

**Good Things Happen Podcast Season 3**  
**Episode 6: Unlocking the Potential of Neurodivergent Talent**  
**Guests: Darren Jarvis & James Cusack**  
**Final Transcript**

**Jorian (00:13):**

Welcome to Good Things Happen, the podcast series that shows the human side of banking. In today's episode, I have two guests to help shine a light on neurodiversity. The Oxford English Dictionary defines neurodiversity as the range of differences in individual brain function and behavioral traits regarded as part of normal variation in the human population, in brackets, used especially in the context of autistic spectrum disorders.

To help us unpick and understand precisely what that means, we have James Cusack, chief executive officer of Autistica, the UK's leading autism research and campaigning charity. Joining James is Darren Jarvis, who is head of operations risk and control for Citi's Institutional Clients Group. As always, we love to start by hearing their stories. James, how and why did you join the charity sector, and why autism? This is, I know, very personal to you.

**James (01:08):**

Yeah, thank you. I joined the charity sector back in 2015. So, I've been in the chief executive role for three years. Before that, I was actually Autistica's Director of Research, overseeing our research strategy and so on. Before that, I worked in academia doing a PhD and a postdoc, but I also worked directly with autistic people in a range of different environments as well as lobbying and working and campaigning to ensure that Scotland had its first ever autism strategy.

I became interested in autism because as a child I was diagnosed as being autistic, and that meant that I grew up alongside other autistic people, and I'm really passionate about ensuring that autistic people have the same opportunities that other people have, particularly considering the really serious inequalities that autistic people face in terms of health, wellbeing, but also access to opportunities that many people take for granted, access to a job, access to the right schooling and education and support and understanding and acceptance and so on. And so, as a charity we're really committed to changing that through the series of goals that we have.

**Jorian (02:14):**

Brilliant, and that is a beautiful segue to Darren. Before we talk about your particular interest in this subject, Darren, tell us what was your career path that led you to fill a leadership role at one of the world's most global institutional banks? Were you a young lad who thought, "I'm going to be a global banker," or did you have a different story?

**Darren (02:35):**

No, no. I did not dream of being a banker as a young lad. I grew up in Wales, a million miles away from the City of London—I had no idea what I actually wanted to study in university or let alone as a career. So, I went to university to study physics, and so it's kind of science oriented.

It's interesting actually, whilst at university studying physics, I realized I was actually not very good at it. At university, it was very conceptual, you need to be creative and imaginative and apply the principles

that you learn, and my brain just didn't work that way. And I realized that physics was not really for me. And then looking around to see what else to do, I fell into accounting, which I loved.

And really, that flip in career from science into accounting then led me into working for banks. And I have worked for a number of big institutions and came to Citigroup 11 years ago now. And I've done a number of roles within Citi of different types. One of the things I really like about working here is just the breadth of what you do. So, it's hard to describe my job because it's very varied in that respect, and we get involved in many different things straddling the organization.

**Jorian (03:35):**

Lovely. I'd like to ask James to recollect his story of learning about and living with autism. I think the word you said was diagnosed. Tell us that story because I think it will help us.

**James (03:47):**

Yeah. I think what was interesting from my perspective is that it was noticed quite early on that I was quite different. I had a brother who was 15 months younger than me. I think to my parents it was very, very obvious the way that I did things was very different to him, and that actually I had certain difficulties in certain areas. And there's a really interesting report which was compiled when I was three, basically summarizing all the behaviors that I have, and they're now what we define as being autistic. But this was in 1988, and because of that it wasn't actually recognized particularly proactively. And so, it wasn't until I went all the way through, until 12 years old before I was finally diagnosed as being autistic.

And at that point we were in a bit of a crisis stage, and I really needed quite a lot of support for mental health services as well as a day patient for periods of time as well while things stabilized. But was very lucky I went to one of the UK's first ever bases, which is essentially a couple of rooms set within a mainstream school, which provides tailored support, but also allows you to go on and get on with your schooling. And that was a very transformative experience for me. It enabled me to go on and go off to university, do my degree and PhD, but also to have the life skills to be able to cope and to thrive in the world as well.

So, I'm extremely, extremely grateful to have had that opportunity, and I often feel very, very lucky to be in the position I am because it could have gone a very, very different way if that timely support wasn't in place for me.

**Jorian (05:20):**

And did you single out one change in you having the diagnosis and getting that support? What changed? You mentioned crisis, did you suddenly realize it was not a crisis?

**James (05:31):**

Well, I think one of the great things about where we are now to where we were in 1997 is I think we conceptualize autism in a different way. But if I'm honest, at the time it didn't feel like good news when I got the diagnosis, it felt like bad news, and I was going to have a series of limitations placed on my life. So actually, it took me quite a significant period of time to process and to really think about it properly. But what I've come to understand in retrospect is that getting this diagnosis helps you to understand who you are and why you're different as a person, and it helps other people to understand who you are and why you're different as a person, and that's really important.

I guess one of the key messages for me around autism, but actually neurodiversity more broadly, is building that understanding of yourself, and beginning to be able to understand other people is so key to

creating societies that work, teams that work, workplaces that work to their optimum effectiveness. And I guess it's something I'm very passionate about because I've seen how difficult it is when you don't understand yourself and you don't get the right support.

**Jorian (06:38):**

Darren, now tell us what's provoked your interest in neurodiversity, but also tell us about the work that you do within Citi related to this subject.

**Darren (12:20):**

Sure, thank you. My experience is one of being a parent of two children with neurodiverse traits. Both are very different experiences actually. But it started quite some time ago when my son was very young and his mother and I began to notice some noticeable speeches with his development, speech was delayed and a couple of other things. And it began to trigger closer observation, and he was diagnosed relatively early on with autistic spectrum disorder.

But that developed over time into a more refined understanding of those areas in which his cognitive ability was atypical, and we settled on diagnosis of dyslexia and dyspraxia and dyscalculia. Now, because this was done very early on, we were able to then set in place various support mechanisms which gave him the opportunity to engage with education, to go through the school experience, and ultimately to get some qualifications and apprenticeship and a job.

My daughter's experience was somewhat different, actually. My daughter went through the whole education process not being considered to have any sort of neurodiverse aspects at all. But really when COVID hit, when she was in university at the time, the remote working conditions really triggered something really pretty profound in her. And she was old enough to see this for herself, acknowledge that she had difficulties. She herself reached out for some assistance and she received a diagnosis of ADHD, and this is in her twenties, which to James' earlier point, I think has really helped her understand a lot about herself and her experience.

I really wanted to share that experience so that there could be a greater degree of awareness, and then to help my colleagues really think about how to assist those of us in our community who themselves are dealing with neurodiverse conditions and help them by giving them what can often be very modest adjustments to their environment and conditions such that they can meet their full potential.

I'm the key sponsor at my organization for the neurodiverse initiative that we have. And really what I'm doing is sharing my own experience, which truthfully I find hard sometimes, but I think it's important to talk about it and really get a conversation going such that we can be a little more sensitive, a little more aware, educated, and can really do what we can to improve the opportunities of our staff and to improve the recruiting process such that we bring that kind of talent into our organization.

**Jorian (09:13):**

The clear thread in everything we've talked about so far is understanding. James, you talked about understanding yourself and your place in the world and how helpful that is. Darren, you are talking about everyone understanding each other. James, let's start with, maybe, understanding terminology. We had a brief conversation before we pressed record on neurodiversity versus autism and explain to me and our listeners the language of how we navigate this because I think if we're freer and more able to express and understand with the language and the terminology we use, then we'll start better understanding.

**James (09:50):**

I think the first thing to say about this is I think it is a bit of a minefield these things and people do naturally find it a little bit tricky to get their head round. I think the key thing to understand is neurodiversity is about everyone, so everybody is neurodiverse in some way. And so, neurodiversity is just the simple idea that we all think about and understand the world in a different way. Being neurodivergent means that you are significantly different in some sorts of ways and would meet the criteria for what we would say is some sort of neurodevelopmental condition, so that could include autism or ADHD or dyslexia or developmental language disorder. And those conditions have distinct terminologies that underpin them.

So for example, if you're autistic, there's a set of diagnostic criteria that clinicians will use to help identify you, normally through a series of interviews, and that would sort of include looking at things around how you make eye contacts, how you socially communicate, how you pay attention to other people, where you've got specific interests, or you like participating in things that involve repetition, whether or not you have any sensory sensitivities to things like light and sound and so on.

So yeah, each piece of language is important, and it has its own place. I really like the emergence of neurodiversity as a concept because I think it's more inclusive in the same way that mental health is an inclusive term and makes it about everyone. And I think there's a real risk with this that as we encounter barriers and issues for autistic people and other people with neurodevelopmental conditions like ADHD, what we end up inadvertently doing is going, "Oh, there's these people over in the corner who are different or have difficulties in some way, and we need to help them to resolve some of their issues." Actually, what you're trying to do is create an inclusive environment for everyone and trying to understand what each person needs within the workplace to thrive.

And it's really essential that we don't make the mistake of thinking that everything isn't an issue with the person who has autism, with the person who has ADHD. And actually, we think about the dynamics involved because just because someone is significantly different or in a minority doesn't mean that the way that they're thinking about things is always wrong. And I think building that two-way process of trying to understand each other is essential to building thriving and successful teams.

**Jorian (12:18):**

Darren, you were nodding your head furiously, which our listeners wouldn't be able to see. It seems like you're in full agreement of getting a broader understanding that we are all different, we all think different, and that autism or people diagnosed with particular conditions shouldn't be separated. Tell us your view of this, and how are you tackling this within Citi?

**Darren (12:40):**

Yeah, no, thank you. So, there's a couple of things here. We spoke at the outset about the need to be sensitive to language and I fully share that as I begin to have conversations around my community, around neurodiversity, I'm very sensitive to the fact that there's a lot of terminology out there which means different things to different people. And obviously what I don't want to do is to upset or offend. but it's important just to try to articulate how I think and express a view.

So, I don't think we should inhibit ourselves or shut down a conversation for fear of offense, I think we should be open and have a conversation. Any rate, the thing that really resonates with me is that notion that we are all neurodiverse in some form to some degree, and that changes the way you look at it. So truthfully, from my own perspective, I began to think about this topic I did zone in on conditions. I don't like that word actually, but you know what I mean by that, and then you begin focusing on some specific needs for those individuals who deviate from a typical pool.

If you start to become sensitive to those issues, and if you start to have conversations, realize that everyone's different, have an environment where you feel free to make adjustments as required, it actually benefits everybody.

And that's really the thing that I'm beginning to really come to terms with is that this is about creating an environment which is about how we see each other in a more fulsome manner, and how we work with each other, and that really begins to be an enriching experience all around. And so, we often talk about diversity as really addressing a particular cohort. I think this is one thing where we're talking about general population, albeit clearly, we need to really think about assisting certain members of our community.

**Jorian (14:25):**

James, talk to me about the work that you do at Autistica to build understanding. And I want to break understanding down because it could almost feel like one huge cohort and a small cohort, but we're not talking about that. We're talking about parents and children; we're talking about individuals wanting to be in the world of work. We're talking about building teams so that different people with different skill sets can excel in different areas, so it's for the common good.

How does Autistica, with the research it does, help people just get broader awareness and understanding to grow in their support of appreciating a neurodiverse population?

**James (15:06):**

For us, I think what we have, we are guided by six goals that we have, which are really all about the change that we want to see by 2030. And for me it starts from people getting the right support and understanding from day one, from the moment that they get a diagnosis. I'm personally very driven by this because I remember my mum coming back to the car, which I was sitting in when she found out that I'm autistic. And it was basically not particularly conveyed in a very constructive way, but it was basically like, "Here's your label, off you go, all the very best of luck."

So, in terms of support and understanding, it first and foremost starts with giving people who get the diagnosis and label themselves the right support and understanding of what it means for them, and I think there's a lot of work to do to ensure that happens. We know in the UK 200,000 people are waiting for an autism diagnosis, for example. It's a huge number of people, so we need to change that.

We need to also change society's awareness and understanding of autism. So, we're doing work at the moment to try and measure attitudes towards autistic people and other forms of neurodiversity. We're actually creating a measure, and we're looking to poll the public on this on a regular basis, but also to test how different awareness-raising and understanding building initiatives can help to change attitudes to people with a view to looking at what the different populations and cohorts need. What do you need in a health setting, what do you need in a workplace setting, and so on?

And then I think a key thing within an employment context is trying to help companies to understand this area. But we do know awareness and understanding of these issues are low. So, we are working on creating a tool which will allow businesses to understand how they can create and make evidence-based changes. But we've also convinced the government to do a review, specifically looking at autism and employment, which has been approved by the Prime Minister and has been chaired by Robert Buckland, who's the former Welsh secretary and former justice secretary. And he's overseeing this review with support from myself and the team at Autistica and the Department for Work and Pensions as well.

So, there's huge, I think, opportunities there to help build the awareness and understanding within companies around what they can do. And I think this is a really timely opportunity because the reality is

if you look at the broader microeconomic environment, people are struggling to recruit people and struggling to find good people. And there's a real opportunity for businesses to understand here that if they can change how they do things, they're going to retain more of their staff and they keep more of their good people, but also, they're going to get other new brilliant people as well.

And so, I think we have a real opportunity here, not just to make the lives of people who are autistic and people who have ADHD and all these other forms of neurodivergence better, we have a huge opportunity to help improve the performance of organizations, and also to build a more inclusive society as well.

**Jorian (18:18):**

Yeah, me too. Darren, you mentioned you're a champion within Citi. What does that entail, and what is Citi doing to help in this area?

**Darren (18:25):**

suppose my role is one of really promoting having the conversation, sharing my own experiences, and being a relatively senior member of the organization, leading by example, in that kind of willingness to have the conversation and share. I think we are relatively early in the journey of fully understanding these issues around neurodiversity, and then changing our environment such that we can more fully get over some of the structures which in the past have impeded sort of progress and meeting full potential of those people who differ from the norm, as we've discussed.

What we're doing right now is really broadening awareness. Candidly, and I can talk about my own experience, unless and until you've been personally touched by this, awareness and understanding of this is really long. So, for my part, once I first began to start talking about things like dyslexia, suddenly it's like a whole new world opened up to me, suddenly you see just how many people are touched by this in some way or another. But before that I was completely unconscious to it. And so, even though I would like to thank them, I'm a fairly open and social person, there's no question that I would've been conditioned by stereotypes and norms, which would've impacted the way which I engage with people. I probably didn't recruit people simply because they didn't look me in the eye or didn't have a strong handshake or whatever. It gives one pause to think about that.

We are working on education for our leaders, managers, and for the organization at large. We provide access to various resources to our staff to learn about all of this. We want to ensure that area managers and other staff are conscious of these issues and really work to offer whatever adjustments are achievable to give full access to talent pools that are out there.

The one thing that I really want to say though is that it's all too easy to frame this conversation negatively in terms of overcoming adversity. And that is important because that is real, but I do think we need to talk about this in more positive terms as well. Diversity in and of itself is a good thing, and I think by bringing into our organization cognitive diversity, we bring into the organization people who see the world slightly differently, who interpret it differently, who process it differently. And that will lead to more creative thinking, problem solving, and so on.

And somebody said to me a couple of months ago, he used a phrase which really resonated, which is, the optimum cognitive function that was chosen for the industrial age may not necessarily be the same for the digital age, and certainly that gives me some thought. So actually, by embracing this, by allowing the neurodiversity of our existing staff to be released, and then by bringing in a greater range of people, I think there's a real commercial aspect to that as well. And so, we need to celebrate that too in a positive sense, and that's the way which we're trying to change our thinking towards this.

**Jorian (21:19):**

I think that is an absolutely brilliant point, James, the thought of in a world that is going to be increasingly AI-enabled, and creativity really does come from diversity. What are your thoughts on this? What does employing a more neurodivergent workforce give opportunity? How would you express this to organizations? Have you got any examples, maybe, of where this has helped?

**James (21:47):**

Well, diversity fuels, as Darren says, and made the point brilliantly, it fuels creativity, it fuels better organizational performance. And we know this is true, we've seen this evidence multiple times. And there's arguably no more powerful form of that than cognitive diversity. It's literally about the differences in terms of how you think about and understand the world, so it's absolutely pivotal.

Autistica, a huge proportion of our team are neurodivergent, so many are autistic, many have a neurodevelopmental condition and we're definitely overrepresented, perhaps not surprisingly in that respect. What I see is a charity who is not bound by convention in terms of how we do things. And that has been a huge advantage for us in terms of how we operate and how effective we are. We have a reputation relative to our income in size of punching enormously above our weight, both in terms of the policy impact we have, the quality of the research that we do, and the way that we communicate information.

And that to me is one of the great privileges of working at an organization like I do. I can look at other banks and other organizations who've included autistic people, and frequently, one of the best findings that I find is it makes people better managers. And I think what encountering neurodiversity and thinking about neurodiversity makes you do is realize that isn't going to cut the mustard. It's actually not going to optimize your performance. What you need to do is to think about what each person and your team member needs and how you can create an inclusive set of expectations as well.

But I think that is ultimately that set of understanding is what embeds creativity. And it creates also that psychological safety. If you can create an inclusive culture, it creates a psychological safety that enables creatives here as well, which I think is absolutely key.

**Jorian (23:44):**

I love this thread of the conversation and it makes me think that we're on our third series of this podcast, and everybody wants to talk about change and disruption and innovation. And you used the word, it's almost the enemy of business is normal and doing the same because it's so competitive out there. Darren, this seems like a huge opportunity for the organizations that understand, embrace, and just use this creativity, channel this creativity, and channel this cognitive divergence to look at new opportunities.

**Darren (24:14):**

Yeah, no, absolutely. This is the thing; I really do think that this is recognizing that we are all different. And if you're really to be successful in any kind of venture, you really do need to have access to the complete talent pool that is out there. And all too often what organizations do is inadvertently, say, put up barriers to large portions of that talent pool, and I fear right now, actually, barriers to an incredibly important valuable talent pool given where the world is going, where technology is going, society writ large is going.

To give you an example, my son with dyslexia, found the accumulation of knowledge via text, by reading hard, but he knows an incredible amount, and surprises me all the time with his knowledge. And sometimes I'll say to him, "Well, where did you get that from?"

"Oh, YouTube."

The world is different. The world is evolving, and different minds are going to be more attuned to some of the evolution that we're talking about here. We need to have access to that; we need to free it up. We need to bring it into our organization and embrace it if we are to be successful.

**Jorian (25:22):**

Well, my brother is dyslexic, and he was schooled in an age where it was never understood, and I keep telling him that Einstein was dyslexic, and if Einstein hadn't been able to look at the world differently, we might be in a very different place. So, I think that's the ultimate example for me.

James, as we come to the end of this podcast, what advice do you give, or would you give to those who are diagnosed with a neurodivergent form to building their careers? What would your recommendations be? What are your learnings?

**James (25:55):**

Yeah. Well, everyone's different and everyone has a different life story and set of experiences. I'm very, very conscious that I'm very lucky, I've had the right support at the right times and so on. So don't be too bound by other people's stories because if they've had success, it's because probably they've had a bit of luck and because they've had the right levers at the right time.

I'm always a bit nervous about using my own story because it is... I'm very proud of everything that I've been able to do, but it's also been about luck and opportunity and having support at the right time. But I think if I was to suggest anything, I think it really starts with accepting yourself, and that's a very, very hard thing for us all to do. I listen to a lot of podcasts and a theme of a lot of podcasts, you hear people being interviewed, celebrities being interviewed, a sort of coming to terms with yourself, and here you are.

And I think it's something that everyone finds difficult, but I think if you're neurodivergent, it can be a bit of an ongoing battle because you're constantly facing stigma every day around who you are and why being different is a problem. I think trying to come to terms with who you are is something that's really important while also accepting that there's going to be times where that's difficult as well. And it's still something that I battle with despite having all the information that I have at my fingertips.

I think that's really, really important because as you come to accept and understand yourself, then that puts you in a position to know that you do have the right and the opportunity to ask for things to change. And actually, you shouldn't just ask for things to change because it's nice for you, it's nice for everyone, it'll make the workplace a better place, they'll get a better employee out of you. And I think it's important for people to know, as well, that things are changing. There are organizations that are thinking about how they can use evidence-based ways to improve their recruitment practices, organizations that are looking to create reasonable adjustments in the workplace as well.

So, there is in many cases a path for people in a workplace, for people that could work for them. I think understanding your own mental health as well, I think is really, really important. I think for many people when they think about something like autism, for example, you see the autism is this primary thing, what about the mental health issues that's around it? We know that people who are neurodivergent have a lot of mental health issues. So being aware of that I think in some ways is almost more important than their underpinning neurodevelopment diagnosis. And I think being aware of that is really, really key.

And to also not be ashamed of what the things that you sim. You are the things that you enjoy, the things that you like to do and not feeling it any way as you come to accept yourself that you have to do things because that's what everyone else enjoys as well, and coming to terms with that is really, really



absolutely key. I also think finding other people with similar experiences to you. I think it's really positive that organizations like Citi are creating initiatives around neurodiversity and finding that community is really important. Having space to be able to share experiences, I think is so important, particularly when you feel quite isolated. So those are some of my initial thoughts, but that's helpful.

**Jorian (29:15):**

Wow. If they're your initial thoughts, there were five brilliant pieces of advice for all mankind, not just the subject that we're talking about. Last word from you, Darren, sorry, that you have to follow that brilliant closure from James, but what advice do you give to your colleagues in better understanding the diverse nature of humankind in an organization?

**Darren (29:38):**

Every time I talk to James, I learn. And there is the thing, I would recommend to all organizations really to reach out and engage with James or similar organizations as well, to really learn, challenge your thinking, get information because it really does open up your mind to the challenges that what's likely to be a fairly sizable portion of your existing employee base have, let alone the lost potential of that, and the loss of potential for the talent pool that is out there as well.

It really does make you think, right? What I would say is just a couple of things. I don't particularly like labels, and I certainly don't like the word normal. What is normal? It is entirely normal to have cognitive diversity in the human species. So, this is about all of us, and it's about really changing the way you think, changing the way you engage with your fellow human being, and changing the way in which you set in place structures and processes to deal with people, and it's in your own interest as an organization to do so. So, it's a journey, we are still learning an awful lot. But I'm encouraged by the conversations we're having, not least this one. So, I do see some sunshine on the horizon.

**Jorian (30:44):**

Thank you so much, gentlemen. I have so enjoyed this conversation. It reminds me of one of my favorite quotes of Oscar Wilde who said, "Be yourself because everybody else is already taken." And I think that absolutely sings out from the concluding comments from both of you. Thank you for your time. Thank you for sharing your insights and observations. Yeah, thank you for joining Good Things Happen.

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