

Neurodiversity: Untapped Talent

- a guide for public sector recruitment

By David Hammond

Manager | Kaiwhakahaere, Quality of Policy Advice

Ministry for the Environment | Manatū Mō Te Taiao

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“As someone who is neurodiverse, more specifically someone who is dyslexic, and working for the government, I am intrigued about why there are not more neurodiverse people employed in the New Zealand public sector”

Introduction

In recruitment and inclusion terms, neurodiverse workers have been overlooked – even shunned – to the detriment of New Zealand’s public sector talent pool.

This group of highly motivated, highly skilled and intelligent people are just waiting to be given a chance. Within this paper I will provide practical and specific steps leaders can take to reach out, enhance recruitment and interviewing processes, embed inclusive practices and adapt their own leadership and communication approaches to allow those with neurodiversity to flourish within their organisations.

Neurodiversity recognises that it is normal and acceptable for people to have brains that function differently from one another. Instead of thinking there is something wrong or problematic when individuals do not operate in a similar way to others, neurodiversity embraces the differences in brain function and behavioural traits as a natural element of human diversity.

Neurodiverse people meet many obstacles in trying to find work. Ignorance and prejudice still exist in a world where inclusion and equality are now demanded.

As I reveal in this research paper, the neurodiverse are an untapped talent and employers need to better understand their potential and the unique skills they possess.

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term for very diverse groups of people, including those on the autistic spectrum, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and Tourette Syndrome.

I have focused on two significant groups – autism and dyslexia. These two groups make up 12% of the population (10% is dyslexic and one in 44 are on the autism spectrum).

But the numbers employed in the workforce are low. Research indicates that dyslexics are five times more likely to be unemployed than non-dyslexics.

At the same time there is an acute shortage of talent in the New Zealand labour market. This has been heightened by limited immigration because of Covid-19. But even before the pandemic, employers were struggling to fill vacancies, including in the public sector.

Current practices are acting as a barrier to accessing this talent and stopping the public service getting the best people for the job.

Outdated recruitment processes are filtering out the minds the future needs. Fundamental change needs to occur in recruitment and human resource practices to tap this under-utilised resource.

Large organisations, such as Ernst & Young (EY) UK, have radically changed their recruitment processes and are redefining dyslexia. They recognise dyslexics have the skills needed for the changing roles in our workplace.

A 'Value of Dyslexia' report by EY found that dyslexics have the skills needed for the jobs of tomorrow where machines are taking over many tasks. The skills that are more challenging for dyslexics are in decline as they are being replaced by AI and technology.

High-value skills such as communication, analytical thinking, innovative thinking and developing solutions, and empathy are in high demand. Dyslexics excel in these thinking skills.

As someone who is neurodiverse, more specifically someone who is dyslexic, and working for the government, I am intrigued about why there are not more neurodiverse people employed in the New Zealand public sector.

This point is particularly relevant given the neurodiverse community makes up 20% of the population and are renowned problem solvers.

The Papa Pounamu initiative, which brings together diversity and inclusion practices to support chief executives to meet diversity and inclusion obligations and goals, has put a strong focus on increasing the number of people from minority groups employed in the public sector.

In the UK, the civil service has gone a step further by introducing development structures for its neurodiverse employees, while the UK cyber security agency GCHQ has an initiative named 'Mission Critical'. It estimates about 25% of their 6,000 employees are neurodiverse.

My report and research is a lived experience. I am dyslexic and dyspraxic, and my story is included in this paper ([Appendice 2](#)) to highlight the challenges I, and many other neurodivergent people, face in Aotearoa New Zealand.

This paper provides practical advice and insights for leaders and recruiters with the aim of making it easier for neurodiverse workers to be recognised and given the opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way to the work of the Aotearoa New Zealand public sector.

Untapped talent

What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is a term to describe neurological differences in the human brain. While everyone's brain is different, there are groups of people who have brains that are fundamentally structured differently and process information differently¹. Functional MRI scans are particularly useful in highlighting these differences.²

Functional MRI essentially shows which parts of the brain are active during a particular activity because of increased blood flow to those areas, meaning they can be used to compare and contrast the functional differences in a neurotypical and a divergent brain.

Neurodiversity includes, but is not limited to, people on the autistic spectrum, dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, and Tourette Syndrome.

For the purpose of this paper, the focus is on two significant groups of neurodiverse individuals: those on the autism spectrum and those with dyslexia.

The reason for limiting it to these two groups is that between them they make up 12% of the population (10% of the population is dyslexic and one in 44³ people are on autism spectrum), a significant segment of the population. Given their differences, including more groups from the neurodiverse community in this research would have diluted its quality.

Why study neurodiversity?

International research indicates up to 85% of individuals on the autism spectrum who have a university degree are unemployed, with 34% of autistic individuals attending university.⁴

While Autism New Zealand does not have specific figures, their anecdotal feedback indicates similar levels of unemployment for university-educated autistic people (they struggle to place people with undergraduate level qualifications through to people with doctoral level qualifications into employment).⁵

This level of unemployment for autistic people will likely contribute to their overrepresentation in mental health statistics. Overseas research indicates that people

¹ The Education Hub, Auckland University and the Harvard Business Review provide good explanations of neurodiversity, the evidence for it and the potential benefits of tapping into this talent [What is neurodiversity? - THE EDUCATION HUB](#) and [Neurodiversity at work - The University of Auckland](#), and [Neurodiversity Is a Competitive Advantage \(hbr.org\) \(I also interviewed one of the authors of this article\)](#).

² The Understood website has a detailed explanation on how functional MRIs help our understanding of neurodiversity [How MRIs Work | Brain Scan | Dyslexia, ADHD, and Learning Disabilities | Understood - For learning and thinking differences](#).

³ Autism statistics from the Centre for Disease Control [Data & Statistics on Autism Spectrum Disorder | CDC](#)

⁴ Forbes, discusses the proportion of the population who are neurodiverse and has some detailed discussions about the different kind of differences brain differences covered by neurodiversity [Neurodiversity As A Strengthening Point For Your Team And Our Society \(forbes.com\)](#)

⁵ Data from Market watch [Most college grads with autism can't find jobs. This group is fixing that. - MarketWatch](#)

on the autistic spectrum are three times more likely to attempt suicide than the general population (there is a very clear gender divide, with women on the autistic spectrum eight times more likely to attempt suicide compared with the general population).⁶

Dyslexics also face significant barriers to employment that are likely to be one of the reasons behind their overrepresentation in negative social statistics. Research from the International Labour Organisation indicates dyslexics are five times more likely to be unemployed than non-dyslexics.⁷

Beyond the high unemployment rate and high underutilisation rate, dyslexics are overrepresented in the prison population. Studies in the UK, the US and New Zealand indicate between 30%-50% of the prison population is dyslexic; not just illiterate, but specifically dyslexic.⁸

Professor Karen Waldie, from the University of Auckland School of Psychology and Principal Investigator with the Centre for Brain Research at the University of Auckland, has used data from the internationally renowned Dunedin longitudinal study to inform her research.

It showed dyslexics were significantly overrepresented in a range of negative mental health statistics. Only 2% achieved a bachelor's degree⁹ and 48% had no school qualifications, impacting negatively on their employment and earning capabilities. This is despite the fact that dyslexia includes people who are either of average or above average intelligence.

Dyslexia is a genetic difference in an individual's ability to learn and process information. Dyslexic individuals have differing abilities, with strengths in creative, problem-solving and communication skills and challenges with spelling, reading and memorising facts.

Generally, a dyslexic cognitive profile will be uneven when compared to a neurotypical cognitive profile. Traditional benchmarking disadvantages dyslexics, measuring them against the very things they find challenging.

⁶ [Suicide Risk among People with Autism Spectrum Disorder | Suicide Prevention Resource Center \(sprc.org\)](#)

⁷ [Achieving Equal Employment Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities through Legislation \(Online guide\) \(ilo.org\)](#)

⁸ [Supporting neurodiverse learners in New Zealand prisons | Department of Corrections](#), [Prevalence of dyslexia among Texas prison inmates - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#), [Unlocking potential A review of education in prison \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

⁹ A 30-minute video discusses this in detail at this link:
https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2022/03/01/karen-waldie-neurodiversity-education-needed.html?utm_campaign=Social&utm_content=TIMESTAMP_EPOCH&utm_medium=social&utm_source=SOCIAL_NETWORK&fbclid=IwAR0VoXo3gxjOHIDWcl5iYfX0F-7HLtEMnbn0Gidspluk77IXAWfUchVhm74

Dyslexia Thinking Skills¹⁰

1. Visualising: Interacting with space, senses, physical ideas and new concepts. 75% are above average
2. Reasoning: Understanding patterns, evaluating possibilities and making decisions. 84% are above average
3. Imagining: Creating an original piece of work or giving ideas a new spin: 84% are above average
4. Connecting: Understanding self; connecting, empathising and influencing others. 80% are above average
5. Communicating: Crafting and conveying clear and engaging messages. 71% are above average
6. Exploring : Being curious and exploring ideas in a constant and energetic way. 84% are above average

Issues/challenges in recruitment and employment

As highlighted in the introduction, with the real challenges facing the public service and society as a whole, there is an underutilised resource waiting to bring their talents to bear.

Traditional recruitment practices that take a behavioural-based approach to assessing someone's suitability for a job often act as a barrier to employment for neurodiverse people.

A potential alternative is taking a skills-based approach or, as a minimum, asking skill-based questions at interviews as opposed to behaviour-based questions (these are discussed in more detail in the implementation section of the paper).

¹⁰ <https://www.madebydyslexia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Join-The-Dots-Workplace-Guide-1.pdf>

The ‘Business Case’ for employing people with neurodiversity

There is another side to the negative social statistics. Current overseas research and practice is challenging such deep-seated prejudices. In short, because the brain is processing information differently and utilising different parts, neurodiverse individuals are able to develop innovative solutions that neurotypical individuals may not be able to.¹¹

As well as significant increases in innovation capability, there are also significant improvements in productivity.

Academic institutions such as Vanderbilt University’s Center for Autism and Innovation, and Yale University’s Center for Dyslexia and Creativity are pioneering research in this area.¹²

Professor Julie Logan, from the CASS Business School in the UK, has undertaken research that shows 20% of successful entrepreneurs in the UK are dyslexic but make up only 3% of corporate managers. Similar research she undertook in the US indicated 35% of successful entrepreneurs have dyslexia but made up only 1% of corporate managers.¹³

Given dyslexics make up 10% of the population, this would indicate dyslexics have been significantly underutilised by organisations. There is no New Zealand-specific research, but there is no reason to think New Zealand is any different.

Benefits and positive impacts of recruiting those with neurodiversity

The benefits and positive impacts of recruiting the neurodiverse are many and varied. There are the direct business impacts; increased productivity¹⁴, improved innovation and problem solving, and better managers and leaders. Ernst & Young, in the US, found that because managers were focusing on the individual needs of their neurodiverse employees, they also started focusing on the individual needs of all their direct reports. They also became more precise communicators.¹⁵

The positive indirect impacts include the potential reduction of negative social statistics from unemployment, and a reduction of mental illness issues among the neurodiverse.

¹¹ <https://www.madebydyslexia.org/assets/downloads/EY-the-value-of-dyslexia.pdf> , [Neurodiversity Is a Competitive Advantage \(hbr.org\)](#), [Neurodiversity As A Strengthening Point For Your Team And Our Society \(forbes.com\)](#)

¹² [All About Us | Frist Center for Autism and Innovation | Vanderbilt University](#), [The Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity - Yale School of Medicine](#)

¹³ [Microsoft Word - PaperID186.doc \(psu.edu\)](#)

¹⁴ [How to get the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce | EY - Global](#) -Reports JP Morgan Chase improved productivity of between 90%-130% for some of their autistic employees compared with their neurotypical employee. [Join-The-Dots-Workplace-Guide-1.pdf \(madebydyslexia.org\)](#), [New Research Reveals Many Entrepreneurs Are Dyslexic | AMA \(amanet.org\)](#), [dyslexic-entrepreneurs-business-leaders-delegation-leadership-skills.pdf \(city.ac.uk\)](#), (4) [“Dyslexia, Learning Differently, and Innovation” | Fumiko Hoeft | TEDxSausalito - YouTube](#), [GCHQ's Director Jeremy Fleming - YouTube](#)

¹⁵ [How neurodiversity is driving innovation from unexpected places | EY - US](#), [How to get the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce | EY - Global](#) [Neurodiversity Is a Competitive Advantage \(hbr.org\)](#), [Neurodiversity As A Strengthening Point For Your Team And Our Society \(forbes.com\)](#),

Implementation framework

While there are a range of HR and recruiting practices¹⁶ that we need to do differently to tap into this talent pool, there are some foundation stones that need to be set in place first. Doing so will address the low levels of understanding about neurodiversity in the public sector and wider community.

International organisations that have successfully introduced neurodiversity recruitment have done so with strong leadership. Without that, efforts to increase neurodiversity are likely to flounder, even if adaptations to the recruitment process are minor.

A striking example is Andrew Fleming, the Director of UK Government Cybersecurity agency GCHQ. He has called the employment of neurodiverse employees as ‘Mission Critical’. Anecdotally, the UK’s intelligence, cyber and security agency estimates approximately 25% of their 6,000 employees are neurodiverse.

For some context, there has been a real push in the UK civil service to increase not only the recruitment of neurodiverse individuals but also their development.

In the same way, many New Zealand public sector organisations have networks for various minority groups, yet UK civil service departments have neurodiversity networks. There is the Civil Service Dyslexia and Dyspraxia Network (CSDDN). The latter has members from every grade of the UK civil service and is chaired by a senior member of the civil service.

Many overseas organisations that have adapted their recruitment process tapped into the NGOs in the neurodiversity sector for help. In New Zealand that could be Autism New Zealand or the Dyslexia Foundation.

HR functions can only succeed in increasing neurodiversity within an organisation if there is strong messaging from senior leaders about the benefits and dealing with any misconceptions about neurodiversity.

The other critical factor is not rushing the process. I encourage organisations to trial changes on a small scale to confirm what works. During this stage, consider partnering with neurodiversity NGOs to develop your recruitment strategy.

¹⁶ [How to interview job candidates with autism | EPIC Assist](#) and [Dyslexia-Dyspraxia-Dyscalculia-and-Dysgraphia-Line-Manager-Toolkit.pdf \(blog.gov.uk\)](#).

The three levels of action that could bring about this change:

Awareness

Action

Educating people about neurodiversity in particular dyslexia and the autism spectrum.

Result

This is likely to result in ad hoc actions by individual managers.

Awareness + Capability building

Action

Combine awareness raising with relevant training.

Result

Neurodiverse talent is accessed more systematically but is still very manager dependent as to how well this talent is accessed.

Awareness + Capability building + System change

Action

Combining a system change with awareness and capacity building.

Result

New Zealand public sector organisations fully utilise the talents of neurodiverse individuals.

Who is leading the way internationally?

There are a number of examples of good practice, particularly the aforementioned GCHQ and Ernst & Young.

GCHQ have:

- Directly targeted people with dyslexia in recruitment campaigns¹⁷.
- Allowed technological accommodations such as smart recording pens at meetings to minimise the anxiety that dyslexics feel when attempting to write down details¹⁸.
- Changed the way information can be presented at either performance reviews or when applying for promotions so the information can be presented either in writing, visually or vocally, whichever presents the applicant in the best light¹⁹.

Ernst & Young UK have radically changed their graduate recruitment process, targeting people with vision or strategic awareness. Previous practices had been inhibiting their search for these qualities.²⁰

- No applications are screened out based on academic performance at school or degree level (and academic intuitions are not listed) This is not to suggest that academic qualifications will not be considered during the recruitment process; but that they are not used as screening mechanism when someone first applies.
- They rely on their own internal assessment tests for such things as problem solving, literacy and numeracy.
- They stopped asking about positions of responsibility and stopped accepting CVs as part of the graduate application process (they felt these were often a reflection of family connections or privilege, rather than any particular qualities of the candidates. These questions were often a barrier to more disadvantaged groups, including dyslexics, being recruited).
- They specifically ask for skills to be listed in the application.
- Once recruited they are paired with a mentor.
- There is a very visible dyslexia and dyspraxia network, in the same way that there are minority network groups in the New Zealand public sector.

Beyond these large-scale approaches, a number of companies in the US have adopted a skills or performance-based approach to recruiting people on the autism spectrum and other forms of neurodiversity.

¹⁷ [Dyslexic thinking skills are mission critical for... - GCHQ.GOV.UK](#), [GCHQ targeting dyslexic and neurodiverse people in recruitment drive, spy chief says | The Independent](#) | [The Independent](#)

¹⁸ [\(4\) GCHQ's Director Jeremy Fleming - YouTube](#)

¹⁹ [\(4\) GCHQ's Director Jeremy Fleming - YouTube](#)

²⁰ [\(4\) Value of Dyslexia Report Full Film - YouTube](#),

In practical terms this means eliminating the traditional pre-employment job interview. Instead, a series of assessments are conducted over a period of weeks. Specific support is then provided once the candidate has started at the company.²¹

Managers also receive specific training in the recruitment process and then managing an individual. This is also accompanied by a mentoring process.

Organisations that follow this model include:

- Microsoft
- IBM
- Ford
- SAP
- JPMorgan Chase
- Ernst & Young USA

²¹ [\(4\) Hiring autistic workers - YouTube](#), [\(4\) Companies seeking out potential employees with autism - YouTube](#), [Why Autism Speaks Is Encouraging Companies To Hire Those On The Autistic Spectrum \(forbes.com\)](#)

Practical implementation

(How do to get more neurodiversity in your workforce)

“ HR functions can only succeed in increasing neurodiversity within an organisation if there is strong messaging from senior leaders about the benefits and dealing with any misconceptions about neurodiversity.”

Job advertisements

Be direct and to the point. Do not list skills or experience unless they are absolutely essential for fulfilling the role successfully. A prime example is asking applicants to be good communicators, regardless of whether the role actually requires good communication.

Make the point that applications are encouraged from the neurodiverse community and you are open to discussing the recruitment process. Literally, this will be enough to encourage neurodiverse individuals to apply for roles in your organisation.

The Interview

For dyslexics:²²

- 1) Avoid long, multipart questions. Many dyslexics find working memory a struggle and will forget these long questions, which then results in clumsy and off-point responses. However, there are some simple solutions: break down a long question into a series of smaller questions; provide a printed copy after you have asked it; or give them time to write down the question.
- 2) Many dyslexics have slower verbal processing speeds so do not rush them in their responses. At the start of the interview let them know it is okay to take their time in replying to questions.

For people on the autism spectrum:²³

- 1) Provide interview questions in advance and allow time to process and think. This might mean inviting them in an hour beforehand to show them the questions.
- 2) Before the interview, clarify how many people will be attending and their roles, thereby reducing anxiety. Consider providing photos of people on the interview panel.

²² [Dyslexia-Dyspraxia-Dyscalculia-and-Dysgraphia-Line-Manager-Toolkit.pdf \(blog.gov.uk\)](#).

²³ [How to interview job candidates with autism | EPIC Assist](#)

- 3) Share details about the interview room. Refer to details in terms of lighting (natural or otherwise), temperature (whether it can be adjusted), room orientation and design (where are the windows and doors; and are the walls made of glass?), access to facilities within the building (toilets, cafes, quiet spaces and public waiting areas).
- 4) Ask if the candidate is happy with the interview arrangements. This could mean a change of location if what you have described is unsuitable; extra time to respond to questions without being penalised; lift access, etc.
- 5) Do not force or expect eye contact. This is interacting with an autistic person 101. A lack of eye contact does not mean anything, and for many it is a way to concentrate better. Seat everyone angled, if possible. The pressure of sitting directly in front of an interviewer can negatively skew the feedback you get from your candidate.
- 6) Avoid indirect and abstract questions and be as specific as possible. Instead of, “Why don't you tell me about yourself?” try “What is your experience with [a specific programme]?” or “How many years have you spent [doing this specific kind of job]?” or “Tell me about your favourite project and why you enjoyed it,” etc.
- 7) Do not discourage stimming (self-stimulatory behaviours such as walking around or flapping hands). Interviews are stressful, so people on the autistic spectrum may stim. It does not mean they are unqualified, unable to handle stress or lying. It just means they are concentrating. Letting your autistic candidate know it is okay to stim will put them at ease and let them know you understand autism.

Recommendations for meaningful change

System-wide change is necessary to increase the number of people employed in the New Zealand public sector who are on the autism spectrum or have dyslexia and then move into leadership positions.

The first task is to raise awareness of neurodiversity, and specifically the autism spectrum and dyslexia. There are still significant prejudices, myths and misunderstandings that need to be corrected.

Raising awareness will make it easier for neurodiverse people already employed in the sector to be able to self-identify (based on first-hand experience this is still not the case).

One way to do this is to discuss neurodiversity, even identifying specific neurological differences such as dyslexia and the autism spectrum, in job advertisements. Based on overseas experience this sends a very clear signal to incumbents that neurodiversity is valued. This will aid the development of neurodiverse employee networks, which will demonstrate to potential employees an organisation “gets neurodiversity” and may be a great place to develop a career.

Embark on a medium-term process of capability building in hiring managers, people leaders and their teams. This has two distinct areas of development — the recruitment process, and leading and managing neurodiverse employees once they have started work. This process may help individuals to fulfil their potential and move into leadership roles. It is important for managers and colleagues to receive appropriate training and support.

New employees should not feel any pressure or obligation to educate their neurotypical colleagues about their neurodiversity. We do not expect other minority groups on day one of their employment relationship to explain how their differences impact upon them.

As they become more comfortable in their new work environment and feel safe, individuals may be more willing to discuss their neurodiversity and how it impacts them at work. This may include the things they find challenging and the strengths they bring to a role.

While awareness and capacity building are great, these can only be fully embraced if they are reinforced by systemic change across the New Zealand public sector and within public sector organisations.

Attempting ad hoc or piecemeal change is unlikely to work because it is too dependent on the discretion of individual managers or organisations who may have limited knowledge on which to make informed decisions.

Awareness campaigns can be wide-ranging and all-encompassing. There is much flexibility in how capacity building can be done. It can be at scale but it is probably better to take small steps initially.

A system-wide approach has worked best in improving the level of employment and experience for other minorities in the New Zealand public sector. Any small-scale

capacity building work should be undertaken with a view to understanding how learnings could be expanded across an organisation or the wider public sector.

There is a lot of good overseas material that can be easily adapted for the New Zealand public sector. These are listed in the footnotes below.²⁴

It is also important to tap into the knowledge base of local NGOs, such as Autism New Zealand and the New Zealand Dyslexia Foundation.

²⁴ [Dyslexia-Dyspraxia-Dyscalculia-and-Dysgraphia-Line-Manager-Toolkit.pdf \(blog.gov.uk\)](#),
[How to interview job candidates with autism | EPIC Assist](#),
[Join-The-Dots-Workplace-Guide-1.pdf \(madebydyslexia.org\)](#),
[EY - The Value of Dyslexia - Dyslexia and the future organisation](#)
[Employing autistic people \(autism.org.uk\)](#)
[1803-2612675_NeurodiversityDrivingInnovationBrochure_v16_singles.pdf \(ey.com\)](#)
[\(4\) GCHQ's Director Jeremy Fleming - YouTube](#)

Appendice 1 – Research methodology

Initially, when this research was proposed it was my intention to travel and meet with overseas academics who had conducted research into the neurodiverse in employment, and visit organisations that had implemented neurodiverse-friendly employment practices. However, Covid-19 intervened.

Without the ability to travel overseas this led to an amended research methodology. A very detailed literature review of the latest research was carried out, followed by interviews with New Zealand and overseas experts. These included:

- Autism New Zealand
- The New Zealand Dyslexia Foundation
- Professor Robert Austin, from the Ivey Business School at Western University in Canada and affiliated faculty member of Harvard University’s Center for Primary Care, who taught for 12 years at Harvard Business School. His research specialisation is talent management with a particular focus of the integration of neurodiverse individuals into professional work settings. He is widely published, with his work featuring in the *Harvard Business Review*, MIT Sloan Management Review and the *Wall Street Journal* among others)
- Andrew Eddy, a co-founder of Untapped, a social enterprise in Australia that has created an employment ecosystem for people on the autistic spectrum. In conjunction with La Trobe University in Melbourne (Eddy was deputy chancellor from 2010 and 2019), Untapped set up Neurodiversity Hub, providing an employment pathway for autistic tertiary students in a range of businesses. These include Westpac, ANZ, NAB, SAP, BHP, Dell, IBM and Deloitte. Rather than purely focus on job placement, Untapped puts processes in place to support students transitioning from secondary school to university, and from university to work (among a range of initiatives is an internship programme so students can gain all-important work experience)

A number of overseas organisations have also shared their human resource processes to tap into neurodiverse talent, in particular people who are dyslexic or on the autistic spectrum. These include videos from British security intelligence agency GCHQ – one from director Sir Jeremy Fleming²⁵ and another giving more detail of their human resources practices.²⁶ Ernst & Young discusses their graduate hiring practices in this video²⁷ (at 4 minutes 18 seconds), and the Value of Dyslexia report²⁸ (mapping the skill strengths of dyslexics against future requirements of the labour market as outlined in the World Economic Forum’s ‘Future of Jobs’ report).

²⁵ [\(4\) GCHQ's Director Jeremy Fleming - YouTube](#)

²⁶ [\(4\) Made By Dyslexia D.Spot Vodcast Dyslexic Intelligence - YouTube](#)

²⁷ [\(4\) Value of Dyslexia Report Full Film - YouTube](#)

²⁸ [EY - The Value of Dyslexia - Dyslexia and the future organisation](#)

Appendice 2 – About the author

David Hammond – a lived experience

As a child, David Hammond remembers being repeatedly smacked over the hand for not being able to read and being told to write faster when physically and mentally impossible. Then, being ridiculed as a teenager for stuttering and, as an adult, being told to keep his neurodiversity quiet to protect his career.

Hammond has lived in a world of ignorance, of myths, prejudice, misunderstanding and stigma. But he has survived – and thrived.

He is dyslexic and dyspraxic. His brain is wired differently. He has a daughter on the autism spectrum.

He has never tried to hide his neurodiversity.

“I’ve always been really out there and I’m really comfortable,” he says. “And I’m aware that not everyone is.”

The 47-year-old’s journey has been long and lonely, a struggle to find his place – “I’ve had to do it my way”, he says because it wasn’t until 2007 that the Ministry of Education recognised dyslexia. And he was first diagnosed in 1983.

“I had issues around spelling, reading and hand writing at school,” Hammond says. “I went to a country primary school where I had the same teacher for three years. I would get hit over the hands with a ruler for not being able to read or join the dots in an exercise teaching kids to write.”

At primary school, he struggled being able to write everything down and his writing was messy, with his parents later revealing someone thought he would be incapable of living away from home. “Quite how you make that leap from these issues to living independently, I don’t know.”

Meanwhile, his intellectual capacity was underestimated.

Not much changed at secondary school. It only accentuated his inability to write things down in time. His maths teacher told his parents he must write faster. He already had pins and needles in his arm from trying.

There was some remedial help but not a lot. And the ignorance and humiliation kept coming. “The PE teacher decided to make me class captain, for whatever reason,” he recalls. “Part of the role was reading out people’s names and, like many dyslexics, I had a stutter. There was some poor kid’s name who I mangled. The teacher decided to mimic my stutter or stammer and the rest of the kids laughed. It went on for about a year.”

Hammond was a whiz at multiple choice but couldn't complete the written components of exams in time. He was even told his writing was illegible.

He went to university but "pulled out after a term because he couldn't see any progress". Northland Polytechnic welcomed him but "they had never seen a dyslexic or anyone who said they were dyslexic. It blew their mind, I think."

But they granted him unlimited time to complete exams and he could focus on the exam and "not on finishing it on time". Consequently, his grades improved dramatically.

Neurodiverse people are renowned problem solvers and Hammond put his brain into overdrive. "I had moved to Waikato Uni and worked out how to finish an exam in three hours: write 66% less than everyone else but get the same marks."

Hammond got his first degree and surprised even himself by going through the education system from getting really low marks and then suddenly getting As at university.

The UK beckoned and Hammond completed a masters' degree at the London School of Economics before he was hit with the Imposter Syndrome.

"I wanted to test myself. Having gone through the education system, was it really true that I was doing so well?"

"I wanted to stay on in the UK but couldn't land a job for love nor money so I came back to New Zealand."

He landed the "worst job possible for a dyslexic" – a case manager role that involved a lot of data entry – then moved to a "far more interesting" role as an immigration officer. The quest for the perfect job continued and he applied for an assistant political analyst role. Another candidate was preferred despite Hammond being told he did "really well" at the interview. "I asked, why then didn't I get it? I gave them a really hard time."

Two months later they called him back and said, "the job is yours" after the first candidate "barely lasted a day".

Hammond spent more than 12 years in ministerial servicing – either in senior advisory roles, as a team leader across the public sector or managing Treasury's ministerial servicing team. "It means I know far too much about OIAs and PQs," he laughs.

Now he's at the Ministry for Environment in charge of the Quality of Policy Advice team. "I have finally started to use my skills really well. Things I'm really good at," he says. "That's dealing with the big picture and being able to join the dots between what seems like quite desperate pieces of information. I didn't realise that is what dyslexics are good at. We are able to join up different pieces of information that other people don't see. Make links. It's potentially one of reasons we are actually quite good entrepreneurs."

Technology is his friend. It has been a vital aid in helping him show his potential and reach his maximum, with voice recognition software giving him the tools to beat his writing block. "I consider the way I operate as perfectly normal because I don't have any experience of being neurotypical," he says.

Hammond says there is much work to be done on education and improving the workplace. "There's a high degree of ignorance and a total lack of awareness of the strengths that neurodiverse people bring. And a superficial understanding of the various types of neurodiversity." He says he is aware of parts of the public sector where there is still a stigma attached to being neurodiverse.

"We had someone working at an agency who was gay, married and very comfortable about being 'out'. But they hadn't told their boss they were dyslexic and it was causing them issues. Towards the end of their time they actually talked to their boss about it. That gives you some indication of the stigma that someone who was openly gay felt very hesitant talking about it.

"I had someone at [a government department] tell me to be quiet about it (my dyslexia) because it might not be good for my career. You don't tell people to be quiet about their culture or their sexuality, or anything else.

I'm aware that in some other parts of the public sector there is still a certain stigma attached to the neurodiverse. They are quiet about it and they really shouldn't be."

Hammond says people who are dyslexic generally have good empathy and people-reading skills, while someone on the autistic spectrum can find social communication a real challenge. He says employers must understand the stress a simple interview can cause because they are basically about social skills and communication. "For autistic people, that's the crux of their difference."

Hammond also speaks from another lived experience because his six-year-old daughter is on the autism spectrum. "We see now what is potentially going to play out later on around the fact she struggles to predict what is going to happen in social situations.

"In social interaction, most people have an instinctive feel of how things will happen and what you are going to do. As I understand it, for someone on the spectrum, it's not automatic. This can result in mimicking what should be done after observing the intricacies of a social interaction so there is a lot of masking, copying . . . putting a lot of energy into that. As soon as you put people in a situation like a job interview, which is unpredictable, it makes it really problematic."