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February 2024
(Neurodiversity focus)

NEURODIVERGENT NEEDS PUT CENTRE STAGE AT ENTREPRENEURIAL BUSINESS EVENT STEPPING UP TO CREATE SAFER SPACES

Neurodiversity Celebration Week 2024

- 88 % of neurodivergent respondents need 'quiet spaces for relaxation' to feel safe at an event
- 24% of neurodivergent entrepreneurs avoid attending networking or business events
- 52% claimed they pushed through comfort zones to attend

The needs of neurodivergent entrepreneurs are being put centre stage next month at a business event recognised as the fastest growing event for personal and business development in the North, which has committed to making its mark in the field of inclusion, having proactively prioritised the needs of under-represented audiences.

The Big Festoon, taking place in Bolton this week on 21 and 22 March, during Neurodiversity Celebration Week, is a 2 day 'edutainment' event which has evolved from a 40 person event in a bar in Manchester to an 800 person event at Bolton Stadium

The event, run by International speaking coach Dani Wallace and her team offers a blended mix of inspirational talks, curated conversations, networking opportunities and performances from Dani herself who is also a professional singer.

Being a mum to a neurodivergent son and having ADHD herself, as the event has grown Dani and her team has invested heavily in inclusion and accessibility, aware that the intensity of events like this can put some people off, especially neurodivergent individuals, but with expansion is a real commitment to make this event accessible to all.

The BIG Festoon takes place during Neurodiversity Celebration Week, a worldwide initiative that challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about neurodevelopmental and additional needs. It aims to transform how neurodivergent individuals are perceived and supported by providing organisations with the opportunity to recognise the many talents and advantages of being neurodivergent, while creating more inclusive and equitable cultures that celebrate differences, challenges and empower every individual.

Dani said: "We have always tried to pave the way for inclusion, putting support in place to help ease anxiety and overwhelm for people who are not comfortable with busy and loud environments but I'm very aware that the pace and intensity of this event could be seen as too much, for many people. This is not OK. It is not OK for my events to be out of reach for people with additional sensory needs, or people who fear overwhelm in networking environments. Neurodivergent entrepreneurs should not be excluded from ANY party -but I know many who feel like they are, because the facilities are just not accessible."

In a recent survey run in Dani's community 88 % of neurodivergent respondents declared 'quiet spaces for relaxation' would be the top adjustment they'd like to see to make business events more welcoming; with clear communication about event schedule and expectations in advance coming a close second at 80%. Having information about the venue, seating and room layouts in

advance came next with 60% prioritising this, before 56% choose 'a sensory friendly environment'. All these things have been addressed for The Big Festoon.

Dani also discovered that 24% of people admitted to avoiding attending networking or business events because they don't feel they're suited to their needs but a staggering 52% claimed they pushed through comfort zones if they really wanted to go.

She said: "I'm all for pushing through comfort zones - when it's safe to do so -but for many neurodivergent entrepreneurs pushing through their comfort zones means actively becoming physically and mentally distressed in a way that is not OK. As event organisers we must do better, to ensure this is no longer the norm, and that we are not asking people to psychologically compromise their safety, in return for learning and development. EVERYONE deserves to be able to grow, within an environment where they feel safe, based on their own psychological risk assessments."

"The Big Festoon is about tapping into ALL the emotions", said Dani, "... and us being playful, having fun, connecting and being conscious with how we deliver important messages. If people don't feel safe in an environment, they will not connect, or absorb information and so they are not fully accessing the growth opportunities".

The biggest challenges which neurodivergent entrepreneurs identified when it came to attending business events were overwhelm and noise - 2 of the key things The Big Festoon has addressed through a number of different measures.

The BIG festoon has undergone a full inclusion audit to identify areas for improvement, which has seen the team review how they can ensure that event-specific marketing, day-to-day operations, and wider communications are open, clear and cater to all, with information being provided well in advance to help reduce anxiety. The team will ask if you have any additional needs, and ask if you have mobility needs that they need to be aware of. They have also attended inclusion and diversity training and have specific mental health first aiders at the event, as part of a full 'flight squad' team who are there to make sure everyone is supported.

The event has also been themed in a way that provides a clear definition of spaces. Housed under the theme of 'Coming Home' -expo areas and breakout areas have been grouped into spaces, such as The Kitchen, The Lounge, The Office - in a way not usually found at business events so it clearly specifies what's happening in each of the spaces and provides more clarity around expectations.

Working closely with specialist inclusion consultants at SENStory Group, as well as putting in physical measures such as a hearing loops, plain text formats of presentations, and providing an accessibility guide, there is also a designated Sensory Breakout Space - a low-noise, low-light space to help regulate any sensory needs.

Jo McMeechan, a neurodivergent SEN mum and founder of SENStory, is a former speaker at this event who braved sharing her message of challenges and triumph in this area, and has now joined The BIG Festoon accessibility team.

She said: "There are an abundance of measures that have been put in place to open this event up to people who often feel 'they are not invited to the party, because the party is 'their worst nightmare'. It's not right that people with additional needs or psychological safety challenges should be excluded from vibrant, empowering events - there is a way for them to be a part of these experiences, in a way that suits them, where they feel safe".

"As a community out in the entrepreneurial world, there are a huge number of diverse people, particularly from a neuro divergence perspective, because of the barriers that we experienced

within mainstream workspaces and the freedom that being in an entrepreneurial space brings. Being able to network and connect with other people with similar experiences is so important. Watching the growth that's happened for Dani I've seen how inclusion and accessibility has been this golden thread for growth. It has really led to her being able to reach and retain more people in her audience and have more of an impact and then in turn, allow those people to grow and connect and have more of an impact with the work that they're doing. It's created a hugely powerful ripple effect of change."

You can read The Big Festoon's inclusivity statement on their website here
-<https://www.thebigfestoon.co.uk/inclusivity>

Dani added: "My whole ethos is around bringing people together to help them rise up, offering a hand to those who need it, so they can come with us. I have been that person who needed the hand offering so many times, for many years, and now I'm determined to use my business to empower others. Success isn't just about money either, but for me it's about feeling like you belong. I have made a commitment to lead others, and create opportunities where we can festoon, to be stronger together. I am still learning about so many elements of life and I want to do this collectively."

Set within the backdrop of inclusivity, the talks within the event are set to appeal to all business owners. Bringing in speakers who have already achieved great success, like event Headline Sponsor Lisa Johnson from That Strategy Co who has made £16million over the last 7 years whilst working around her twins, and keynote Speaker Laurie Burrows who started her business whilst pregnant and now celebrates turning over up to 100K a month by the age of 30, the event is set to inspire, educate and motivate ambitious entrepreneurs looking to achieve the same. Also sharing the stage is world-renowned speaker Daniel Priestley - an award-winning entrepreneur, and best-selling author who started with nothing, then built successful multi-million dollar businesses in Australia, UK and Singapore. These experts will be sharing knowledge on how others can also scale, whilst working flexibly, and still enjoy life.

But the majority of the line up is curated from entrepreneurs earlier in their journey -who will be taking to the stage to share their stories and messages as part of their commitment to overcome their fears of glossophobia, and as part of their mission to create bigger ripple effects with their work. One such speaker is Helen Daniel - a late diagnosed neurodivergent entrepreneur and author, and founder of Outside The Box Sensory. Bullied as a child Helen experienced the trauma of being misunderstood, and since went on to study Autism and mentor neurodivergent children before recently writing her book - 'Neurosensory Divergence: Autistic Languages, A Roadmap Towards an Equitable Life for Autistic Children'. Helen is on a mission to drive societal transformation towards greater neuro-inclusivity and sensory accessibility and is fuelled by her passion to create an equitable education system, where every child can thrive. Drawing from her own experiences as a teacher, mentor and as a parent in a neurospicy family, she is moving the narrative away from viewing neurodivergent children as less able and instead highlighting how society can best serve ND-children in 'outside the box ways' that value neurodivergent profiles. At the Big Festoon she is speaking about her experiences as an ND child who was bullied and struggled at school to ask: 'Is school the future of Education?'

Tickets are available via <https://www.thebigfestoon.co.uk/> and there are a couple of sponsorship slots left if any businesses would like to be a part of this too. For more info email bookings@iatqb.com

Images attached of Dani Wallace and more available:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1RXWnbgqicNriiKWxFqTf_djlkbuGsDbP?usp=sharing

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Notes to Editor

More about The Big Festoon

From startups to 7 figure founders, entrepreneurs are coming together from across the globe to learn and connect next month, in the fastest-growing inclusive personal and business development event, The BIG Festoon on 21st and 22nd March. The Big Festoon is an event focused on sharing knowledge, inspiring action and creating opportunities, particularly for those in self-employment.

Dani said: "This isn't your usual business event - what we explore here are subjects that matter on a very human level - not just on a business level. We talk fears, and limiting beliefs, money blocks and marketing and we also talk about what it takes to succeed and over these 2 days it's my job to help everyone in that audience to see how they can slay their own dragons, so that they can grow, and walk away more confident and more ready to take their place in the world".

"With talks spanning topics from education to energy, mindset to mental health, and sales to self-sabotage, this event creates conversations that matter. We see so many lightbulb moments year on year, and we've had people quitting their jobs live on stage and committing to following their dreams -it's powerful stuff!"

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