



Neurodivergent Struggles in Agile

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With this Experience Report, I want to take you through my personal journey of discovering how my (neurodivergent) brain works and where I identified that I struggle with agile practices because of it. I want to broaden your understanding of neurodivergence and inspire you to rethink resistance to agile ways of working. Since 10-20% of the world's population is neurodivergent, this topic is relevant for everyone.

1. INTRODUCTION

I sat in Alastair Cockburn's "Deliver" workshop two years ago. I realized that even after over a decade in Agile Software Engineering and as a Scrum Master, I still couldn't wrap my head around how to slice stories. I had learned numerous techniques and strategies to help my team through the process, yet it still felt like an impossible task, every single time. While everyone else in the workshop room started to count out the number of stories, they would slice the feature into, I blanked. They seemed to see a trail of steps: where to start, what to do next, when the goal was reached, and what was unnecessary for an MVP; I just couldn't see any of it. I felt like I did not belong in that room.

I've seen it time and time again in agile teams I worked with, team members not only struggle with story slicing but also with estimating, planning, and keeping focus. As their Scrum Master, I should be the person who helps them with these things, but I struggled just as much and couldn't let that show. I had put in the work, given it a tremendous amount of effort, but it never clicked, and I felt I had to work extra hard, to generate less or at least the same outcome as other Scrum Masters. I beat myself up about it, because practice makes perfect, and if you do something often enough, it becomes a habit, and you don't even think about it anymore. But that point never came for me, a fate I share with so many other neurodivergent individuals.

2. BACKGROUND

But why should my professional shortcomings interest you? Neurodivergent individuals often face unique challenges with agile practices, adding to their daily struggles in an inherently non-neurodivergent world. And it's not because they choose to hate agile; it is because their brain is built differently.

What do I mean by neurodivergence/neurodivergent?

You might have heard of neurodiversity before. Sociologist Judy Singer coined the term in the '90s, and she defines it as follows: "A biological truism that refers to the limitless variability of human nervous systems on the planet, in which no two can ever be exactly alike due to the influence of environmental factors" (*Singer*). That means brain function and cognition are diverse, so there is no universal way of thinking, learning or doing. That's something you probably experience yourself every day. Just as biodiversity exists in nature, neurodiversity is present in humankind.

Closely associated and often wrongfully interchangeably used is the term neurodivergence or neurodivergent. The adjective neurodivergent is comprised of neuro-, relating to the nerve or nervous system, and -divergent, varying from a standard or different (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). In contrast to neurodiversity as a general concept, neurodivergence is a non-medical umbrella term for people with a neurodiverse condition or brain, meaning their cognitive functioning differs from the norm and is not considered "neurotypical". Under this umbrella fall various conditions, that are labeled as "disorders". I'm using air-quotes here because the intention of the term "neurodivergent" was to get away from the deficit-based language that disorder indicates. Yet most conditions have the word disorder in them, so there's no way to avoid the term altogether. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, certain Anxiety disorders, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Tourette's and others are considered

neurodivergences. Again, neurodivergence describes a difference, it doesn't pass judgement and is not a synonym for a diagnosis or neurological disability.

When presented with a diagnosis, how we are conditioned invites us to generalizations based on patterns and stereotypes we have experienced. But symptoms are not such a universal experience as you might think. Diagnosing neurodivergence isn't straightforward; symptoms can vary widely between individuals and even change from day to day. Some conditions can have significant overlap in symptoms with different root causes, and there might be more than one condition present in an individual. Depending on the dominant disorder, the same symptoms can have different sources or reasons. Autism Advocate Dr. Stephen Shore's quote "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." underscores the diversity within the autism spectrum and I would like to extend that to neurodivergence overall. What you know about a condition might be limited or biased by your personal experience, and neurodivergent individuals are not all the same or similar. Just because a person has ADHD, that doesn't automatically mean, they can't concentrate. Avoid making assumptions based on diagnoses; instead, use neurodivergence as a framework for empathy.

Why is this relevant?

Neurodivergent individuals make up about 10-20% of the world's population, with Dyslexia and Dyspraxia having a prevalence up to 6-10% each, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) around 5% and ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) around 1-2%. That means 1-2 in every 10 people are neurodivergent, so you most probably know at least one neurodivergent person. It is assumed (and my experience points in that direction too) that chances of encountering neurodivergent individuals are even higher in the tech industry.

3. MY STORY

I am one of the 5% with ADHD and I was diagnosed at the tender age of 39. Disclosing this isn't easy, and I am not doing it lightheartedly. The label carries stigma, bias, lack of understanding, denial and a particular perception. While I'm currently in a personal and professional space where my neurodivergence is embraced, I know that this is a luxury and could change in the future.

Growing up in the '90s, the ADHD stereotype was hyperactive, disruptive young boys, who had to be medicated with Ritalin to make it through the school system, hoping that they would grow out of it, as the disorder primarily affects kids. This description is dripping with judgement, and it shaped my perception of ADHD throughout my life. A German children's book, "Struwwelpeter," features the story of a fidgety boy named Phillip, who gets into trouble for taking the whole dinner and tablecloth down because of his inability to sit still. This "Zappel-Phillip" became the poster child for someone with ADHD and this misleading image is still perpetuated.

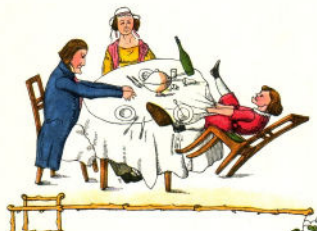


Figure 1: Zappel-Phillip (the story of Fidgety Phillip), the boy who won't sit still at dinner; from a famous German children's book "Struwwelpeter", published 1845 ([Wikipedia](#))

This stereotype is still very present in people's minds. I notice it often when I let people in on my diagnosis. They react with disbelief, because I don't fit that stereotype of ADHD. I was in denial myself when the suspicion was first presented to me and it took over 2 years from there to being diagnosed. The seed was planted in the first year of the pandemic, though I didn't want to admit the possibility.

During the pandemic, I was struggling with anxiety, panic attacks, depressive episodes, and burn-out, though there was no change in stressors or anything in my life. I attributed it to the collective stress the world was going through. I saw others describe similar experiences on social media; it seemed to be a collective experience. I thought I had to try harder to adjust to the new normal because I could do everything before the pandemic. I was still doing okay, excelling at my job, and even got hired by a new company; who cares if my dishes get done or if I can't leave the house to go grocery shopping?

I started to care once the restrictions were lifted. I still couldn't return to my old self, which affected my performance at work back in the office. I struggled to focus, had mood swings, memory problems and insomnia because my brain just wouldn't shut up. Since I'm used to pulling myself up by my bootstraps, I decided to get my life together. Attempting to regain control and organize my scattered mind, I turned to a familiar tool, the bullet journal. It was working, and I gave knowledge sharing sessions around how I used it to be a better Scrum Master. Fueled by the success of those sessions, I pushed myself even further outside my comfort zone and answered a call for presentations for the Mental Health Hacker Village at Defcon, world's biggest hacker conference in Las Vegas. During the Q&A portion of my talk about Bullet Journaling as a stress management tool, someone in the audience pointed out how he liked that I used the tools my occupation as a Scrum Master had taught me to make my personal life more manageable. Another participant came up to me later and thanked me for giving so much practical guidance on how to manage one's ADHD without medication. Looking back, this evening in a suite in Caesars Palace and the conversations I had led to me learning about neurodivergence and inspired this experience report.

I like to help people and I found the thought of how the principles of Scrum could help people with ADHD to manage their symptoms very intriguing. Research revealed ADHD's multifaceted nature and I learned my understanding of what ADHD is, was only a fraction of the picture. Besides the predominantly hyperactive presentation, which shows up as impulsivity and physical hyperactivity, like the "Zappel-Phillip", ADHD can also present itself as inattentive and having trouble maintaining attention, as well as a combination of it. I learned that the symptoms can present themselves differently in adults and how gender and gender roles often result in symptoms being overlooked. The more I learned about ADHD and how it is presented in female adults, the more I had to face the possibility that this was the explanation to my own struggles and why so many things I had tried didn't seem to work for me.

Recognizing my own struggles, I want to share my perspective, aiming to foster understanding and dispel misconceptions. Unfortunately my reality is that I am often misunderstood, how I feel is invalidated, and I am hit with unsolicited advice on how I can easily overcome my ADHD. But you can't willpower out of ADHD. Trust me, I tried. I hope that the examples illustrating how my brain functions in certain situations, how symptoms manifest for me, and the strategies I can employ to address them will help you understand some of the challenges neurodivergent individuals encounter in agile environments.

3.1 The diverse roots of neurodivergent struggles

Let's start at the beginning, with the situation I found myself in at the "Deliver" workshop. Why was slicing a feature into stories so challenging for me? Why did I not see the steps that others could? The simple answer lies in executive dysfunction, a hallmark of ADHD.

Executive function is a set of cognitive processes that help us self-regulate so we can effectively plan, prioritize, and sustain effort toward our long-term goals (*McCabe*). People with ADHD often struggle with these skills, not due to a lack of effort, but because their executive function development is delayed due to neurodevelopmental differences in the brain (*Barkley*). Additionally, there is a deficit in certain neurotransmitters, which affects their control over executive function, emotions, and the reward system. These challenges are not exclusive to ADHD but are also observed among other neurodivergences.

Intellectually, I know how to break projects down into steps and prioritize them against each other. I have experience and training, and I learned techniques and tactics. Yet translating knowledge into action proves difficult. Multiple layers of this problem affect my approach every step of the way, and I try to illustrate only a fraction of those layers for comprehensibility, knowing that there can be many more. You might have encountered the same situation or struggles and felt it yourself, but keep in mind how you dealt with it might not apply to others, as we all are different. In addition, neurodivergent brains are wired differently, therefore not all neuropathways are as available, or developed as in neurotypical brains.

3.2 Breaking down the known

When tasked to slice a feature into stories, my brain doesn't go through an organized list of steps that must be completed. There is a constant stream of thoughts instead, ranging from relevant to the task to absolutely irrelevant and in no particular or logical sequence. While others may effortlessly prioritize their thoughts in real-time, focus only on the relevant, and filter out distractions, it seems that I must put more conscious effort and energy to do the same.

Consider the task of creating this experience report for example: To slice the Feature "publish an experience report for XP2024", I can use techniques I learned like starting from the information given to me, leaning into my own or other people's experience and my transferrable knowledge, to come up with the steps.

Despite lacking direct experience, I can draw from transferable knowledges such as writing college papers, and I can interview colleagues, who have published experience reports before. I would describe this as slicing “a known” as I understand what is expected from a formal point of view and have sources available to acquire more information. I can deduct from the Call for Submission schedule that I must write a proposal, a document showing the progress and a final version, with clear deadlines. My slices are as follows: Write a proposal, write a draft, write the final version. My agile mindset and my training tell me the steps, the expectations and deadlines are clear, so let’s go do step 1, then 2 and then 3. As I learn more along the way, I can adjust or add more stories.

But my mind is already flooded with a web of interconnected thoughts, steps and dependencies, that are hard to untangle. Additional steps like prepare a talk, make some slides, book travel, and preliminary steps like obtain approval to attend the conference already clutter my brain. They pop up in no particular order and at random points in time before I even put any work into writing a proposal. Are all those things essential to publishing the report? Would you consider them part of the feature? I’m inclined to say probably not. For me, they are intertwined in a way that is hard to describe, I can’t automatically discard them as not relevant right now. Partly because they take up the same space, partly because my filters don’t work that way and partly because I know, if I don’t give them attention right now, they’ll be lost forever, especially if they are very far out in the future.

While I use story mapping, use cases or jobs to be done, concentrate on the happy path or focus on most important user group to try to narrow the slices down to “the right steps” and not just any, I struggle to start from the beginning. I allow the stories to develop in a non-sequential way, knowing that it can be difficult for others to start somewhere in the middle and hop around.

Rather than starting from the beginning, I find it easier to start with the end, especially for big projects where I can gauge the expected outcome. Though visualizing the picture of what the end of the project looks like doesn’t work for me, I can apply the concept to identify events, deadlines, deliverables, and expected outcomes. It can tie those things far in the future to the present and help me monitor actions and foresee their consequences.

Despite difficulties with executive functioning, familiar subjects and situations allow me to guide myself and others through these strategies.

3.3 Dealing with the unknown and emotions

Adhering to a logical sequence, filtering irrelevant thoughts and starting from the beginning is already hard when dealing with the known. But breaking down the unknown is daunting, especially for neurodivergent individuals like myself, who struggle with navigating unfamiliar territory. It can feel overwhelming and quite paralyzing when there is no reference, no experience, no starting point, no looking up how someone else has done it, nobody to consult and no expectation to measure against.

For task planning, lacking a clear starting point can trigger a freeze response. For example, none of the steps to writing this report stated in the last section are actionable to me and I freeze. I have to consciously remind myself of strategies to identify a starting point, like defining a spike, a set of research questions, consulting others, establishing guardrails with probable assumptions, writing out scenarios or extensive research.

Before I even attempt to understand what I am supposed to do, I run the idea by a few people for reassurance. This is my natural first step; after all, it might just be another thought that can be discarded as irrelevant. Involving others also creates external accountability, forces me to refine the idea, and raises the probability of success for long running projects. Once others validate my idea and I have formulated my “why” to them, I need to understand what needs to be done. Though the mechanical steps to publish an experience report are clear to me, what that means is not. There are still a lot of “unknowns” even in the known which not only prevents me from breaking it down further, but also from executing it later on. The inability to separate the “how” from the “what” complicates matters. One might argue that you don’t have to know the how, when you’re breaking down the what, but I could advocate the neurodivergent interconnected thought patterns beg to differ. I need to understand both aspects in order to move forward. This is a pattern I often observe in neurodivergent peers.

My next step is extensive research, to find references, identify potential starting points, and determine whether something on this topic already exists. I also like to identify different approaches to a solution and combine them to fit to my purpose. An article on how to write a successful experience report suggests a structure that I try to apply to my story: start with the initial state, describe what you tried to alter the state, what worked, what didn’t and what you learned, and end with the current or desired state. The proposal needs to show the story’s structure and the unique perspective to sell the idea. When I realize I can’t apply this structure to my report, I get immensely frustrated. It triggers an emotional reaction in me, that can seem way out of proportion when viewed from the outside. On the inside, I feel helpless and ready to give up, knowing I can’t deliver that.

The thought carousel in my brain already deemed, that there is no clear initial state or problem to describe. I learned in order to sell the idea I need to be concise and present a distinct problem and solution. My topic however describes a complex problem space and the report has only a few pages to explain it. Any attempt to boil it down feels like trivializing the complexity and implying that the stated “problem” can be solved with the right technique. My reality, however, is that solutions that used to work for me can fail on a whim without any apparent cause. In the end, the desired end state cannot be “a solution to the struggle”, which I assume is what most people expect from this report. I’ve run all the scenarios in my head, and I can’t deliver on most of those presumed expectations. Ultimately, that triggers my emotional reaction and leaves me clueless about what to do.

My thoughts are spiraling, the stress hormones are flowing and that has a significant impact on a neurodivergent person’s access to executive functions. Communication, memory and emotional regulation are impaired even more than usual in a dysregulated nervous system. So while I am in this state, I don’t have access to my full toolbox. Only later, with distance to the situation, I can articulate what triggers me, challenge the presumed expectations, be open to suggestions, and think of other, better, outcomes of this report.

Since neurodivergent individuals process emotions differently and often have trouble controlling them, their response to events can seem out of proportion and appear irrational to others. Past experiences and associative thinking patterns can add fuel to the fire. In addition to impairment while it is happening, it can be challenging to regain focus and move on after such an emotional reaction. I don’t have a recipe for how to diffuse these situations, but knowing how the brain is affected by stress and intense emotions helped me be more understanding and sympathetic when emotions are at play. It also led me to understand why breaks, stepping away from a problem and physically changing the point of view can help to reset before continuing a discussion. Recognizing these patterns in oneself lays the groundwork to improve emotional regulation. Cognitive behavioral therapy, meditation, and mindfulness practices are also very helpful tools for reprogramming automatic responses and enhancing control over emotions.

3.4 Decisions and responding to change

Navigating the unknown presents unique challenges for neurodivergent individuals due to differences in information processing and decision-making. Decisions help to narrow down the path to a solution and demystify the unknown.

Working memory, another executive function which can be underdeveloped in neurodivergent brains, can hinder access to the part of the brain that holds the knowledge at the point of performance (*Barkley*). Even if they try to think before they act, they might not be able to remember past experiences or necessary details before they act. This can lead to avoidable, repeated mistakes and poor risk assessment for decisions requiring attention to detail. Agreed-upon changes to procedure or plans from retrospective, planning or daily, can simply be forgotten during task execution due to this issue.

However, the neurodivergent brain can process large quantities of information very quickly while considering multiple perspectives and running through various scenarios. This can help make good, swift decisions, particularly in high-pressure situations.

While some people are put off by diving too deep into details, others, like myself, are quite the opposite and require more time and information to decide. This need for thorough understanding often leads to extensive research with no end, a behavior linked to analysis paralysis or decision paralysis, the trouble making decisions. It took me a long time to gather information for this report before deciding what to include, and I frequently revised my choices, partly due to indecision and partly due to doubting my decisions.

This indecisiveness can prevent me from starting and finishing tasks, causing delays and extra effort. However, it also allows me to synthesize all the research and approaches, so I can tailor my strategy to a multitude of situations and predict reactions. My ability to absorb a situation in its entirety helps me adapt to changing circumstances.

Decision-making requires a lot of conscious effort from the neurodivergent brain, quickly depleting cognitive resources. Managing this decision fatigue can lead to better decisions, utilizing the rapid processing speed of a neurodivergent brain to think things through thoroughly and consider all possible angles in a relatively short time. Establishing routines and structure can ease the cognitive load. Reducing excess choices, simplifying decisions or minimizing unnecessary decisions can alleviate the burden of decisions. A famous example is Steve Job’s “uniform” which eliminated the daily decision of what to wear, freeing up the brain for more important decisions.

Agile processes are designed to quickly respond to changing conditions, feedback, or new information, requiring us to decide which changes to respond to and which to ignore. This can turn neurodivergent decision

fatigue into change fatigue. While some neurodivergent people thrive in a volatile and uncertain environment because they get a kick out of the novelty and developing situations, others need familiarity and routine. Changes can impact established structures and systems a neurodivergent person needs to function. Sudden changes, unpredictable consequences or unclear reasoning can overwhelm the neurodivergent brain, leading to a dismissive reaction.

3.5 Planning, starting and completing work

Russel A. Barkley highlights a critical struggle for people with ADHD about planning: “To put it simply, adults with ADHD are blind to time – or at least myopic” (Barkley). Effective planning requires estimating how long activities take and constant management along this time axis. Whoever said we all get the same 24 hours in a day was probably neurotypical. Because time perception is distorted in neurodivergent brains, time either runs too slow or too fast. I struggle to gauge how much time has passed, so estimating the duration of tasks, even routine ones, is nearly impossible for me.

The problem this time blindness creates is not only being late for things but also the constant over- or underestimating how long things take. While visual timers can help to remind myself of the passing time and to track how long activities take, I still find myself unable to estimate and plan accurately.

Given the right environment and structure, the neurodivergent brain can work miracles. Give me an interesting or new topic, a competition or make me do it under pressure, my neurodivergent brain can get hyper-focused and it will feel like the world around me ceases to exist. When I am in the zone, immersing myself in something that is stimulating to me, hours passed feel like minutes. At the same time, I can deliver astonishing results in a fraction of time.

But the last 20% of a project are so tedious, completing them require a lot more energy while time seems to slow down. I am more likely to give in to distractions and chase more interesting things rather than complete the “boring” thing, until it becomes so urgent the pressure of a deadline makes me finish it. This might not be the best, most effective or safest way to do it, but it works for me. Leaning into the individual strengths and interests to create space for a directed hyper-focus can push productivity of a team to new heights and generate results you can’t even dream up. Implementing safe-guards like external accountability, check-points, feedback loops and accepting things to be done in one’s own way can help to manage the risks along the time axis.

However, estimating how long all the necessary steps take, is crucial for plan integrity. In a team setting, those estimates can add more stress to a person affected by time blindness. On one side, a team estimate provides a peer-verified understanding of how long something *can* take, but on the other side it can create a false sense of how long something *should* take.

When initiating a task, working in a logical sequence, blocking out distractions and seeing things through until the end is against the makeup of your brain, the pressure of an estimated task can crush you. A software engineer with ADHD explained how he feels inadequate because he can never meet his team’s estimates. He often takes longer because he loses track of time, gets distracted or interrupted and needs longer to resume what he was doing than his neurotypical peers. When he beats the clock and completes a task faster, he is anxious that he made mistakes along the way or forgot something crucial rather than assuming he found a more efficient way to do it.

3.6 Recognizing neurodivergent struggles in team settings

Navigating social situations, group dynamics and communication can be challenging for neurodivergent individuals within the established working culture, affecting how they collaborate. Social anxiety, difficulties in reading social cues, understanding unwritten rules, and differences in sensory processing and communication can cause friction in teams.

Agile ways of working emphasize direct collaboration, often favoring face-to-face and real-time interactions. For neurodivergent people, these interactions are demanding as they often need more time to process and respond to information, recognize subtext and hidden meanings, and manage the sensory input from their environment.

People with ADHD often struggle to recognize the perceived relevance of their thoughts to the group, but those thoughts are still very relevant to them. They might lack the impulse control to wait their turn to speak or lose the ability to listen while holding onto their thought until it’s their turn. Though it might seem ineffective and like a waste of time, sometimes the seemingly irrelevant idea can lead to a breakthrough, innovation, or solution. Therefore, giving these “interruptions” some room instead of dismissing them can be beneficial.

Behaviors such as repeating questions, making seemingly irrelevant or unrelated comments, or providing excessive detail are often shut down by facilitators to restore the focus. I adopted these behaviors to some extent,

understanding that time is finite and endless discussions don't deliver outcomes. However, learning about neurodivergence has given me a new perspective on these contributions and why the seemingly correct responses to such interruptions upset me. What others see as "too detailed" might be the step-by-step instructions a person with autism needs to process information or the reminders a person with ADHD needs to remember crucial details.

The neurodivergent web of thoughts might identify patterns or connect things in a way that can be hard to follow for those who don't see these connections. In situations where a solution is very obvious to me quickly, I often have to give others time to catch up and talk them through my thought process. Letting someone verbalize their thoughts doubles as a way to help them organize ideas and assess their relevance. Capturing this thought process in a mind map can help visualize the connections and leave a trail of breadcrumbs that can help with the execution. If you don't want to derail your meetings with the full team, book sessions with a smaller group, allow them to follow the stream of thoughts and see where it leads. My colleague Kris has the remarkable talent to capture my thought streams in a conversation and structure the ideas in a Miro board. He also uses curious questions to softly steer the conversation back on track, when I get carried away.

While limiting the cognitive load helps to focus on the most important things, being too constrictive can kill neurodivergent productivity. Striking a balance between focus and allowing distractions can help address fluctuating energy levels. I feel the urge to limit the work in progress as a Scrum Master, but I also know that allowing task hopping can help get people out of a freeze or a dead-end. When someone has an off day, I prefer they do something of value that is not on the board over forcing them to work on the open task that they don't have the brain capacity for.

4. WHAT I LEARNED

Success in business isn't achieved through a one-size-fits-all approach. While businesses often replicate proven models and push for efficiency and conformity with systems and processes, they may overlook individual needs in favor of organizational norms. We live in a normative world where being different is still widely labeled somewhere between a nuisance and impermissible. However, divergent perspectives, such as those of neurodivergent individuals, offer untapped potential.

Neurodivergent brains perceive and process the world differently, experience it with all senses simultaneously, and have trouble processing and filtering these stimuli. Their brain chemistry and neuronal pathways are wired differently, which influences how they absorb, access, and connect knowledge. That can unlock unknown possibilities but also requires to rethink how we approach things and how we do things. Instead of forcing neurodivergent people to overcompensate their weaknesses in systems and processes that deplete them, we can help them use their unique abilities and strengths to propel organizations towards unprecedented success.

There is enormous potential in embracing this diversity, allowing people to bring their unmasked selves to work. After all, one of the key values in the Agile Manifesto is "Individuals and interactions over processes and tools", so let's follow it.

There is no solution to neurodivergence, nor is there a need for one. I am responsible for my actions and reactions even if they are caused by my ADHD. Being neurodivergent is not an excuse, but it can provide context. Acceptance and accommodation are key, allowing neurodivergent individuals to thrive in their own unique ways. We don't all have to use the same tools or play by neurotypical rules, just because that is how it always has been done. Flexibility, patience, clear communication and encouragement go a long way. I am glad I have a supportive environment and a job where my unique strengths and talents add value, without sacrificing who I am.

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