

**World Changers Podcast**  
**Ep.2 Beautiful Minds**



**Elle Bradley-Cox 00:08**

Welcome to World Changers, a podcast exploring the trends making an enduring mark on our world of work, and how business leaders, HR teams, and internal communicators can stay one step ahead.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 00:24**

Whether it's driven by the business case or the moral case, neurodivergent people are finally beginning to be valued by the mainstream, as several high-profile corporate announcements in 2021 show. But to make sure this isn't just a token moment; we need to disrupt hiring policies and change mindsets for the long term. Consultant Hester Lonergan chose this theme as her World Changer for our 2022 report. Later in this episode, we chat with Anthony Friel, who sits on the board of Neurodiversity in Business as Chief Community Officer. He's also a senior consultant at Deloitte, bringing his business expertise and insights to the charity. But, before that, Hester, I got together with our D&I champion Russ Norton to explore some beautiful minds.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 01:03**

Russ, Hester, welcome! Thank you for joining me on World Changers.

**Russ Norton 01:09**

Oh, pleasure to be here. Thanks for having us.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 01:10**

So, Hester, this is your topic, what inspired you to write about this?

**Hester Lonergan 01:16**

I am passionate about understanding and supporting and opening conversations on neurodiversity and neurodivergence. One of the most recent interesting - not debates - but conversations I've been having is around the terminology. I know we refer to neurodiversity and neurodivergence, sometimes interchangeably. I'm not necessarily sure there's a right answer. But I tend to refer to an individual who is neurodivergent as neurodivergent. And then the I guess, more conceptually, or more collectively, the idea of neurodiversity. Just to call that one out. So yeah, I'm passionate about neurodiversity, I think, both from a professional perspective, but also from a personal perspective. In this role, we always have our ear to the ground, understanding what's going on within businesses, and what initiatives and what conversations are really starting to surface, getting to the bottom of those to try and help drive the change that there needs to be within business. I think one of the things that we have started to really see over the last few years is more conversation and more nuance around neurodiversity. Obviously, we've seen a lot more conversation around things like mental health, and general diversity and inclusion, which I'm sure Russ will get to at some point. And it feels like neurodiversity really is then the next conversation,

the next stigma that people have started approaching. People have started feeling more confident to ask questions. Seeing that conversation starting to develop has been brilliant. And it's something that I've noticed, and that others have noticed. It felt like the right time to start surfacing that. Also, from a personal perspective, it's something that hugely resonates with me. Currently, in the UK, I think one in seven people are neurodivergent. So, whether you know it or not, chances are you don't work with one person who's neurodivergent. You work with loads of people who are neurodivergent. And as I said, it's something that really is close to me. I, over the last few years, have really come to understand myself better. And understand that the way that I think is slightly different to the way that people assume I maybe should think. Being able to be part of conversations on neurodiversity has been a huge step-change in the way that I communicate, the way that I do my job, but also the way that I live. Having gone through that process myself, and then seeing this opportunity to evolve the conversation come up more broadly within the workplace, it really felt like the moment to start finding ways to talk more about it. Finding ways maybe to help other people across the country and across the world get to know themselves better and feel more open and feel more able to be authentic.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 04:31**

Thank you for sharing a little nudge into your own personal life there, Hester. I know that it's not easy, and hopefully it's a safe enough space that you can share so thank you. And I couldn't agree with you more. I'm certainly party to a lot of conversations on neurodiversity, but Russ, I'm really interested because in your field of expertise as diversity and inclusion professional, I feel like you must be hearing this too, right?

**Russ Norton 04:54**

Yeah. And it's interesting. I've learned masses from Hester, actually and I'm grateful Hester has brought this conversation to the agenda. I think it's interesting also, as you mentioned, how previously, neurodiversity was sort of lumped in with mental health. And the two don't belong together at all. They are completely different themes, and they raise completely different questions and needs for support in the workplace. I think it's right to look at it as two distinct topics. I think the other thing that I've heard, and I've observed is a certain level of positive discrimination towards neurodivergent people, in that there's some flippant comments around "Oh, autistic people are really good at coding, we need to hire more autistic people, because that will help fill our tech roles". And that's just a negative assumption and isn't the solution to any business challenge anyway. It only reinforces misconceptions about people. So, I think the time is right for more dialogue, more conversation and greater understanding.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 06:16**

It's very simplistic that approach, isn't it. While you can certainly see that some people have different skills and super strengths, getting in that in inverted commas, talent, for that reason, doesn't feel that comfortable.

**Russ Norton 06:31**

Not at all. And that's not good for those people. And it's not good for those organisations. That's not a long-term strategy by any means. I think the other interesting point that Hester raises is around the spectrum – everything is a spectrum: sexuality is a spectrum., gender is a spectrum, neurodiversity is a spectrum. And everyone experiences this to different extents. To some people who are further along the spectrum, it's much more important and it has a greater impact on their lives. But we can all understand how our own brains work, and what I love, from what you've shared with me, is around how understanding neurodiversity has helped you make sense of how you navigate the world. I've really noticed you becoming more confident and almost embracing it as part of your identity. I'm grateful to you for sharing that with me because I've learned masses from you already.

**Hester Lonergan 06:33**

Thanks Russ! There's so much that I could respond to that with. I think one of the interesting things that I'll touch on is neurodiversity. Such a huge part of thinking differently to how society has decided we maybe should think, comes hand in hand with communication. And when you've talked about mental health conversations, and all the other facets that we acknowledge as part of diversity and inclusion, being able to express yourself and being able to advocate for yourself. Any group that you are looking to support and champion or move into the conversation on being able to communicate clearly and authoritatively and articulately is so important. So, what happens with neurodiversity? Part and parcel of that is viewing the world slightly differently and speaking about the world and ourselves slightly differently. So, when you don't necessarily play into the agreed collective narrative, and you don't necessarily use language in the same way, how then do you advocate for yourself.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 08:50**

I really like your point on different thinking. It plays into so many very open, honest, and brave interviews that I've had with individuals recently, one very memorable conversation I had with a chap who had ADHD and he said to me, "people are scared of people who think differently." You only have to look at religion and war to understand that people don't like different thinkers. And I have always, and will always, be an outsider because I think differently. And he just acknowledged it, faced into it, and sort of embraced that persona. I think "thinking differently" is a healthy way of looking at neurodivergence, because it's just about different minds. When you get the right minds in the room, and make sure that they are all different. We've done quite a few pitches this week and we've been talking about how important it is not to have everybody play the same role in those pitches and to have different voices, different minds, and different thinkers. It's massively important. Now, I do want to talk a little bit about how we often think, sadly, in cliches and stereotypes when it comes to neurodiversity. Very often in the mass media, disability in general is portrayed as something that we need to fix. I'm wondering how you think we could help change this mindset in people if we embrace this different thinking tone?

**Russ Norton 10:17**

I think that's really interesting, especially when you start from "why is the majority view, why is the stereotyped view, what it is?" I think Hester, another thing that you've taught me is about later diagnosis of autism and ADHD in women. Because all the scientific studies originally were done on men. And more than likely they were done on white men. So also, for people of colour who are autistic, or neurodivergent, they've gone for many, many years without that support. They face even worse stigma. So, I think there's a compound issue here, that being different from the majority is difficult in the first place. When you combine that with other dimensions of diversity, it becomes even more of a struggle. But what you're saying here, Elle, is that there isn't a problem, there isn't a barrier to fix necessarily. It's the lack of acceptance, or the lack of understanding from the majority that causes the problem. That's the same with disability. Disability is only disabling because our worlds are geared for people who are fully able bodied. And as soon as you introduce things like ramps and lifts into buildings, and Braille signs and other accommodations, then you're no longer disabled, necessarily, because your environment is more welcoming to you. So, I don't think neurodiversity is a disability necessarily. Any disabling effect of neurodiversity is only through the lack of understanding and lack of accommodation from the people around you.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 12:06**

Sometimes that can be solved if you're brave enough and feel safe enough yourself. I saw a brilliant example Kate posted on LinkedIn today, where somebody had held a presentation and said they were autistic, and that they would really struggle to answer audience questions during, because it would make them forget the key points of their own pitch. They said it would take their mind to other places and they put cute little ideas on their presentation document about where it might take their mind to which just engaged the audience. But really was a way of kind of outing themselves in the room, early. If you've got the bravery to do that, amazing. It really warms the audience up, too. Hester, any thoughts on this?

**Hester Lonergan 12:47**

I think within neurodiversity, one of the useful ways for me, personally, to think about it and speak about it is "high needs versus low needs". So, it is a huge, probably, unending spectrum. But when we talk about things like being autistic, it's a complete binary. You are either, by definition, autistic or allistic. So, you are either what society has deemed "normal", or you're not. That is what autistic means. So, we have then lumped different kinds of behaviours and characteristics into that. But essentially, it just means either you're the same, or you're different. And within that huge, huge group of people, there are people who really find it difficult to perform the tasks within a traditional or modern workplace they need to be able to do. But then there are also innumerable amounts of people who have what we'd term "low needs". So, they can get along well without anybody noticing that there's anything different or maybe any accommodations. There's some support that they would benefit from that viewing neurodiversity purely as a lack and purely as something that means people cannot do what they may need to do in a workplace or cannot function productively in society, is really limiting. I think, as I say, thinking about it around the support requirements, and how it shows up and how it plays out within traditional structures is a useful way to view it.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 14:38**

So, I guess then, thinking about what you've just been talking about with employers, what considerations should people have for neurodivergence in a post-pandemic workplace?

**Hester Lonergan 14:50**

Well, broadly and specifically here, I think it comes down to not necessarily just thinking of ways to accommodate thinking different but thinking more. It plays so much into the assumptions that we make around how people should behave and what we expect from people. And I guess jumping to the obvious conclusions, because we're all time poor and it's much easier to be able to predict behaviour and feel like you do X, Y, and Z and that will make people feel X, Y, and Z, but taking a bit of extra time to expect and plan for a difference in response to the difference in needs. And a difference in behaviours and characteristics and abilities means that you are better equipped.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 15:47**

And line managers really come into play here because this is supposedly their heartland. They kind of must think about the people who are working for them, and how they can help make the best world of work for them and help listen to them and understand more. I mean, have you got any thoughts on what else employers should do?

**Russ Norton 16:06**

For me, it's interesting because when you start to look at the things that benefit neurodivergent people; setting clear parameters, being crystal clear with your instructions, defining a brief, helping those people understand what "great" looks like, regular check ins and support and being available for advice and questions. Those are things that everyone benefits from. So much of the world of work is Paste, Paste, Paste, delivery, growth, aggressive targets, delivery, execution, execution, execution. And an awful lot of this is just creating the headspace and the time and the permission for people to get to the same end outcome or a better end outcome, but in a slower way, or in a way that's better for them. So, a huge part of this is around giving people the permission and the space to work in a way that's best for them. And how many times have we heard the phrase "slow down to speed up"? That is embracing diversity of thoughts, that is carving the time and the space out in your organisation to allow people to be at their absolute best, and not just be laser focused on delivery, delivery, because that's precisely what's going to exclude anyone who doesn't fit into that highly capitalistic growth orientated mindset.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 17:39**

I think sometimes in the corporate world as well, there can be such ambiguity and politics at play in meetings, which can be hard for anybody to read.

**Russ Norton 17:49**

100%. Like I said, a set of clear instructions, check-in processes along the way, and celebrating a good job well done at the end, who wouldn't benefit from that?

**Hester Lonergan 18:02**

Absolutely, I think as well, if you're on board as a business with ideas around, "fail fast" and "test and learn", it's about really living those ideas. What better opportunity to really surface the amazing power, the amazing skill, the amazing creativity, the amazing wisdom, and the amazing originality of people who think differently, then when you give them space to breathe and you let things fail, and you let new ideas come to the table? You give people space to put themselves forward and put their ideas forward, without feeling like it must be bob on every time.

**Russ Norton 18:37**

Hester, do you mind if I ask you a question about the flip to virtual working? Did you notice any benefits for yourself? Or any downsides from virtual working? What was the impact of that on you as an individual, when that change happened because of the pandemic?

**Hester Lonergan 18:55**

When we went into the very first lockdown, I found it hugely difficult because I am a creature of habit. I love a routine and I also really thrive when I'm around other people. There's something about being in a designated space, being around other people who are focusing on tasks, that really allows me to sit down and focus as well. And, there's a really interesting concept within the neurodivergent community around task buddies. It's well acknowledged that people can work a lot better when they're in the company of somebody else who's doing the same thing. And going from having a safe place to go every day. Being able to channel my brain when I got there, check out at the end of the day, and be around people who would pull me along and keep me going kept me motivated. It was such a huge shock and sent me spiraling a little but the less we talk about that the better! It's been a huge adjustment; I think as is the same for every single person. There have been major positives to the move to hybrid. But there have also been downsides. I really value having my own space and being able to make plenty of time. I can get quite overstimulated and overwhelmed if I spend loads of time around people in big open spaces with lots of noise, lots of chatter. So being able to be at home for part of the time is really great as a way to restore and recharge from that. But then at the same time, it can make going back into those environments more difficult. I, as many of us did, got used to the safety of my own home. I guess the thing is, it doesn't feel like any of this stuff necessarily is separate to the collective experience, it feels like this is something that everyone can relate to. It's about how can people feel comfortable to express that in their own way, and really advocate for their own needs. As we have moved into hybrid, and things kind of have continued to seesaw and people aren't sure quite where the dust is going to settle, I think it's about really, honestly, truly allowing people to share what they need and what works for them. Until people feel like they can acknowledge and interrogate their own needs, because it's a viable option, until people feel like there's a space for them, there's never going to be enough of that conversation.

**Russ Norton 21:43**

I think that's interesting, Hester, especially working in our environment, where you've got writers, designers, project managers, consultants. We're already a collection of very different brains. I've been here eight years now and with our team of designers, I've got a different way of working with every single one of them, because I've gotten to know how their brains work best. There's one who I'll brief two days in advance, because they do their thinking while they're walking, while they're in the shower. There is one who I will always sit next to and draw with because they're a very visual thinker, and they're there in the moment. That's because I've done a lot of diversity of inclusion work, and I'm used to flexing my style to suit the needs of others. But none of those people have ever sat down and told me how they get the best out of

themselves. That's a process of trial and error that I've discovered with them. But I think that self-realization of going, "what is it that I need to be at my absolute best?" And "how do I articulate that to others?" is again, something that everyone would benefit from. "What is my learning style? What is my instructional style? What support do I need? How often do I need check-ins and reassurance?" If you can own that and communicate that with the people that you're working with, whether you're neurodivergent or not, I believe you would benefit.

**Elle Bradley-Cox** 23:16

I think that too. I also think that when people do that, not only do they feel better, do people around them feel better, their career takes off because they have the chance to be at their best, because everybody's open to them just being themselves.

**Hester Lonergan** 23:34

A couple of things on that. Yes, that self-awareness is crucial. In an ideal world, everybody would possess that. The reality is that it's something that needs coaxing. I think with lots and lots of people, they need permission, and they need prompting. That is a tangible action and strategy there for IC teams and wider people process functions. How can you help people understand that process of self-awareness and learning and asking yourself the right questions? And then what as a business and as individuals can you do with that information to make your working life better and to help you thrive?

**Elle Bradley-Cox** 24:19

Oh, a tangible action for the IC team. I think that's a good place to stop. Take that people, listen to it, enjoy it, learn from it. And thank you both for joining us. Really appreciate your time.

**Hester Lonergan** 24:31

Thanks, Elle

**Russ Norton** 24:32

Lovely to talk, as always

**Elle Bradley-Cox** 24:41

"Let's talk about neurodiversity. Diversity of perspective, different ways of thinking, different ideas and different approaches are what empowers Deloitte to deliver the best solution for our clients. If you're interested in what Deloitte is doing for neurodiverse colleagues, let me know and let's have a chat." This is the empowering rallying cry in Anthony Friel's email signature, and it perfectly encapsulates his passion for inclusion. I sat down with Anthony to explore how organisations can best nurture neurodiversity. Anthony, welcome to the World Changers podcast. Thanks for joining me,

**Anthony Friel** 25:11

I'm very happy to be here

**Elle Bradley-Cox** 25:12

You're on the CO-production board of Neurodiversity in Business. Tell us a little bit about that forum and what it means to you.

**Anthony Friel** 25:19

Absolutely. Neurodiversity in Business, incidentally, I do not know where we will be by the time this goes out. So it's going to be a national charity. We're in the process of spinning it up right now. We have had quite a positive response. So, Deloitte are a member obviously as I mentioned to you before, it's separate from Deloitte, who are one of the big four consulting firms and as are a number of some of the largest employers in this country. And it's about, obviously, self-

explanatory Neurodiverse in Business, is about supporting them and how they do ND inclusion right. But the thing about it is, and especially my role, is that we are kind of at a tipping point, you know. I don't know if you will have noticed this yourself, but we have been - I certainly, personally, have been talking about neurodiversity for a long time. And it's just in the past year, that suddenly, all of the businesses in this country are turning around and saying "now, we need to talk about it. How do we do it? What does it mean to us? And how would we do ND inclusion?" And this has kind of happened all at once. I think that a big part of that is because of things like what's in my email signature, right? The co-production boards - co-production incidentally, if you don't know what that means, it's actually a concept from social policy. So, in social policymaking, someone dreamt up this idea that, especially in the UK, where we bring a lot of things down to the local authority level. If you're trying to develop public services, you should view the people who are going to be beneficiaries of them as partners in developing them. So, we've always done consultation, we've always done reaching out and doing surveys and asking and doing modelling. But no, let's elevate the people who will be involved in using the services into full partners in developing them. The thing is, it's been a hard fight for a long time to be able to allow neurodivergent people to own the conversation around ND D&I, especially in corporate settings. But that is the thing that kind of has broken down a lot of the walls. As we start giving people the opportunity to own their own narrative, that gives them the opportunity to actually correct a lot of well-meaning assumptions, not just discriminatory ones, but well-meaning ones around what they can and can't do. And so that means now there is a big business driver, largely of the fact that there's pressure but also there's an understanding now that it doesn't need to be hard. That it can open access to talent pools, that would be a significant advantage in many settings. And because that has been such a big drive on the change, the co-production board is actually at the top of NIB's government structure. So it's a panel of all ND activists and self-advocates who set and review over the charities policymaking, which we feel is also a really strong assurance we can offer to our members and the charity, the big corporations have signed up to say "okay, can you take us by the hand and choose how to do this that they wouldn't do it the wrong way". They won't do inclusion in name but not in spirits. I mean, I've worked with organisations that have maybe done autism hiring programmes or a big pilot for organisations that have been very effective and got a lot of people in a lot of good jobs, but lead to a narrative that okay, autistic people are coders should be putting a coding box and isn't actually very empowering, and a bit otherising. And we can offer an assurance through the co-production board that NIB will avoid having that bent around what our members do.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 28:57**

You know, I'm sitting here Anthony, and I'm really feeling you. And especially I'm looking at you and thinking, "Well, how do you identify? Is it as an ally? Is it as an activist? Where has this fire come from within you to help neurodivergent people?"

**Anthony Friel 29:14**

This is the thing. I am neurodivergent myself, I have ADHD, you know, and autism. But the fire from me is, and you asked, "am I an ally? Am I an activist?" I am just someone who's been opened to the revelation, right? Because the great thing about the word "neurodiversity" is it includes everyone. Neurodiversity is the whole of humankind. It's recognising the differences between how we think and communicate and express ourselves and experience things are all fundamentally equal and valid. So that little signature in my email, where that came from is I really wanted to be able to talk to people at Deloitte about this. If someone emailed me, especially if I had to work with someone, maybe my senior, I wanted an obvious way into having that discussion with them. And I turned around one day and I thought, well, you actually neurodiversity is what we've always done. And consulting. Any consulting firm usually sells itself to his clients on the basis of "we'll have a team of people who, everyone's got different ideas, they've got different way of looking at things, and we will find the solution." That's neurodiversity in action. And by accident, in a lot of cases we, for a long time, have had a condition where we create different kinds of different. So we go, "okay, this team, we've got visual learners, and we've got audio and practical elements, we got people who think like this, and people who think like that, but Anthony over there, he's got ADHD". So, we're all different. But that's a different kind of difference when we are all on board with the fact that difference is the advantage, difference of perspective is the problem solver. And people didn't necessarily feel comfortable

saying, well, no, autism, ADHD, dyslexia, things that, again, well-meaningly people might understand as disabilities, represent a difference in perspective that can be valuable. If people didn't feel comfortable saying "you're dyslexic, you probably have a different take on this." But now, we are starting to break down those walls because of this revelation, which is neurodiversity is all of us. And so, I just find that personally very energising not even with respect to myself, for my experience, or the people I'm trying to make a difference for, I think that is something that can be a changing revelation for everyone. And so, I'm just energised by it. And that's how, when it clicked for me, I said, "this is something that's a thing for me this, this is a driver for me now in how I approach everything."

**Elle Bradley-Cox 31:52**

I mean, I'm sitting here really energised by you and your voice on this. Gosh, you're an absolute tour de force. And I really, really hope that you can you can drive some more change with this, particularly in your role on the board. I mean, you're right, that the conversation has changed. Is it from an allyship? Is it from activism? Is it from businesses waking up and smelling the coffee? What do you think it's come from?

**Anthony Friel 32:14**

It's a little bit of everything. You know, everyone has a theory about what the main driver is. Like I said, we kind of at a tipping point where a lot of people have been banging the drum for a long time. And all of a sudden, one day we woke up and every big employee in the country wants to know how they do this. There are a few drivers that we knew were the case in specific sectors. For example in consulting, we know that there are some skill sets that neurodivergents are overrepresented and they are competitive skill sets. Coding is an example I use. We don't want to create a condition where people think "autistic people are great coder, go and find an autistic person to do that". But we know that autism comes with an over representation of skills. So it's a diagnosis as a statistical statement, ultimately, more likely to struggle with this and more likely to be stronger at this. And if you're working in the technology sector, there is competition for talent. And enough companies are waking up to this that autistic people could turn around and say "no, I can choose where I want to work. I can choose where I take this talent I have. And I'm not going to go somewhere where I wouldn't feel included and valued". And so that for a lot of sectors we know was the tipping point. It's motivation by access to talent. But the other thing is, for a long time, especially the past couple of years, a lot of organisations are under pressure across all areas of D&I. You know, after the explosion of Black Lives Matter that came to the forefront of organisations, quite rightly. And behind that came a reexamination of how they approach a lot of other issues in diversity and inclusion. And as they've reopened some of these topics that some organisations potentially when will know we've done some things, we've got programme, we've got reporting, we've got potentially a mixed board, we can close it down. They've opened it, they've re examined. And a lot of the principles that come from this revelation of neurodiversity are now entering their minds from other parts of D&I and that potentially opens them up to the conversation. I think for me, neurodiversity strikes at the heart of all diversity and inclusion, because one of the things that we do on the co-production boards is we try to represent as many different neurodivergent experiences as possible. So not just different conditions, but people who come from different ethnic backgrounds, people who belong to different sexual identities who identify as minority genders are people from basically any group that could potentially be viewed as an out group. If they are also neurodivergent, they will have a specifically conspicuous different experience that is shaped by sitting at that intersection. And we want to represent that and what that comes down to is if you are from an ethnicity, that's a minority where you live, or you belong to a specifically marginalised sexual identity or gender identity, where you live, then the reality is you have an experience, and you have a perspective that is not welcome. And neurodiversity really is all about, every perspective, every experience, everything that comes from those set of adaptive choices that made the person who we are, including the things that were out of our control, those create a person who has a contribution that is equally valid. And everything, every single way we can be different is something that has value. So that is a principle I think, comes from neurodiversity. But as D&I in general becomes more mature, that's becoming embedded across every area of inclusion, and that opens up the room for what was previously a bit of an odd child in the D&I agenda.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 36:09**

I love that intersectional approach. And what are people saying to you about that approach? Do you feel like it's the right one? Now you've got the people together in the room?

**Anthony Friel 36:18**

It's very difficult, right? I mean, you asked if I think it's the right one. I think it's the right one. Absolutely, I think it's the right one. But there are a lot of questions around "how do we do that?" It's an approach that still in its infancy. Neurodiversity is a recent revelation - the word only came on the scene in the past 30 years. So when we look at intersectionality, there is a lot of pressure to focus on things that there are metrics for, right. So we know that ADHD is under diagnosed in people of colour. We know that autism is under diagnosed in people of colour. We know that, for example, in education, if you have an idea of what ADHD can look like in children, a lot of educational settings, to put it bluntly, a white child that has some of those issues that might raise questions that may lead to support. But in some places, if it's a child who comes from an ethnic minority background, depending on the teacher, they may be branded as a bad child. And you know, that starts a process that then pushes them off. You know, their development can be excluded, which will set them back. So there's a lot of questions around how we account for those things. How do we account for things that have metrics when it comes to intersectionality? But the co-production board, what our point was, is to make sure that we do inclusion in spirit. Not just in name. That we reflect what people are feeling, what they are experiencing. So we bring in measures that actually do move the needle, that get people included, that bring up equity, that see representation on boards, that see equal access to opportunities, but don't actually create narratives that are otherising because they don't take into account the actual experiences of what it's like to be first of all, neurodivergent, but to sit at these intersections. So the pressure is to go back to looking at metrics. We almost won that fight with saying, "No, you need to think about actually how you do this. How you do real inclusion is more than moving the needle". And then we've opened up these discussions that weren't had for a long time. And there's pressure to go back to looking at metrics, what moves the needle. And there should be, because there are big groups of people that are just permanently structurally excluded from access to diagnosis. But in the education example, just pushed off of the path to enjoying a good life. And so how you balance that is something you're still wrestling with, which is we want to say, "No, you need to go out and do these things. Here are a list of things, you should change, your list of measures." But the main mission has to be creating connection and understanding because neurodiversity includes everyone. That means I have an opportunity as someone with ADHD to say, "Okay, actually, I'm on a continuum with you in the same way you can be different from someone else, just because mine has a label," How do we keep our approach, moving along in a way that is all about creating those connections and creating understanding because that will be the motivation that will really change things. So it's a conflict, but I think we are taking the right approach, which is putting the people who are the authorities in these experiences, the people with these experiences, at the forefront of talking about them.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 39:46**

Anthony, we haven't met before and I don't work with Deloitte. So do draw the line back for me to how you're pushing this with the firm now that you've got that experience externally working on the board. What's Deloitte actually doing about neurodivergence, now you're kind of championing it in such a public spectrum?

**Anthony Friel 40:05**

So this is the thing, I think it was a hard won thing. It has been a long journey and a long discussion. But I think the approach of just talking to people, especially senior people, along the lines of what's said in my email signature, which I put that there with a view that maybe someone will respond and say, "let's have a chat about this". That's what happened. People have very much embedded this idea, that neurodiversity is Deloitte. There are a lot of organisations where I have colleagues in the charity, where they've had some really difficult fights around bringing in a transformation programme, bringing in

adjustments. But I was able to kind of win that discussion, which is as I've been able to convince people that neurodiversity is kind of what makes Deloitte, an effective consulting firm. I can't go into obviously too much detail about conditions at Deloitte. But compared to other consulting firms, we have always been a touch more agile. So you know, we've always been quite flexible in, for example, working from home, when you work, the first day I joined I was told "you're a consultant, you're targeted on your output, not hours in front of the desk. I need 40 hours of work this week, when you do them, how many hours it takes you, that's fine". You know, COVID-19 obviously moved a lot this up the agenda as well, because Deloitte looked to lean in to the flexibility that has always set us apart from our competitors. And so that meant that I could say to leaders in this firm, this does not need to be hard for us. We know that this is an approach that has been our strength historically, we know that not really leaning into it and banging the drum about what we already believe, could potentially stop us accessing the most talented people to do the job that we do. And we know that it doesn't need to be hard for us, because we are already ahead of the game. You know, we are flexible, we do encourage our people to say what they need to be their best and give it to them. So once I had that discussion, I think Deloitte realised that they should be out and banging the drum for neurodiversity, because it is an opportunity for them to say - not to be crass about it - they were right all along. Deloitte, like any firm its size, has a people agenda. And how we differentiated our people agenda was through this flexibility, agile work, respecting people to own their own narratives. And that's what neurodiversity is all about, which is the new big area of D&I. So Deloitte should be leading, not following on that topic. And that is something we've had support from the top of the firm. It's been integrated into our people agenda, we talk about it a lot, we will soon be releasing some materials around what we've done internally and what we think other organisations should do themselves, which is an unusual thing to do. And I don't think in any other part of our D&I agenda, would we say, we've done this, and we want other companies to do that. But that's some of the approach. We're talking about taking in what we talk about externally around what we've done. And I'm really pleased that I've been able to have those conversations, but also that I was able to win that argument, because there is always the possibility that no one would have clicked on. You know, most of the problems I see when I look at other organisations are well meaning discrimination. Trying to do the right thing, not wanting to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing. You know, we could have went on without anyone ever realising No, actually, neurodiversity is what we do. We are a neurodiversity business, not that Deloitte would necessarily describe themselves in such extreme terms. But that was always my view on it. And I think it resonates with people who maybe didn't know what neurodiversity was five minutes before I spoke to them.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 43:56**

This is very bold. I'm looking forward to seeing what you come out with later on this year. I think a last question for me on HR and internal comms professionals. They're kind of the levers that are going to help you with this message. What's really important and what are you hoping to see from them?

**Anthony Friel 44:10**

So this is difficult because I can only really speak in a personal capacity, right? I can't speak on behalf of Deloitte. I have a temperature feel, you know, I dip my toe in and I feel like this is the way this is going and I feel like, from talking to people, I've got traction, and I have a feeling that what Deloitte does will look like what I just told you. And in NIB, our corporate members, we've brought them on board. They're very enthusiastic. Some of them sought us out. A team of three people. We didn't have a website, we didn't have anything. And all of a sudden we're speaking to the Head of Diversity and Inclusion at Santander or at EY. It was very, very encouraging to see how seriously they take it. But sometimes the feeling I get is they understand that it's important. HR departments, heads of D&I understand that they've got to a point where either they need to do something now, or potentially that they should have done something before, but they don't necessarily know how to do it right. There is always so much apprehension around doing D&I wrong. To the point where I know in some companies that does stop them doing anything. A lot of organisations feel like they can't not do anything anymore. But it's such an immature space that people are worried about doing it wrong. The only way I can see to fix that, and certainly, that's what we're trying to do at NIB, is to explain that it doesn't need to be hard, you don't need to be afraid

of doing the wrong thing. You only need to let people own their own narratives. As HR professionals, HR departments, stop trying to build structures around. "Okay, neurodiversity equals these conditions, these conditions match to these profiles". Create some flexibility for your people, all of your people, to say "this is what I need to be my best". And you'll find amazing traction in doing ND inclusion right. Because fundamentally, even if you do adjustments, and you make interventions that move the needle and change metrics, the thing that actually makes people feel valued and included and equal, is being given that opportunity to saw on equal footing. "No, this is what I need. Don't worry about my diagnosis, that's a label for my doctor, not for you. I'm telling you what I need to do my best." And really, we should be doing that for everyone. We should be doing that for all of our colleagues, everywhere we work. And potentially, I'm somewhat reserved in this, but what I would like to see happen is that neurodiversity moves that forward. So outside of people affected by neurodiversity, organisations, start saying to our people, what are your individual circumstances? And what do we need to give you so that you can be the most effective for us? COVID-19 has really pushed that up a lot of organisations agendas, especially with working remotely, and potentially people having to flex their hours, because people have all different circumstances. What that conversation looks like. It could be someone that is caring for a member of the family that's ill, or it could be someone who has young children, so they need to start after the school run? Fundamentally, how mental would it be, if you passed up some really important talent, if you potentially lost someone who would be an extraordinary value to your organisation, because you didn't want to let them start 15 minutes after the school run, especially if they have a role that doesn't really require it? One of the most revelatory things - I keep using that word, because so much of it is a revelation - I spoke to an education professional, someone who does research in ND and education. And they said to me, "Well, I was in a call with myself and a colleague of mine from another consulting firm, not colleague, an acquaintance. And they said to us, lots of children are pushed off of the path to a really fulfilling life quite early, because perhaps they're not diagnosed as autistic or have ADHD. And they don't want to wear a school tie, and teach us how to deal with that. They don't know why they react badly and maybe they get in trouble. And that starts the whole process. And when we ask teachers, why they press that, what they tell is, well, maybe we need to teach children to wear ties. Maybe they'll have high performing jobs one day." And myself and my consulting colleague looked at each other, not having seen a tie in a couple of years, just with bewilderment, and you know, fundamentally, Deloitte, I'm a consultant but Deloitte's also an accounting firm. One of the reasons we have offices is because once upon a time, accountants had to be close to paper ledger's physically. They don't anymore. So why did it take COVID-19 for some organisations to loosen up on working remotely? And a lot of the things that would come out of those conversations around "what do you need to be the most effective for us?" are things that there were no reason to not be giving people before? If you don't have a meeting at 9am why can't you start after the school run?

**Elle Bradley-Cox** 49:32

I truly believe your your point on kind of owning a narrative. Hopefully, with internal communicators there, you're pushing on an open door because it's all we want people to do. I think you're such an inspiration to talk to us now. Last question from me. Thinking about people making the biggest impact on the world of work right now, who would you nominate as your 2022 World Changer?

**Anthony Friel** 49:53

I was vaguely aware you're going to ask that question so I have been thinking on it. I find it very difficult, but I think I will actually potentially go somewhere off script here, and say something you wouldn't expect. I just recently, in the past couple of weeks, met a gentleman named Simon Minton. He was a friend of a friend, which is how I got introduced to him. And I actually found out that that he used to work at Deloitte but doesn't anymore. The entire time we both worked at Deloitte, I never met him. And then one day, I meet him randomly, but he now works at an organisation called Persefoni. what Persefoni do is effectively, help organisations understand, where they sit in the carbon ecosystem. So you know, they can help organisations understand what their carbon footprint is. You know, lots of people do that. Lots of consulting firms come in and tell organisations, "this is your carbon footprint", but Persefoni can do, which I have not seen anyone else

doing, is they can say to organisations, they have clever tools and clever data, "let's assume this happens. Let's assume two degrees of climate change happens. This is what your company will look like, in five years, 10 years, if you keep using the approach you're using now." And the reason I find that inspirational, the reason I think that will change everything, is I don't like trying to win climate change conversations with people. Just like I don't like trying to win diversity and inclusion conversations with people. So instead, I say, "neurodiversity is what we're all about". I think, if you say to organisations, especially big organisations that have the power to really move the needle, sustainability is about sustainable business, it's about being continuing to be business that's effective and makes money for the long term, then we can start actually pushing a lot of stuff towards a green Net Zero path. If you say to an organisation that's worth potentially \$2 billion, that if you keep on this current trajectory, and we know what that looks like, then if 1.5 degrees or two degrees or three degrees of warming happen, this is how much money you're going to lose. It's a bit cynical, but fundamentally, it means they are more open to having the conversation about, what do we do about that? What do we change? How do we change our trajectory? And that's how you open conversations about how do we do business differently? How do we build a sustainable world, we will make our company sustainable to do that. We need to make XYZ sustainable, so we need to rethink everything. I don't like sounding cynical and I do think I come across as cynical sometimes, because I say, these conversations are too hard. I'm going to try and end around. But I don't think it's cynicism. I think most people care about these things. I think most people care about D&I, I would even say most companies care about climate change. But fundamentally, what I want to do is try and connect to people on a mental level, try and put things in a way that will click, they know exactly what I'm talking about. Because I've put it the way they would assemble it. And you know, I think that's been very powerful in ND and neurodiversity. I think it's something that could really change the way we talk about climate change and could actually help us make a difference. And so when I looked up Persefoni, I see that this is the approach they are taking. I was immediately like, this is the thing that can actually make a difference, because I think these conversations are hard, but I feel like if I done this, they would be easier. So Simon Minton is my nomination for 2022 World Changer, because fundamentally, I think that will be a thing that, in a few years from now, if we speak again, we'll have really been make or break for where we are. And I don't know exactly what Simon's doing at Persefoni now, but I think I understand what Persefoni are doing. So I'm happy to give my new friend a shout out.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 54:17**

Nice. Simon Minton. You are a needle mover. You are a 2022 World Changer and Anthony Friel makes it so. Thank you so much, Anthony, for your time. I really enjoyed our conversation and wish you a beautiful day.

**Anthony Friel 54:30**

You too. Have an amazing day. It was wonderful speaking to you.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 54:40**

Our huge thanks to Anthony Friel. If you want to explore how to support and champion neurodiversity in your organisation, do join us later this month for our webinar, where you can put your questions to our expert panel. We'll share the details in the session notes and on our social channels. Want to continue the conversation in the meantime? Do come and chat to us over on Twitter @scarlettabbott or drop us an email [hello@scarlettabbott.co.uk](mailto:hello@scarlettabbott.co.uk) We'll see you next time for another dive into World Changers 2022.

**Elle Bradley-Cox 55:10**

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