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# Building Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Workers Thrive

Issue Briefing | November 10, 2022



The Future Skills Centre – Centre des Compétences futures (FSC-CCF) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead.

The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada.

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# Contents

3

**Key Findings**

5

**Introduction**

6

**What Is Neurodiversity?**

7

**Increasing Accessibility for  
Neurodivergent Employees Is Crucial**

11

**Final Thoughts and Next Steps**

12

**Appendix A  
Methodology**

13

**Appendix B  
Bibliography**

# Key Findings

- Neurodivergent workers and managers express positive attitudes toward neurodiversity in the workplace. However, non-neurodivergent managers in particular would benefit from a strengthened understanding of the barriers that neurodivergent employees face.
- Half of neurodivergent employees surveyed feel that informing their employers about their neurodiversity status might limit their opportunities for career progression or have other negative repercussions.
- We identified three first steps for improving the workplace experience for neurodivergent Canadians:
  1. Increase transparency in the accommodation process of available supports.
  2. Implement company-wide neurodiversity awareness training.
  3. Offer more flexibility in work arrangements.





# Introduction

## Neurodiversity in Canadian workplaces benefits everyone.

Studies show that neurodivergent individuals demonstrate significant potential to be highly engaged and productive employees.<sup>1</sup> However, barriers to their employment persist. According to the most recent Canadian Survey on Disability, only 33 per cent of adults on the Autism spectrum reported being employed in 2017.<sup>2</sup> Further, even those who are employed tend to earn less than the national minimum hourly wage, endure extended periods of joblessness, and frequently shuffle between positions.<sup>3</sup>

Neurodivergent individuals experience barriers in accessing employment and often lack the supports and accommodations that facilitate career progression and access to leadership-track positions.

These barriers stem from an undervaluing of neurodivergent workers' strengths in the workplace, as well as biases against the way that neurodivergent individuals may present themselves and/or communicate with others during the interview process or within the work environment.

The unemployment and under-employment of neurodivergent Canadians can have negative repercussions not only for these individuals, but also for the Canadian economy. For example, the Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada estimates that the disproportionate unemployment and under-employment and lower workplace productivity of employees with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can cost the Canadian economy anywhere from \$6 billion to \$11 billion annually.<sup>4</sup> Increased support for neurodiversity in the workplace benefits everyone.



1 Dujay, "‘Autism Advantage’ to Neurodiverse Employees"; Moeller, Ott, and Russo, "Neurodiversity Can Be a Workplace Strength"; and Twaronite, "How Neurodiversity Is Driving Innovation."

2 Public Health Agency of Canada, "Autism Spectrum Disorder."

3 Ibid.

4 Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada, *Paying Attention to the Cost of ADHD*.

# What Is Neurodiversity?

Coined in 1998 by sociologist Judy Singer,<sup>5</sup> the term neurodiversity means that people naturally differ in terms of how they think, understand information, interact, and communicate with others.

Many different types of people fall under the neurodiversity umbrella, including those who identify with the Autism spectrum, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and Tourette syndrome, as well as certain mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

Source: Autism Awareness Australia, "In Conversation With Judy Singer."

<sup>5</sup> Autism Awareness Australia, "In Conversation With Judy Singer."

## Creating Workplaces That Work for Neurodivergent Employees

We explored strategies and best practices for reducing the economic and social costs associated with the low workplace engagement, employment, and productivity of neurodivergent employees in Canada. Through a comprehensive survey, we gathered perspectives from 171 neurodivergent Canadian employees and 139 managers (54 of whom also identified as neurodivergent).

We identified three key areas of focus for employers to improve the workplace experience for neurodivergent Canadians:

1. Increase transparency on available accommodations and accommodation processes.
2. Implement a company-wide training initiative on neurodiversity awareness.
3. Offer more flexibility in terms of work schedule and location.

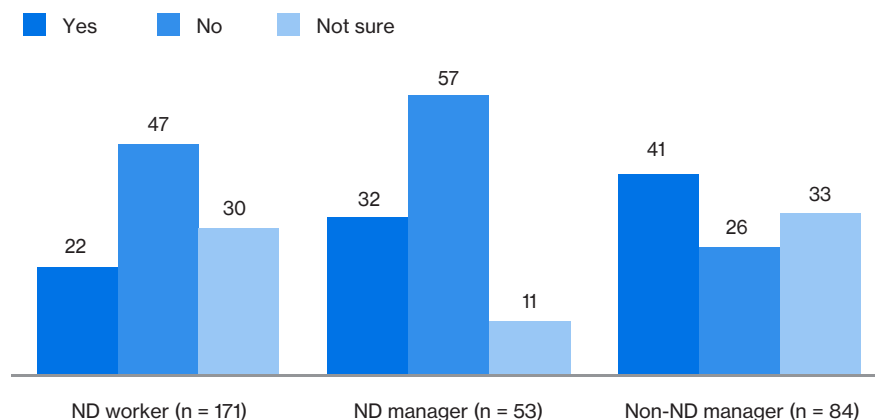
# Increasing Accessibility for Neurodivergent Employees Is Crucial

The majority of survey respondents displayed positive attitudes toward neurodiversity in the workplace. For example, both employees and managers, regardless of their neurodiversity status, largely agreed that neurodiversity is beneficial to the workplace, and over 90 per cent of all respondents agreed that neurodivergent employees should receive appropriate accommodations.<sup>6</sup> These positive attitudes lay a good foundation upon which more tangible supports for neurodivergent employees can be built. However, there's still room for improvement.

Although most respondents agreed that neurodivergent employees should be provided with workplace supports, few organizations currently offer them. Only 22 per cent of neurodivergent employees, 32 per cent of neurodivergent managers, and 40 per cent of non-neurodivergent managers surveyed stated that neurodivergent employees in their organization are provided with tools, training, and supports to assist them in their day-to-day work activities and/or communications with managers and co-workers (see Chart 1).

**Chart 1**

Are neurodivergent (ND) employees in your organization provided with any tools training or supports to assist them in their day-to-day work activities and/or communications with co-workers and managers?  
(per cent)



Note: All values rounded to the nearest whole number.  
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

<sup>6</sup> For example, 85 per cent of neurodivergent employees, 93 per cent of neurodivergent managers, and 75 per cent of non-neurodivergent managers either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "neurodiversity is beneficial to the workplace." Further, 94 per cent of neurodivergent employees, 94 per cent of neurodivergent managers, and 93 per cent of non-neurodivergent managers agreed with the statement that "neurodivergent employees should be provided with accommodations to assist them in their day-to-day work activities and/or communications with managers and co-workers."

These findings suggest that many organizations have the opportunity to create or enhance their accommodation practices and policies to better support neurodivergent workers.

Importantly, the specific accommodations required will vary from person to person, as each neurodivergent individual has their own set of needs. But even when accommodations are available, many neurodivergent employees find the accommodation process difficult to navigate, not always knowing whom to reach out to and what supports are available. Employers can use communication strategies to enhance the visibility of available accommodations and how neurodivergent employees can access them.

Finally, given the general lack of understanding about neurodiversity in the workplace, some neurodivergent individuals may be reluctant to even ask for accommodations for fear of negative repercussions. For example, half of neurodivergent employees surveyed indicated that they chose not to disclose their neurodiversity status to their employer as they felt it would limit their opportunities for career progression. Instilling a culture of awareness and understanding that enables neurodivergent employees to feel more comfortable seeking out accommodations is just as important as offering such accommodations.

## Fostering Inclusion Through a Strengthened Understanding of Neurodiversity

Supports for neurodiversity in the workplace may be limited because of a general lack of awareness about neurodiversity and the barriers that neurodivergent employees face. More than half of individuals surveyed had become aware of the term neurodiversity only within the past five years. We found that non-neurodivergent managers in particular lack a comprehensive understanding of the barriers that neurodivergent employees encounter.<sup>7</sup> Implementing the appropriate supports is difficult without a clear understanding of the many facets of neurodiversity. These findings highlight the need for more awareness training, particularly among managers.

More than 90 per cent of all respondents agreed that managers would benefit from tools, training, and supports to assist them in their day-to-day management of and communications with neurodivergent employees (see Chart 2). However, when asked whether managers in their organization are currently provided with any tools, training, or supports, over 80 per cent of all respondents either responded “no” or were unsure (see Chart 3). Without the appropriate knowledge or skills, managers may be ill equipped to provide neurodivergent employees with the understanding and support that they need to succeed in the workplace.

Providing opportunities for company-wide awareness training will help to foster a culture of inclusion that enables neurodivergent employees to feel more comfortable discussing with their managers what supports they need.

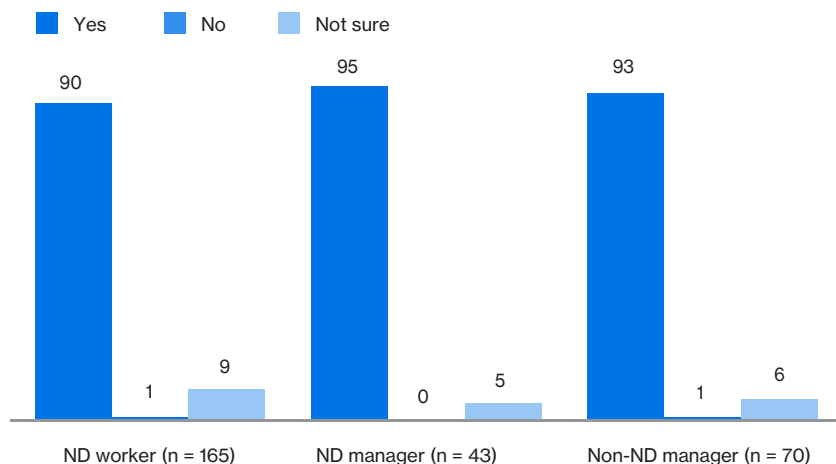
<sup>7</sup> For example, only 75 per cent of non-neurodivergent managers agreed with the statement that neurodivergent employees face challenges in the workplace, compared with over 90 per cent of neurodivergent employees and managers.



**Chart 2**

Do you think that managers of neurodivergent (ND) employees in your organization would benefit from any tools, training, or supports to assist them in their day-to-day management of and communications with neurodivergent employees?

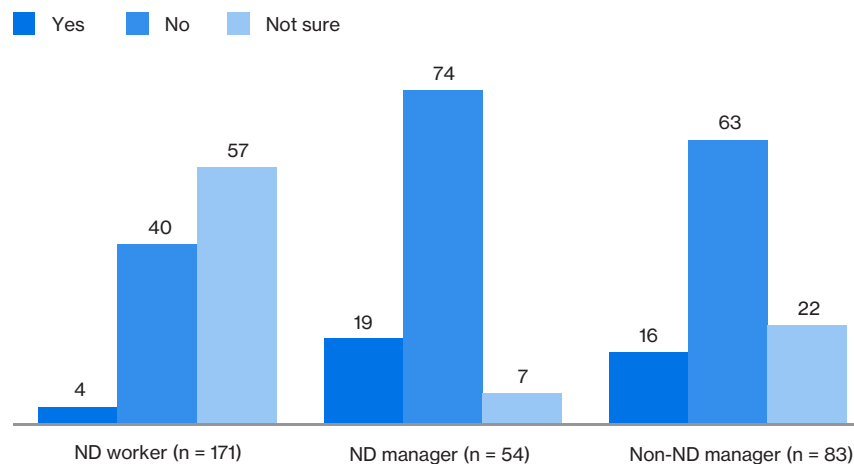
(per cent)



Note: All values rounded to the nearest whole number.  
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

**Chart 3**

Are managers of neurodivergent (ND) employees in your organization provided with any tools, training, or supports to assist them in their day-to-day management of and communications with neurodivergent employees? (per cent)



Note: All values rounded to the nearest whole number.  
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

“Instead of focusing on making neurodivergent people fit in to a neurotypical world, the focus should be on making the neurotypical world more inclusive of neurodivergent people.”

Anonymous survey respondent

## Leveraging Flexibility to Create Inclusive Workplaces

When asked about the types of workplace supports that might be helpful, many neurodivergent employees and managers emphasized the importance of offering flexibility in work location and scheduling. While employees in general may benefit from flexibility, neurodivergent individuals can especially benefit because they are more likely to be affected by office distractions like noise and social interactions that can lead to sensory overstimulation and limit productivity.



Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw a rapid transition to remote work, and many employees, both neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent, don't want to go back to the office full time. A 2021 study found that 59 per cent of knowledge workers wouldn't work for a company that required them to come to a physical office five days a week. Employees want the autonomy and flexibility associated with hybrid work.<sup>8</sup> Another study found that more than half of employees would quit or leave their job if they were not given the option for flexibility after pandemic-related public health measures were lifted. As well, 54 per cent want flexibility in relation to hours, and 40 per cent want flexibility in the location of their work.<sup>9</sup> Given this overwhelming demand, leaders should consider offering flexible work practices.

Organizations that implement hybrid working arrangements can reap the benefits of having a flexible, motivated, and higher-performing workforce—but only if they provide the right training and tools to support their employees. Leaders who can effectively communicate expectations and responsibilities to employees will help maintain a healthy company culture while allowing organizations to recruit, attract, and retain top talent. Both neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent employees have unique needs, with some preferring a quiet work area with minimal distractions and others preferring the camaraderie of working in an open-office environment. By giving individuals the flexibility to work when and where they feel most productive, organizations can create inclusive and accommodating work environments for all employees, especially those who are neurodivergent.

<sup>8</sup> Reisinger and Fetterer, "Forget Flexibility."

<sup>9</sup> Ernst & Young Global Ltd., "More Than Half of Employees Globally Would Quit."



# Final Thoughts and Next Steps

Critical first steps that employers can take to improve the workplace experience for neurodivergent employees include:

- better communicating how employees can access appropriate accommodations
- implementing company-wide awareness training
- providing more flexibility in work hours and location

By creating inclusive policies that allow neurodivergent individuals to retain meaningful employment, companies can benefit from this largely untapped pool of talented candidates.

The next stage of the research will build on these findings by analyzing interviews with neurodivergent employees and employers who have experience in managing and/or hiring neurodivergent individuals in Canada. These in-depth conversations will contextualize our survey findings and provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities that neurodivergent employees and their managers face, as well as the training and supports that they need to succeed. By supplementing our survey findings with deeper insights from those with experience with neurodiversity in the workplace, our goal is to provide Canadian employers with actionable steps toward becoming more inclusive of those who are neurodivergent.

## Appendix A

# Methodology

### Sample

This project was developed to better understand the experiences of neurodivergent Canadians in the workplace and the actions that employers can take to support them. As a first step, we conducted a comprehensive survey with 171 self-identified neurodivergent employees and/or job seekers and 139 managers (54 of whom also self-identified as neurodivergent). Of the 306 respondents who indicated their gender, 229 identified as women, 62 identified as men, and 13 identified as genderfluid, non-binary, Two-Spirit, or other. Of the 296 respondents who indicated their race, 247 identified as white, 15 identified as Asian, 12 identified as South Asian, 10 identified as multiracial, five identified as Indigenous, three identified as Black, three identified as Latine, and one identified as Arab.

### Survey

The survey was designed to better understand perspectives, attitudes, and ideas for supports for neurodiversity and was broken down into five sections:

1. Knowledge and awareness of neurodiversity
2. Attitudes and perceptions of neurodiversity in the workplace
3. Organizational neurodiversity inclusion initiatives
4. Tools, training, and supports for neurodiversity in the workplace
5. Demographic questions

### Analysis

Data were cleaned and analyzed using SPSS. For quantitative data, we calculated the frequency of responses across different response options and compared across the following three groups: neurodivergent employees, neurodivergent managers, and non-neurodivergent managers. For open-ended qualitative responses, we pulled out main themes according to how frequently they were noted by respondents.



## Appendix B

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Jane Hutchison and Beth Robertson

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