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Cluster Approach to the Development of Identity (CADI)**

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**Fostering sustainable career narratives with neurodivergent clients: Introducing the  
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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** This essay demonstrates how the Cluster Approach to the Development of Identity (CADI) can support career practitioners in fostering sustainable career narratives with neurodivergent clients.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A qualitative methodology was employed, combining autoethnographic reflections as a neurodivergent framework developer with a detailed case study of a practitioner supporting a neurodivergent client. The approach undertaken aligns with the *nothing about us, without us* (also referred to as *nothing without us*) principle, supporting a growing recognition that listening to and incorporating neurodivergent perspectives is essential in developing effective career development practices.

**Findings:** The CADI approach can enrich career development by enabling neurodivergent clients to: (1) identify sustainable ways of working that align with their preferences and capabilities; (2) challenge limiting stereotypes through a structured exploration of work environments and values; and (3) develop adaptable career narratives.

**Originality:** This essay draws on a combination of practitioner insights and the author's lived experience to offer a unique perspective on delivering neurodiversity-affirming career development for enabling neurodivergent clients to thrive within and contribute to an inclusive and sustainable career ecosystem.

**Practical Implications:** Career development practitioners gain specific insights into using the CADI framework to support neurodivergent clients toward career exploration and the

construction of meaningful career narratives. In doing so, practitioners can move beyond interest-matching to consider work preferences, environments, and values in supporting sustainable career development.

**Keywords:** Cluster Approach to the Development of Identity (CADI), neurodiversity, career development, sustainable careers, career narrative, neurodiversity-affirming practice

**Article Classification:** Practitioner Insights

## **Setting the Scene**

Career development practitioners increasingly recognise the need for inclusive ways to support all their clients to prepare for and experience sustainable careers. While Donald (2024) has discussed the notion of academia as an exclusionary career ecosystem threatening the career sustainability of disabled scholars, practical strategies for delivering inclusive career development remain underrepresented in the literature. Of particular interest, and the focus of this essay, is support for neurodivergent individuals, who account for an estimated 15-20% of the global population, yet face more barriers to participation in work than neurotypical individuals (Doyle, 2020).

As a neurodivergent practitioner, in developing the Cluster Approach to the Development of Identity (CADI; <https://thecareerclusters.com/>), I join a growing number of neurodivergent individuals who are ‘cutting our own keys’ (Bertilsson Rosqvist *et al.*, 2023), by creating tools and approaches that reflect our lived experience. CADI is a practical framework, designed to assist career practitioners in supporting neurodivergent clients to identify sustainable career pathways and authentic ways of working. In doing so, it aligns with sustainable career theory and career ecosystem theory (Donald *et al.*, 2024a), which emphasise the interplay between individual capabilities, organisational contexts, and broader societal factors in career sustainability. By equipping practitioners with tools to help individuals identify and articulate their authentic ways of working, CADI enables career practitioners to act as pivotal agents in fostering both individual career sustainability and the resilience of the wider career ecosystem. Since career sustainability depends on the dynamic interaction of personal, organisation, and societal influences, frameworks like CADI can play a crucial role in facilitating meaningful and lasting career development.

The CADI framework departs from an overemphasis on matching interests to occupations, as seen in traditional career development approaches, since such an approach can be particularly limiting for neurodivergent individuals who may find the work environment and its values more crucial to their success than interest alignment alone (Chapman, 2020). The CADI framework, encompassing six clusters (Table I), offers an alternative approach by focusing on how people prefer to work, considering factors like environment, communication styles, and value systems that particularly impact neurodivergent individuals' career sustainability (Sattler, 2024).

INSERT TABLE I HERE

This essay aims to demonstrate how the CADI framework can support career practitioners in fostering sustainable career narratives with neurodivergent clients. I consider how the CADI approach supports career development by enabling neurodivergent clients to: (1) identify sustainable ways of working that align with their preferences and capabilities; (2) challenge limiting stereotypes through a structured exploration of work environments and values; and (3) develop adaptable career narratives.

To illustrate how CADI supports neurodivergent clients, this essay follows Alex, an autistic individual whose journey challenges common assumptions about the careers of neurodivergent individuals. Alex's story demonstrates how encouraging individuals to focus on preferred ways of working, rather than specific occupations or interests, may lead to more sustainable career choices.

### **How CADI Facilitates Vocational Identity Development**

When supporting neurodivergent individuals, career development professionals often find that traditional career development approaches are inadequate because they fail to capture the individual's strengths and needs to support sustainable career development (Krzeminska *et al.*, 2019). As shown in the vignette below, a key strength of the CADI framework is that it helps individuals identify ways of working aligned with a range of occupational preferences and capabilities, by distinguishing between work preferences and specific occupations and interests. Like Alex, many neurodivergent people find that their career sustainability ultimately depends more on alignment with preferred ways of working than with recreational interests (Chapman, 2020).

*Alex began working with a Community Career Practitioner while in high school and, as part of this engagement, they expressed a deep interest in drones and electronics. Together with the Practitioner, Alex undertook work preparation and was supported in finding a job in a drone retail shop. After a few months, it became clear that this job wasn't meeting Alex's needs, and their Practitioner suggested exploring other options. Using the CADI framework as a tool showed Alex to fit within the Informer and Guardian Clusters. Their lack of fit within the Innovator Cluster seemed at odds with their technological interests. More exploration was needed.*

As individuals use their Cluster to describe the types of work that may suit them, as Alex did, they begin to reconceptualise what may be possible and challenge internalised assumptions. Rather than focusing on specific occupations or traditional interest matching, the framework helps clients to identify a distinct cluster(s) based on their preferred ways of working (from the six clusters shown in Table I). These new insights help the Practitioner to guide their client toward constructing a

suitable career narrative and vocational identity (LaPointe, 2010), advancing theoretical discussions around re-framing sustainable careers (Donald *et al.*, 2024b).

### **Developing Adaptable and Sustainable Career Narratives**

Building a comprehensive career narrative, which considers more than just interest areas, is a neurodiversity-affirming way to position the individual as the expert of their career development (Lerner *et al.*, 2023), encouraging them to be the author of their own career (Savickas, 2020). As we see in the vignette below, neurodivergent individuals often face societal stereotypes and misconceptions about their capability's development (Krzeminska *et al.*, 2019).

*While Alex and their Practitioner were exploring alternative jobs, Alex shared that one of their teachers had remarked that autistic people 'aren't good communicators' and 'shouldn't work with other people'. These comments had made Alex reluctant to explore roles where they would encounter others, and they expressed this reluctance to the Practitioner. To challenge this assumption, the Practitioner used Alex's key Clusters to identify possible career alternatives, and Alex undertook a series of Informational Interviews and workplace visits, which led them to apply for a technology support job in an aged care facility.*

Despite having absorbed messages that autistic individuals 'shouldn't work with people', Alex's identification with the Informer cluster revealed natural strengths in sharing knowledge and supporting others, which influenced the development of Alex's self-efficacy (Lebrón-Cruz & Orvell, 2023).

*Alex expresses enjoyment in their work at the aged care facility because it is meaningful and satisfying. They are responsible for supporting residents to use their phones and other electrical*

*devices and have enrolled in a part-time vocational electronics course to further develop their skills. Alex enjoys working directly with the older people, while also expanding their knowledge in a key area of interest and now considers themselves an 'Informer'.*

In this example, the holistic approach, of CADI, contributed to the development of a sustainable career identity. Such an approach supports individuals (both neurodivergent and neurotypical) to prepare for and undertake multiple career transitions, and offers a range of benefits compared with traditional interventions designed for neurotypical people.

### **Benefits of CADI**

#### ***For Supporting Neurodiverse Individuals***

The six-cluster approach of the CADI framework offers several key benefits for neurodivergent clients. First, it supports the use of inclusive language to describe career preferences without being constrained by occupational stereotypes (Doyle, 2020). Second, it helps clarify seemingly contradictory aspects of identity – such as Alex’s technical interests, versus their people-focused work preferences – thus aligning with current insights into neurodivergent identity development (Chapman, 2020). Finally, it facilitates the creation of flexible career narratives that can adapt to changing circumstances while staying true to one’s core work preferences and values, thereby enhancing self-efficacy (Lebrón-Cruz & Orvell, 2023).

Unlike static occupational titles (such as ‘electrician’ or ‘lawyer’), the CADI framework offers a flexible way to support sustainable career development, as preferred ways of working often remain more stable across the career span than specific occupations (Sattler, 2024). The approach can help clients navigate multiple career transitions while maintaining core aspects of their work identity

(Savickas, 2020). For Alex, this approach supported their career progression while staying true to their strengths as an Informer and Guardian – roles that emphasise working with and supporting people.

### ***For Career Development Practice***

The implementation of the CADI framework can enhance career development practices when used appropriately. When combined with traditional interventions, such as workplace visits and informational interviews, CADI enriches career exploration by providing a structured language for reflecting on these experiences (Sattler, 2024). Additionally, the flexible vocabulary offered by the clusters within the CADI framework means that the practitioner can empower neurodivergent individuals to articulate their career paths in ways that reflect their unique perspectives and experiences. In Alex's case, the Practitioner was able to leverage their interests and strengths within the Informer and Guardian Clusters, helping them to identify viable career options, thus increasing the likelihood of a fulfilling and successful career experience. This neurodiversity-affirming approach helps clients to author career narratives that feel authentic, fostering genuine self-expression and agency – evidencing how the language we use profoundly shapes how we construct and understand our experiences (Savickas, 2020).

### ***For Organisations***

When employees understand and can articulate their work preferences and environmental needs, organisations are more likely to provide suitable workplace adjustments and career development opportunities that benefit both the individual and the organisation (Krzeminska *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, organisations may wish to consider the benefits of using the CADI framework to

support employees' career development, since benefits to career sustainability at the individual level can lead to organisational benefits through innovation and profitability (Donald *et al.*, 2024a).

### **Ethical and Other Important Considerations**

Career practitioners must carefully consider ethical considerations when supporting neurodivergent clients, particularly around client autonomy and systemic employment barriers. Alex's experience highlights key principles for ethical practice. While frameworks like CADI provide valuable structure, they should be one of several tools offered, and discussions with clients should occur to select the most appropriate approaches for them. Practitioners should challenge internalised stereotypes about neurodivergent capabilities in a supportive and respectful way, encouraging clients to identify their strengths across diverse areas, rather than narrowly focusing on interests (Chapman, 2020).

Recognising their own knowledge boundaries, practitioners should establish referral networks with disability employment services, vocational training providers, and workplace adjustment specialists for additional expertise (Krzeminska *et al.*, 2019). Most importantly, practitioners must respect client agency, offering guidance while ensuring clients retain control over their career decisions (Lerner *et al.*, 2023). The CADI framework should be used as a tool to foster neuroinclusive and affirming dialogues that guide individuals toward considering options and making informed decisions, rather than prescribing tasks and limiting the range of options available to individuals.

More broadly, other actors, particularly organisations, need to take responsibility for creating conditions that acknowledge and value neurodiversity as a natural human variation (Doyle, 2020), enabling both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals to flourish. For instance, offering

workplace adaptations like flexible work arrangements, sensory-friendly environments, and accessible communication practices (Doyle, 2020). Only by combining individual support with systemic change can we foster a sustainable and inclusive career ecosystem (Donald *et al.*, 2024a).

### **Concluding Remarks**

As demonstrated through Alex's journey, the CADI approach can enrich neurodiversity-affirming career development by enabling neurodivergent clients to: (1) identify sustainable ways of working that align with their preferences and capabilities (Sattler, 2024); (2) challenge limiting stereotypes through structured exploration of work environments and values (Chapman, 2020); and (3) develop adaptable career narratives (LaPointe, 2010). Moreover, the benefits of the CADI framework span individuals, career development professionals, and organisations, acknowledging these as three pivotal actors that influence the inclusiveness and sustainability of the career ecosystem (Donald *et al.*, 2024b).

Since its launch in 2022, over 38,000 people across forty-two countries on six continents have learned their CADI cluster(s). Future research could examine how the CADI framework can be integrated with other career tools to enhance its value for supporting neurodiverse and neurotypical individuals. Furthermore, while the CADI approach is mainly used in educational settings, its versatility and ability to help individuals understand and articulate work preferences means it may be applicable across the lifespan. For more information and to learn your career cluster, please visit [<https://thecareerclusters.com/>].

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**Table I: The Six Clusters**

| <b>Cluster</b> | <b>Definition</b>                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Maker          | Makers created and maintain the places where we live and work. They grow crops, build homes, repair vehicles, and keep the power on.                                                |
| Guardian       | Guardians protect our mental and physical wellbeing. They help us care for our health, and guard against illness or injury.                                                         |
| Linker         | Linkers help us find, choose, secure, and use things. They can help us with products and physical items, or with services and support we need.                                      |
| Informer       | Informers advise, teach, and guide us so we can manage our legal, social, and financial responsibilities, and participate in society.                                               |
| Coordinator    | Coordinators are the people who plan, prepare, and administer our events, systems and economy. They play a vital role in making sure everything runs smoothly.                      |
| Innovator      | Innovators design, engineer, and manufacture things we use in all areas of our lives, from the clothes we wear, to the food we eat, the homes we live in and the roads we drive on. |

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