

# Working across time and space: a neurodivergent way of working

*By Marcus Coetzee, June 2026*

I had a recent chat with a friend who works as a London-based psychotherapist specialising in helping neurodiverse geeks. We were catching up and discussing how clearly he had positioned his therapy practice.

Our chat inspired me to write about the challenges I encounter within my neurodivergent life, and how my various preferences, systems and workarounds help me to thrive in the consulting environment. I also write about the trade-offs I've needed to make. This topic has been on my mind recently. This is probably the only essay I will ever write on this topic.

I have written this essay from the perspective of agency (not victimhood) and intentionally avoided any medical terms and diagnoses. I write as if I were describing things to a friend.

I wrote this essay for two reasons. First, I wanted to organise my thoughts on this subject and remind myself of the types of working environments where I will thrive. Secondly, I wanted to help neurodivergent people, and their partners, parents and employers, to better understand some of the phenomena. Someone remarked that this would make a good clinical case study for teaching therapists, and I'm happy for it to be used this way, without charge.

I will start by explaining the situation in South Africa, where I lived for almost fifty years, until 2021, when I moved to the UK. Then I will discuss 10 aspects of how my brain works and how I've adapted my working environment and method of working to accommodate this. I will conclude by discussing how it has impacted my career. I share many personal stories throughout.

## 1. South Africa encourages the survival of the fittest

There are no special privileges, indulgences or support in South Africa for people who are neurodivergent. There are also no significant disability or unemployment benefits for those without work, so people must find work or rely on friends and family to support them.

Neurodivergent people need to compete with everyone else for jobs and other opportunities. While a specific manager and organisation might be more understanding and supportive, this is not the general rule.

This Darwinian system forces neurodivergent people to adapt and become more hardened, and select industries that are likely to be more accommodating, and to develop ways of working that mitigate their blind spots, and ideally, build upon their unique talents and preferences. This process is admittedly very difficult and painful for many, and I've seen how much some friends have struggled.

Many of my neurodivergent friends have found a home in software development, data analysis or writing, and a few have found their niche and become very successful.

While having a diagnosis is seen as useful to understand one's situation, people are very hesitant to be seen as victims because victims are often prey.

Mostly, neurodiverse people simply get on with their lives, and others are tolerant of their quirks. No one makes a big thing about it.

## 2. My preferences and workarounds

Here are ten distinctive characteristics of how I like to work. These are all built around how my brain functions. These characteristics have plagued me throughout my life. They have become even more pronounced in our digital age, which has encouraged fragmented attention. Through trial and error and lots of reading, I have evolved methods and tools that help me to be productive and continue building my career. Some of these may help you or someone you know.

### 2.1. Physical items occupy mental space

I have always been a minimalist, or monk-like, as my friends tease me.

When I moved out of my parents' house after university, all I took with me was a mattress and bedding, an army kit bag of clothing, and a box full of books. And when I moved to the UK in 2021, I took a backpack, a carry-on suitcase on wheels, and shipped boxes of books.

My possessions all occupy a place in the back of my mind. They are like background software using my RAM. Hence, I regularly go through the things I own and get rid of anything that isn't essential or doesn't resonate. I have applied every minimalist philosophy - my favourite is most probably Marie Kondo's "The Magic of Tidying Up" or Fumio Sasaki's "Goodbye Things". Minimalism frees my mind and helps me to think more clearly.

I prefer to have as few possessions as possible. I like these to be good-quality items that I can trust and rely on, preferably items I can keep for decades, if not longer.

Untidy and crowded spaces are noisy and clutter my mind. They make it difficult to think clearly. I get claustrophobic in them.

I'm a big fan of one-bag travel with a single 26L Goruck backpack and have travelled to multiple countries with only this bag. This makes it much easier to keep track of everything. I have also optimised my packing lists for different types of travel. I use the same bag as my everyday carry or EDC as it's called. Having these essentials with me gives me a sense of freedom and control.

Every possession has its home. I get very frustrated and eventually overwhelmed when I can't find things.

My electronic devices (desktop PC, laptop, iPhone and iPad) are all optimised. I remove any unnecessary software or visual clutter, and keep screens and keyboards clean. I love using

Google Workspace because it enables me to move between devices seamlessly, which makes it easier to work in different spaces, as I'm wont to do.

My wife doesn't share my philosophy on austere minimalism. My friends were all glad when I got married, and she started making our home more cosy and welcoming, instead of like a monk's cell in a monastery. My friends were very happy with my change in state.

## 2.2. Multiple spaces enable resets and fresh perspectives

Physical spaces play an essential role in working productively and thinking clearly.

I find it almost impossible to sit at my desk for an entire day. My brain slows down. I struggle to get fresh perspectives on my work. I eventually get restless and claustrophobic. I have learned that my brain reboots and gets reenergised in different spaces.

### **Types of varied spaces**

If I'm working from home, I will alternate between the couch, lounge table and my study. I will work on my laptop, desktop PC and with pen/paper to get variety. I will work from a bench in my garden (or in the park) if the weather is reasonable. I will also work from a nearby cafe.

And when I had an office to go to, I would work at my desk and in breakaway spaces, including the couches in the reception area. This would be interspersed with attending (and often chairing) meetings in the boardroom. I would walk with colleagues or clients to a nearby cafe to have meetings or informal discussions. Sometimes we would simply go for a walk together, and that would be the meeting. The ritual of walking to a cafe is also great since it helps prepare my mind to work productively on the matter at hand.

### **The whiteboard office**

I used to have two massive whiteboards (about 4' x 6' each) in the one office where I worked for over a decade. When I wanted to think about a problem, I'd stand and work at my whiteboards for an hour or two. And when staff or directors were struggling with a problem, they'd come into my office and take some felt-tipped pens, and we'd start drawing the problem on my whiteboards. There were some comfortable chairs, so problem-solving meetings would gravitate into my space. I often joked that we needed to put a coffee machine in my office since we spent so much productive time there.

### **My best days had varied spaces**

Client visits and fieldtrips to informal settlements and factories were also enjoyable and a welcome break from my workspace. They also gave me a much better perspective – meeting the people I'd been chatting with on video, seeing operations underway or being in the homes and workspaces of people we were trying to help.

There is also something very tactile about smelling the woodsmoke hanging above an African township in the morning, or seeing the large dusty sun on the horizon while chatting to a taxi driver with Swahili gospel music playing on the radio, or seeing the frenetic activity in the inner-city.

There were many days when I worked from home, from the office, visited clients, and worked from cafes, and these helped keep me engaged.

### **Cafes as a working environment**

Friendly cafes with a nice buzz of background chatter and movement are my favourite spaces to work. I often tell people that this helps distract the distractible parts of my mind so I can get some important work done. I love reflecting, writing, planning, studying and journaling (in cursive with a fountain pen) in cafes. I feel a sense of solidarity with others doing the same. Cafes are also good spaces for administrative work since the environment keeps me engaged and distracted from the monotony of this work. I used to visit two to three cafes per day in Cape Town; now it's just one cafe per day in Scotland since they're much more expensive.

I am consistent and like routine, which means that baristas at cafes tend to start making my coffee when they see me walk in, or sometimes when they see my car being parked outside. There have also been times when they've started making my coffee when they noticed one of my regular guests arrive before me.

### **Spaces that overwhelm me**

I tend to struggle in quiet environments as the default space, except for early in the mornings, as I get bored more quickly. However, I may seek out quiet spaces like a remote boardroom or library if I need to do a certain type of work or find some solace during the day.

I especially hate spaces with bright fluorescent lights and shiny objects, like some supermarkets and crowded shopping malls, as I tend to get claustrophobic and anxious, and some spaces even feel like they are touching my skin.

### **Active engagement over passive reception**

One more quirk of mine worth mentioning, related more to digital spaces. I prefer active, engaged communications with broad communication channels. For example, I prefer playing computer games to watching TV. I prefer chairing meetings to being a minor participant. I prefer presenting at conferences to watching presentations. I prefer meeting people in person rather than being on a video chat with them. And if I must be on a video chat, I much prefer having an active two-way conversation with cameras turned on, or I tend to lose concentration and track of what is going on. My nervous system requires sufficient incoming stimulation to stay regulated and focused, otherwise I get distracted.

## **2.3. Productivity happens in intense bursts**

My brain doesn't operate linearly. My attention and productivity energy can't be allocated evenly over an 8-hour workday with a defined start and finish like most people.

For example, I began writing this section of this essay at 05:30 this Saturday morning. I normally start working on my computer around 06:00 on most workdays and do my best work until about 11:00. By 15:00, my brain is completely dead, and I would struggle to do basic arithmetic. However, I'm perfectly capable of socialising non-stop for 12 hours since this is engaging and energising.

There are often days when I can complete a normal day's work in 3-4 hours of hyper-focused productivity with amazing concentration, especially since I can touch-type at about 80 words per minute. (Learning how to touch-type is one of the greatest gifts I've given myself.) My brain is exhausted after such sessions. I can still chat and meet with people, but I will struggle to do any further desktop work, though I can sometimes trick my brain into providing another hour of concentration by taking a walk to a cafe and working there instead.

### **A frenzy of writing**

I wrote my most recent essay of 2,500 words on the [Brexit experiment](#) in five hours, and last month I wrote my 25,000-word essay on the [deindustrialisation of Scotland](#) over three weeks before breakfast, and at cafes in the early afternoons. Ideas and patterns incubate, sometimes for years, until my brain decides to give birth, and then I work in a frenzy to deliver the fully-formed and coherent concept or strategy onto paper. I can identify with how John Kerouac wrote *On the Road* in 1951 over three weeks on a 120-foot roll of tracing paper.

### **Trance states**

I am most productive when I'm able to enter a trance-like state where everything else disappears - time and space and people and other thoughts. All I have is the project in front of me, combined with perfect concentration. Everything comes together. Then, when I exit these states, I tend to marvel at what I've achieved and wonder how I could have written or conceptualised such a thing - sometimes it looks like another person must have done it, and I've said as much to my wife.

I try to chain these together over days when I'm working on something engaging. I am most able to create the conditions to trigger these trance states in the early mornings (before the official workday starts), and at cafes, and sometimes when I'm at my desk listening to music like heavy metal or opera, and I'm able to time-block about 3 hours to exclusively do one thing.

### **Mental barricades**

And when I need to concentrate on something, and my brain is in a mode where it is skittering around, I have to consciously try to create some mental barricades to build a cocoon to keep out the mental noise and protect a clear mental space when I focus on the work that needs doing. This takes time and intention to do.

These barricades involve clearly determining what needs to be done, allocating a specific number of hours, choosing a suitable space to work from, putting on suitable background distraction like a familiar soundtrack, making some tea or coffee, and then spending 30-60 minutes trying to get into the right thinking mode, where my self-distractions and multitasking mind slowly reduce, so I can focus properly. These concentration states are precious, so I try to protect them when they occur.

## **Outcomes-based work is best**

I much prefer outcomes-based work to hourly billing or fixed office hours. I tend to work much quicker than most people when I'm able to concentrate properly, given that I work in intensive bursts and have meticulously optimised my productivity systems and workflows.

But when I track my actual productive hours, as I always do in 15-minute billing units, it tends to be less than my colleagues' for the same deliverable. This unfortunately undermines how much I can charge for the same deliverable when there is a system of hourly or daily billing in place. In other words, I work fewer productive hours, but get more done in them, so I end up billing less.

This has created some absurd situations recently. Several times over the past year, I've been assigned a set number of days to do a piece of work for a client as part of an associate consulting agreement, where a charity applied for a set number of consulting days of support. I completed this work in less than half the allotted time since I worked efficiently or found an alternative route to the outcome. I then went back to the client and asked them what I should do with my remaining hours. We agreed on more work. I then delivered another assignment for them. Then sometimes, there was still time left, so I did a third piece of work for them so I could honestly use up the time they'd been allotted. The clients were very happy with this situation when it occurred.

The lesson here is to judge neurodivergent employees by results wherever possible.

I also think that South Africans tend to work much quicker than most since budgets and timeframes are much tighter than what I've experienced in the UK, and the fear of retrenchment is always present.

## **A word of caution about coffee and alcohol**

And one word of caution. When I was younger, I used to drink several cups of coffee to intensify and extend my periods of concentration, so I could work 50-60-hour weeks for over a decade. Whenever my brain slowed down, lost concentration, or brain fog emerged, I had a cup of coffee and was generally able to surf the waves of clarity and adrenaline it created. I then drank a few glasses of wine every evening to slow down and stabilise my brain, allowing me to then work after supper. I saw coffee and alcohol as nootropic productivity tools which I used intentionally.

I eventually burned out badly, and it took me a year to recover. I abandoned alcohol in 2013 and haven't touched it since, one of the best decisions I've ever made, and generally limit my coffee intake to 1-2 cups per day.

## 2.4. Brain does work on its own

I have realised that my brain does its most productive work without my conscious involvement. This doesn't look like work, and I can't record it on my timesheet, but it is.

### **Working while sleeping or doing chores**

There are some early mornings when I wake up and notice paragraphs being written by themselves in my mind's eye. If I can't ignore it and get back to sleep, then I might write some prompts down on my phone. If that fails, I will get up, make coffee, boot up my laptop and start typing frantically to catch up and not miss out on any insights.

The same mental processing can happen when I'm doing chores, walking somewhere or training at my gym. The difference is that the writing becomes auditory, not visual, like when I'm half asleep. In other words, my mind imagines me having a conversation or giving a presentation, explaining something to someone, and then it repeats in an infinite loop, refining with each iteration. This often helps to clarify my understanding and rehearse for a situation. It's useful but incredibly annoying!

This means that I'm frequently "working" productively when I'm not actively working. I will also tend to notice or remember things - a newspaper headline or overheard snippet of a conversation - which trigger my thinking further in new directions or provide another piece of the puzzle.

### **Attention residue after intense periods of work**

When I work intensely on any document for over an hour, or have an intense conversation where we are struggling with something complex and interesting, my brain will continue to put ideas loudly into the forefront of my consciousness for the next few hours.

My brain sometimes repeats the exact same thought or phrase, every 30 seconds or so, non-stop. This can be intensely distracting if I'm trying to work or concentrate on something else. I need to consider each idea, and if it is good, like they often are, I need to make a note or email myself so I don't forget it. Only then does the mental reminder stop bugging me.

Sometimes when I'm driving somewhere, I need to pull over to the side of the road to quickly record the thought so I can focus on driving again. These nagging mental reminders tend to dissipate over a 1-4 hour period afterwards. They are useful but frustrating. This is also why I mostly start working at 5.30 am since sleep has rebooted my system and I have fewer distracting thoughts accumulated from the day.

## 2.5. Restless brain loves learning new things

My brain is always hungry for information. I struggle to turn my brain off. This can get very frustrating.

### **Libraries as magical places**

I was fortunate to have an excellent library at my school in the 1980s and a supportive librarian whom I became very fond of, and we kept in touch until she passed away fairly

recently. I would often volunteer and help out in the library. Then, when I did my degree at the University of Cape Town, I would spend many hours each week immersed in some of the 1.2 million books in the different corners of the university library, reading up on topics from mysticism through to economics. I would also visit our public library with its 80,000 books whenever I passed it on my walks, sometimes daily.

I saw libraries as magical places that contained the answers to all my questions. It was very easy to sit there, immersed in a pile of tangible books, each with its own feel and smell, looking for answers. I used to read a book each day for decades. I also met one of my closest friends in a library almost 40 years ago, who has the same insatiable thirst for knowledge.

### **The internet changed everything**

Access to the internet in the 1990s initially enhanced this search for knowledge once I had my first desktop PC with a colour screen. There were so many strange corners of the internet to explore. My first iPhone 3G, which a client gave me to say thanks, changed everything and started a new trend. I could access any information I wanted from anywhere, pretty much immediately. This was addictive in itself. Then came along social media apps, FOMO, gamification, unlimited scroll, and addictive algorithms, and made things a hundred times worse.

It has become increasingly difficult to immerse myself in a book, deeply reflecting on its contents to gain wisdom and insight, almost impossible at times. I have started buying physical books again to try to recapture my original way of reading. While this medium is better than their digital equivalents, my ability to single-task and immerse myself in a book has proven elusive. This is because my ability to concentrate has deteriorated, possibly due to life stress and age, and possibly due to our collective digital environment.

### **Collecting information like bees collect pollen**

Nowadays, it has become much easier to flit between pieces of information like a bee collecting pollen or a bard collecting stories. When I get interested in the next new topic, I tend to obsess a bit. I subscribe to all the newsletters and Substack feeds I can find. I buy books. I listen to podcasts. I chat with friends who are interested in similar topics. I spend all my free time reading up on it.

Eventually, over the course of a year, a pattern starts to emerge, and information starts to repeat itself, merely confirming what has already been said. I look for new angles and sources, but eventually run out. The information feels too shallow and empty. There's nothing new being said. I get disappointed with what I'm reading. I then lose interest and become bored. I get diminishing returns. Additional information stops providing the "fix" I need. I might hang on to less than 10% of the original information sources - those few authors who are writing more in depth and inclined to consistently reveal insights I'd never considered. I move on to the next topic, which is normally associated with my former obsession, and start the process again.

### **Current work interests**

My current work-related interests have steadily evolved. They are primarily in the areas of development economics, national resilience and security, [industrial history](#) and development,

and [energy policy](#). I am still learning about the fields of strategy, social enterprise and charities, which occupied me for many years, but I primarily pay attention to new, interesting and unexpected developments.

## 2.6. Consulting and leadership environments bring variety

I have always gravitated towards strategy consulting. History was my strongest subject at school and I got great marks for it. I was able to page through my history textbooks in my head and see each page clearly in my mind's eye, but I've sadly lost that ability. I always found a way to do my projects and assignments on military strategy - Roman military strategy, Hernando Cortez's conquest, Battle of Britain, Harald Hardrada's life and battles.

### **University provided an array of interesting puzzles**

At university, I thrived in the subjects with the most puzzles and problem-solving, where there was an underlying logic involved. Surprisingly, this proved to be in accountancy and finance. The lecturers were very skilled at creating bizarre and complex problems, which proved very different from the monotony I experienced while doing articles to become a chartered accountant before I dropped out after three months. I remember being given 12 boxes of 50 bank statements each to reconcile for a big client, and I had to do this manually on a laptop with a black-and-white screen. I nearly went insane.

### **My first job and starting a business**

I tried to get a job with the big management consultancies like Bain, Accenture and McKinsey, but was never shortlisted. I eventually found my way into an internship position with a charity where I quickly rose to the position of financial manager. I became familiar with the nonsensical strategies of South African charities, which were overly reliant on grant funding and scorned performance measurement. It took me three years of networking before I met another person in the charity sector with a business degree. I then tried to get another job at various charity consultancies at the time, which have since all gone bust, but they lectured me on being too radical in my approach.

I did the logical thing and started my own consultancy business in 2000 at the age of 27. Most people would not have identified starting a consultancy as the logical next step. For me, it was simply the most obvious solution to an obvious problem. This also gave me the freedom and versatility I required to function optimally.

I started promoting a more business- and performance-oriented approach to strategy, which has become doctrine nowadays, but was taboo back then. People were horrified when I suggested that charities might have something to learn from businesses. I simply built upon this foundation and kept going. I have since worked under different brands to manage projects and help manage strategy, research and economic development consultancies.

### **Consulting and executive management are good for novelty and variety**

Consulting tends to provide a good platter of novelty. I have experienced different continents, different countries and cultures, different industries and sectors, different organisations, and different problems and permutations of these problems, and consequently different solutions to these problems.

Executive management was also invigorating. This was another area where there were different domains to manage with all their novel challenges. Every week, I had to deal with issues related to strategy, marketing, finance, operations, culture, technology, partnerships, impact, systems building, etc. There were always fires to put out in various departments, balanced with proactive work to build the future we were after. We had to locate the organisation in its story and sell the next steps.

### **Puzzles became more challenging over time**

Across these domains, there were always problems and puzzles to solve, and new patterns to learn. As I gained more experience and became older, I started craving more intricate and abstract puzzles, dealing with more industry-level and national challenges. I also gained great joy and meaning from mentoring younger consultants and staff under me. This is a long way from figuring out how to optimise a strategic planning process or explore the various business models of social enterprises, which I focused on in the first decade of my business.

Consulting provides a high stimulation and varied environment, which is nice and refreshing. However, many others would find this overwhelming, but then I would feel the same emotion sitting at my desk all day and being unable to take a walk for coffee - a terrifying prospect.

## **2.7. Pattern recognition is a massive asset**

I tend to be uncommonly good at pattern recognition. I see everything in patterns. Patterns emerging. Patterns repeating. Patterns winding themselves up. Patterns in people. Patterns in economies and societies. Patterns between countries.

A pattern is like the big picture, history, story or theory behind something. The patterns vary in complexity. All [simple, complex and wicked problems](#) are embedded in a pattern.

I struggle to make sense of details without understanding the pattern to which they belong. When explaining something to me, it's much easier to start with the big picture. I do the same when I explain things to people.

### **Two examples of needing to understand the pattern before working on details**

For example, I accompanied my wife on a field trip with the Paisley Natural History Society to study lichen in a Scottish woodland. Everyone excitedly pulled out their magnifying glasses and started searching for lichen, comparing it, and citing the official Latin names for the different species of lichen. There was lots of vibrant activity. In the meantime, I was reading up and inquiring about the size and history of the woodland, and who owned it, and what type of woodland it was, and what types of trees and creatures tended to live here. I was also learning about the socio-economic and environmental pressures on this woodland. Then, when I had a good sense of the big picture, I was able to join in and learn a bit more about lichens, now that I understood their place in the pattern.

And even last week, I was helping a new charity in Peterhead (near Aberdeen) to figure out its first strategy. My first step was to dive into the economic history and situation in Peterhead, the shift from oil and gas to green energy production. The pressures on its

fishing industry. The likely jobs to be lost and created. I assessed the type, levels and geographic distribution of poverty in the town. I considered the likely social problems that are emerging and the support infrastructure. I also looked into who the major players in the town are, including those involved in this green transition, and what opportunities this might create for partnerships and funding. I even reviewed some position papers put forward in Westminster.

I sent the charity a comprehensive background paper to review. My client responded well and said it felt “almost like you have lived in Peterhead for the past five years.” Now it will be much easier to help them position themselves and design a suitable strategy. This process goes quickly now.

### **Deductive and inductive reasoning and upstream thinking**

I tend to use a mix of [deductive and inductive reasoning](#) to understand patterns. I also found that it's much easier to understand how to [intervene upstream](#) to prevent problems, especially in our age of austerity, when resources are scarce. These essays, and the one at start of this section, give some insight into how I actually think through problems in practice.

Once a pattern is recognised, it becomes much easier to extrapolate, infer, deduce or predict something. This is the true beauty in understanding them; everything else becomes much easier.

### **Patterns in people**

Patterns also apply to people. I am a sociable and chatty extrovert. But when I meet someone new, I tend to match their personality and situation to the patterns of people I know well. This acts as a set of assumptions about them, which are then refined over time. This makes it much easier to know how best to interact with them.

When I was younger, I used to consider their personality profiles since I was obsessed with psychometric models and tests for several years. This ability improves with age as my library of personality patterns from different cultures and people continues to accumulate. This process is largely intuitive and unconscious nowadays, though sometimes I catch myself doing it. We all do this anyway as human beings, though perhaps not this explicitly.

I still dabble in personality profiles but I'm more interested in political archetypes and dimensions. For example, More in Common has identified seven distinct segments of political attitudes in the UK and there is an interesting quiz you can take.

### **Pattern recognition improves with age**

As I've just mentioned, my ability to recognise and understand patterns is definitely improving with age and experience, one of the few advantages of getting older. I have more data in my mental library; my mental models are more refined. Moving continents also helps, as it gives a fresh and comparative perspective, and I see so many patterns starting to emerge in the UK which are well-established in Africa. This provides some prescience. I am certainly able to contribute exponentially more nowadays than I would have been a decade ago.

I've also become increasingly interested in larger patterns - i.e. industry, economic and country level patterns, cultural trends and ideas, historical foundations of current structures, multi-generational patterns and how history repeats itself. My writing reflects this shifting focus.

And finally, I never, ever, forget a pattern once I've learned it. It becomes hardwired into me and something I build upon. This is the opposite of my unreliable short-term memory.

## 2.8. Movement releases pent-up energy

When I get frustrated or anxious about something work-related, I often get this intensely restless feeling in my arms and legs, which makes it impossible to concentrate or remain at my desk. My limbs feel hot and claustrophobic.

### **Habits to release energy**

The only way to release this energy is to get up and do something else - this might be doing the dishes or the laundry, cleaning part of my flat. I might take a walk to a cafe to think about it and get some perspective. I might try working on another device and/or room, or even on a whiteboard or pen/paper, or going to the office kitchen to make some more coffee, or chatting to someone for a while.

This might happen every 10-15 minutes on a task I'm very frustrated with, or only every few hours if I'm making progress. Then my frustration converts into productive energy once I find an angle of approach.

Even when I'm doing these tasks to dissipate my feeling of claustrophobia and frustration, my brain is still working on the topic and figuring out the best solution. It is a productive time, although an outsider might not see it this way.

### **Physical training programmes provide structure and unlock creative thinking**

I often tell people that I do my best work at my gym in the evenings - I train about 6 hours each week at a strongman gym in Paisley. I have a coach who manages my programme since I don't have the brainpower to do this myself. These intense physical workouts help to normalise my hyperactive (or exhausted) thought patterns. They dissipate any excessive mental and emotional energy.

My physical training programme, whatever form it takes, helps ground me and keeps me on track with everything else in my life. I've often told people that my gym programme is like a set of train tracks that keeps me moving steadily forward in life, no matter what terrible storms are happening around me.

So many times, over the course of a workout, in the break between reps or exercises, I've made massive realisations and breakthroughs, developed strategic approaches, and conceptualised entire essays or documents. I've often pulled out my phone and made frantic notes after realising something. When my training buddies inquire what I'm doing so enthusiastically, I tell them I'm working on an essay or strategy. These realisations and scribbles help set the scene for the next day of work.

Walking in the park also helps clear my head and prepare me for my workday or an upcoming event or client meeting.

### **Methods of turning thoughts off**

I struggle to turn my brain off and have a break from my thoughts. Please don't suggest meditation! It doesn't work. I've tried many times and read several books on meditation, both secular and Buddhist. Believe me.

What helps most is a grounded, multisensory experience, such as physical exercise, an immersive, face-to-face conversation with friends, a structured musical event like an orchestra or choir, sitting in the walled garden at Barshaw Park, or spending extended time in nature. I've recently been learning how to paint miniature figurines at this hobby club, and this is also relaxing. Certain computer games also help me at times. These strategies all help by normalising my thoughts and crowding them out with other sensory information.

## **2.9. Productivity systems are a lifesaver**

Through trial and error, and way too much time spent exploring different productivity and knowledge management systems, I've settled on an integrated approach that works. I haven't changed the fundamentals in over five years, since it does its job well, though I have updated some of the technologies I use.

I explain it all in an essay called "[My productivity and knowledge management system](#)."

The catalyst for this essay was a chat with someone who had lost their short-term memory due to a medical issue and had consequently decided to change careers. I realised how my system might help him since my short-term memory is impaired when I'm overwhelmed and doing too much. This essay began as a long email to him.

### **Task management system**

The essay explains the five major components of my system in more detail. It explains how I use a system called Getting Things Done (GTD) to manage tasks and projects. This is combined with a task-management app that I use in every aspect of my life. I paste relevant emails into tasks since I'm inclined to forget what was said and don't want to waste precious attention trying to find them. My brain feels like a sieve sometimes, with important tasks falling through the cracks. Because my brain has learned to trust this system, it stops bugging me about tasks once I've recorded them.

### **Knowledge management system**

I use a system called Building a Second Brain for knowledge management and to record important information so I don't forget it, as I am inclined to do, although I do remember interesting stories and examples for decades. Sometimes, I can even remember conversations from 40 years ago with friends, and what they were wearing at the time, but my memory is unpredictable. I take extensive notes at most meetings since I often refer to them.

## **Time and calendar management**

I use Google Calendar very strictly, recording 15-minute units throughout my day. I also use it to time-block periods for when I need to concentrate on a particular project. This helps me to treat time as a precious commodity and also remember where I am in time, since I can easily forget everything I did in a day.

## **Recording thoughts and folder system**

I write my thoughts in a Moleskine journal with a fountain pen. Cursive handwriting helps me slow down and organise my thoughts. Finally, I use a method called PARA for organising my files and folders, with the same format mirrored in the Google Cloud and therefore available across my devices. Every piece of information now has its place, just like with my physical possessions. Digital clutter also bugs me in the same way as physical clutter.

## **Rigorous system improves productivity and sanity**

I use this system rigorously. It helps me to stay sane and keeps me moving forward. I've managed up to 20 simultaneous consulting projects across multiple continents. Without it, I would constantly forget things and get overwhelmed with the tasks in front of me, and overwhelmed with deciding which task to prioritise or do next. My limited attention would be burned out on details, never being deployed for productive work. I would use up my daily quota of concentration in a few hours. I would be like a car stuck in the mud with wheels spinning loudly and steam coming from the engine until it breaks down.

I've often said to my wife that my attention is one of the most precious things in the world - something which I need to spend very intentionally and wisely. It is the thing I struggle with more than anything else. These systems help me to manage this.

## **2.10. Tendency to question underlying paradigms**

I tend to question the assumptions and paradigms behind ideologies, theories and beliefs, and behind the policies and decisions they lead to. My thinking naturally takes me there because I always think about the underlying pattern and sense-check what is being proposed.

### **Resistance to ideology**

Therefore, I rarely align precisely with any ideology, political party, social contagion or groupthink. These all have prepackaged sets of underlying ideas that need to be evaluated on their merits and underlying logic. I can't adopt ideas simply because of tribal loyalty. I might agree with some, but not with others. I cannot adopt them in their entirety like many people seem able to do. This means I tend to feel like I'm on the outside, looking in on people who have built their identities around something, or who are enthusiastically implementing a popular idea along with everyone else.

Out of curiosity, I asked my AI to map my economic and national security essays, including one about the understated vulnerability of the UK's [undersea infrastructure](#), against the manifestos of political parties contesting the UK's 2026 local elections. The results showed

overlaps with a handful of parties, some more than others, but there was no perfect alignment.

### **Benefits of questioning consensus**

Fortunately, there are some benefits to how I see things. I am unlikely to endorse an approach just because everyone else is doing it, and because it's become a fashionable trend, though I might take some ideas from it. This helps prevent the types of disasters that happen when there is massive pressure of momentum to do something that turns out to be foolish and fraught with negative consequences. I'm unlikely to get caught up in this momentum and in the riptide of some ideas that sweep everyone out to sea. I also have my own sense of right and wrong, which is independent of social consensus.

### **Traumatic break with consensus in the Apartheid army**

I learned about social consensus the hard way. I was a whistleblower in the Apartheid army because I reported, to the correct internal structures, incidents of abuse by senior officers to members of local tribes and their staff we'd taken on. I had my own objective standards of morality and I couldn't go along with things simply because everyone else was.

These incidents were never properly investigated since the colonel who was appointed as the investigator was friends with the accused. The events simply resulted in a stream of death threats and people threatening to shoot me with their rifles on the weekend, and bury my body somewhere in the bushveld. Several other negative consequences emerged as some field officers took a personal dislike to me. It became a game of cat and mouse. Fortunately, I had the support of a doctor who was doing his national service and the local indigenous staff. This was a lot for a young 18-year-old lance corporal and paramedic to deal with, but I'd do the same if I had to go back in time and repeat the experience.

When I left school, my headmaster wrote in my reference letter that I stand up for my own strongly held convictions. This observation still holds.

Interestingly, research suggests that neurodivergent individuals, particularly those on the autism spectrum, are more inclined to blow the whistle on wrongdoing since a strong moral compass is a common neurodivergent trait.

### **Problem-solving starts with the underlying assumptions**

If there is a problem to be fixed, then I'll first seek to understand any underlying assumptions, and the big picture or the upstream situation, and whether the problem is best fixed there rather than in its detailed or downstream manifestation. I also consider the first-order and second-order consequences of any proposed solution. This is all part of the pattern which explains the past and the likely future.

### **Three examples of questioning assumptions**

Let me give three examples to illustrate this point, increasing in levels of abstraction.

Example one: A charity providing free legal services to unemployed mothers asked me to help them develop a revenue strategy. Taking a step back and sense-checking their broader strategic position first revealed that they would get a better return from revamping their

website and improving how they wrote funding proposals and prepared their financial reports. Only once those foundations were stable should they consider selling services to subsidise their free activities. The revenue problem was downstream of a communications and credibility problem.

Example two: A long-term client asked me to help conduct due diligence on agricultural enterprises in Africa using a proprietary tool that the funder required. After several days working alongside the team, we were all frustrated by how poorly the tool fitted the work. I questioned the assumption that we had to use it at all, and proposed designing our own framework instead. The CEO persuaded the funder to agree. I led the team over the following months to build a tool they still use almost a decade later across multiple countries. It saved money, produced better results, and deepened client relationships in the process.

Example three: I have often heard charities and government departments complain about dwindling budgets without ever asking the deeper question: how does [more money enter the system](#) in the first place? The immediate answer of increasing taxes for the rich has real limits and its own unintended consequences. A step further back asks how the government grows the economic activity it can draw tax from over the coming decades. A step further back still asks what economic assumptions have shaped UK policy for a generation and whether they are producing the outcomes anyone actually wants. A question as specific as why a local charity is struggling for funding can connect, through a chain of upstream reasoning, to decisions made in Westminster decades ago.

When any course of action or remedial intervention is proposed, I always need to sense-check it at the appropriate level before I can let go and work on it.

### 3. Impact on my career

My style of thinking and working has almost certainly had an impact on my career.

On the positive side, it has enabled me to thrive in work where there is an inherent variety of people, places, projects and industries, and where there is a need to learn rapidly and think creatively about how to solve intricate problems and other puzzles. My friends and colleagues have said that they would be overwhelmed by my perfect workday.

My abilities continue to improve with age and experience. While I no longer have the ability or inclination to work long, adrenaline-fuelled 50-60-hour weeks like I did when I was younger, my potential impact is significantly higher.

But there have also been several downsides, trade-offs and unusual arrangements I've needed to make.

#### **No formal employment contracts**

First, I have never had a formal employment contract in my life, and this is not for a lack of wanting one. I have never been able to fit the exact terms and conditions of employment contracts during the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s because they tended to be structured around a set of office-based working hours with an expectation to be at one's desk during this time, sticking precisely to the activities within the job description. Companies needed to be equitable in how they applied these rules so they couldn't give me any special favours.

Fortunately, working arrangements have recently become much more flexible with remote and hybrid working, partly due to the Covid pandemic, and this makes the prospect of employment much more feasible.

### **No job security or pension**

Second, not having formal employment has meant I've never had formal job security at any point in my 35-year career. I have never received a company pension or company contributions, so I'd make these payments out of any profits at the end of each financial year. I've always had to live frugally and save for those times when work was scarce. The Covid pandemic drained my savings significantly as I wasn't eligible for any social security benefits.

My job security has always stemmed from doing amazing work and developing a good brand. I networked extensively and developed many longstanding relationships with clients and other consultants. Marketing and business development became a way of life. I became the most proactive person I knew. I developed the ability to push forward through hardship with resilience, self-discipline and a positive attitude. I have always believed that a good brand is the best job security one can have, but sadly I left most of my hard-earned brand in Africa. I'm steadily rebuilding it in the UK.

### **Never shortlisted**

Third, I have only twice been shortlisted for jobs that were formally advertised, and the first time was back in the 1990s. My career counsellor and my friends have reviewed many of my job applications and said they were of a good standard. The challenge was that my CV did not fit the traditional patterns that HR practitioners, and nowadays AI agents, look for.

### **The CEO sponsor model provided the best security**

Fourth, all my long-term opportunities and "job-type" arrangements emerged because a CEO or MD noticed my abilities and took a chance with me. They sponsored me and were able to create a type of relationship where I was a member of the "team" (but without an employment contract). This happened precisely six times in my career, and these arrangements typically lasted between five and fifteen years.

I still value these CEOs and keep in contact with many. Their staff treated me like I was a member of the team, and clients thought I was formally employed. I had job titles like "deputy director", "financial manager", "principal consultant", "senior researcher" and "project manager". I even had various company business cards, email addresses, website profiles and desks at multiple locations, with staff that reported to me. I joked that I was like a spy with multiple identities.

What made things even more confusing is that I sometimes had between one and three of these relationships on the go at the same time, in addition to my normal consulting work. I was effectively an interim manager on call. I had multiple offices around Cape Town with line and/or project staff reporting to me. Some days I drove between the offices. This was a workaround solution that suited everyone, but it provided little job security. Neither did it produce an easily understandable CV, hence the difficulty in formal job applications.

## **Racial quotas in South Africa**

Fifth, South Africa has a compulsory procurement framework with strict racial quotas governing the proportion of White males in organisations, particularly in senior and executive positions. This made it rational for consultancies to keep me off their formal payroll and contract me instead, sometimes through intermediaries. Formal employment would have exposed them to penalties that would have undermined their ability to win contracts. The entire team then would have suffered.

It would also have been expensive, since, having performed at an executive level for years, employing me at that grade would have added significant overhead to a small or medium-sized consultancy operating within a difficult economy. Contracting me was the pragmatic solution for everyone, even if it left me permanently outside the security and benefits of formal employment. I was offered a partnership in a fairly large international economic development consultancy as I was about to emigrate, which would have suited me, but I had to decline since emigration plans had already been finalised.

## **Work that doesn't look like work**

Sixth, my work often doesn't look like work. This was especially a problem earlier on in my career, when work was more tangible - i.e. I had to reconcile X number of bank statements, write Y number of words in a report every hour, or make Z number of phone calls. But as the level of my work increased, it became more conceptual, and the focus shifted towards the value I provided. It became more about the contracts I could win, the partnerships I could negotiate, the money I could save through reimagining operations, the quality of strategies I could develop, and the insights I could provide. These outcomes are less bound to a desk or set office hours. This gave me more freedom.

Even so, it took a while for people who didn't know me to become familiar with my restlessness, my coffee shop meetings, my outside walks, and with how much I loved drawing on whiteboards, but they eventually came to enjoy it and see its value. The lesson here is to judge the performance of neurodivergent people on what they produce at the end of the day, and not on an hour-to-hour or day-to-day basis.

## **Always the outsider**

Seventh, the above factors, combined with the tendency to view systems from the outside, meant that I have often felt like an outsider throughout my career, and still do. There were many times when I felt I was simply cursed, fated or destined to always be on the outside, and this seemed to be a rational conclusion, since I couldn't explain why things had always worked out this way.

I am often jealous of all these people on LinkedIn with seemingly great jobs and regular promotions, with companies that appear to treasure and invest in them, and with the financial benefits and security that come along with the job. I see their company getaways and holiday photos and imagine the investments they've managed to accumulate. I look in from the outside and often wish this were possible for me, and then I avoid LinkedIn for a while since I get too upset, so I rather immerse myself in my own work again.

To be clear, this does not mean that the CEOs who "employed me" didn't value me or make me feel welcome and part of things, which they certainly did as good leaders, but rather that

contractually I've always been on the outside, and felt that the way I think and work would eternally place me in this state.

### **Coming to terms with things**

My way of thinking and working, and all the preferences that go along with it, have certainly impacted my career. I most probably would have been much richer and more financially secure if this had not been the case, though not necessarily happier. Perhaps I might have even remained in Africa. Nevertheless, I have largely come to terms with this. I am grateful I have always had the opportunity to do meaningful and varied work, and found ways of working that have suited me.

## **4. Conclusion**

Writing this essay was a worthwhile experience. It brought up a range of emotions which I needed to process, including some grief, as I've realised the consistent thread of sacrifices and trade-offs I've made since I was a child. It helped me understand myself and come to terms with the types of working environments where I will be likely to thrive. I reflected that I have done my best to intuitively navigate my career and make choices that would suit me, even before I knew anything about neurodivergence. I've also been proactive about developing compensatory systems to help me function optimally.

I am very grateful that the quirks in how my brain works haven't affected my ability to make friends and maintain relationships. I am a friendly and chatty extrovert skilled at reading social situations, chairing meetings, and facilitating workshops. I like and get along with most people I meet. Most of my friends are eccentric in some good way. I feel blessed in this domain compared with many others with neurodivergent patterns.

The fact that I'm sociable and athletic defies the stereotype of neurodivergent people that one often sees in movies and popular culture. This made it much more difficult for me and others to see my habits as anything other than strong values (e.g. freedom and variety) and idiosyncratic preferences. Though looking back through my life, all the way to when I attended early years schools that specialised in cerebral palsy and other disabilities and neurological disorders, the thread becomes obvious.

I am genuinely grateful for an exciting, varied and meaningful career, with over two hundred successful projects across different countries, and many close relationships with organisations and colleagues. I wouldn't be me without these experiences. I look forward to further engaging work and getting to know people along the way.

I wrote this essay for people who think and operate differently, struggle to fit in, and nevertheless want to build a successful career that can work for them. I also wrote this essay for their partners and parents, colleagues and bosses, so that they get more insight into how different types of brains work and have more empathy and understanding. My offer remains for therapists to use my essay as teaching material and to share it with those it might help.

I won't pretend that my future is without anxiety. I am ambitious, and there is much I can still do with my life. I see all my remaining years clearly lined up in front of me, like quotas of time that I need to use wisely. I get frustrated when I spend them without sufficient progress. I

realise that while I need to navigate a more tricky and narrower path than most people, my way of seeing and thinking brings me some unique advantages, which I need to build upon.

I am looking to join an organisation where I can be part of something greater, since a lone individual can only achieve so much. I want to work closely with people and get to know them well. I want to mentor people under me and see them thrive. I want the flexibility I need to do my best work, but within a structure that provides me with the stability and security I need. This is what I am working towards.