# Fostering an inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem: empowering neurodivergent individuals and employees to thrive

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article synthesises contributions from the special issue "*Fostering an inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem: empowering neurodivergent individuals and employees to thrive*". It reframes neurodivergence as a source of strength, while acknowledging the complex interplay between strengths and systemic challenges. The article advocates for evidence-informed strategies that promote inclusive and sustainable career pathways, emphasising the interaction between individual agency and structural change rather than commodifying neurodivergent talent as "superpowers".

**Design/methodology/approach** – Guided by the sustainable career ecosystem theory, this article identifies five key principles derived from the nine contributions spanning four continents and seven countries. These principles are examined in relation to five United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting their global relevance and alignment with broader equity and sustainability agendas. The article concludes with a forward-looking research agenda that centres neurodivergent voices in shaping future scholarship and practice.

**Findings** – Five principles are essential for cultivating an inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem for neurodivergent individuals: championing neuroaffirming, strengths-based practice; recognising the interplay of diagnosis, identity and lifespan development; fostering neuroinclusive workplaces and leadership; addressing structural and societal barriers; and supporting sustainable outcomes and ecosystem impact. Together, these principles provide a cohesive framework for guiding inclusive career development and workplace transformation.

**Originality/value** – This article offers a novel synthesis of insights from the special issue, integrating current evidence into a coherent framework. It identifies actionable pathways for research, policy and practice to empower neurodivergent individuals. By articulating guiding principles, it provides a foundation for employers, career practitioners and neurodivergent employees to collaboratively develop neuroinclusive policies and foster systemic change.

**Keywords** Career development, Career ecosystem, Inclusion, Neurodivergent, Sustainable career, Sustainable career ecosystem, Sustainable development goals (SDGs), Workplace design

**Paper type** Research article

## Introduction

This article introduces a special issue in *Career Development International* dedicated to exploring the transformative contributions of neurodivergent individuals in contemporary

organisations. By highlighting the value of neurodivergent people within neurodiverse workplaces, this collection invites readers to consider how diversity of thought and experience can fuel genuine inclusion, drive innovation, spark creativity and support sustainable growth. As a neurodivergent team of Guest Editors, we are committed to reimagining work cultures as environments where neurodivergent individuals feel safe, accepted, respected, valued, supported appropriately and ultimately empowered. This commitment shapes not only the focus of this special issue but also the language we use – recognising that words profoundly influence how people are perceived, understood and supported (Reed *et al.*, 2024). Our overarching aim is to reframe neurodivergence as a source of strength, while acknowledging the complex interplay between strengths and challenges (Lampinen *et al.*, 2025). We advocate for evidence-informed strategies that promote inclusive and sustainable career pathways, emphasising the interaction between individual agency and structural change rather than commodifying neurodivergent talent as "superpowers".

This special issue arrives at a critical moment. Recent data show that only 25% of neurodivergent professionals feel truly included in workplaces globally (Kirby *et al.*, 2025). Statistics such as these are placing new pressures on organisations to address persistent barriers to inclusion and wellbeing through inclusive leadership – both as a matter of social responsibility and in recognition that diverse perspectives are essential to workplace success (Foster, 2024; Marques and Dhiman, 2024). While research into the value of neurodiversity and the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals in the workplace has gained momentum in recent years (e.g. Bölte *et al.*, 2025; Branicki *et al.*, 2024; Hennekam and Follmer, 2024), important questions remain about how best to create conditions in which neurodivergent individuals can thrive across all stages of their careers (Sahyaja and Shankar, 2024). This special issue addresses that gap by bringing together a diverse range of voices – scholars, practitioners and policymakers – many of whom draw directly on their own lived experience of neurodivergence, to enrich our collective understanding of what meaningful inclusion looks like in practice.

Our approach also engages with ongoing conversations within the neurodivergent community that challenge the persistent misconception that neurodivergent individuals are a "hard-to-reach group" in research contexts. In truth, it is often our underrepresentation within research teams that creates barriers to meaningful engagement, limiting the inclusion of neurodivergent perspectives in both the design and interpretation of research (Zisk, 2024). This lack of representation also influences which forms of knowledge are legitimised within academic publishing. Given the diversity and individuality of neurodivergent experiences, it is critical to recognise the unique value that qualitative research can offer. Rich, context-specific insights – often best captured through in-depth qualitative methods – are essential to understanding the nuanced realities of neurodivergent lives and informing inclusive, strengths-based approaches to career development. As Owens-Schill *et al.* (2024) demonstrate, even a single participant can contribute profound and valuable insights. This special issue responds to these challenges by modelling inclusive authorship – through diverse methodological choices and the integration of lived experience across varied backgrounds – to ensure neurodivergent perspectives are meaningfully represented throughout.

We encourage journal editors, reviewers and scholars to reflect on how prevailing assumptions about sample size and generalisability may inadvertently exclude neurodivergent voices. More inclusive research practices can better accommodate and elevate individual experiences, fostering deeper understanding and more equitable knowledge production (Reed *et al.*, 2024). This inclusive ethos is exemplified in the special issue, which features two practitioner contributions based on individual autoethnographies (Lennox, 2025; Sattler, 2025), alongside a three-year longitudinal ethnography of two autistic individuals living in Brazilian favelas (Felix and Hennekam, 2025).

The article proceeds as follows: first, we outline the context and background for this special issue, including our framing of neurodivergence in workplace settings. Next, we introduce the sustainable career ecosystem theory that informs our work. We then explore five key principles

drawn from the nine featured articles, highlighting their alignment with five United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs). Finally, we present a forward-looking research agenda and practical pathways for advancing inclusive policy and practice, with neurodivergent voices central to driving systemic change.

## Context and background

Understanding neurodivergence begins with recognising the broader concept of neurodiversity, which refers to the natural variation in how people think, learn and interact with the world. As defined in Australian guidelines developed in consultation with the neurodivergent community, neurodiversity is "the perspective that people experience and interact with the world in different ways" (Goodall *et al.*, 2023, p. 128). This view challenges the notion of a single "normal" way of being and reframes behavioural and cognitive differences as part of human variation rather than deficits.

The neurodiversity paradigm, first popularised by Singer (1999) but now understood to have collective origins (Botha *et al.*, 2024), positions neurological variation as a "natural and valuable manifestation of human genetic diversity" (Chapman, 2020, p. 219). This paradigm resists deficit-based framings and instead highlights the strengths and contributions of neurodivergent individuals – such as pattern recognition, deep focus and creative problem solving – which can enrich organisational learning and innovation (Bruyère and Colella, 2022; Vincent and Cook, 2025; Wiklund *et al.*, 2018). Despite growing academic interest, deficit-oriented language rooted in the medical model remains pervasive. As Praslova (2024) notes, "entire generations of researchers and clinicians" (p. 26) have been shaped by the medical model paradigm. This legacy continues to influence how neurodivergent individuals are perceived and supported – particularly in workplace and career development contexts. Our concern echoes calls from Wise (2023) and others to reframe neurological differences as natural variations rather than problems to be solved.

Within the neurodiversity paradigm, neurodivergence describes individuals whose cognitive functioning diverges from what is considered typical – including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and other conditions. Importantly, neurodivergence is not defined solely by diagnosis; many individuals self-identify based on lived experience, and preferences around terminology may vary. For example, some prefer "neuromajority" over "neurotypical" to avoid reinforcing normative assumptions. As Vincent and Cook (2025) emphasise, respectful dialogue should honour individual preferences and the evolving nature of identity. With this in mind, we encouraged the contributing authors to this special issue to use the language and terminology that they preferred, rather than imposing our own. We hope readers adopt a similar approach, while remaining mindful that language and preferences can vary across different regions and evolve with time (N.B., these works were published in 2025).

With an estimated 15 to 20% of the global population identifying as neurodivergent (Doyle, 2020) and persistent disparities in employment outcomes (Hennekam and Follmer, 2024), it is imperative to build an inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem (Baruch *et al.*, 2023; Donald, 2023, 2025; Donald *et al.*, 2024a). This special issue contributes to that goal by foregrounding neurodivergent voices and promoting strengths-based and neuroaffirming approaches to workplace inclusion. Working towards this goal also requires acknowledging that disclosure is a complex and deeply personal decision. Many neurodivergent scholars may not feel psychologically safe or adequately supported to disclose their identity, particularly in environments shaped by deficit-based assumptions. This collection aims to foster cultures that empower neurodivergent individuals to be themselves – and to thrive. Reflecting this commitment, the articles in this special issue deliberately shift away from deficit-based framings. They highlight the distinctive contributions of neurodivergent individuals and offer practical insights into how workplaces can better support collective diversity. Meaningful inclusion requires more than accommodation – it calls for a reimagining of values,

relationships and practices that centre recognition, empathy, trust and collaboration with care (Vincent and Cook, 2025).

To deepen this understanding, the next section introduces the sustainable career ecosystem framework, which offers a lens for understanding how inclusive organisational practices can support neurodivergent individuals not only to access employment but also to flourish across the lifespan of their careers. By situating neurodivergence within broader conversations about sustainability, equity and innovation, we aim to advance a more holistic and future-oriented approach to workplace inclusion.

### Theoretical framing: sustainable career ecosystem theory

Sustainable career theory (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015) introduced the concept of sustainability into career studies, defining a sustainable career as:

> the sequence of an individual's different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual. (p. 7)

This theory emphasises three interrelated dimensions: individual agency, environmental context and temporal progression (De Vos *et al.*, 2020), with health, happiness and productivity identified as key indicators of career sustainability (Van der Heijden, 2005). Building on this foundation, Donald *et al.* (2024b) argue that integrating the often fragmented literature of vocational behaviour, career development and human resource management enables the design of policies and practices that support sustainable outcomes for both individuals and organisations.

Our special issue builds on recent scholarship that foregrounds the lived experience of neurodivergent individuals within career development. Vincent and Cook (2025), for example, examine how neurodivergent doctoral students navigate career pathways shaped by unique cognitive, emotional and relational dynamics. Their work challenges conventional career models and highlights the importance of inclusive frameworks that reflect diverse ways of being, learning and relating. The dimensions of context and time are particularly salient when considering neurodivergent career trajectories. Owens-Schill *et al.* (2024), for example, introduce the concept of the "surrendered self" – a provisional identity shaped by socio-cultural expectations that can eclipse other aspects of selfhood. This concept, developed through the life history of a mother-worker caring for two neurodivergent children, illustrates how competing demands and shifting identities over time can profoundly shape career development. Such insights are especially relevant to neurodivergent individuals, whose career paths often follow non-linear or atypical trajectories not captured by mainstream models.

Career ecosystem theory (Baruch, 2013, 2015) complements this perspective by conceptualising career development as a dynamic system of interdependent actors. Drawing on Iansiti and Levien's (2004) definition of an ecosystem as "a system that contains a large number of loosely coupled (interconnected) actors who depend on each other to ensure the overall effectiveness of the system" (p. 5), career ecosystem theory highlights the importance of relationships and structures that facilitate employment, progression, and opportunity (Baruch, 2015; Baruch and Rousseau, 2019). Together with sustainable career theory, these frameworks offer a comprehensive lens for understanding career development as both individually driven and systemically shaped. In this way, a sustainable career ecosystem can be understood as a network of interconnected and interdependent actors – spanning educational institutions and workplace settings – through which individuals' lives and careers unfold over time, with a focus on achieving sustainable outcomes for people, organisations, and society as a whole (Donald and Jackson, 2023).

Applying this framework to neurodivergent careers is both timely and necessary. Employees are recognised as actors within a sustainable career ecosystem. However,

neurodivergent individuals remain significantly underrepresented in these discussions. Donald (2025) has begun to address exclusionary aspects affecting disabled scholars – building on earlier work (Donald and Frank, 2023; Donald and Yarovaya, 2023; Paul Vincent and Donald, 2024) – but neurodivergence specifically has yet to receive comparable attention. Neurodivergent individuals often face systemic barriers that constrain career development and diminish wellbeing – particularly in environments shaped by deficit-based assumptions (Bruyère and Colella, 2024; Butcher and Lane, 2025; Vincent and Cook, 2025).

This gap is concerning given that neurodivergent career paths often diverge from conventional trajectories designed for neurotypical minds (Hennekam *et al.*, 2025). The "surrendered self" concept (Owens-Schill *et al.*, 2024) further illustrates how identity negotiations and competing demands can shape career outcomes in ways that are often invisible to mainstream models. Effective interventions must therefore respond to both immediate needs and long-term aspirations, recognising the dynamic and relational nature of neurodivergent career development. To address this gap, the special issue advocates for a more inclusive and adaptive career ecosystem – one that enables neurodivergent individuals to thrive without compromising core aspects of their identity or potential. By embedding neurodivergence within sustainable career ecosystem theory, we aim to advance a more holistic, equitable and future-oriented approach to workplace inclusion.

The articles in this special issue collectively demonstrate the versatility and relevance of sustainable career ecosystem theory in advancing neurodivergent inclusion across diverse contexts. Table 1 provides an overview of the geographic scope, methodological diversity and theoretical applications across the featured studies.

The studies explore how interconnected actors and inclusive practices support neurodivergent individuals to thrive across a range of cultural and organisational settings. Together, these contributions expand and reimagine the sustainable career ecosystem framework, offering new theoretical and practical insights that highlight adaptive, strengths-based and context-sensitive approaches to workplace inclusion. Building on this foundation, we outline five principles that underpin an inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem for neurodivergent individuals.

### Principles for empowering neurodivergent individuals and employees to thrive

Guided by the sustainable career ecosystem theory, we distilled five key principles from the nine articles in this special issue that are essential to cultivating an inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem for neurodivergent individuals – and, by extension, for all. These include championing neuroaffirming; strengths-based practice; recognising the interplay of diagnosis, identity and lifespan development; fostering neuroinclusive workplaces and leadership; addressing structural and societal barriers; and supporting sustainable outcomes and ecosystem impact. In this section, we outline each of these principles before shifting our focus in the next section to demonstrate how these principles align with five of the United Nations SDGs.

*Principle 1: championing neuroaffirming, strengths-based practice*
Autistic employees contribute valuable skills and experiences, champion equity and bring unique perspectives to workplace problem-solving (Lennox, 2025). However, fostering an inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem requires more than recognition – it demands an explicit commitment to neuroaffirming, strengths-based practice. Kersten *et al.* (2025) advocate for building a career coaching infrastructure that centres on individual strengths. They suggest embedding this mindset into everyday organisational processes to support neurodivergent workers in developing satisfying and sustainable careers. Szulc and Staniszewska (2025) reinforce the importance of recognising diverse cognitive profiles and non-linear career journeys, demonstrating how a strengths-based lens can help dismantle

**Table 1.** Summary of articles in the special issue – an inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem for neurodivergent individuals

| Author(s) | Type of article | Study location | Approach and key insights |
|---|---|---|---|
| Abeysekara, Hayward, and Spoor | Literature review | n/a | A scoping review of 46 studies examining how autistic employees define and experience career development, using a misfit lens to identify employee job fit, organisational fit and psychological safety as key factors influencing sustainable career progression |
| Felix and Hennekam | Research article | Brazil | A three-year longitudinal ethnography of two autistic individuals living in Brazilian favelas, examining how intersecting societal, organisational and individual barriers render their career ecosystem structurally unsustainable, and highlighting the need for inclusive, context-sensitive approaches to career sustainability |
| Grabarski, Jameson, and Mouratidou | Research article | USA | Semi-structured interviews with 31 adults diagnosed with ADHD, exploring how ADHD influences career sustainability through the lens of sustainable career ecosystem theory, and identifying key personal, contextual and systemic factors that shape career experiences. Crucially, key actors at the local ecosystem level (e.g. family members, teachers, neighbours, friends, co-workers and therapists) play an important role in individual careers within the ecosystem, particularly regarding diagnosis and support |
| Kersten, Scholz, Van Woerkom, Smeets, and Krabbenborg | Research article | The Netherlands | A multi-method qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with 31 participants (HR professionals, line managers and neurodivergent employees), follow-up focus groups with 12 participants, and a qualitative survey. The study explores strengths-based practices for supporting neurodivergent employees and identifies key actors and practices at both local and societal levels of the sustainable career ecosystem |
| Kugler | Research article | Germany | Episodic biographical interviews with 14 employed individuals diagnosed with ADHD in adulthood, reflecting on their career paths in terms of success and career crafting. The study also identifies deficits in the German healthcare system, and informs a call for further research on additional life events and factors shaping sustainable careers in individuals with ADHD and other neurodivergent populations |
| Lennox | Practitioner insight | UK (Northern Ireland) | An autoethnographic reflection by a late-diagnosed autistic career practitioner, examining identity reconstruction and workplace adjustment. Practical strategies to enable autistic workers to flourish include awareness-raising and education in workplace environments, individualised accommodations and neuroinclusive workplace policies and practices |

**Table 1.** Continued

| Author(s) | Type of article | Study location | Approach and key insights |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sattler | Practitioner insight | Australia | Combines autoethnographic reflection and a case study to introduce the Cluster Approach to the Development of Identity (CADI), demonstrating how neurodiversity-affirming career development can support neurodivergent clients in constructing sustainable and adaptable career narratives |
| Szulc and Staniszewska | Research article | Poland | Semi-structured interviews with 20 neurodivergent professionals exploring career sustainability through a strengths-based lens, highlighting how unclear pathways and misfit, invisible barriers such as masking and stigma, as well as inclusive environments that enable safe disclosure and peer support, shape non-linear career trajectories and the potential for thriving when neurodivergent strengths are supported |
| Vodden and Arman | Research article | Australia and UK | Semi-structured interviews with 10 adults diagnosed with ADHD, exploring how work contexts, leadership and stigma shape career sustainability. Findings highlight masking, disclosure dilemmas and the need for inclusive practices that support autonomy, strengths and psychological wellbeing |

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation

invisible barriers, such as masking and stigma, which otherwise deplete personal resources and hinder progression.

Sattler (2025) introduces the Cluster Approach to the Development of Identity (CADI), a framework that equips career practitioners to guide neurodivergent clients in identifying work patterns aligned with their unique preferences and abilities. This approach also encourages individuals to explore possibilities and construct meaningful career narratives that reflect their authentic selves. Collectively, these contributions align with Branicki *et al.* (2024), who emphasise that moving beyond deficit-focused perspectives is essential for cultivating workplaces that genuinely value neurodiversity. As Szulc and Staniszewska (2025) argue, strengths-based and neuroaffirming practices are not only an ethical imperative but also a strategic advantage – unlocking talent, driving innovation and supporting diverse ways of working will ultimately improve long-term organisational sustainability.

*Principle 2: recognising the interplay of diagnosis, identity and lifespan development*
Diagnosis timing and identity work across the lifespan are critical factors shaping career sustainability for neurodivergent individuals. Lennox (2025) offers a personal account of how receiving an autism diagnosis in adulthood reshaped self-perception, workplace interactions and the reinterpretation of past experiences. This process can profoundly influence how individuals navigate their careers and advocate for appropriate accommodations. Extending this insight, Grabarski *et al.* (2025) note that earlier diagnoses provide greater opportunities to reframe past challenges, build self-awareness and strengthen self-advocacy. These factors are closely linked to improved psychological wellbeing and career satisfaction, echoing Helgesson *et al.* (2023), who found that formal diagnosis can enhance labour market participation.

Kugler (2025) adds further nuance by exploring how undiagnosed ADHD can limit career crafting, often resulting in impulsive or unintentional career decisions. The post-diagnosis journey is marked by phases of reflection, grief and intentional planning – though many individuals struggle to move from self-awareness to action without appropriate support. The risks and benefits of disclosing a diagnosis in the workplace are also addressed (Lennox, 2025; Vodden and Arman, 2025), highlighting the complex interplay between identity, stigma and organisational culture. Collectively, these studies illustrate how identity development is not static but evolves with new knowledge and shifting circumstances. This highlights the need for career interventions that are responsive to changing contexts and supportive across the lifespan (Hirschi *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). Combined, these findings underscore the importance of career support systems that adapt across different life stages and transitions.

*Principle 3: fostering neuroinclusive workplaces and leadership*
Organisational cultures, leadership practices and workplace structures play a critical role in shaping whether neurodivergent employees can thrive (McDowall *et al.*, 2023). Lennox (2025) calls for easily accessible, tailored support for autistic employees, alongside broader awareness-raising initiatives aimed at normalising diverse representations of autism in workplace environments. Complementing this, Abeysekara *et al.* (2025) emphasise that overcoming person-organisational misfit is essential for fostering psychological safety – supported by inclusive policies, coworker understanding and a workplace culture that values diversity. The role of organisational actors in translating policy into practice is further emphasised by Kersten *et al.* (2025), who highlight teams, line managers and human resource professionals as key enablers. This aligns with Bölte *et al.* (2025), who stress the need to centre individual strengths in job and career matching. Kersten *et al.* (2025) additionally note that co-worker support and team-level openness are vital for sustaining careers, while human resource professionals and line managers must enable strengths-based task allocation and ensure balanced workloads.

Vodden and Arman (2025) show how masking behaviours often emerge in response to rigid management styles, as neurodivergent employees adapt their working identities to avoid misunderstanding or judgment. They advocate for trust-based environments where disclosure feels safe. Additionally, Szulc and Staniszewska (2025) emphasise that normalising diverse working methods shifts responsibility from individuals to organisations, fostering collective commitment to inclusive design. Crucially, Felix and Hennekam (2025) demonstrate that misalignment between workplace characteristics and autistic needs increases the risk of unemployment or unpaid work. Taken together, these contributions underscore that top-down leadership and bottom-up advocacy are essential for building truly neuroinclusive workplaces.

*Principle 4: addressing structural and societal barriers*
Beyond individual and organisational practices, structural and societal conditions significantly shape the career sustainability of neurodivergent workers. Felix and Hennekam (2025) reveal how spiritual beliefs about autism and a lack of governmental support can create significant barriers for autistic individuals living in Brazilian favelas, limiting their career agency. Kersten *et al.* (2025) situate organisational efforts within wider societal norms and institutional frameworks, highlighting the influence of market dynamics and policy environments. Additionally, Grabarski *et al.* (2025) show that, while formal diagnoses can enhance labour market participation and self-esteem, many individuals continue to face hidden barriers, such as stigma and systemic inflexibility. Helgesson *et al.* (2023) further emphasise that timely diagnosis is a key enabler of career development, yet access to diagnostic and post-diagnostic support remains uneven across contexts. For example, Kugler (2025) illustrates how, despite the clear benefits of diagnosis, affordable professional support is scarce within Germany's healthcare system.

These findings point to the need for robust policy frameworks that protect and promote neurodivergent talent, address systemic discrimination and fund accessible support structures. Without these foundations, even the most progressive organisational policies and employees cannot fully counteract entrenched inequalities that limit the career sustainability of neurodivergent individuals. Such a view aligns with the recent reframing of neurodivergence as a source of strength, while acknowledging the complex interplay between strengths and challenges (Lampinen *et al.*, 2025) – capturing the interconnected nature of our five principles.

*Principle 5: supporting sustainable outcomes and ecosystem impact*
Finally, it is essential to consider the broader outcomes of empowering neurodivergent individuals – not only for the individuals themselves but also for organisations and society. Abeysekara *et al.* (2025) argue that moving beyond one-size-fits-all models enables better alignment between roles and individuals, supporting both performance and wellbeing. Moreover, Sattler (2025) observes that strengths-based support at the individual level can have ripple effects, positively shaping team dynamics and organisational culture.

Crucially, Szulc and Staniszewska (2025) remind us that sustainable careers require ongoing alignment between individual strengths, contextual factors and change over time (aligning with previous work by Van der Heijden *et al.* (2020)). When needs go unmet, self-esteem can erode and career aspirations narrow, while unsupportive workplaces and structural neglect can entrench patterns of unemployment and underemployment (Felix and Hennekam, 2025). Consequently, Grabarski *et al.* (2025) advocate for recognising broader sustainability indicators – including financial security and growth – alongside health and happiness, while cautioning against over-reliance on narrow productivity measures. These contributions to Principle 5 highlight the interconnected and interdependent role of individuals, organisations and societal systems (Baruch, 2015; Baruch and Rousseau, 2019) in creating an inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem (Donald, 2023, 2025; Donald *et al*., 2024a).

*Summary*
Empowering neurodivergent individuals requires coordinated action across individual, organisational and societal levels. Crucially, this must include authentic collaboration with neurodivergent individuals to ensure that workplace policies, practices and environments are shaped by those with lived experience. These five principles contribute to building a more inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem – spaces that not only accommodate difference but actively support neurodivergent individuals in developing fulfilling and sustainable careers. Together, the five interconnected principles not only support individual and organisational wellbeing but also advance broader societal goals, aligning with the vision of the United Nations SDGs.

## Extending the five principles: contributions to the United Nations sustainable development agenda
Building on the five principles, this section explores how approaches showcased in the nine articles of this special issue contribute to key targets within the United Nations sustainable development agenda. Specifically, we demonstrate how fostering inclusive workplaces and supporting neurodivergent individuals can directly advance five of the United Nations SDGs, in alignment with the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). These contributions highlight the transformative potential of redesigning work environments, in collaboration with neurodivergent people, to recognise and celebrate their talent.

*SDG 3: good health and wellbeing*
This special issue highlights the critical connections between sustainable careers, mental health and self-esteem for neurodivergent individuals. Neuroaffirming, strengths-based

practices – such as those described by Szulc and Staniszewska (2025) – reduce masking and stigma, enabling individuals to maintain psychological wellbeing and preserve personal resources across their working lives. Furthermore, Grabarski *et al.* (2025) highlight how supportive workplace environments – including flexibility, understanding colleagues and access to coping strategies – can promote emotional wellbeing and enable individuals with ADHD to align their work with personal values, contributing to long-term career sustainability.

*SDG 8: decent work and economic growth*
Inclusive workplace design enables neurodivergent employees to access meaningful employment and contribute unique skills that drive innovation and economic resilience. For example, Felix and Hennekam (2025) demonstrate how targeted career interventions in marginalised communities in Brazil unlock local talent and strengthen economic sustainability. Similarly, Abeysekara *et al.* (2025) underscore the importance of addressing person-organisation misfit to enhance psychological safety and job satisfaction. These contributions show that inclusive employment practices are not only socially just but also economically strategic.

*SDG 10: reduced inequalities*
This special issue demonstrates how career coaching (Kersten *et al.*, 2025; Sattler, 2025), tailored supports (Lennox, 2025) and inclusive leadership (Vodden and Arman, 2025) can dismantle barriers that perpetuate disadvantage for neurodivergent workers. Recognising non-linear career journeys, valuing diverse cognitive styles and addressing structural biases are essential steps towards closing employment gaps and building fairer, more inclusive workplaces. Crucially, a sustainable career ecosystem must confront intersectional inequalities – including those related to race, gender identity, socio-economic status and immigration status – rather than treating neurodivergence in isolation. These contributions highlight the need for systemic reform alongside individualised support, ensuring that neurodivergent workers are not excluded from broader equity and inclusion efforts.

*SDG 16: peace, justice and strong institutions*
Equitable workplace practices that enable neurodivergent employees to thrive can generate ripple effects beyond the individual, fostering cultures of fairness, psychological safety and mutual accountability. These cultural shifts contribute to more transparent, responsive and resilient institutions – qualities that are essential for meeting the needs of diverse communities. Vodden and Arman (2025) emphasise the importance of trust-based environments where disclosure of neurodivergence is not only safe but actively supported, reinforcing institutional integrity and justice.

*SDG 17: partnerships for the goals*
Building an inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem depends on cross-sector collaboration among individuals, employers, practitioners and policymakers (Grabarski *et al.*, 2025; Kersten *et al.*, 2025). International cooperation and shared learning are essential to embed inclusion and sustainability at scale. Developing robust indicators and transparent reporting can help track progress and drive meaningful change – but only if neurodivergent individuals are meaningfully involved in guiding this work. Furthermore, addressing barriers to healthcare accessibility – such as those highlighted in Brazil (Felix and Hennekam, 2025) and Germany (Kugler, 2025) – demonstrates how improvements in health and social systems are deeply interconnected with the other SDGs discussed. These examples reinforce the need for integrated, cross-sector approaches that link workplace inclusion with broader social infrastructure.

*Summary*
Collectively, the nine contributions in this special issue demonstrate that neurodivergent-inclusive practices are not only ethically and socially imperative but also strategically aligned with global sustainability goals. In the next section, we turn to the future research agenda, outlining key directions for advancing neurodivergent inclusion through participatory, intersectional and globally responsive scholarship.

**Future research agenda**
Future research in this field should prioritise methodologies that centre neurodivergent perspectives, leadership and lived experience. As Reed *et al.* (2024) argue in their critique of engagement terminology, there is a need to develop "processes and language that can identify, represent, empower, and give voice to those we want our research to serve" (p. 1486). This calls for a shift beyond consultation towards genuine co-leadership, where neurodivergent individuals hold decision-making roles in research conceptualisation, design, implementation and dissemination. Drawing on the contributions to this special issue, we outline key directions for advancing neurodivergent inclusion through future research.

*Embedding participatory governance and co-authorship*
Future research should move beyond treating neurodivergent individuals solely as informants and instead ensure they hold meaningful power in shaping, producing and publishing knowledge. This includes supporting neurodivergent scholars, practitioners and community members as co-authors, co-researchers and co-editors. Editorial boards and peer-review processes must actively value lived expertise alongside academic credentials, recognising that authentic inclusion demands structural transformation within academia. Similarly, publishers also have a role to play, as acknowledged by Emerald Publishing's recently formed (June 2025) *Neuroinclusive Publishing Environment Advisory Board*, which brings together individuals with professional and/or lived experience to support neurodivergent authors, editors and reviewers in the academic publishing process. As Reed *et al.* (2024) argue, participatory governance helps dismantle hierarchies that often silence marginalised voices. Research that foregrounds co-authorship and shared decision-making will not only enhance equity but also improve the validity, relevance and impact of neurodivergent scholarship.

*Expanding global and cross-cultural purposes*
Future research should address the prevailing Global North bias by prioritising studies that explore neurodivergent experiences in under-researched regions and culturally diverse contexts. As Felix and Hennekam (2025) demonstrate in Brazil, structural barriers and cultural attitudes towards neurodivergence vary significantly across settings. Greater attention is needed in contexts where resources, legal protections and diagnostic pathways diverge from Western norms. This includes funding locally led research in the Global South, fostering international collaborations that respect community knowledge and amplifying historically marginalised voices. A more globally balanced and culturally responsive evidence base will be essential for building a truly inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem. In addition, comparative global studies might reveal how different welfare regimes, education systems and labour market structures either exacerbate or mitigate barriers for neurodivergent workers. Building cross-cultural frameworks will make it possible to identify universally supportive practices while also respecting the need for locally grounded adaptations.

*Addressing structural and policy level barriers*
Research should examine how structural and societal factors shape career opportunities for neurodivergent individuals across diverse settings. Future studies could map gaps in diagnostic access, funding for support services and legal protections against discrimination.

Comparative, cross-cultural research can identify best practices and inform policy innovation. This agenda must centre the voices of neurodivergent people living at the intersections of other marginalised identities, ensuring that policy recommendations address multiple, overlapping forms of disadvantage. There is also value in exploring how to support neurodivergent individuals in non-traditional career pathways – such as gig work (Akkermans *et al.*, 2025) or digital micro-entrepreneurship (Mishra *et al.*, 2024) – through inclusive policy design, seed funding and targeted incentives that promote economic empowerment.

*Longitudinal studies on lifespan identity development for neurodivergent individuals*
Future research should investigate how neurodivergent identities evolve across the lifespan and intersect with career development. Longitudinal, co-produced studies can illuminate how factors such as diagnosis timing, disclosure decisions and self-advocacy influence career sustainability and wellbeing over time. This work should explore both personal and systemic dynamics that shape how individuals reinterpret past experiences, navigate transitions and construct authentic working identities. A more robust evidence base will enable the design of flexible, identity-responsive career interventions that reflect the diversity and complexity of neurodivergent lives. Such research should thoughtfully attend to the methodological challenges of following participants across all or part of their lifespan, including minimising attrition and how to meaningfully involve them in the research, while capturing changing contexts and meeting participant needs. Insights from such work could inform the design of appropriate policies and interventions that anticipate life transitions such as education-to-work, mid-career change and retirement.

*Evaluating neuroaffirming coaching and support models*
There is a pressing need for rigorous, user-led evaluations of neuroaffirming, strengths-based coaching and support models. Research should examine how approaches, such as the Cluster Approach to the Development of Identity (CADI), influence self-esteem, job satisfaction and career progression for neurodivergent workers across different sectors. Comparative studies could explore individual versus group-based interventions, the role of peer coaching and the conditions under which these models can be effectively embedded within organisational systems. Co-creation with neurodivergent practitioners and clients will be essential to ensure contextual relevance, scalability and real-world impact. Collaborative research methodologies – such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) or Developmental Education (DE) – offer promising frameworks for this work. As Boyle and Cooke (2025) argue, while PAR has transformative potential, it can be constrained by the need for multiple action cycles and challenges in accommodating diverse epistemologies. In contrast, DE may offer a more flexible, systems-oriented approach that aligns well with the complexity of workplace environments and the dynamic needs of neurodivergent individuals. Integrating such methodologies could help to determine whether models can be embedded into mainstream career services and supported through public policy or workplace budgets. Evidence from these studies could shape accreditation standards, training curricula for practitioners and organisational guidelines for implementing coaching at scale.

*Designing and testing neuroinclusive workplaces*
Future research should examine how concrete organisational practices, leadership behaviours and team dynamics translate inclusive principles into everyday workplace realities. Again, collaborative research methodologies (Boyle and Cooke, 2025) offer a valuable approach for designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions such as co-produced training for managers, flexible job crafting, tailored onboarding and co-worker education. Comparative studies across sectors and regions can help identify which practices most effectively reduce masking, foster psychological safety and support sustained, meaningful employment.

Crucially, this work must foreground lived expertise to define what genuine inclusion looks like in practice and ensure interventions are contextually relevant and scalable. For example, research must consider the fluctuating support needs of individuals (between days and within the same day), while considering co-occurring conditions to create environments where people feel safe to be their authentic, unmasked selves.

### Developing broader sustainability indicators

Research should broaden how we define and measure sustainable career outcomes for neurodivergent individuals. This includes developing holistic indicators that go beyond narrow productivity metrics to include wellbeing, financial security, identity alignment and long-term career satisfaction (Grabarski *et al.*, 2025). Mixed-methods research can illuminate how individual, organisational and societal factors interact to support or hinder sustainable careers. Testing and refining carefully identified measures alongside practical interventions could help employers to track progress and remain accountable for building truly neuroinclusive workplaces. Co-creating meaningful indicators with neurodivergent workers is essential to ensure they reflect what genuinely matters for a good working life. Moreover, embedding these indicators into organisational reporting systems could strengthen transparency, build trust and signal a genuine commitment to inclusion. As Boyle and Cooke (2025) highlight in the context of sustainability and climate action, collaborative methodologies, such as DE, can be particularly effective in complex, dynamic environments. Applying DE to the development of career sustainability indicators may offer a pragmatic and systems-oriented approach that accommodates diverse perspectives and evolving workplace realities – particularly important when working with neurodivergent populations whose experiences often challenge conventional metrics and assumptions. Over time, such practices could guide policy and inform best practice across sectors.

### Embedding intersectionality and neurodivergent leadership in research

Finally, future research must account for the intersectional nature of neurodivergent experiences. This includes examining how neurodivergence interacts with other dimensions of identity – such as race, gender, socio-economic status and migration background – as well as how individuals may navigate multiple diagnoses or co-occurring conditions. Recognising that each person's experience is unique, research should avoid extrapolating from individual cases and instead aim to build a richer, more nuanced tapestry of insights. This calls for methodological approaches that honour complexity and resist reductive categorisation. In addition, neurodivergent individuals should not only be research participants but also active members of research teams. Their lived expertise is essential for shaping research questions, designing inclusive methodologies and interpreting findings in context. While some contributions in this special issue already reflect this ethos, future studies should go further in embedding neurodivergent leadership across all stages of the research process.

### Concluding note

We, Associate Professor William E. Donald (United Kingdom), Dr Elizabeth J. Cook (Australia) and Dr Nimmi P. Mohandas (India), as the Guest Editors, extend our heartfelt appreciation to all the authors and contributors whose rigorous research and thoughtful perspectives have shaped this special issue. Your dedication to advancing knowledge on neurodivergence in the workplace has made this collection both timely and impactful. We are equally grateful to the reviewers, whose discerning feedback and detailed suggestions have elevated the scholarly quality of each contribution. Our sincere thanks also go to Associate Professor Jennifer A. Harrison, Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Career Development International*, and to Emma Ferguson, Commissioning Editor at *Emerald Publishing*, for their steadfast support and commitment to inclusive scholarly dialogue.

We hope the research and practitioner insights shared here will inspire tangible action towards workplaces that not only accommodate but actively celebrate neurodivergent talent. By recognising neurodivergence as a vital source of innovation and resilience, organisations can foster environments where all employees flourish and contribute meaningfully to sustainable growth. Collectively, the nine articles presented in this issue illustrate that building genuinely inclusive and sustainable career pathways for neurodivergent individuals is not only an ethical imperative – it is a strategic investment in the future of work. As organisations navigate the complexities of a rapidly evolving global landscape, these insights offer guidance for creating workplaces that are adaptive, equitable and forward-thinking. In doing so, we hope this collection contributes not only to more inclusive employment practices but also to broader societal goals, including those outlined in the United Nations SDGs.

Looking ahead, we invite researchers, practitioners, policymakers and organisations to engage with these insights, share lessons learned and build partnerships that extend the impact of this work. We firmly uphold the principle of *nothing about us without us* (The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, n.d.), underscoring the necessity of ensuring that neurodivergent people are not only consulted but empowered as leaders in shaping initiatives that affect their working lives. Authentic partnership and co-creation will be vital in moving beyond inclusion as aspiration towards a reality where neurodivergence – as part of the broader spectrum of neurodiversity – is recognised as a source of collective strength and shared progress.

It is with humility and solidarity that we thank all who continue to challenge, inform and inspire this vital work.

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**Note: Special issue articles are designated with an ***

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