

NEURODIVERSITY IN THE OUTDOOR SECTOR

Cory Jones discusses his research on the prevalence of neurodiversity amongst outdoor professionals

Author profile

Cory Jones is an experienced outdoor practitioner with over thirty years' experience leading groups on fieldwork and adventurous activities worldwide. Cory is a founding member of First Aid Training Co-operative and an ex-Head of Centre. Over the past three months Cory has been leading a working group of outdoor professionals to develop training on mental health which focuses on the needs of outdoor practitioners.

For over thirty years, I have worked in the outdoor sector in various roles – countryside ranger, wildlife guide, kayak guide, international mountain leader, wildlife trust manager, outdoor first aid instructor and environmental educator. As someone with dyslexia, I have often wondered if the outdoor sector attracts more neurodivergent individuals than other industries. Many people I speak to within the sector feel that this is the case, but until now there has been little empirical evidence to confirm it. The NHS describes dyslexia as “a common learning difficulty that mainly causes problems with reading, writing and spelling. It’s a specific learning difficulty, which means it causes problems with certain abilities used for learning, such as reading and writing.” (1).

Does the outdoor sector attract more neurodivergent workers than other sectors? This question led me to conduct a survey of 143 outdoor professionals, aiming to quantify and analyse the prevalence and impact of neurodivergence in outdoor professions. The findings are clear: neurodivergent individuals are significantly over-represented in outdoor jobs, with 60.8% of respondents identifying as neurodivergent, compared to the UK national average of 15-20% (2; 3).

This article breaks down these figures, comparing neurodivergent representation in outdoor professions to national averages and highlighting the differences between self-diagnosed and professionally diagnosed respondents.

The over-representation of neurodivergent professionals in outdoor jobs

According to my research, while the national average for those with dyslexia in the UK sits at 10% (1), this figure rises to 29.4% for those working in the outdoor sector with 22.4% professionally diagnosed and 7% self-diagnosed. This trend continues with both ADHD and autism where the national average sits at 3-4% (3) and 1-2% (4) respectively, while the average in outdoor learning sits at 21.7% (14.7% professional diagnosed, 7% self-diagnosed) and 19.6% respectively (13.3% professionally diagnosed, 6.3% self-diagnosed). Our survey found similar trends in both dyspraxia and other learning differences. This data confirms the many conversations I had with other outdoor practitioners – neurodivergent professionals are drawn to these careers in numbers far exceeding national trends.

Neurodivergent representation across outdoor roles

The survey also examined which job roles attracted the highest number of neurodivergent professionals, with multi-activity instructors and mountaineering/watersports instructors coming out on top with 24.1% and 19.5% respectively. 17.2% of surveyed outdoor learning practitioners identified as neurodivergent, as did 13.8% of expedition and international guides and 11.5% of wildlife and conservation workers.

These findings suggest that neurodivergent professionals are particularly drawn to roles that involve hands-on learning, dynamic environments and practical problem-solving – all areas where neurodivergent strengths can shine.

Self-diagnosed vs professionally diagnosed: what does it mean?

One of the key aspects of our survey was distinguishing between self-diagnosed and professionally diagnosed respondents. Of the 60.8% of our survey participants who identified as neurodivergent, the breakdown was:

- **34.3% (57 respondents) were professionally diagnosed by a medical professional.**
- **26.6% (40 respondents) self-identified as neurodivergent, but had not received a formal diagnosis.**

Self-diagnosis is common, particularly for adults who were not assessed as children or who work in industries where diagnosis is not required for workplace accommodations. For many, formal diagnoses can be expensive, time-consuming, or difficult to access within the UK healthcare system. However, whether self-diagnosed or professionally diagnosed, neurodivergent respondents in our survey reported similar challenges and strengths in their roles.

Why is the outdoor sector attractive to neurodivergent individuals?

The over-representation of neurodivergent individuals in the outdoor sector suggests that many find this work better suited to their strengths, compared to traditional office-based jobs. Survey respondents highlighted the following reasons why outdoor work is a good fit:

Practical, hands-on work – Many neurodivergent individuals excel in environments that prioritise physical activity and practical learning over abstract thinking and paperwork.

Flexible working conditions – The ability to work freelance or in varied environments reduces rigid structures that can be challenging for neurodivergent individuals.

Focus on problem-solving and creativity – Outdoor roles often require quick thinking, adaptability and lateral problem-solving—areas where some neurodivergent individuals thrive.

Reduced sensory overload compared to offices – While some outdoor environments can be overwhelming, they generally lack the artificial lighting, constant background noise and social complexities of office work.

Challenges faced by neurodivergent outdoor professionals

Despite the benefits, neurodivergent individuals in the outdoor sector still face significant barriers. For example, qualification processes often rely on written assessments, often to the disadvantage of neurodivergent professionals. Further barriers include limited workplace support due to a lack of neurodiversity awareness (54% of respondents stated that their employer had no formal training in neurodiversity) and sensory challenges relating to overstimulation in busy outdoor environments.

Recommendations for a more inclusive outdoor sector

Given the high number of neurodivergent professionals in the sector, outdoor organisations should take proactive steps to ensure accessibility and inclusion:

1. **Adjust training and qualifications** – Offering practical, verbal, or portfolio-based assessments instead of written exams could make qualifications more accessible.
2. **Provide neurodiversity training for employers and trainers** – Increasing awareness can improve communication, reduce stigma and ensure that neurodivergent employees feel supported.
3. **Introduce workplace adjustments** – Clear communication styles, structured schedules and sensory-friendly environments can enhance accessibility.
4. **Support freelancers and self-employed professionals** – Many neurodivergent professionals choose self-employment for flexibility, but better industry support (e.g., networking, mentoring) could improve job security.

Conclusion

Our survey provides compelling evidence that the outdoor sector attracts and retains neurodivergent professionals at far higher rates than the national average. The combination of practical work, dynamic environments and flexible career structures makes outdoor jobs uniquely suited to some neurodivergent strengths. However, challenges remain, particularly around qualification processes, employer awareness and workplace adjustments.

While the survey data is certainly large enough to identify important trends, it remains relatively small for making broader generalisations. Also, given the self-selecting nature of the survey (which was promoted through professional networks, newsletters and social media channels), there may be some participation bias to acknowledge.

By taking steps to better support neurodivergent professionals, the outdoor industry has an opportunity to harness the full potential of its workforce. Recognising neurodivergence as an asset rather than a barrier will not only improve accessibility, but also enhance the sector Δ

References

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