# The Brain Economy is an Inclusive Economy

Harris Eyre

*Perspectives from a neuroscience policy strategist and migraineur.*

*Note: The below is adapted from Eyre's remarks at the European Federation of Neurological Association's Stronger Connected Workshop, in April 2024.*

For most of my life, I've lived with migraine with visual aura. Migraine with aura, also known as classic migraine, is a headache disorder that can cause sensory disturbances called auras before or during a migraine episode. Auras are usually visual, but can also be sensory, motor, or verbal disturbances. Visual auras are most common. I've dealt with trial-and-error medication attempts and triggers that aren't clear. This all led me to a career in medicine and neuroscience to explore the brain. I have faced workplaces that are understanding of my condition and workplaces that are stigma-laden. Fortunately, I now have a new medication that gives me relief, however, I understand this medication is not available in most countries and is very costly (fortunately covered by my insurance plan). Managing my migraines requires a comprehensive approach: a good workplace, advanced medication, insurance, and stigma reduction. This has led me into my career as a neuroscience policy strategist to architect a new 'system', a brain-positive economy. The brain-positive economy is one which has a goal to stop and reverse the loss of brain capital.

I was buoyed when the European Federation of Neurological Association (EFNA)'s Executive Director, Orla Galvin, recently noted empowering neurology patients and caregivers to live optimally is facilitated by an understanding and harnessing of the value of a brain-positive economy. Galvin went on to note that under the umbrella of brain capital, an economic asset integrating brain health and brain skills, neurology patients, caregivers, and patient organizations can mobilize and influence change to support research and innovation, access to therapeutics, and services and supports, ultimately improving the quality of life of those affected (patients and caregivers) and in turn serve as a foundation for benefits to healthcare systems and the employment sector.

The concept of the brain economy is deeply personal to me, not only as a professional in the field but also as a person living with migraine. My experiences have taught me that what some may view as a vulnerability can, in fact, be a source of strength and innovation. This is the essence of an inclusive brain economy, where the unique perspectives of individuals with brain health disorders are not just welcomed but seen as essential to our collective progress.

This week, The Brookings Institution published a roadmap titled '4 ways to make our economy brain healthy,' which underscores the urgency of integrating brain health into our economic policies. As we face slowing productivity and rising economic security concerns, the inclusion of people living with brain health disorders and their caregivers is not just a moral imperative but a strategic one. Brain disorders, including mental illness, neurologic conditions, and stroke, account for more than 15% of all health loss worldwide — more than either cardiovascular disease or cancer — at huge cost to healthcare systems and society, an analysis of data from a recent Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study shows. The McKinsey Health Institute recently noted that employers have considerable opportunities to improve employees' health through modifiable drivers such as social interaction, mindsets and beliefs, productive activity, stress, economic security, and sleep. They projected that investments like these could not only result in thriving workers, businesses, and societies but could also potentially create between $3.7 and $11.7 trillion in economic value.

To effectively integrate individuals living with brain health disorders and their caregivers into the modern economy, we must adopt a multifaceted strategy:

1. Promote Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Drawing on frameworks like those from the HKS and Center for BrainHealth's Brain Healthy Workplace project, RAND Corporation and Google Xi, we can create environments that value a wider range of cognitive talents, particularly in sectors like national security.
2. Foster Brain-Healthy Workplaces: Initiatives like the Business Collaborative for Brain Health, One Mind at Work, Migraine at Work and ECONA (the global center of excellence for entrepreneur mental wellness) are pioneering models for organizations to support brain health.
3. Economic Integration of Mental Wealth: The work I've done with Jo-An Occhipinti at The University of Sydney on Mental Wealth aims to integrate social production *and* economic production, recognizing the value of caregiving, civic participation, and the diverse talents and contributions of all individuals to the social fabric as essential to the prosperity of nations.
4. Policy Development: We need policies that support flexible work arrangements, provide accommodations, and foster an understanding of the value that neurodiverse individuals bring to the workforce. A brain health safety net for entrepreneurs is also key given they are vital to our economic dynamism and are often challenged by brain health conditions.
5. Education and Awareness: Increasing awareness among employers about the benefits of hiring individuals with brain health disorders is crucial. This can be achieved through targeted campaigns and educational programs.
6. Investment in Support Systems: Ensuring that caregivers have the resources they need to continue their invaluable work is essential for a sustainable brain economy.
7. Collaborative Networks: Encouraging partnerships between the public and private sectors to share best practices and resources will enhance the support for brain health in the economy.

As we look to the future, the brain economy stands as a beacon of inclusivity and resilience. By embracing the full spectrum of cognitive abilities and supporting those who care for individuals with brain health disorders, we can create a more robust and dynamic economy that benefits everyone.

The path to a brain-positive economic transition is clear. It requires commitment, collaboration, and a willingness to embrace the diverse talents of all individuals within an inclusive organizational and governance structure. The brain economy is not just an economy for the few; it is an economy for all, and it is within our reach. It's a new system within which we can all live and flourish.

How do you think we can make the brain economy more inclusive?

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