

Neurodivergent Talent in Project Management: From Underrepresentation to Strategic Asset

Caroline Tite*, Lydia Adigun**, Nicholas Dacre***, David Pontin**

*University of Winchester, **WMG University of Warwick, *** University of Southampton

caroline.tite@winchester.ac.uk, L.Adigun@warwick.ac.uk,
nicholas.dacre@southampton.ac.uk, David.Pontin@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper examines the underrepresentation of neurodivergent individuals in project management and explores strategies to enhance their inclusion. Through an integrative literature review and planned semi-structured interviews with 20 neurodivergent project management professionals, the research investigates barriers to entry, unique cognitive strengths, and workplace adaptations necessary for inclusion. Initial findings highlight systemic discrimination and bias faced by neurodivergent individuals, alongside their valuable contributions in problem-solving, creativity, and attention to detail. The study identifies critical enablers for inclusion, including supportive workplace accommodations, improved hiring practices, and education on neurodivergent strengths. Legal protections and disclosure challenges are also examined. The research aims to contribute theoretical knowledge on neurodiversity in project management while providing organisations with actionable strategies to foster inclusive environments. This work addresses a significant gap in project management literature and practice, with implications for organisational policy, team composition, and leadership approaches.

1. Introduction

The underrepresentation of neurodivergent individuals in project management constitutes a critical gap in workplace diversity and represents a lost opportunity for organisations to benefit from cognitive diversity (Gortadello et al, 2025). Despite mounting evidence suggesting that neurodivergent professionals possess valuable strengths in areas such as problem-solving, pattern recognition, and attention to detail, attributes particularly beneficial in project environments, systemic barriers continue to limit their full participation and career prospects (Tomlinson et al, 2024). This research aims to explore the factors behind the underrepresentation of neurodivergent individuals in project management, identify key enablers that can enhance their participation, and develop actionable strategies for organisations to foster a more inclusive workforce. By examining barriers to entry, recognising strengths that neurodivergent professionals bring to the field, and outlining practical steps for implementation, the study seeks to drive meaningful change in project management practices, ensuring greater diversity and inclusion.

2. Integrative Literature Review

In beginning to explore the academic literature and theory around neurodiversity and project management and planning a PRISMA systematic literature review, it was quickly realised that the lack of extant work was a limitation. This led to further exploration into grey literature where research could delve into real world settings and experiences for

neurodiverse individuals in project management, and also their organisational settings and experiences.

2.1 Understanding Neurodiversity in Project Management

Doyle (2020) considers neurodiversity through a range of perspectives including neuroscience, psychology, and lived experiences, encompassing conditions such as dyspraxia, Asperger's and Tourette's syndromes, acquired brain injury, and chronic neurological conditions. Neurodiversity refers to many conditions including autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia and Tourette's syndrome (Doyle, 2020; Ekblad, 2013).

The development of neurodiverse project management teams offers significant opportunities for creating inclusive and adaptive workplaces (M-GSO and PCUBED, 2021). While underrepresentation affects many marginalised groups, neurodivergent individuals encounter distinct barriers, including systemic discrimination, gender bias, and professional stereotyping that limit their advancement (Project Management Institute, 2017; Shah & Marks, 2019; Hwang et al., 2020; Tantawi & Khater, 2020). Despite possessing recognised cognitive strengths applicable to project environments, neurodivergent professionals often struggle with career progression, experiencing higher unemployment rates, increased incarceration risk, and significant academic challenges compared to their neurotypical counterparts (Fung, 2021). However, there remains a gap in research specifically addressing the barriers faced by neurodivergent individuals in project management.

3.2 Conceptualising Neurodiversity

The term neurodiversity, first introduced by Judy Singer in 1998, describes cognitive variations, including autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, and Tourette's syndrome. Rather than being viewed as deficits, these conditions represent natural variability in human cognition (Salter & Hendrickx, 2009; Yankowski & Perry, 2013). Neurodivergent individuals can experience challenges such as social communication difficulties (Pennisi et al., 2021), hyperactivity (Ronald et al., 2021), and anxiety (Clark & Khattab, 2012). Conversely, they also demonstrate unique strengths, including strong attention to detail (Abu-Akel et al., 2020; Nocon et al., 2022), creativity (Cope & Remington, 2022), and enhanced problem-solving abilities (Sutherland, 2016).

3.3 Benefits of a Neurodiverse Workforce in Project Management

Recent literature suggests that neurodivergent individuals thrive in environments requiring innovation and problem-solving, making them well-suited for project management (Coplan, 2021). Their unique cognitive abilities enable fresh perspectives, leading to increased efficiency and productivity (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Research also highlights the potential for competitive advantages in hiring neurodivergent individuals due to their hyperfocus, critical thinking, and creativity (Doyle, 2020).

3.4 Neurodiversity in the Project Management Landscape

The large-scale nature of project management, as exemplified by the Government Major Project Portfolio (GMPP), underscores the necessity of diverse teams with a broad range of skills (M-GSO and PCUBED, 2021). However, neurodiversity remains an underexplored area within the field. Addressing implicit biases, increasing visibility of neurodivergent role models, and creating supportive work environments can contribute to greater inclusivity in project management (Flynn & Steward, 2020; Hossain et al., 2018; Tantawi & Khater, 2020).

3.5 Strategies for Encouraging Neurodiversity in Project Management

Baker & Degen (2023) explore how employing neurodivergent individuals can enhance financial management, emphasising the need for inclusive organisational cultures. Effective strategies include fostering workplace accommodations, improving hiring practices, and educating managers on neurodivergent strengths (Szulc et al., 2021). A key focus of this research is to examine the role of organisational culture in attracting and retaining neurodivergent talent in project management.

3.6 Legal Protections and Disclosure Considerations

Neurodivergent individuals are protected under the UK Equality Act, which mandates reasonable workplace accommodations. However, disclosure remains a challenge, as employees may fear discrimination or may not be formally diagnosed (Kirby & Smith, 2021). Employers must proactively create inclusive environments by implementing pre-emptive accommodations and reducing biases in recruitment and retention processes.

3.7 Diversity in Project Teams

Horwitz (2015) highlights the impact of functional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal diversity on project team performance. Cognitive diversity enhances problem-solving capabilities, yet challenges in team coordination may arise (McDonough, 2000; Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007). Research suggests that moderate levels of diversity optimise project outcomes by balancing varied perspectives with effective team integration (Huckman & Staats, 2011). The inclusion of neurodivergent individuals adds a new dimension to project team diversity, warranting further investigation.

3. Research Approach

Building on the findings from the integrative literature review, this study will employ a qualitative research design featuring a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 neurodivergent professionals currently working in project management roles. This methodological approach was selected for its capacity to elicit rich, experiential data from participants who have firsthand knowledge of navigating project management environments as neurodivergent individuals. The research design aims to generate valuable insights that will both deepen theoretical understanding of neurodiverse representation in project management and provide organisations with practical, evidence-based recommendations for enhancing inclusivity and improving project management practices. Ethical considerations have been used to ensure that participants are content with the process and that their information will be held securely and erased following completion of the research. Participants will be recruited through professional networks, neurodiversity advocacy groups, and project management associations to ensure diverse perspectives across different neurodivergent conditions, career stages, and organisational contexts. Inviting project professionals for interview leaves it to the participant to decide their neurodiversity and aspects within that.

4. Key Findings

The following key findings emerge from the systematic review of literature conducted, which will subsequently inform the qualitative interview stage of this research. First, the literature reveals that neurodivergent individuals in project management environments encounter persistent barriers to inclusion, including systemic discrimination, unconscious bias, and insufficient organisational support structures. Second, some neurodivergent individuals possess distinctive cognitive strengths, including problem-solving capabilities, innovative

thinking approaches, and attention to detail, which potentially enhance project management outcomes. Third, workplace adaptation, encompassing inclusive organisational policies, appropriate physical and procedural accommodations, and comprehensive education regarding neurodivergent strengths, constitutes a critical framework for fostering supportive work environments. Fourth, despite established legal protections, the literature identifies significant disclosure challenges whereby pervasive stigma and well-founded fears of discrimination frequently inhibit neurodivergent individuals from disclosing their status. Fifth, contemporary team diversity research suggests that neurodivergent individuals substantially contribute to cognitive diversity within project teams, potentially improving innovation metrics and problem-solving outcomes.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

The initial findings from this integrative literature review underscore the need for research on neurodivergent inclusion in project management, which aims to enhance both diversity and productivity within the profession.

The theoretical benefits of this review and of the outcome of the next stage of project professional interviews will be substantial, as they will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the realm of neurodiversity within project management. By exploring this area, the research will deepen our understanding of how neurodiverse individuals experience and navigate the challenges and opportunities in project management roles.

From a practical standpoint, this research will offer actionable insights for organisations seeking to develop more inclusive project management environments. Through identifying evidence-based practices for fostering inclusive conditions that accommodate neurodivergent employees, the study will provide tangible guidance on how organisations can strategically adapt their project management methodologies to benefit from diverse cognitive perspectives.

The next phase of this research will involve detailed empirical insights of projects successfully integrating neurodivergent professionals into project teams, thereby providing models for emulation. Additionally, future studies should examine the potential economic benefits of neurodiversity in project management through quantitative performance metrics. Ultimately, this research agenda seeks to enhance project team performance, stimulate project management innovation, and facilitate the creation of more equitable and inclusive project management environments, simultaneously improving both neurodivergent employee well-being and organisational project outcomes.

References

- Abu-Akel, A., Webb, M. E., de Montpellier, E., Von Bentivegna, S., Luechinger, L., Ishii, A., & Mohr, C. (2020). Autistic and positive schizotypal traits respectively predict better convergent and divergent thinking performance. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 36, 100656. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2020.100656>
- Austin, R. D., & Pisano, G. P. (2017). Neurodiversity as a competitive advantage. *Harvard Business Review*, 2017(3), 96-103.
- Baker, S., & Degen, C. (2023), 'Neurodivergence emerging as key consideration for inclusion; Money managers missing out on talent if they don't include it in diversity efforts' (2023)

Clark, C. J., & Khattab, A. D. (2012). Association Between Joint Hypermobility Syndrome and Developmental Coordination Disorder – A Review. *Journal of Sports Medicine and Doping Studies*. <http://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/21092/>

Cope, R., & Remington, A. (2022). The Strengths and Abilities of Autistic People in the Workplace. *Autism in Adulthood*, 4(1), 22–31. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2021.0037>

Coplan, J., Crocker, L., Landin, J. and Stenn, T. (2021) 'Building Supportive, Inclusive Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Thinkers Thrive: Approaches in Managing Diversity, Inclusion, and Building Entrepreneurship in the Workplace', *SAM Advanced Management Journal*, 86(1), 21+, available: <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A661737956/AONE?u=ucwinch&sid=bookmarkAONE&xid=d24b68f8> [accessed 26 Jul 2023]. Pp21-30

Doyle, N. (2020). Neurodiversity at work: A biopsychosocial model and the impact on working adults. *British Medical Bulletin*, 135(1), 108–125. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bmb/ldaa021>

Ekblad, L. (2013). Autism, Personality, and Human Diversity: Defining Neurodiversity in an Iterative Process Using Aspie Quiz. *SAGE Open*, 3(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013497722>

Flynn, P. M., & Steward, D. V. (2020). Women in project management: A review of the literature. *Journal of Management in Engineering*, 36(1), 04019052.

Fung, L. K. (2021), Neurodiversity: From Phenomenology to Neurobiology and Enhancing, *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law Online* September 2022, 50 (3) 489-490; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29158/JAAPL.220053-22>

Gottardello, D., Calvard, T., & Song, J. W. (2025). When Neurodiversity and Ethnicity Combine: Intersectional Stereotyping and Workplace Experiences of Neurodivergent Ethnic Minority Employees. *Human Resource Management*.

Hossain, L., Javed, K., & Islam, M. A. (2018). Diversity in project management: A review and future research directions. *International Journal of Project Management*, 36(4), 633-655.

Horwitz, S. K. 2015, *Functional Diversity in Project Teams*, pp. 339-350 *The Psychology and Management of Project Teams*, New York: Oxford University Press, ISBN: 0199861374

Horwitz, S. K., & Horwitz, I. B. (2007). The effects of team diversity on team outcomes: A meta-analytic review of team demography. *Journal of Management*, 33(6), 987–1015.

Huckman, R. S., & Staats, B. R. (2011). Fluid tasks and fluid teams: The impact of diversity in experience and team familiarity. *Manufacturing & Service Operations Management*, 13(3), 310–328.

Hwang, B. G., Zhao, X., & Toh, K. C. (2020). Discrimination of ethnic minorities in the construction industry: A review of the literature. *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management*.

Kirby, A., and Smith, T., (2021) *Neurodiversity at Work: Drive Innovation, Performance and Productivity with a Neurodiverse Workforce*, Kogan Page Ltd: London.

McDonough, E. F. (2000). Investigation of factors contributing to the success of cross-functional teams. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 17(3), 221–235.

MI-GSO and PCUBED, 2021. Think Differently: Three neurodiversity questions to ask when setting up a new project. Civil Service World.

Nocon, A. S., Roestorf, A., & Menéndez, L. M. G. (2022). Positive psychology in neurodiversity: An investigation of character strengths in autistic adults in the United Kingdom in a community setting. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 99, 102071. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2022.102071>

Pennisi, P., Giallongo, L., Milintenda, G., & Cannarozzo, M. (2021). Autism, autistic traits and creativity: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Cognitive Processing*, 22(1), 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10339-020-00992-6>

Project Management Institute. (2017). Pulse of the Profession. <https://www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/learning/thought-leadership/pulse/pulse-of-the-profession2017.pdf>

Perry, A, Yankowski, A, & Herrera, C (eds) 2013, Ethics and Neurodiversity, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [24 July 2023].

Ronald, A., de Bode, N., & Polderman, T. J. C. (2021). Systematic Review: How the Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder Polygenic Risk Score Adds to Our Understanding of ADHD and Associated Traits. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 60(10), 1234–1277. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2021.01.019>

Salter, C. & Hendrickx, S. (2009) The Adolescent and Adult Neuro-Diversity Handbook: Asperger Syndrome, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Related Conditions. London, UNITED KINGDOM: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Shah, S., & Marks, A. (2019). Project management and neurodiversity: An initial review. *Journal of Modern Project Management*, 7(1), 45-57. 7

Singer, J. (2016). Neurodiversity: The birth of an idea. Lexington: Singer.

Sutherland, A. (2016). Time to celebrate neurodiversity in the workplace. *Occupational Health & Wellbeing*, 68(11), 11.

Szulc, J. M., Davies, J., Tomczak, M. T., & McGregor, F.-L. (2021). AMO perspectives on the well-being of neurodivergent human capital. *Employee Relations: The International Journal*, 43(4), 858–872. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ER-09-2020-0446>

Tantawi, M., & Khater, M. M. (2020). The potential of individuals with autism in project management: A literature review. *Journal of Modern Project Management*, 8(2), 23-34.

Tomlinson, M., Vincent, J., Reedy, F., Mason, L., Coney, K., Fitzpatrick, J., ... & Toogood, C. (2024). Enhancing Neurodivergent Graduates' Access to Graduate Employment (ENGAGE): a report on neurodivergent graduates' employment transitions and outcomes.

Yankowski, K. L., & Perry, C. (2013). Neurodiversity in higher education: Positive responses to specific learning differences. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 26(2), 135-150. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1012694.pdf>