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## Burning Bridges and Building New Ones: A Story of Autistic Burnout in the Workplace

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**A**T THE AGE of 21, I found myself seated in an oversized leather chair at EY's Manhattan office. I was there for my final interview for an entry-level analyst position. I had nearly finished my engineering degree, and I was interviewing with a few firms for my first full-time job.

"And what would you say are your weaknesses?"

I took a moment to reflect on the question, even though I had rehearsed my response months in advance. I was well aware that the interviewer expected a humble and self-aware answer, something that wouldn't be too shocking. It had to be a weakness that could be clearly defined using SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely) and should align with the company's strategic objectives. After all, my weaknesses would inevitably be brought up during my annual performance review, and the ideal outcome would be to receive a rating of "meets expectations." I gave a rehearsed, cliché answer about how I am too self-critical (not true), and how I impatiently jump in to solve problems (sort-of true).

While the details of the rest of the interview escape my memory, I must have left a positive impression, as they ultimately decided to hire me. Interestingly, a colleague later revealed that my decision to sit in the Partner's chair instead of the visitor's chair was seen as a display of confidence. Little did they know that my choice was driven by a desire to avoid distractions from the flashing lights of Times Square outside the window.

Filled with optimism and determination, I arrived on my first day of work with high hopes. My very first full-time job marked a significant milestone in my life as a young adult, and I was brimming with confidence. I was a fresh college graduate, I had just gotten back from a memorable month backpacking in Thailand, and I was living on my own for the first time in a little downtown apartment. As I stepped into the office, a sense of competence and enthusiasm filled me. However, the person I presented during the job interview was not the same person who showed up to my first day of work. This version of myself crashed and burned in a spectacular fashion. By the time week three rolled around, I found myself withdrawn and isolated from my friends, hardly sleeping or eating, and fighting back tears every day on my bus ride to the

office. Not only did I loathe the work of creating boring spreadsheets and writing reports; I was exceptionally bad at it too. I felt like I was the only one of my peers who had managed to crash and burn so quickly.

How did it come to pass that a reputable financial services firm ended up hiring someone who turned out to be an utter disaster? Well, to be fair, it's not entirely their fault. I had spent my entire life honing the skills necessary to become the kind of person who fits seamlessly into any team. I meticulously learned the right words to say, their specific order, and how to deliver them to win people over. Throughout my childhood, I observed my friends closely, mirroring their tone, gestures, and language. I consciously adjusted my posture and body language to meet societal expectations. In classrooms, I forced myself to sit still, aware that my teachers disliked fidgeting. Eye contact and small talk became practiced until they felt natural. I had unknowingly established a set of unspoken rules in my mind for deciphering the meaning behind others' messages. Subtle verbal cues or minuscule facial expressions became telltale signs of humor or anger. Each and every interaction required careful calculation, leaving me utterly drained. No wonder I was so bad at spreadsheets; I was using up all of my brainpower trying to communicate with my coworkers. Connecting with others was hard work! At the time that I started my first job, I was still 5 years away from a discovery that would forever change my understanding of myself and how I interact with the world around me. I didn't know it at the time, but I am autistic, and this was my first time experiencing autistic burnout.

I managed to stick it out at EY for about 15 months. I wish I could report that I got better at my job and my mental health improved, but that would not be the truth. Each quarterly performance review became more and more awkward, as my manager and I both knew that we were only prolonging my inevitable departure. In true corporate fashion, I was simply assigned less and less work, until I sat at my desk trying to stretch 1 hour of work from 8 a.m to 7 p.m. Eventually, I found a lifeline with another company and submitted my two-week notice the moment the ink was dry on my new contract. In the years since this experience, I worked at several other organizations in a variety of roles. I gained a better

understanding of my abilities with each passing year. I eventually learned to prioritize my mental health and everything started to get a bit easier. I began going to therapy and taking medication to manage my anxiety and depression. I learned to be honest with myself, accept my flaws, and embrace my talents. I finally sought an autism diagnosis at age 27, which provided me with a framework to understand my behaviors and needs, a framework that was badly needed by the 22-year-old version of myself. I can't go back in time and change my experience for that year of my life, but I can certainly learn from it and the lessons will stick with me indefinitely.

In reflection, my experience of crashing and burning at my first job provided me with some much-needed personal growth and resilience. I have learned the importance of self-awareness and the need for accommodations that allow individuals to thrive in their work environments. My physical environment at the office had partially contributed to the burnout I experienced. I spent 8–10 hours per day in a cold, noisy, open-office plan that lacked natural lighting and sound barriers. I commuted for about 2 hours each day on a city bus with an unpredictable schedule. I wore uncomfortable business-casual attire and blister-inducing high heels because that is what was expected of me. In 2016, working from home was not even a possibility. At the time, I didn't realize how deeply these sensory stressors were affecting my ability to focus on my work. I was already burned out just from physically showing up to the office.

Knowing what I know now, I can clearly see why my experience played out the way it did, and what accommodations would have made a difference. I could have benefited from a career coach to help me navigate the interpersonal relationships and group dynamics of the workplace. I've always had the ability to learn new things, but I haven't always accounted for my unique style of learning. Perhaps I struggled to learn the data models because I didn't have a solid understanding of the way my brain processes information and

approaching it in a different way might have made a big difference in the outcome. I also would have benefited from getting into therapy long before the burnout set in. Most recently, I have learned how important it is to mitigate burnout through intentional self-care and work–life balance. If I could do things differently, I would have given more consideration to my overall emotional well-being, rather than diving into the corporate world alone and unprepared.

The pursuit of neurodiversity inclusion rests upon the shoulders of us all. Employers bear a portion of the responsibility, as they must actively listen to our needs and foster an inclusive culture within their organizations. Simultaneously, my fellow neurospicy friends, it is incumbent upon us to take charge of designing our own accommodations and advocating for ourselves. Together, we can pave the way toward a more inclusive and supportive environment for all.

In reflection, my journey from crashing and burning at my first job to becoming a passionate advocate for neurodiversity has been one of personal growth and resilience. I have learned the importance of self-awareness and the need for accommodations that allow individuals to thrive in their work environments. It is a shared responsibility, with employers needing to listen and create inclusive cultures, and individuals embracing their unique strengths and advocating for themselves. As I continue on my mission to bridge the gap between neurodiverse individuals and organizations, I am fueled by the belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to pursue a fulfilling career in an environment that celebrates diversity and enables individuals to reach their full potential.

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