



Mathew Townsend

A NEURODIVERSE
JOURNEY IN SOCIAL
ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Embracing the Spectrum

Emergent Entrepreneur

Collection Editor

DREW HARRIS

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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The Emergent Entrepreneur
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*To all neurodiverse and people with disabilities around the world,
you have an opportunity to showcase your innovation and
creativity every day.*

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Abstract

What can the lived experience of a neurodiverse social entrepreneur teach us about the strength and innovation that comes from diversity?

Through storytelling, social entrepreneur and author Mathew Townsend takes readers on a captivating exploration of the entrepreneurial landscape. Delving into unique challenges, triumphs, and insights gained from navigating the intricate intersection of neurodiversity and entrepreneurship, this book explores topics including building an inclusive enterprise, leadership styles, adaptation, and embracing authenticity. A must-read for those seeking a fresh perspective on entrepreneurship, this memoir is ideal reading for students of business and entrepreneurship, disability studies, entrepreneurs, human resource professionals, and allies.

Keywords

Neurodiversity, entrepreneurship, inclusive innovation, empowerment, advocacy, diversity in business, social impact, start-up business journey, disability leadership

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Content warning

This book contains explicit references to, and descriptions of, situations that may cause distress. This includes references to and descriptions of:

- Suicidal thoughts, intentions, and actions
- Ableism, discrimination, and microaggression
- Mental health episodes

Learning objectives

- Understand neurodiversity and its role in entrepreneurship.
- Recognise strengths and challenges of neurodiverse individuals in business environments and their networks.
- Learn social entrepreneurship principles and identify opportunities to support neurodiverse individuals.
- Develop inclusive leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills.
- Create inclusive business models that embrace neurodiverse talent.
- Analyse case studies of neurodiverse entrepreneurs and their success.

About the author/ Introduction

Mathew Townsend is a young social entrepreneur living with disabilities and mental health issues from Brisbane, Australia. With two academic qualifications under his belt, he leads a social enterprise organisation and a job within the social enterprise sector. He has seven years of experience working in the space of people with disabilities, environmental management/sustainability, and leadership. He also has seven years of experience being involved in the social enterprise ecosystem space, especially in the state of Queensland.

His journey of finding passion in nature was living in the countryside of northern New South Wales, where he often felt that living with nature helped his sense of space and serenity. As he travelled and went to two universities to find a career in this space, he was often left out from his peers. Challenges were mostly lack of understanding about his disabilities; hence, space was non-inclusive nor accessible.

He started out finding a local group of peers that aligns with his passions. He joined the Greens Party (political party) to voice issues around environmental and human rights sides of things. He thought he made friends with, and career aspirations, but he continued to discover after he quit after four years.

Mathew often felt lonely and disconnected from people around his age cohort due to differences in values and understanding of his disabilities. This affected his social life and employment prospects, especially after university when he graduated from The University of Queensland in 2016. He tried his best to be open-minded about career choices, but the challenge was being able to find a job in his area of passions and qualifications.

A year later, he founded Nature Freedom after volunteering with a local Landcare group, an environmental group that supports bushlands, sustainability, and conservation. The ideal brought his attention to the lack of inclusion and accessibility, where he also experienced the same challenges and barriers. This is where his social entrepreneurship journey started.

Personal challenges and barriers were mostly communication-based, and this was again experienced while working his way up, starting a new business such as being involved in program workshops, seminars, conferences, networking, and meeting with stakeholders and funders. It was like a new environment for him to discover living life after university. The system is new; the networking is unique but very mainstream.

Neurodiversity didn't come to his mind until 2020 during the COVID lockdown when he met other social entrepreneurs online via LinkedIn. He started learning more about neurodiversity and self-employment, especially in the space of social entrepreneurship. He added his experience to his social enterprise, Nature Freedom, as well as the social enterprise ecosystem that he is still involved in.

In this book, he will discuss and explore the experiences from his journey to be a social entrepreneur from a lived experience of being a neurodiverse individual. Unlock the experiences' challenges into potential solutions addressing what neurodiversity means in the space of social entrepreneurship, including how we are able to support other neurodiverse individuals exploring their ventures.

1

Unveiling uniqueness

Wow, this is my first time writing a book, yes, actually. It's so exciting for me to unleash this opportunity for all readers to learn about my experience living with neurodiversity and navigating through the social entrepreneurship journey! It is such a privileged opportunity for me to write something I can share my journey as a neurodiverse (ND) individual in the social entrepreneurship space.

When I first started my social enterprise in 2017, I always convinced myself that I was just another person with a disability who wanted a job and career where I wanted to start getting paid for my future ambitions. There are so many people with disabilities who are unemployed here in Australia (AIHW, 2022). There is a lack of career development opportunities, including limited professional development and skills training, being passed over for promotion and higher duties, and lack of job rotation. I was one of this statistic and felt ashamed. There was no conversation nor data on self-employment. This was a reality when I was doing some literature review on why I should start this social enterprise.

My social enterprise was Nature Freedom. Based on my experiences and passions in nature space, it is all about creating

meaningful, inclusive, and accessible outdoor adventures for people with disabilities and all abilities across the Greater Brisbane Region. I started out as a sole trader to test my market and environment to see if there was any interest from someone in my communities who wanted to go on a kayak, canoe, and bushwalk with me. It didn't happen much until 2019 when we became a registered non-profit where we enable charity activities to establish accessible and affordable experiences to share with. We go on tours along little creeks, mostly in bayside suburbs of our city, and go on bushwalks scattered across the city where parklands and bushlands are.

Providing inclusion and accessibility was a core element and mission for Nature Freedom. My hope is to find an opportunity that I can learn from a community perspective towards how nature enables them and how they find it beneficial. I added community gardens and crafts for schools and holidays in 2021 to add a variety of interests and opportunities for other people with disabilities who don't want to go on adventures but want to stay connected with nature. Delivering experiences also resonates with my experiences being ND.

The definition of neurodiversity didn't come along until I was doing public speaking about my autism awareness and as well pitching my social enterprise at conferences and forums. I learnt this definition and concept through other autistic individuals, explaining how this is relevant to my personal life. So yes, I am also ND.

ND means to describe the way the differences in the way people's brains work. In this point, it conveys that there is no "correct"

way to justify that people perceive and respond to the world, and these differences are to be embraced and encouraged. Neurodiversity is a term to describe the collective action for ND people. This term is usually associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and other neurological disabilities.

There are about 20% of individuals in Australia who are identified as ND (Life Without Barriers, 2022), which makes up the majority of disability identified. This number is considered a hidden disability, and those with neurodivergent conditions can feel isolated socially and in the workplace. I often relate to this statistic, and that's something I need to remind myself of: I am not alone. During my public speaking gigs, the more I meet other ND people, the more I learn about myself and how to relate with other's experiences, especially feeling isolated, dealing with challenges, and overcoming communication barriers.

So, the question is, what does neurodiversity mean to me? In early days I was often thinking of myself coming to the older definition of Aspergers's Syndrome; when I was 12, it was diagnosed as a mild case. It does not surprise me that the definition has changed later on to clarify what it means to have a "mild" case for me. I don't often feel any difference as a label for myself, who I am being autistic, an Aspie, or neurodivergent to be honest. Just like having a different race, disability, or gender, it doesn't mean to define who I am. I used to judge myself, whining a lot about how bad I was at communicating with people and getting upset about missing out on social events. I tend to blame my autism for the reason people don't invite me.

That was something I never considered again because it led me to periodic depression and anxiety, especially during my university years. It was difficult making friends, finding a girlfriend, and getting a job. I tend to whinge and complain about who I am as I identify myself. I tend to reciprocate how negative people are towards me, who they see or perceive who I am. So I realised that it's hurting myself, and I can see myself in the mirror and in photos looking back; it doesn't make a difference. I had to start accepting that I am "different" among my peers. The longer I give up whining about who I am, the more opportunities unexpectedly come to me. I finally made friends, got a job, and eventually a girlfriend. It doesn't make me happy, but I had to accept myself first before taking on those.

So, why neurodiversity and social entrepreneurship? What's the connection between these two? You can tell by the strengths, skills, and talents of everyone who brings. They can be employable and educational (*Neurodiversity is a competitive advantage*, 2021). Notwithstanding that everyone brings their own, they are unique from each other depending on passions, ambitions, and goals in their lives. When I get passionate about something, I tend to deeply focus on the item or objective topic I excel in sharing that information. For instance, when I learnt about astronomy personally, I taught my family and friends to understand space travel. After I was reading journal articles, I was able to articulate and elaborate on that information.

The majority of ND individuals bring organisational, creative, and empathic communication skills that satisfy their roles in the space they excel in (Etrata, 2023). What this means to me is that,

of course, we can see and feel other feelings and perspectives. Contently, at times when challenging, is because of communication style being different from non-ND individuals.

Everyone brings the best out of them, and from my experience, I highlight a few perspectives that we all can be unique and creative that best to be a social entrepreneur they are:

1. **Diverse talents and skills:** My attention to detail has been a cornerstone in problem-solving, especially in areas I'm passionate about. Recognising patterns and leveraging specialised knowledge has enabled me to deliver high-quality products and services. As consumers, you can trust that a ND-led business, especially a social enterprise, is committed to excellence.
2. **Innovation and creativity:** My unique problem-solving skills often stem from a deep fixation on issues, allowing me to find innovative solutions. Viewing challenges through different lenses helped me to identify effective strategies, especially with several different approaches to drive the social and cultural change in the entrepreneurial space and foster growth within the ecosystem. For example, demonstrate how accessibility works for everybody, no matter if they are ND or not, relying on note-taking during workshops and meetings.
3. **Empathy and social consciousness:** My lived experiences fuel my commitment to work on social causes, especially environmental and community inclusion and accessibility. It helps myself to understand personal journeys and the desire to create a positive impact central to my work through problem-solving abilities that working with the

communities and ecosystem enables me to learn more about their experiences.

4. **Inclusivity and accessibility:** Emphasise the importance of my ambitions towards creating inclusion and providing accessible solutions; my leadership aims to create a positive, inclusive culture where ND individuals can thrive. This extends to building an inclusive ecosystem to support our ambitions.
5. **Challenges and accommodation:** Leading by example, I strive to create opportunities that embrace neurodiversity and to offer open and necessary solutions for accommodations and communication approaches to provide essential support that I desire within others. This ensures ND leaders can be developed based on my experience to establish their own spaces and communities.
6. **ND-lead initiatives:** Develop a role model that supports and impacts specific needs within the ND community, promoting economic empowerment and social inclusion, which is my goal. I created a pathway to create an inclusive and accessible entrepreneurship environment for all, as well as their own communities.
7. **Education and awareness:** Through my journey, I aim to raise awareness and understanding about ND individuals and their communities. This strategic approach helps create meaningful opportunities and a brighter future for all of us to be part of the journey creating a positive impact on our livelihoods.

When I first started Nature Freedom in 2017, I always wondered how people in my networks could support me even when I had disabilities (ND wasn't identified until later years). I didn't have

any ability to take lessons and learn the communication styles and reading body language of others until I took those from my personal psychologist appointments to clarify how those social and professional scenarios elaborate for me. I describe how I feel and see how those situations interpret to me.

In the further chapters, I will break down my challenges and barriers navigating both social and communication experiences through my personal lens of being an ND individual.

2

Inception of innovation

This chapter will explore my experiences navigating the early stages of building an inclusive social enterprise and the creative breakthroughs that ensued. In my late teens and early 20s, I was struggling to find something positive in my life, and what got me was feeling socially isolated and feeling left out of career aspirations, especially when I was trying to build my aspirations.

When I was struggling in Landcare and related environmental groups, there were so many challenges that impacted on my disabilities, which stopped me from achieving and being part of the experience, especially being part of group projects or activities to enjoy due to common interests in nature space. Trying to grow my authenticity by speaking up about my rights and what I should be doing. From this lesson, it enabled me to do something about my career aspirations.

This is where self-employment, and entrepreneurship come from, which sparked the idea of my social enterprise Nature Freedom. Being identified as ND at the time I was discovering who I had enabled me to understand the inclusion and accessibility more. In the first year of bringing my venture idea into reality, I had vast opportunities meeting people who are similar in my networks

that taught me more about neurodiversity and the space of diversity and inclusion in practice for workplace environments.

So, the more I learnt about this space, it enabled me to invest my skills and experience as a social entrepreneur. I combine my passions into a space of advocacy and blended them into the entrepreneurship arena. Another new milestone is social entrepreneurship – where my values align with the lived experiences I learned and my passions together. This is something where most social entrepreneurs around the world thrive (Jeong *et al.*, 2020), especially on occasions that we can learn from lived experience; social entrepreneurs generally can develop something meaningful and impactful towards people who have lived experience in neurodiversity. There seems to be common ground that social entrepreneurs' aspirations, self-knowledge, identity-defining moments, and their sustainability-orientated leadership and how they build a community that can handle the burden of work for the future due to their nature of self-advocacy and passions.

Communication is the number one challenge I faced during entrepreneurial programmes that enabled my leadership journey and starting up a social enterprise. The challenges were mostly around understanding my emotions and intellectual focus, sharing with facilitators, mentors, and stakeholders that contributing to my development. The programmes had never met an ND individual before, especially someone with a hearing loss as well. This undermines their strength and creativity in what accommodations to deliver the programme for someone like me.

The study by Axbey *et al.* (2023) show that how a ND individual can learn from this experience and expect how problem-solving

and adaptability are critical to being more inclusive. Autistic and other neurodiversity identities often experiencing high rapport or strong social connection are more likely to copy each other or emulate each other's ideas, either consciously or subconsciously. In this context, I just see whether it is helpful for me to navigate my communication style. For instance, standing position on the stage during the public speaking. I see a lot of neurotypical (non-ND) individuals often just read out from a sheet of script in front of the audience. I see many ND individuals from conferences I participated in just "speak up and be confrontable" instead of panicking. I find this interesting; in my experience, I never had stage fright.

Since the stage fright wasn't my thing, I just spoke from my heart and shared what my passions were and told what they were. I kept going to learn from others' behaviour of being confident and tall. Of course, there are neurotypical individuals who are also like this, but when coming from someone who has lived experience, they are more meaningful and insightful given the nature of their journey. The prejudice from my networks still happening during my time of growing confidence. It happened to be like this at least six or seven years ago when neurodiversity awareness wasn't a thing. I had to spend more time being patient with my networks about why and how my confidence instils the way I communicate to the audience and networks.

From my experience, it takes at least a year for my networks to understand who I am as an ND individual; thus, patience is important. Once this comes to fruition, the facilitators and

mentors from such entrepreneurial programmes finally have a chance to support my ambitions to define the social enterprise mission, goals, and feedback based on the business model that I envisioned for. So, what innovation took place?

Since I learnt to be authentic to my networks, they learnt more about who I am to understand what strategies to improve on communication and approach. I have experienced that in this “naturally connected neurodiversity” study (Callander, 2021), it has provided insights in their research. In different contexts, the author is a late diagnosed ND individual who shares the way they express in common social perceptions, such as communication and dealing with emotions. I was an early diagnosed individual myself, who shared familiar aspects of going through new environments. Seeking refuge from a non-ND environment was something I felt accepted of being with other similar individuals, especially at conferences I participated in. This enabled me to take perspective on what is happening outside of my mind. I needed to self-express and try to observe others’ behaviour. I feel “normal” by doing this.

Self-learning was an important skill I was able to achieve the ambitions I want to target for my career and future. The best part of the experience is to take feedback and iterate on approaching and navigating opportunities and capabilities. For example, listening to my mentor to have a say on how I communicate with my team members through human resources issues. This lesson taught me that I has never experienced before. This is part of personal growth, as an ND individual, to learn more about your employees and volunteers, even if they are also ND. This brings trust and integrity.

I believe this was missed during the programmes I participated in because start-up programmes don't generally talk about human resources and policies generally. Starting up a business with social impact, being ND at the same time, is quite complex, but worth it to experience. Understanding contentious and critical thinking is part of the journey that enables me to explore issues more and be more flexible, especially in ND perspective. That's why it's strategic to start a social enterprise. ND experiences would enable opportunities for ND individuals to participate. This is an inclusive and accessible aspect.

How does this innovation extend beyond product and service development involving collaboration and community engagement, breaking traditional moulds, fostering diversity, and creating a positive impact on stakeholders? A ND thinking played a big part in innovation, where I spent most of my time on my own, away from the distractions of a typical co-working environment and hubbub. I was able to identify potential opportunities through using my own strengths and skills, especially organisation, critical thinking, and eye for detail.

I embedded those strengths and skills into my passions in the areas of sustainability, inclusion, and accessibility based on my lived experience. In Mathur's (2021) research, it has been identified that why lived experience, passions, together with the strengths of an ND individual would be the best practice for entrepreneurship development. This means that problem-solving to solutions to create quality products and services for the communities would be more desirable. Thus, the general ND population will have confidence in those abilities of ND social entrepreneurs.

The study highlighted that it's important to balance lived experience and passion together, especially in career space. It brings special memories and skills being developed for the individual coming from what background where they come from to enrich their lives based on growth and development. In this context, I was in that position in the early days of my venture, Nature Freedom. I have spent so many months trying to figure out how my passions relate to my lived experiences. I need to evaluate my values and my vision. I needed to make sure that this journey is the right one for me. Will it make me happy and help me reach the goals I want to seek and achieve? Furthermore, the social change is being developed.

I have a strong desire to taking the mission of my social enterprise, which is to take commitment on social change, willingness to challenge conventional norms, and continual process on learning on adapting towards development on a sustainable and inclusive social enterprise. Conventional norms are a way of life to determine how people ought to dress, greet, eat, and play games, and behave in such reactions in the public place (O'Neill, 2017). So how does it relate to the ND way of life? In my perspective, it really depends on how we grew up as children while our minds structured the capabilities to communicate and organise objects a little differently. As a social entrepreneur, our businesses are wired by the way we are wired. The values, branding, vision, and mission are related to the experience of one's self's conventional norm. How it differentiates from non-ND businesses?

This has brought to my attention that generally non-ND businesses lack the ability to address and tackle social challenges to those with lived experience. My intentions with arguments to

agree with Mackie's (2018) research on social change initiatives are related to the conventional norms highlighted that are undesirable and impractical to solve problems towards social change that are from mostly non-lived experience individuals. I don't mean that non-ND individuals are lacking experience generally but think about how it relates to personal development in a business context. For example, how ND individuals view communication with nature being different from a non-ND individual seeing the same perspective. The business values, brand, vision, and mission will translate differently in the same context.

At the beginning of my social entrepreneurship journey, I always thought of myself as different from other start-up entrepreneurs because I see how I share and communicate about my values and vision as unique to those without disabilities who are more seen as "conventional". This means I see that how the business programmes are structured is suitable for non-ND entrepreneurs, the way how to communicate, design, and develop them. That's why I struggle to cope with mentors when I seek advice and support on building the business model of my social enterprise.

In the next chapter, I will discuss and explore the overcoming barriers of the challenges I faced, turning them into opportunities.

