



Neurodivergent Minds Are Powering the Modern Economy. So Why Are So Many Burning Out and Leaving?

There is a contradiction at the centre of modern business that few organisations are prepared to examine closely. At the very moment we celebrate visionary thinking, unconventional problem solving and relentless cognitive stamina, we are quietly losing many of the minds most capable of delivering exactly those qualities.

Neurodivergent professionals are not marginal participants in the economy. In many sectors, they are shaping it. Pattern recognition, deep analytical focus, systems thinking and the ability to interrogate inefficiencies are traits frequently associated with neurodivergent cognition, and they underpin industries ranging from technology and finance to engineering and design. In an economy increasingly defined by complexity and rapid adaptation, those traits are not decorative. They are decisive.

Prominent leaders have spoken openly about how cognitive difference has shaped their trajectories. Elon Musk has discussed having Asperger's syndrome and the way he processes information. Richard Branson has long described how dyslexia influenced the way he built Virgin. Greta Thunberg has characterised autism as a source of clarity rather than limitation. Their stories are not identical, nor are their diagnoses interchangeable, but they collectively illustrate a broader truth: cognitive difference and leadership are not mutually exclusive.

Corporate policy has begun to catch up with this reality. Microsoft has developed a Neurodiversity Hiring Program designed to access overlooked talent pools. SAP has publicly reported measurable productivity improvements in teams that include neurodivergent employees. EY established Neurodiversity Centers of Excellence after observing tangible gains in data and analytics performance. JP Morgan Chase has stated that in certain roles, neurodivergent hires have demonstrated significantly higher productivity than their peers.

The economic argument is therefore well established. The retention data is more troubling.

According to figures from the National Autistic Society and other advocacy bodies, neurodivergent adults remain significantly underrepresented in sustained full-time employment relative to their qualifications. Surveys repeatedly highlight elevated rates of workplace stress, anxiety and burnout among neurodivergent employees, particularly in environments characterised by sensory overload, ambiguous communication and social performance as a proxy for competence. What begins as adaptation often becomes exhaustion, and exhaustion frequently leads to exit.

The talent drain rarely announces itself dramatically. It is more often disguised as a change of career, a move to freelance work or a decision to prioritise "work-life balance". Beneath those explanations there is sometimes a quieter truth: the environment required too much continuous self-suppression.

I recognise that pattern because I lived it.

When I entered corporate banking, I believed that discipline and hard work would compensate for any internal strain. From the outside, I appeared high performing. Inside, I was not sleeping properly, not eating consistently and self harming while maintaining a composed exterior in meetings. I assumed resilience meant endurance, and that any difficulty was evidence of personal weakness rather than structural mismatch.

In 2018 my body intervened. I began losing the ability to walk and was later diagnosed with Functional Neurological Disorder. The explanation was stark: my nervous system had been pushed beyond sustainable limits for too long. I was not incapable of the work. I was operating within a system that required constant masking of how I processed it.

Research increasingly distinguishes neurodivergent burnout from general occupational stress, noting its cumulative nature and its roots in prolonged masking and sensory strain. The consequences are not merely emotional; they are physiological and professional. Highly capable individuals reduce output, withdraw or leave entirely, taking with them institutional knowledge and specialist skill.

In December, when year-end targets coincide with social disruption and heightened sensory demand, I spoke publicly about neurodivergent burnout. More than four million people engaged with that content in a single month. Senior leaders wrote privately about near collapse. Graduates described leaving roles they had once considered aspirational. The volume of response made one point unmistakable: this is not a fringe issue.

Autism Acceptance Month has helped elevate awareness of neurodivergence across organisations. Awareness, however, does not automatically translate into operational change. Inclusion that depends on annual campaigns or individual disclosure will always be inconsistent.

What improves retention and performance is structural clarity.

Explicit expectations. Predictable feedback loops. Sensory consideration in physical and digital environments. Support mechanisms that employees can access without navigating the additional risk of formal disclosure.

That recognition is what led me to build AntiPocket.

Launching on 1 April, AntiPocket is designed as a swiftly deployable, non-disclosing support system that organisations can embed within existing diversity and inclusion strategies. It provides neurodivergent employees with practical tools for preparation before cognitively demanding work, regulation during periods of overload and structured decompression afterwards. Crucially, it does so without requiring individuals to formally label themselves in order to benefit.

For employers, this is not a question of benevolence. It is one of optimisation.

When neurodivergent professionals are supported to manage cognitive load effectively, output becomes more consistent, absenteeism decreases and retention improves. Recruitment costs reduce as high value employees remain within the organisation rather than exiting through preventable burnout. Commercial growth becomes more stable because performance is not repeatedly interrupted by collapse.

Neurodivergent minds are already shaping the modern economy. The competitive advantage of the next decade will belong to organisations that learn not only how to recruit those minds, but how to sustain them.

AntiPocket is not positioned as a wellbeing add-on. It is infrastructure for performance in an economy that increasingly depends on cognitive diversity.

Innovation may capture headlines. Sustainability determines who remains to deliver it.

Editor's note

Rosie is an autistic founder, speaker and author of My Autistic Fight Song. Her social platforms reach millions each month and she regularly speaks and appears on podcasts about autism, ambition and relationships. AntiPocket, her support app for neurodivergent adults, launches publicly on 1 April and is available for discussion during Autism Acceptance Month.