

Case History – NeuroHive¹

Introduction

Ian Lawton is Founder and CEO of NeuroHive CLG, a social enterprise that operates a website and companion app for neurodivergent adults. It offers bespoke peer support specifically for late diagnosed neurodivergent adults. The idea stemmed from Ian’s own late diagnosis of ADHD at 49 years old and autism at 51 years old. These diagnoses were a revelation for Ian and went towards explaining why school was a struggle and why he frequently felt left out in work and in life. However, in the wake of his diagnoses, Ian also experienced a strong sense of loneliness and disconnection. He wanted to find his tribe – those neurodivergent adults with shared experience of late diagnosis – and so the idea for NeuroHive was born. The creation of NeuroHive (<https://www.weareneurohive.com/>) will not only allow Ian to meet his own need for emotional and practical support, but will also enable him to extend support to others with this shared lived experience.

Personal Background

Ian was born in Dublin in 1971. He describes his childhood years in education as “incredibly difficult”. There were no diagnostic assessments, and little understanding of students with special needs. Ian was marked out as the troublesome child and was subjected to corporal punishment, which was not yet abolished. In 1981, Ian and his family moved to Cork. He started secondary school where he experienced severe bullying from his peers. The bullying became so extreme that his parents moved him in the middle of second year to another school. Ian was 15 years of age, on the cusp of sitting his first state examinations, when his Maths teacher raised concerns. Ian’s parents were brought into school and were informed that he had dyslexia. Every maths class, Ian would be excused from the classroom to have a one-on-one session. The teacher would teach maths from scratch using building blocks. “*It was infantilizing and it was embarrassing*” recalls Ian. In the following year, Ian learned from his teacher that his dyslexia impacted his mathematics skills also, and this was called dyscalculia. He was told it was “dyslexia for maths”.

During secondary school, along with all the other students Ian took a standardized IQ test and scored above the top performing pupil in his year. However, due to ignorance regarding dyslexia and dyscalculia, doubt was cast on his score and was disregarded with laughter and ridicule. Frustration mounted for Ian who was a highly creative, visual thinker. He remembers the kindness of his English teacher who saw beyond any spelling or syntax errors to recognize his exciting talent for creative writing and story-telling. Fortunately, Ian was able to make a few very close friends that helped make his schooling life more bearable. In his late teenage years, Ian began to embrace his difference, and inspired by music icons, he would dress alternatively. When it was time to go to college, Ian applied to Dun Laoghaire College of Art

¹ This case history was prepared by Thomas M. Cooney and Martina Brophy (College of Business, TU Dublin) as a basis for discussion rather than to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of any business situation.

and Design (now known as IADT – Institute of Art, Design and Technology) and he was accepted on his preferred course.

In 1990, Ian moved to Dublin to begin his degree programme in design communication at DLCAD. In his first year, concerns were raised about Ian’s academic abilities. He was aged over 18 years old at the time, yet his father was called to the college to discuss the matter with a member of faculty. Ian was sent for a cognitive assessment to a location in Donnybrook (Dublin) and he distinctly remembers that the furniture and décor in the office were designed to cater for children. The test was insultingly simple and Ian felt yet again humiliated and demeaned. A few weeks later, Ian’s father handed him the results from the cognitive assessment. The letter read as cold and clinical, referring to Ian in the third person. He could only make it through the first page, before he hurled the letter away in disgust and never read it again. Poor evaluation methodologies meant that Ian was not diagnosed with ADHD or autism at this time. His first assessment came just prior to the publication of 4th version of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) that first recognised Asperger Syndrome and ADHD as manifesting in adulthood. As Ian describes it: *“I slipped through the cracks.”*

Despite the adversity, Ian completed his degree programme at Dun Laoghaire with a specialisation in animation. After college, Ian began working on a series of animated short films for the Irish Film Board. He had the ambition of becoming a successful film maker, but found it very difficult to gain a foothold in the industry. His difficulty in reading people and recognising social cues (symptoms of his undiagnosed autism) made networking exceptionally challenging. He felt marked out as someone difficult to work with. He also preferred to have creative control, but that was only possible for people who had earned their credentials as a recognised film-maker. Ian also had a few negative experiences of having his project proposals (proof-of-concepts) accepted by production companies, only for him to be pushed out of the process. He decided, after decades of false starts and failed projects, that his career as a film-maker was not to be.

Ian, however, did find his niche for a time in post-production as an editor. This allowed him to create a more tolerable work environment where he could be on his own in a dark room absorbed in the task of editing. He was also able to fit his work around his duties as a stay-at-home dad. The employment contracts were precarious, however, and if there was no work, Ian quickly found himself on social welfare. He also had perfectionist tendencies and could spend too much time and energy on minor projects (e.g. editing corporate health and safety videos, making animatics for animation). This quickly led to burnout for Ian, plus there were several major personal traumas for Ian in this period that included the loss of his second son, and the breakdown of his marriage. Ian also suffered with an eating disorder and was morbidly obese. He was pre-diabetic and was told by a doctor that he would likely be dead by the age of 50 if he did not make major changes to his diet and fitness. For Ian, this dark period in his life marked the beginning of drastic, much needed change.

Empowerment through Diagnosis and Fitness

Following multiple changes in Ian's lifestyle, he went from morbidly obese with a life expectancy of 50 years to running his first ultra-marathon two weeks before his 50th birthday. Following his doctor's warning, Ian underwent a regimented lifestyle turnaround that focused on 3 Ms – Menu, Movement and Mindset. He adopted a completely plant-based diet, moving from vegetarianism to veganism. He became a running fanatic, graduating from marathons to ultra-marathons. In the midst of this period, Ian left his family home in Dublin and moved back to Cork. *"I was looking to change my life."* When he moved to Cork, he trained under Howard Jacobson (American wellness coach and author) to become a health and behaviour coach. Ian qualified and initially took on a number of clients on a pro bono basis.

Another life altering and profound occurrence came about for Ian during this period. At 49 years of age, Ian received his ADHD diagnosis and at 51 years of age, his diagnosis for autism. For Ian, his diagnoses were revelatory and helped to make sense of this feeling of difference that he carried throughout his life. He felt he had just received "a state-of-the-art GPS" for how to navigate life. Ian joined support groups including Adult ADHD Ireland, where he became a volunteer facilitator, and as a more regular attendee at support groups hosted by Thriving Autistic. He learned that for many people his age or older, their first understanding of ADHD, autism or dyslexia may only emerge during the diagnosis of a child or grandchild. The individual then recognises these diagnostic criteria in themselves and are prompted to go for assessment.

Even during his mainstream work, as a health and behaviour coach, Ian noticed that between 75-80% of his clients had either autism, ADHD or both. This pattern was complete chance, but Ian notes that: *"We sort of find each other somehow."* Through his coaching, Ian began to notice a series of commonly quoted problems and unmet needs among his clients. Some of these problems related to productivity and personal organisation, but a large number of problems stemmed from a lack of emotional support and connection. Ian saw then the potential for a platform that would enable peer-to-peer support and shared lived experience among individuals who were neurodivergent. Furthermore he saw the potential for collaboration. For instance, though Ian struggled with written language and arithmetic, he was excellent at visualisation and creativity. Perhaps his skills could complement those with different strengths, and they could find a basis for collaboration, mentorship and community. This was the genesis for NeuroHive.

NeuroHive

When Ian had conceptualised NeuroHive, he was eager to see it through from idea phase to reality. He enrolled in the UCD Graduate Certificate in Creativity, Innovation and Entrepreneurship run by UCD Innovation Academy. During that programme, Ian was able to incubate his idea and conduct market research. Ian not only understood the needs of his target customer, he was his target customer. *"I was influenced to create that [NeuroHive] as it was simply filling a gap that I myself needed."* The feedback from potential community members of the app offered an important source of external validation for NeuroHive. Ian also enrolled in the Entrepreneurship for People with Disabilities programme at TU Dublin.

During that 12-week online course, Ian developed each element of the business model for NeuroHive. The course rounded out with Ian pitching NeuroHive to a panel of judges and it airing on national TV.

NeuroHive is not dissimilar to other companion apps (e.g., dating apps). A new member of the NeuroHive app is able to sign up and go through an onboarding process. They can add personal details and preferences for the kinds of social connections they desire to make through NeuroHive. According to Ian: *“It all sounds very, very fancy, but it's all about connecting people who experience social poverty and need support, and who better to support each other than people who get it”*.

NeuroHive was soft launched in Dublin at Neuroconvergence 2024², a first of its kind festival gathering for the neurodivergent community. Present at the event were many potential community members of the NeuroHive app as well as representatives from support services organisations that work closely with the neurodivergent population. Ian is hugely conscious not to heavily monetize the NeuroHive platform and exclude the very people he wishes to help. NeuroHive is a social enterprise that will see all of its profits reinvested into the organisation. Revenue will be generated through member subscriptions. According to the CSO 2022, only 16% of autistic people are in full-time employment, with 32% engaged in some form of paid work.³ Ian's own personal experience has made him keenly aware of the financial difficulties people from this community face. Therefore, he intends to use a model of reciprocity where those who cannot afford it, use the platform for free, and those who can, become a paid subscriber. Ian is reluctant to accept corporate sponsorship as he wants to create a completely safe, uncorrupted space for community members. Whilst NeuroHive is in the development stage, Ian is receiving funding from a grant secured through Rethink Ireland while under Tús⁴ supervision as part of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP).

Final Thoughts

Ian recognises that no two autistic people are the same and that other individuals in the neurodivergent community may have very different stories to tell about setting up a business in Ireland. From his perspective, confidence came from participating in and completing the programmes he undertook in UCD and TU Dublin. However, he has also experienced a number of challenges. His strengths lie in the creative details of and vision for NeuroHive, and he has less patience and focus for the more administrative side of business activities. For instance, communication clashes were a risk for Ian when sourcing information for establishing his social enterprise. *“When you ask a clarifying question, most neurotypical people take that as a challenge and they become defensive and think you're being argumentative.”* Ian believes he would benefit from greater clarity and signposting regarding the stages of setting up a social enterprise. As part of his broader vision for NeuroHive, Ian sees the potential for many different hives, including one with members who are setting up

² Ian is part of the organising committee for Neuroconvergence 2025.

³ CSO (2022). *Census 2022 Profile 4 – Disability, Health and Carers*. [Link found here](#).

⁴ A government run community work placement initiative.

their own business and can support each other through the process. When Ian delivers on his vision, NeuroHive will abound with opportunities for meaningful connection and collaboration among the neurodivergent community.