

## **How ADHD and Mental Health Challenges Fuel Founder's Success**

*Nicola Thomas, Technical University of Denmark, Denmark*

Paul English, the co-founder of KAYAK, often describes how having Bipolar Disorder was a significant part of his start-up's \$2.1 billion success. "There are a number of ways that having Bipolar helps in being creative, I think," Paul recounts.

Paul English said this condition enabled him to spend all night coding and gave him the confidence to convince others of the genius of KAYAK.

Symptoms of Bipolar 2 can cause people to experience an elevated mood, decreased need for sleep, and unusually high energy and confidence. But even with these symptoms, Bipolar is normally associated with a range of negative consequences like unemployment, poor quality of life, and suicide. However, in start-ups, these symptoms could lead to an advantage, and Paul isn't the only founder that feels having a neurological difference gives him an edge.

"If someone told me you could be normal or you could continue to have your ADHD, I would take ADHD," says David Neeleman, founder of JetBlue Airways. "I can distill complicated facts and come up with simple solutions. My ADHD brain naturally searches for better ways of doing things."

Are Paul English and David Neelman outliers in leveraging their differences? Or can mental health challenges really give entrepreneurs an edge?

We sought answers by analyzing 5,452 start-ups in Denmark. Our paper, presented online at BCERC 2020, analyzed 16,000 founders during 2004-2013 and found:

- Start-ups founded by someone with a mental health condition did better than other start-ups
- Having a founder with a neurological difference (like ADHD) enhanced start-up performance in the long run

This is not to say having a mental health condition is without its challenges. There are significant challenges to overcome in dealing with these conditions as a founder. But, based on our initial results, we have found three core ways to help founders to reach their potential and leverage these conditions.

1. *Get Treatment*

We found that when a founder took medication their business outperformed start-ups with founders who were diagnosed but not taking medication. Put simply, don't be afraid your creativity will go with medical treatment: it won't.

2. *Rely on Your Team*

Our study found that compared to starting a business alone, being part of a start-up team leads to better performance.

3. *Don't be Afraid to be an Underdog*

With the right treatment and the support of others, being different can actually be an edge. So shake off any shame or self-doubt, and know that being an 'under-dog entrepreneur' can actually give you an edge.

We found that with the right conditions, facing these challenges can help founders to create coping mechanisms that can transform their struggles into an advantage.

While our initial research suggests these mental health and neurological conditions can become an asset for entrepreneurs, there are other factors we did not investigate which may give founders an advantage. For example, a founder with one of these conditions may take more risks, or better handle uncertainty. We are not suggesting that having neurological or mental health conditions makes life easier, or that the success of Paul English and founders like him was because of their mental health conditions.

But by seeking help and support you can leverage these conditions in your start-up journey. When Paul English told his psychiatrist he was worried he would lose his edge on medication, his psychiatrist replied "You are a more than average creative person, and it'll keep you stable, it will keep you running for a much longer time."

While it may be tempting to start your business alone, we discovered a positive relationship between team size and performance for founders with addiction and mental health conditions. Friends and teammates can help you tap into your assets. But, if you are starting your business alone, don't forget the support of your family - when entrepreneurs with ADHD have a long-term romantic partner, they achieve about 4 times better performance than those without a partner. As the old proverb says "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

**CONTACT:** Nicola Thomas; ntho@dtu.dk; Technical University of Denmark; Centrifugevej, Building 372, 2800 Kgs. Lyngby, Denmark.