executive Summary

Awareness of neurodiversity – in the world of work, and society in general – is increasing. More and more successful entrepreneurs are talking openly about their neurodiversity and how it changes how they approach running a business. But despite growing understanding, there is still a lack of robust evidence on neurodiversity within business.

To get a better idea of how neurodiverse entrepreneurs think and feel, we polled a sample of over 500 founders from across the UK who have been diagnosed with a form of neurodiversity. Our findings paint a mixed picture – sometimes positive, sometimes negative, and sometimes showing that the neurodiverse community does not always have a homogenous view on specific issues.

Our findings were grouped around four broad themes. The first looked at discrimination. Shockingly, only 4% of neurodiverse founders surveyed report never experiencing discrimination because of their neurodiversity, while almost half report ‘regularly’ or ‘always’ experiencing discrimination. In addition, nearly four fifths of neurodiverse founders surveyed agree they have ‘hidden’ their neurodiversity in business situations.

Then, we turned our attention to understanding and representation of neurodiversity. Nearly half of neurodiverse founders surveyed believe there is an adequate level of understanding within the business community, but still more than a third do not. Meanwhile, slightly more neurodiverse founders surveyed think neurodiversity is accurately portrayed in the media than those who do not think that it is.

After this, we considered how neurodiversity impacts running a business. On several tasks neurodiverse founders are split on whether their neurodiversity makes them harder or easier to complete. Ultimately, however, over two thirds of neurodiverse founders surveyed say their neurodiversity makes them a better business person.



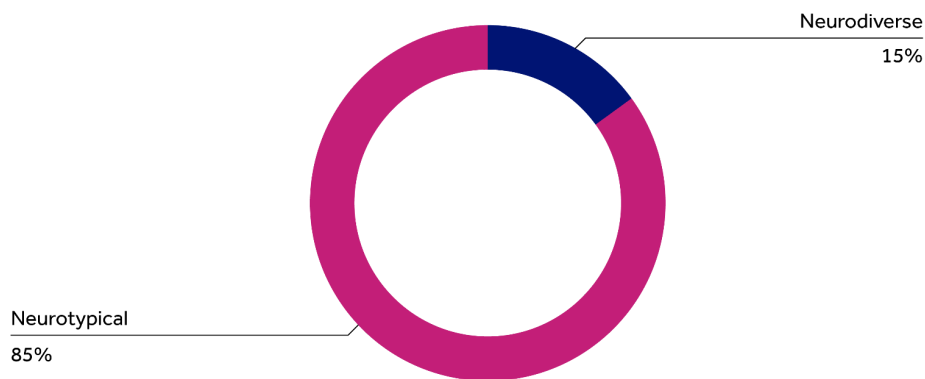
Finally, we asked neurodiverse founders about what advice they would give to other people with neurodiversity who have not yet started a business. Nearly three fifths agree that ‘seeing your neurodiversity as an advantage rather than a disadvantage’ is good advice for someone who is neurodiverse and hasn’t started a business yet.

Introduction

It's often taken for granted nowadays that diversity can bring a range of benefits in the workplace. Different people offering different talents and different perspectives can ensure a company is more well-rounded, and greater than the sum of its individual parts. This isn't just idle supposition either – academic research has linked ethnic diversity of firms to increased rates of innovation, while analysis from McKinsey shows that greater gender diversity on executive teams is linked to higher profitability.

One form of diversity that has been receiving increasing amounts of attention lately is neurodiversity. This umbrella term refers to a spectrum of neurological differences an individual may have, including, but not limited to, conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia. In the UK, an estimated 15% of people have a form of neurodiversity, and neurodiverse individuals may have several forms of neurodiversity simultaneously.

CHART 1. An estimated 15% of people have a form of neurodiversity.



Source: Nancy Doyle (2020). [Neurodiversity at work: a biopsychosocial model and the impact on working adults](#). British Medical Bulletin, vol. 135, pp. 108-125.



In recent years, neurodiversity has begun to be seen not necessarily as a disadvantage, but rather as a potential strength, including within the workplace. Many neurodiverse people credit their professional success because of, not in spite of, their neurodiversity – and the way in which it enables them to approach problems in different ways. Richard Branson, one of the UK’s best-known entrepreneurs, for instance, has spoken of how he regards his neurodiversity (dyslexia and ADHD) as his “superpower.” In an interview in 2022 he stated how: “It taught me to delegate,” and that he thinks “by and large, dyslexics are more creative and good at seeing the bigger picture.” Perfumer Jo Malone, meanwhile, has remarked how her dyslexia enables her to “reach the destination and the solution faster than most people,” and how her OCD allows her to keep “things very organised and structured in my mind.”

Yet despite the increasing prominence neurodiversity has nowadays, there is still a lack of solid evidence about neurodiversity in business.

Moreover, unhelpful stereotypes stubbornly persist, and many neurodiverse individuals still experience challenges in the world of work which ‘neurotypical’ people may not.

This report attempts to shed light on neurodiversity in a particularly important area of the economy – namely, among British entrepreneurs. To delve deeper into the debate around neurodiversity and entrepreneurship, we polled a sample of entrepreneurs who have established their own companies and have been diagnosed with a form of neurodiversity.⁸ We asked them a variety of questions, ranging from whether they face discrimination due to their neurodiversity, to how their neurodiversity impacts (both positively or negatively) their work, to what level of understanding of neurodiversity there is in the business world, and to how circumstances have changed since they first became an entrepreneur.



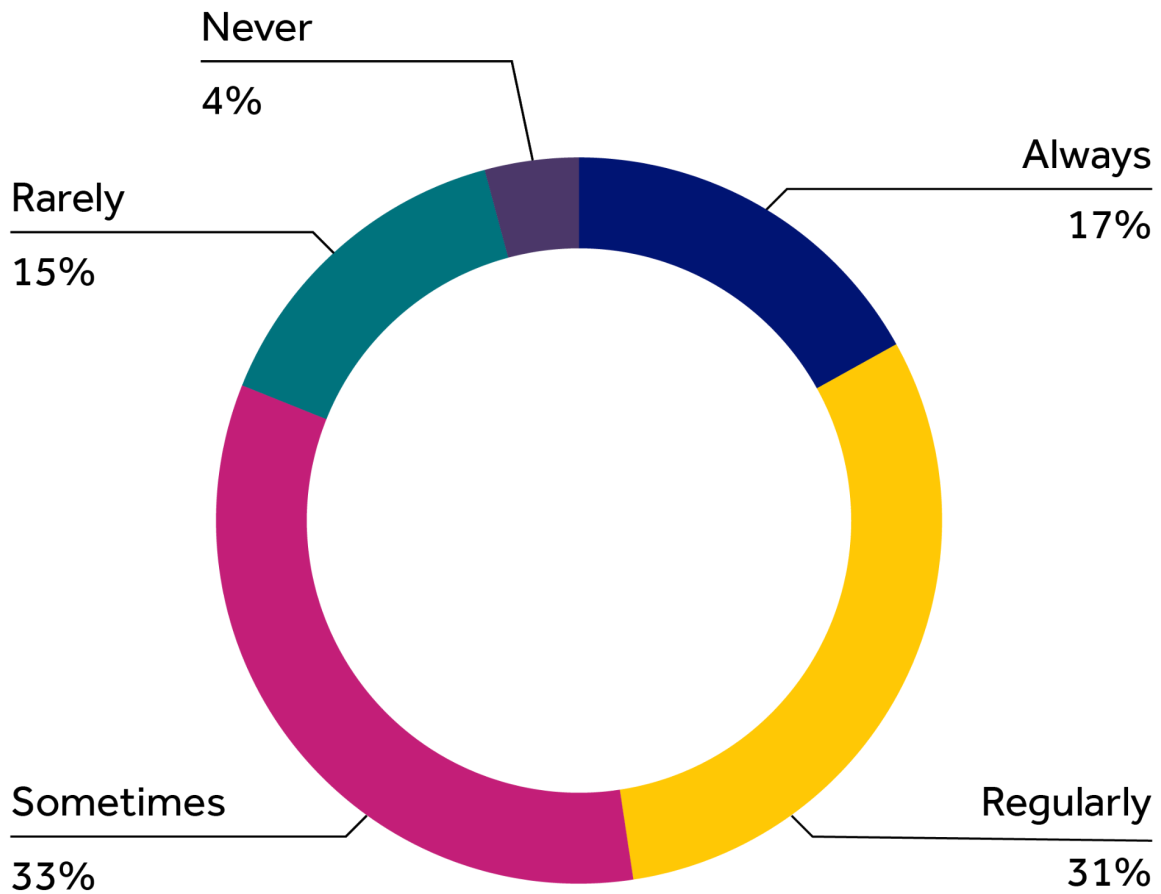
Discrimination against neurodiverse founders

Discrimination in different guises plagues the economy, and neurodiverse people are not immune from unfair treatment at work. Just one indicator of this can be seen in the sheer, and increasing, number of employment tribunals relating to neurodiversity.

Sadly, our survey confirms the prevalence of discrimination that neurodiverse people feel. Virtually all respondents in our sample said they experience some level of discrimination due to their neurodiversity – with almost half (48%) reporting either ‘always’ or ‘regularly’ facing discrimination due to their condition(s). In comparison, only 4% of founders said they ‘never’ face discrimination.

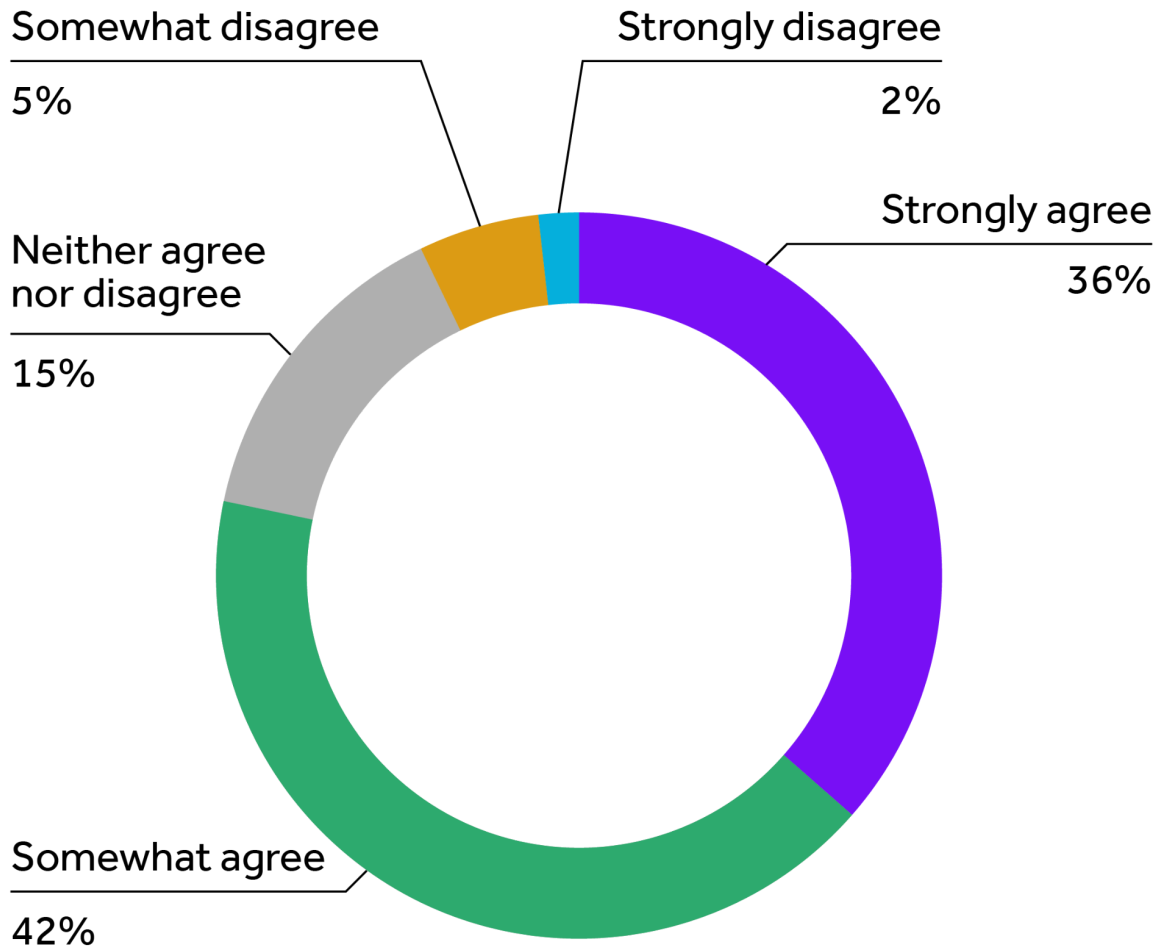
Perhaps because of this, it might not be surprising that the vast majority (78%) of neurodiverse founders surveyed told us that they ‘hide’ their neurodiversity in business situations.

CHART 2. Almost all neurodiverse founders report direct experience of discrimination.



Question: How often, if ever, do you face discrimination as a founder because of your neurodiversity?

CHART 3. Nearly 8 in 10 neurodiverse founders report 'hiding' their neurodiversity.

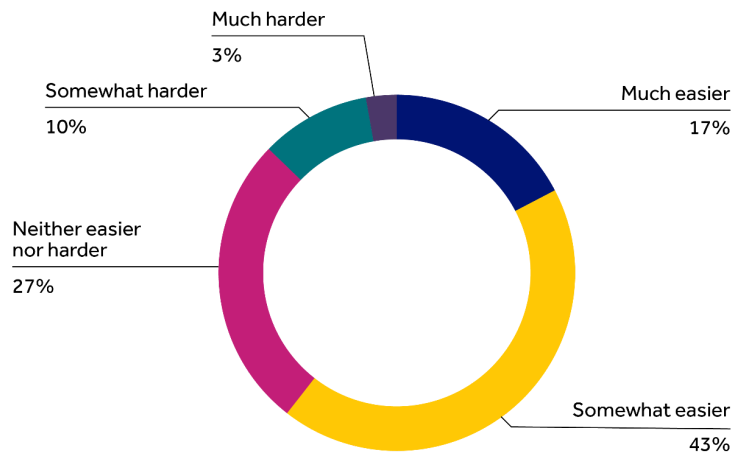


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? “I have ‘hidden’ my neurodiversity in business situations”

While we all might play up a certain side of ourselves at work, this question lays bare the extent to which neurodiverse people feel they cannot be their true, authentic selves in the course of their day-to-day working lives.

With all of this being said, responses to another question we asked founders give reason for optimism. More than three fifths (61%) of neurodiverse founders surveyed believe that it has become easier for people with neurodiversity to succeed in business compared to when they first became a founder. This indicates that genuine progress is being made. Moreover, the likelihood that a respondent agrees it has become easier to succeed increases among entrepreneurs who launched their business further in the past. Nearly seven in ten (69%) founders of businesses started seven or more years ago agreed this to be the case.

CHART 4. More than three fifths of neurodiverse founders believe it has become easier for people with neurodiversity to succeed in business compared to when they first became a founder.



Question: Compared to when you first became a founder, how much easier or harder do you think it has become for neurodiverse people to succeed in business?



Case study – Andy Clayton

Andy Clayton is the Founder of Fermtech, an Oxfordbased biotech company which aims to decarbonise food production, reduce waste, and minimise the amount of land needed to feed the world. Fermtech takes spent grains from breweries, and through a unique, proprietary technology, produces nutritious protein to be used to make plant-based foods.

Having struggled with long periods of isolation, Andy was diagnosed as autistic as an adult. “Of course being autistic impacts me as a founder,” he says, adding that “it’s one of the main reasons I am an entrepreneur.”

Before starting Fermtech, Andy notes how he struggled to work for other people – explaining how having control over his working environment was important to him, and that being able to indulge his “relentless curiosity” was vital to seizing business opportunities that presented themselves.

Andy thinks entrepreneurship is a great option for autistic people who, like him, might not be able to fulfil their true potential in ‘traditional’ employment. In terms of what can be done to help autistic founders flourish, he notes how important it is for people with autism to get together and support each other. “Every time I have done this or been a part of it, we have had excellent results,” says Andy.



Representation of neurodiverse founders

Awareness of neurodiversity is steadily growing. Prominent individuals from business, sports and entertainment increasingly feel able to disclose their neurodiversity publicly. Television programmes and films are now showcasing ever more neurodiverse characters, and many of us will have anecdotal evidence of neurodiversity being a subject which is now much more openly talked about.

But something being discussed more often than it once was does not necessarily equate to our general understanding of it being accurate. We were therefore keen to know how neurodiverse founders felt about the level of understanding of neurodiversity within the business community.

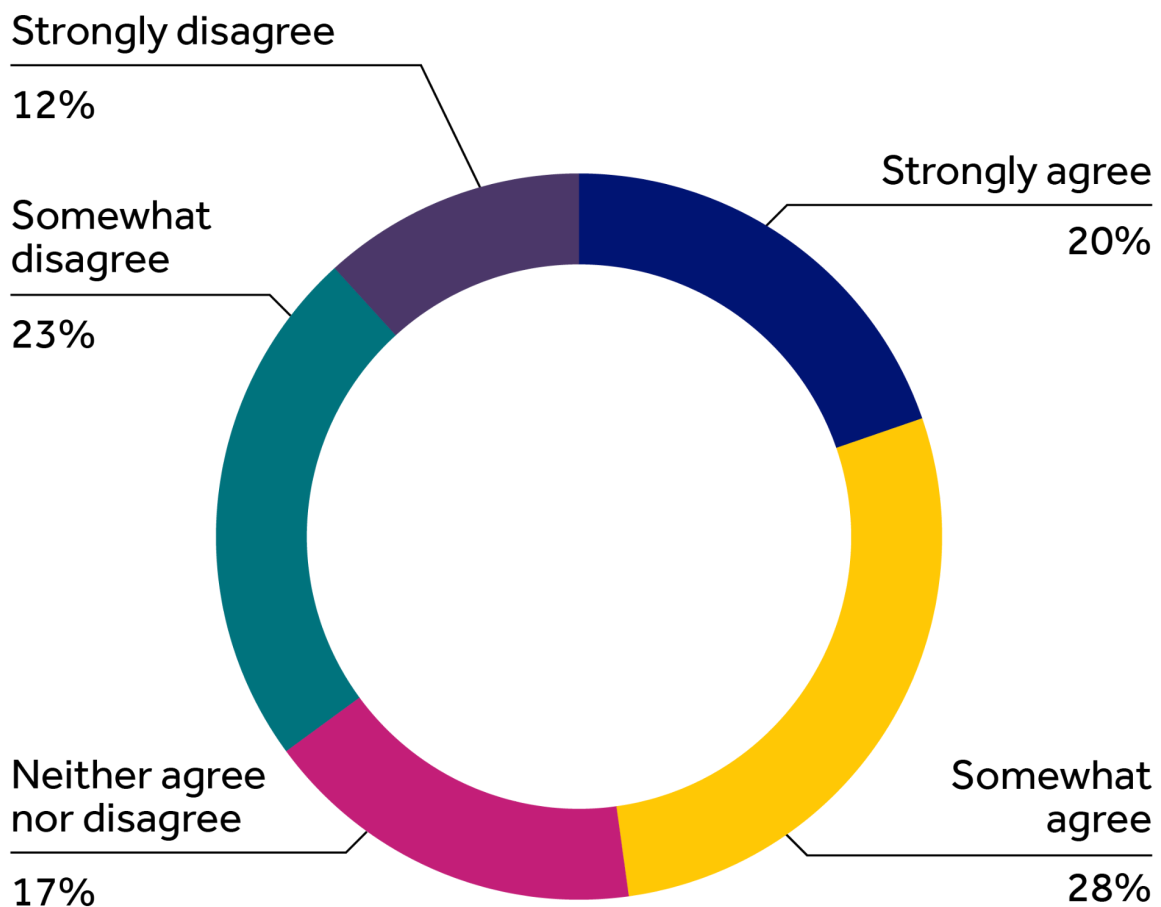
What we found was both positive and negative. Almost half (48%) of the neurodiverse founders we polled said that there actually was an adequate level of understanding of neurodiversity in the business community. However, still more than a third (35%) did not, including more than one in ten (12%) who strongly disagreed that there is an adequate level of understanding.

Thus, while the level of understanding might be higher than we had expected, there is still further to go towards creating an inclusive culture for all.

We then asked whether neurodiverse founders believe that neurodiversity is accurately portrayed in the media – something which will almost certainly influence the extent to which the general public properly understands the topic. Once more, we found that neurodiverse founders were roughly split in their collective opinion. While 42% said that neurodiversity is accurately portrayed in the media, almost as many (38%) said it is not. Again, our results on this question suggest that there is further to go in improving how neurodiversity is portrayed

within the media – even if the plurality of neurodiverse entrepreneurs believe it is already accurately represented.

CHART 5. Less than half of neurodiverse founders think there is an adequate level of understanding of neurodiversity in the business community.

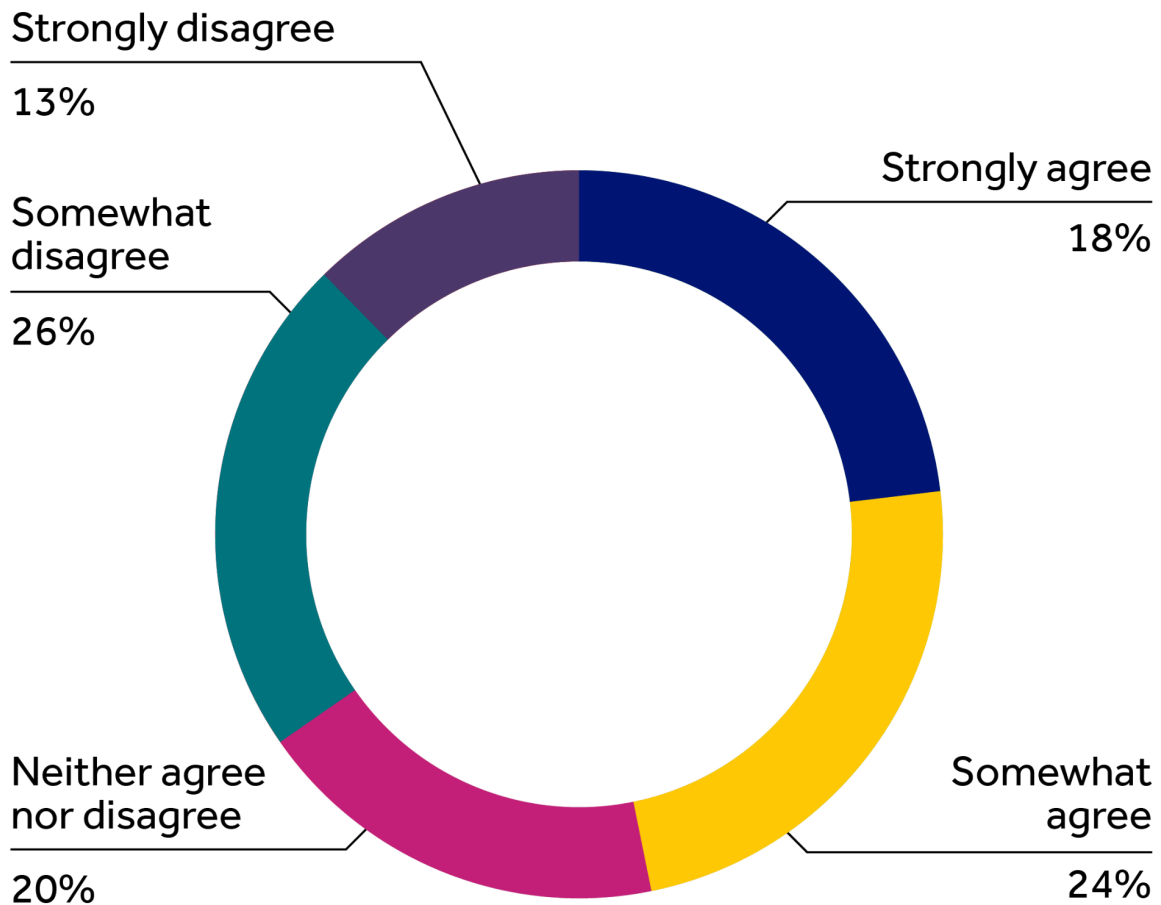


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? “There is an adequate level of understanding of neurodiversity in the business community”



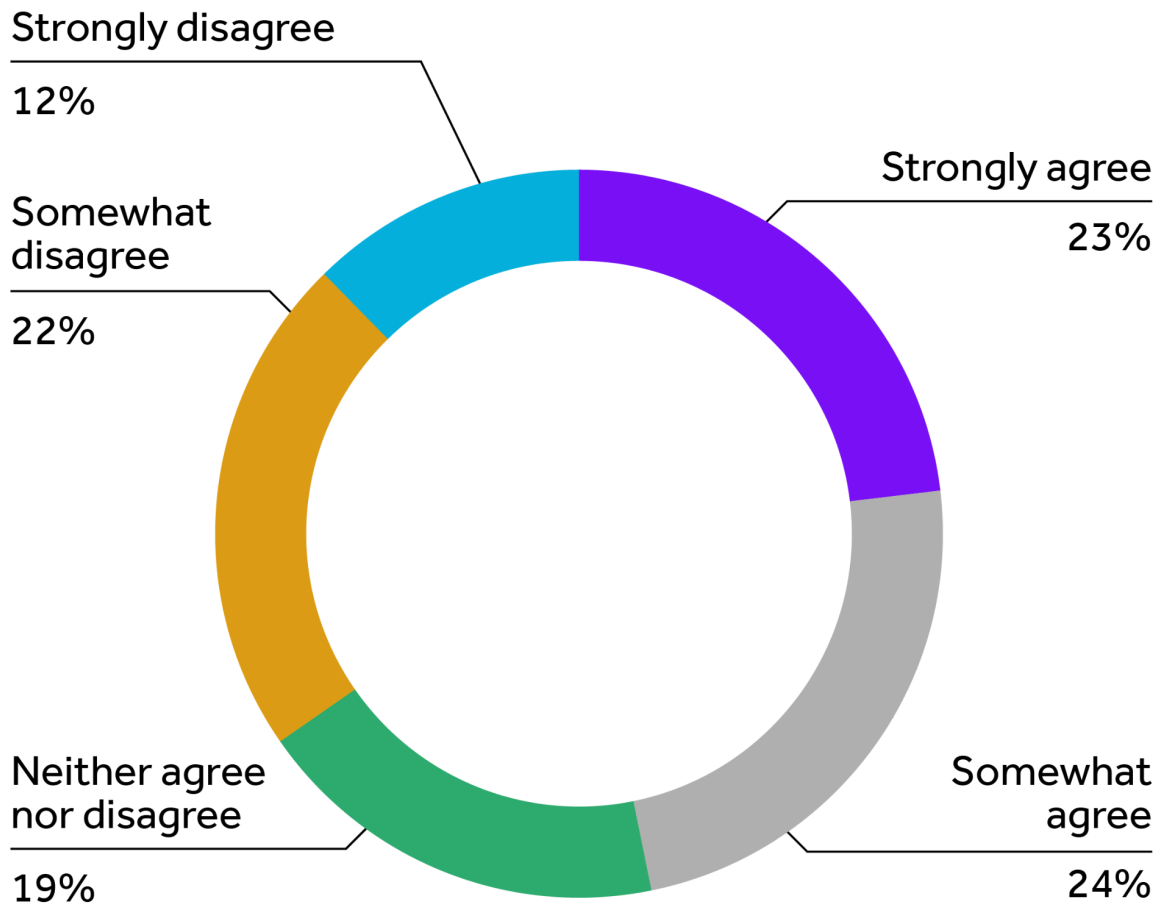
In many walks of life, having role models to look up to can be critically important. Certainly, this can be clearly seen for a variety of underrepresented groups in business – whether that’s ethnic minorities in particular industries, or women in senior positions, or, indeed, people with neurodiversity succeeding professionally. Yet, according to our survey, more than a third (35%) of neurodiverse founders surveyed believe that there are not enough role models for neurodiverse people in business. That being said, a greater proportion (47%) believe that there are. Again, while we can point to positives on this question, there is still a large minority of neurodiverse founders who believe that additional progress is required.

CHART 6. Less than half of neurodiverse founders think there is an adequate level of understanding of neurodiversity in the business community.



Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? "Neurodiversity is accurately portrayed in the media"

CHART 7. Slightly more neurodiverse founders agree than disagree that there are enough role models in business for people with neurodiversity.



Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? “There are enough role models for neurodiverse people in business”



Case study – Noetic Health

Ai Ling Walker launched Noetic Health in 2023 to tackle the confusing process of assessment and support for adult Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia. Noetic’s mission stems from Ai Ling’s own struggles accessing diagnosis, which she describes as “a long, isolating journey that’s sadly still experienced by millions of neurodivergent people around the world.”

For Ai Ling, she felt she had to set up her own company – for reasons both positive and negative. The first, she says, is because neurodivergent people have “natural strengths which lend themselves to entrepreneurship.”

The second, meanwhile, is because of “the unfortunate reason that we often struggle in traditional work settings – from exclusionary hiring practices, to sensory overwhelm in open plan offices and long commutes, to rigid promotion plans that keep us from progressing into positions of leadership.”

When it comes to challenges which Ai Ling faces because of her neurodiversity, she mentions “chronic fatigue, struggling to consistently time-keep, and task prioritisation.” Moreover, Ai Ling notes that a tendency to “take things on face value” makes “reading between the lines and navigating business politics challenging.”

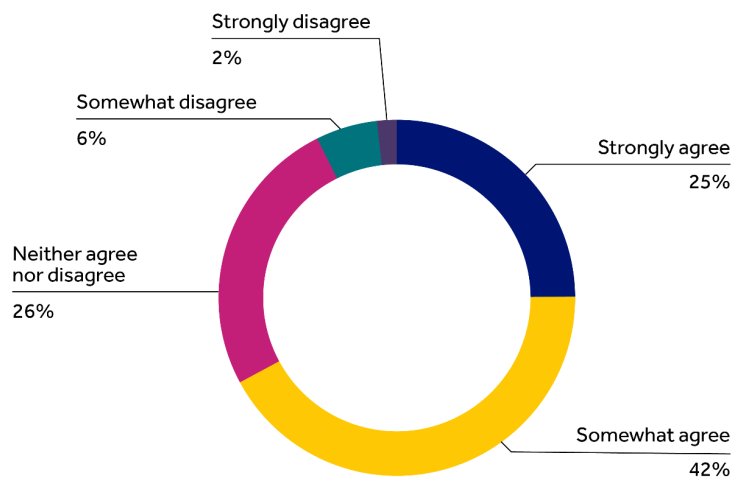
What advice does Ai Ling give to neurodivergent founders? “It’s important not to judge the parts we find difficult, and instead empower each other to lean into our strengths – the rest can be delegated. I very much recommend every neurodiverse founder works with an neurodiverse-aware assistant – mine has changed my life.”

Neurodiversity impacting enterprise

One of the biggest misconceptions about neurodiversity is the belief that the conditions that comprise the spectrum are disabilities. Many neurodiverse people prefer to regard themselves not as disabled, but rather as differently abled – viewing their neurodiversity as an asset that can give them an advantage in the world of work.

To put this theory to the test, we first asked our sample of neurodiverse founders whether they think that their neurodiversity makes them better business people. Overwhelmingly, founders believe that it does – with 67% in agreement, compared to just 7% who think it makes them a worse business person.

CHART 8. Two thirds of neurodiverse founders think their neurodiversity makes them a better business person.

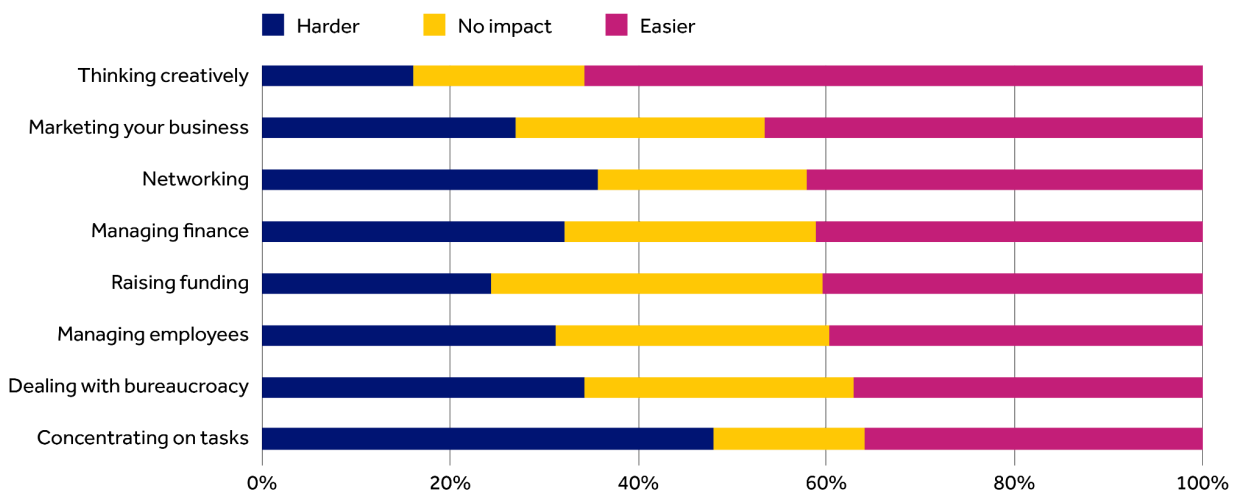


Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? “My neurodiversity makes me a better business person”

While that question allowed us to get a topline idea of whether neurodiverse founders believe their neurodiversity either helps or hinders them in business, we also wanted to go deeper. For that, we gave them a list of tasks many founders will need to carry out while starting and running a business, and then asked whether their neurodiversity makes them easier or harder to complete.

The responses we received again show a spread of results. For some tasks, it seems founders tend to believe being neurodiverse is a bonus – such as ‘thinking creatively’ for example, which 66% of founders in our sample said was made easier thanks to their neurodiversity, compared to just 16% who said it was made harder. Other tasks which founders seem to think are made easier in general due to their neurodiversity are ‘marketing your business’ (47% agreeing against 27% disagreeing), and ‘raising funding’ (40% agreeing against 24% disagreeing).

CHART 9. Neurodiverse founders tend to think their neurodiversity makes a range of tasks easier, though not all.



Question: As the founder of a company, how much easier or harder does your neurodiversity make the following?



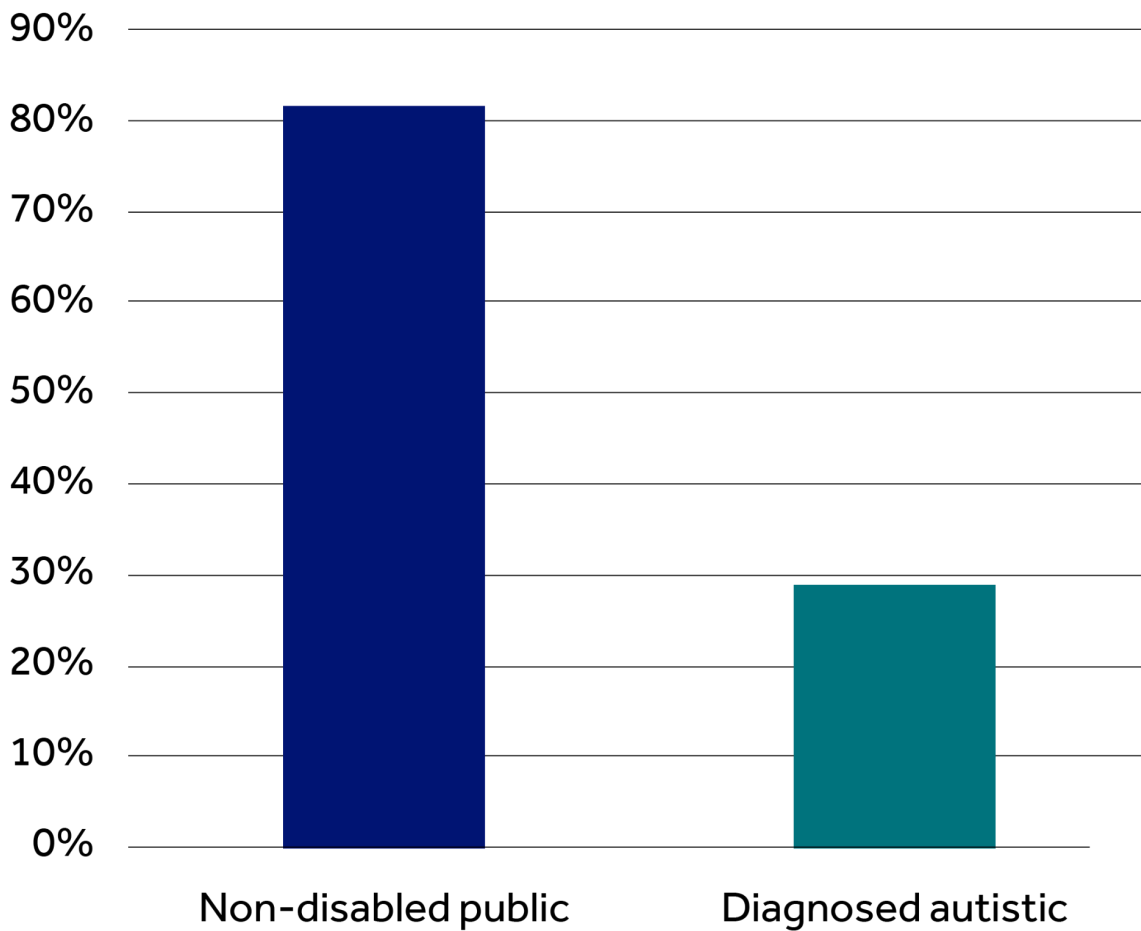
In fact, with respect to the tasks we asked about, being neurodiverse makes all but one marginally easier rather than harder on net, according to our founders. The one task where more founders said their neurodiversity made completing it harder rather than easier was ‘concentrating on tasks’ – where 48% said their condition made it harder, compared to 36% who said their condition made it easier.

Despite the results of the previous question suggesting neurodiverse people generally believe that their conditions help make them more productive, this doesn’t necessarily mean that they are rewarded for it. One of the most obvious ways this shows up is in the employment rates of neurodiverse people.

To take one form of neurodiversity in isolation – latest available figures from the Office for National Statistics show that people with autism have an employment rate of just 29%, compared to 82% among the non-disabled population. Meanwhile, the National Autistic Society claims that 43% of people with autism have left or lost a job because of their condition.

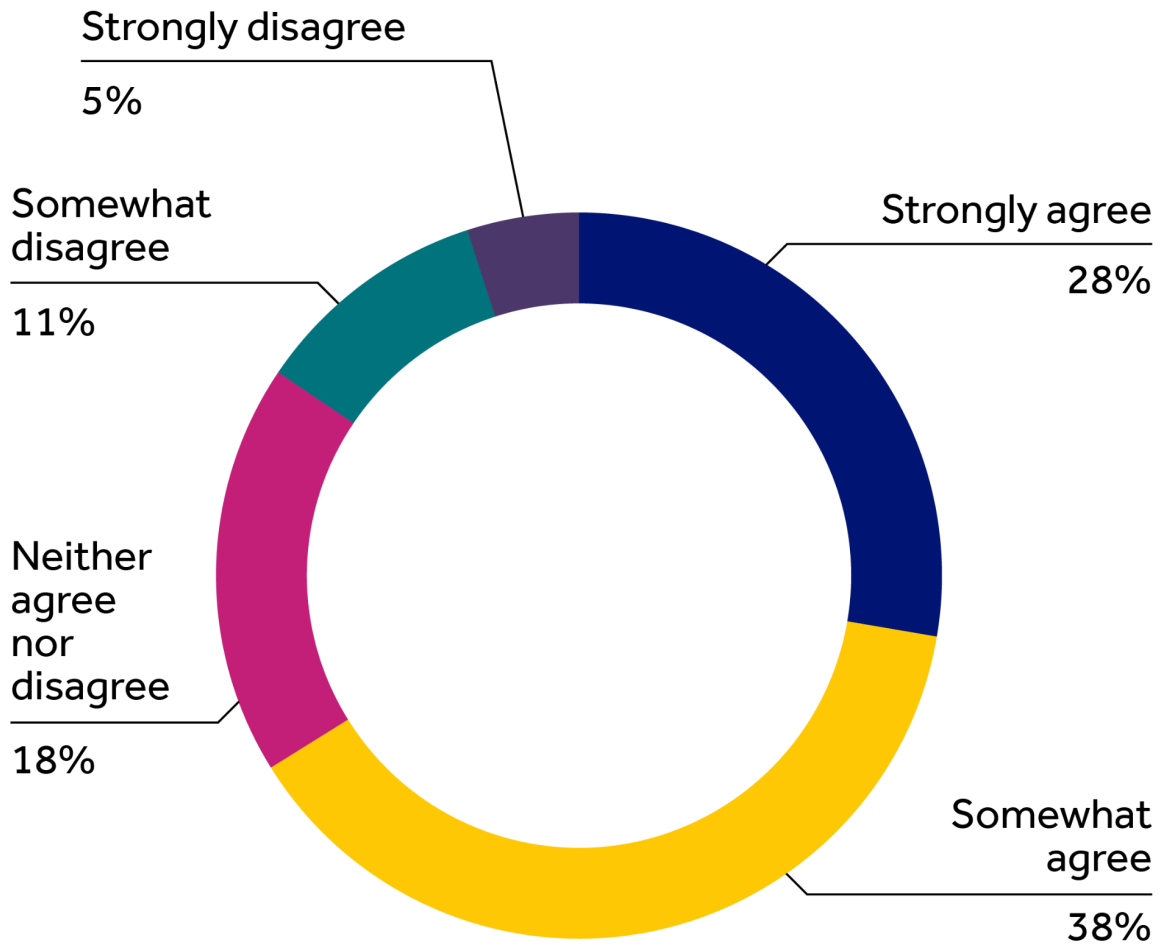
In our survey, we asked whether the neurodiverse founders in our sample struggled to find employment prior to setting up their own companies specifically because of their neurodiversity. Nearly two thirds (66%) of our sample agreed, compared to just 15% who disagreed.

CHARTS 10. Employment rates of diagnosed autistic people is much lower than nondisabled people.



Source: Office for National Statistics (2022). [Outcomes for disabled people in the UK: 2021](#).

CHART 11. Most neurodiverse founders struggled to find employment before starting their business.



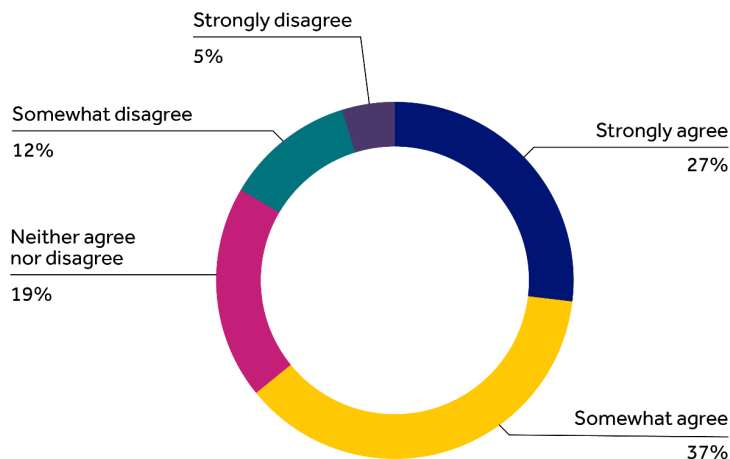
Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? “Prior to setting up my own company, I struggled to find employment due to my neurodiversity”

This could signify the need for more awareness of the tailored needs of neurodiverse individuals in the workplace, hiring processes, and elsewhere.

Perhaps because of these findings, it might not be surprising that a similarly large portion of neurodiverse founders agreed that their neurodiversity meant that setting up a company of their own was the only way they could earn a living. Sixty-four per cent of founders in our sample agreed to this question, against 17% who disagreed.

Clearly, neurodiversity impacts those who have it in a work context. Among our founders, many believed that it helps them to succeed in various ways, while some recognised that it can be a hindrance. But it also influences the choices they make in the labour market – specifically, we find evidence that neurodiversity has negatively impacted individuals’ ability to gain employment, and that this drives them to start their own businesses as a result.

CHART 12. Nearly two thirds of neurodiverse founders felt starting a business of their own was the only way they could make a living.



Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? “My neurodiversity meant setting up a company of my own was the only way to earn a living”



Case study – Sarah Kingston

When Sarah Kingston and her Co-Founder Alex Birtles grew frustrated by how hard it was to find ethical businesses, while also seeing them struggling to get enough custom to thrive, they decided to do something about it. In 2023, they launched In Good Company – a self-described ‘tech-for-good’ startup with a mission to drive growth for small, ethical and sustainable bricks and mortar businesses in the hospitality, retail and entertainment sectors.

In Good Company does this by connecting people with ethical businesses and experiences via a data-driven search and match platform. From cafes and restaurants, to shops and markets, her platform provides curated listings that are verified by experts, and reviewed by consumers who want to use their spending power for good. Already, 5,000 people have used their platform and there are over 350 companies listed, with more being added each week.

Sarah was diagnosed with ADHD aged 37 – with the diagnosis coming while on her journey of launching In Good Company. One of the main ways her condition manifests itself in “decision paralysis,” with Sarah explaining that: “As a founder of a small startup, I need to wear a number of different ‘hats’. Switching between these jobs can be overwhelming, especially for someone who struggles to concentrate. I’ve had to learn how to better prioritise and manage my time and to find tools that help me save time and capacity.”

Since being diagnosed, however, she notes how that has helped her to better understand how it affects her work and how to articulate what she needs to her team and others she works with. She also credits her ADHD for enabling her to “think outside the box and come up with ideas or solutions that others might not,” as well as being “adaptable having masked and adapted for years working in more ‘traditional’ work environments.”



When it comes to changing the debate around neurodiversity, Sarah thinks “there should be more openness and encouragement for neurodiverse people to explain that they are neurodiverse and how they need to work.”



Advice for potential founders with neurodiversity

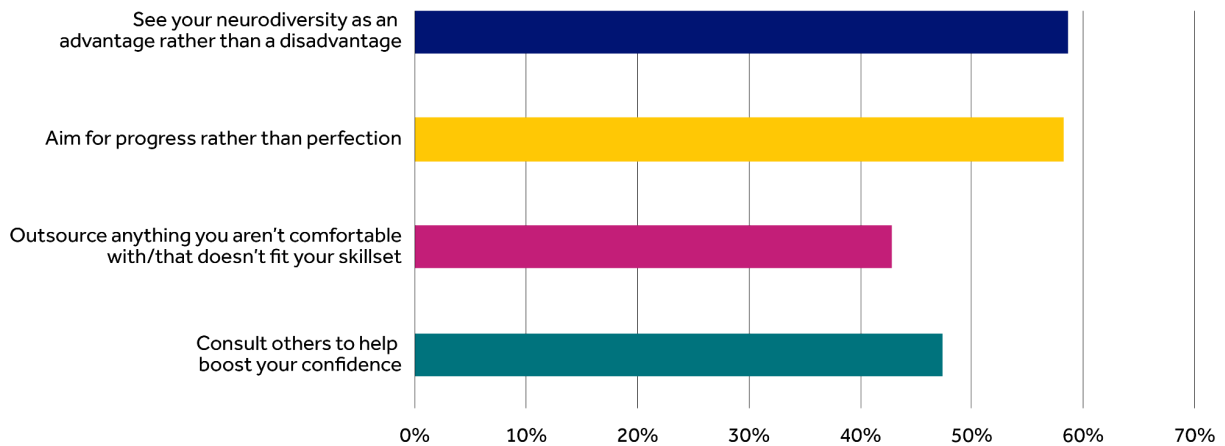
It might be easier to give advice than to take it, but that doesn't diminish the importance of founders passing experiences and wisdom on to one another.

This is true for all entrepreneurs, but perhaps especially so for ones diagnosed with neurodiversity, given the additional challenges they may face when running and growing their companies.

We asked our sample of neurodiverse founders what they thought about a handful of different pieces of advice that could be given to someone with neurodiversity who hasn't yet started a business of their own.

The first statement we tested was “See your neurodiversity as an advantage rather than a disadvantage” – something we had already established a significant proportion of neurodiverse founders agree is true. Here, almost three fifths (59%) endorsed this message, and it was the most popular out of all the statements that we offered founders to pick from.

CHART 13. A majority of neurodiverse founders think seeing neurodiversity as an advantage rather than a disadvantage is a good piece of advice for those who haven't started a business.



Question: What, if any, advice would you give to a neurodiverse individual who hasn't started a business yet, but might be interested in doing so? (Tick all that apply)

Second, we canvassed opinions on “Aim for progress rather than perfection.” Again, around three fifths (58%) of our sample of neurodiverse founders supported this suggestion.

Third, we asked for thoughts on “Outsource anything you aren't comfortable with / that doesn't fit your skillset.” Earlier, we discovered that there were competencies – such as ‘concentrating on tasks’ – which many neurodiverse founders told us they struggled with, specifically because of their neurodiversity. Yet this piece of advice just failed to attract majority support – with only 43% backing it. One reading of this finding is that neurodiverse founders still want to be given an equal opportunity to attempt tasks and resolve issues.



Fourth, we assessed views on “Consult others to boost your confidence” as a mindset to have. This was the least popular idea we tested, receiving the support of only 40% of neurodiverse founders.

As well as testing these pieces of advice, we also allowed founders to offer up any of their own words of wisdom which they would give to neurodiverse individuals who haven’t taken the plunge into entrepreneurship.

Statements such as the above demonstrate that neurodiverse founders feel empowered and self-motivated to succeed – and the sense that neurodiversity can be an advantage in entrepreneurship is something that is strongly recognised.



Conclusion

Neurodiversity should never be a barrier to success in entrepreneurship. Certainly, it does not seem to have held back some of the world's most innovative founders. In fact, many neurodiverse entrepreneurs would argue that it was precisely their different way of working that enabled their business accomplishments in the first place.

But despite neurodiversity being something that is more regularly spoken about nowadays, challenges still remain. From our polling, we can see how a considerable portion of Britain's neurodiverse founders feel the level of understanding about neurodiversity is not adequate, that neurodiverse people lack role models, and that the media inaccurately portrays neurodiversity. Shockingly, 96% of neurodiverse founders surveyed say they face some degree of discrimination because of their conditions, and 78% of neurodiverse founders say they have purposely hidden their neurodiversity in business situations.

Yet we can see many positives too. Just over two thirds (67%) of neurodiverse founders surveyed believe their neurodiversity makes them better business people, and many think that their neurodiversity actively makes a number of tasks easier, not harder. The number of neurodiverse founders who think it has become easier to succeed in business since they started their own outnumber those who think it has become harder by almost five to one (61% compared to 13%).

Another crucial narrative we can draw from our polling is how a pro-entrepreneurial society is typically also a pro-neurodiverse society. From the fact that many neurodiverse people struggled to find employment because of their conditions, or that they felt starting a business of their own was the only way they could make a living, we should recognise that failing to allow entrepreneurship to flourish will often equate to failing to allow people who are neurodiverse to flourish as well.



The mixed messages which our polling lays bare should be encouragement to us all that while further work is required, change is eminently possible, and the foundations for that change have already been laid. A world where neurodiversity isn't the obstacle to success that it is today is firmly within our grasp.

Methodology

The polling for this piece of research was conducted by Censuswide with 502 UK entrepreneurs (who founded their company) who have been diagnosed as neurodiverse, in companies of all turnovers (18+) between 29 December 2023 – 9 January 2024.

Censuswide abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society, which is based on the ESOMAR principles and are members of The British Polling Council.

CHART 14. Forms of neurodiversity that respondents in our sample have.

