

“The way my brain is wired helps me do better”: neurodiversity at Dstl

If I've had a 'peopley' day I need to sit in a dark room in silence or hide under a blanket when I get home.

This is how Andrew, or AJ as he is known, manages being a principal software engineer in a world-class organisation with the challenges of having Asperger's Syndrome and dyslexia.

He started working for Dstl 18 years ago and it was through his job that he was first diagnosed – although he already suspected that he had Autism Spectrum Disorder.

He talks about his experience as the organisation marks Neurodiversity Celebration Week.

AJ said:

My story is an unusual one, perhaps since my diagnosis came later in life.

I've always known that I wasn't quite the same as other people, and at school I didn't really have many friends and I was bullied quite a lot.

I was that boy at school that spent every lunchtime in the library, reading or playing with the computers.

However, it was at school that he developed a passion for science and engineering, and he remembers a favourite book at aged five was on the history of iron and steel manufacturing.

He believes attitudes have changed since he was a child and that Neurodiversity Celebration Week is important as it helps explode prevailing myths and signposts available support.

I think there are lots of stereotypes around all kinds of neurodiversity. Some people think of dyslexic people as being unable to read, or those with autism and Asperger's as people that have no social skills at all who can't cope in the real world.

I don't think any of those are true. There's an adage that says, 'If you've met one neurodiverse person... you've met one neurodiverse person'. We are all different – in the same way everyone is different.

AJ's Asperger's also manifests itself in a hypersensitivity to sound, where an almost inaudible hum of electrical equipment can be painful, while travelling on the London Underground is unbearable.

In a work environment the general noise of an office can be very distracting and networking or making small talk is extremely stressful.

People are often surprised to learn AJ is neurodiverse as he has learnt to "mask the symptoms and fake being 'normal'." However, he says this coping technique is emotionally and mentally draining.

He went on to say Dstl provided a package of help which included a flexibility around his work station, a screen reader and coaching to help with specific things that he finds difficult.

I think Dstl is a good, supportive employer, I think there's lots of scope for making appropriate adjustments for people that have needs.

It's not about curing it, it's not about taking it away it is about giving people the tools they need to be the best they can. I was surprised at the level of support that was available.

Everyone's journey is going to be different but the important thing for everyone to realise is that, as an organisation, Dstl really wants you to be yourself and be the individual you are and embrace that diversity.

He feels, with the support of the organisation, his condition makes him better at his job.

He said:

It gives me an ability to concentrate deeply on something technical for long periods, a skill at spotting patterns and following logical sequences.

I've always had 'the knack' when it comes to electronics and computers – and I have no doubt that my Asperger's plays a significant part in that.

The way my brain is structured, the way my brain is wired, helps me do better. I still want to know exactly how everything works – but now it's an asset and Dstl pays me to do it.

If the little boy sat in the corner of the library was to meet me now? I would have loved to have known as a child that I would end up working in an environment like this on things that really matter and things that have really interesting problems to solve.