

# Experiences of neurodiverse employees in the UK transport industry

James Richards, Kate Sang and Abigail Marks

Centre for Research on Work and Wellbeing (CRoWW)

Heriot-Watt University

EDI 6 – Athens 1-3 July 2013

# Overview of study

- Funded by UK transport trade union
- Baseline study on knowledge, awareness and attitudes to neurodiversity (ND) in UK transport industry
- Supplemented with internal-funded interviews
- This study: Explore the experiences of ND employees in a particular organisational setting
- Today: Four key findings – attitudes to ND, support, experience and disclosure

# Neurodiverse conditions and neurodiversity

- No consensus on ND condition, e.g. PTSD, OCD, bi-polar, schizophrenia, Tourette syndrome, dysgraphia
- Commonly cited ND conditions: dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, ADD/ADHD, Asperger syndrome
- 10 per cent of adult population affected
- ND movement emerged from 'autism epidemic' and search for cure in late 1990s
- Political and academic movement to 'normalise' ND conditions – place alongside diversity movements such as race, gender, etc.
- Conceptual problems – each individual different, seen as 'idealistic', wider public views very different

# Existing research on employment and neurodiverse conditions

- No employment-related research on ND per se
- Existing research focus on individual ND conditions
- Very limited/no research on employment and dyscalculia, dyspraxia and ADD/ADHD
- Guide books, medical articles, disability and diversity
- Biased towards medical model of ND conditions
- Missing the voices and experiences of ND people

# Research methods

- 7 focus groups with transport workers (July-August 2012) (n=44)
- 22 telephone interviews with employees with ND condition(s) (October 2012 to March 2013)
  - focus of findings
- 18 interviews with line managers (not used here)
- Data analysis: *Priori* and *in vivo* coding

# Key finding 1: Attitudes towards neurodiversity

- No consensus of attitudes towards idea of ND
- Mostly positive or neutral towards ND:
- “I think it pretty much describes itself in terms of; you know...I'm a deep believer that people are wired in different ways” (interview, employee with dyslexia).
- “I have mixed feelings about it. I haven't really decided whether I think it's a good term or not...If you have a, be it eccentricity or something it's now called neurodiversity. And I'm not sure if I like that” (interview, employee with AS).
- “I think it could put people off by not knowing what it is. I mean it make sense to me now that I've thought about it but, when I first saw it, I didn't...I wouldn't have automatically thought, yes, that would cover dyslexia, just cover the...et cetera” (interview, employee with dyslexia and dyscalculia).

# Key finding 2: Support for neurodiverse employee

- Vast majority received some level of internal and/or external support
- Actual experience of support varied significantly
- "... I mean I've had a couple of good line managers where I can be honest and things. So you know there has been sort of support on that...There's been you know informal, chatting to people and, you know, kind of almost mentored by some people...I suppose the graduate programme, there's kind of you know, a pleasant environment and actually reflecting on how you work, and your strengths and weaknesses, I suppose has been quite helpful" (interview, employee with dyspraxia).
- "...if I went to my line manager and said 'I need this because I've got dyslexia' he'd probably say, 'Yeah, no problem. Go and do it.' But it's more the case of I need to ask that...I would then have to go through all the process of getting it...there's an embarrassment factor. I've got to speak to somebody on the phone in Manchester to speak to them to ask for this equipment. And then, justify why I'm asking for it... (interview, employee with dyslexia).
- "I have asked my managers to link with *Prospects* [employment support provided by the National Autistic Society] who come in and help. It is like talking to brick wall at times. They can't take it in, they don't know how to deal with the information they have been given" (focus group, employee with AS).

# Key finding 3: Experiences of employment

- Majority reported positive experiences of employment
- “I’ve gone through a lot of series of different jobs. I was lucky in terms of the way in which I look at things, the way in which I analyse things over the years within network rails, but that skill has been recognised and I’ve been able to pretty much define a role for myself that people are seeing as giving significant benefits to the company” (interview, employee with dyslexia).
- Significant minority reported mixed or negative experiences of employment
- “One thing after another, constant interruptions and it was my worst nightmare. It was just awful. I had explained to them before. They helped me through this but that I would have problems doing it about this calculator. The manager I had originally was not at all sympathetic. She thought I was just trying to get out of doing something...” (interview, employee with dyslexia).



# Key finding 4: Disclosure

- Small minority openly disclose
- “You hear about role models like Richard Branson speaking out. He is not afraid to disclose, neither am I. It doesn’t hinder my job, only in certain areas, but I have coped and adapted” (focus group, employee with dyslexia).
- Majority disclosed, but typically in informal or managed manner
- “It was with a line manager but it was actually only in conversation...it hasn’t gone as far as HR. I don’t think they’ve made any record of it or anything about that. But I haven’t sort of officially disclosed it to HR. So there won’t be anything on my personal record” (interview, employee with dyslexia).
- Sizeable minority no disclosure
- “I don't, no. I don't see what it's got to do with them...I mean, if somebody asked me, I'll tell them. But if they don't ask me, I don't tell them...” (interview, employee with ADD/ADHD).
- “No way would I ever disclose this, even in a question in equal opportunities. I think people would make assumptions about who you are and where you are coming from. They would assume I am hard work, ‘no thank you’” (focus group, employee with dyslexia).

# Conclusions

- Limitations: Exploratory study of particular industry in UK and focus on sample of ND conditions
- No consensus on how employees view themselves in terms of ND condition
- Support mixed – onus on employee to do some or all of work
- Mixed experiences of work – onus on employee to find suitable work
- General unease about disclosure – no one reason why
- Overall, experiences good on the whole, but long way to go