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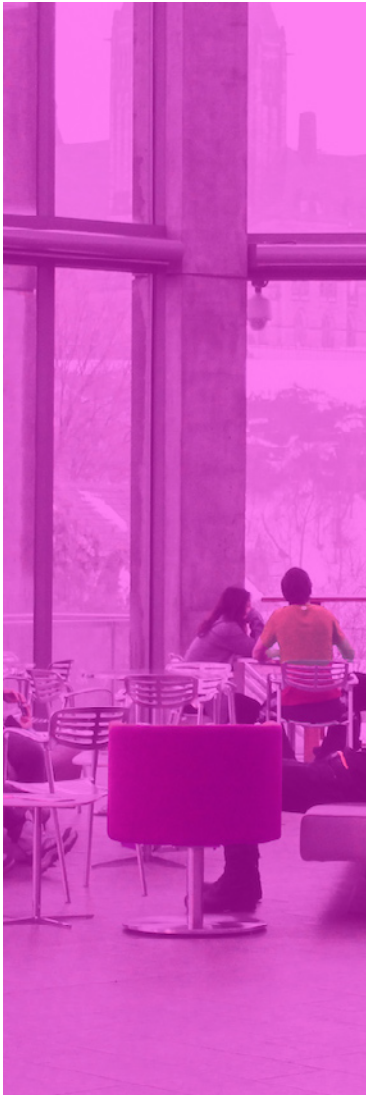
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# Breaking Down Barriers

Improving the Workplace Experience for  
Neurodivergent Canadians





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

4

**Key Findings**

5

**Introduction**

7

**Barriers to Employment and  
Career Progression**

10

**Fostering Neurodiversity Inclusion  
in the Workplace**

13

**Employer Perspectives: Advantages  
of a Neurodiverse Workplace**

15

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

16

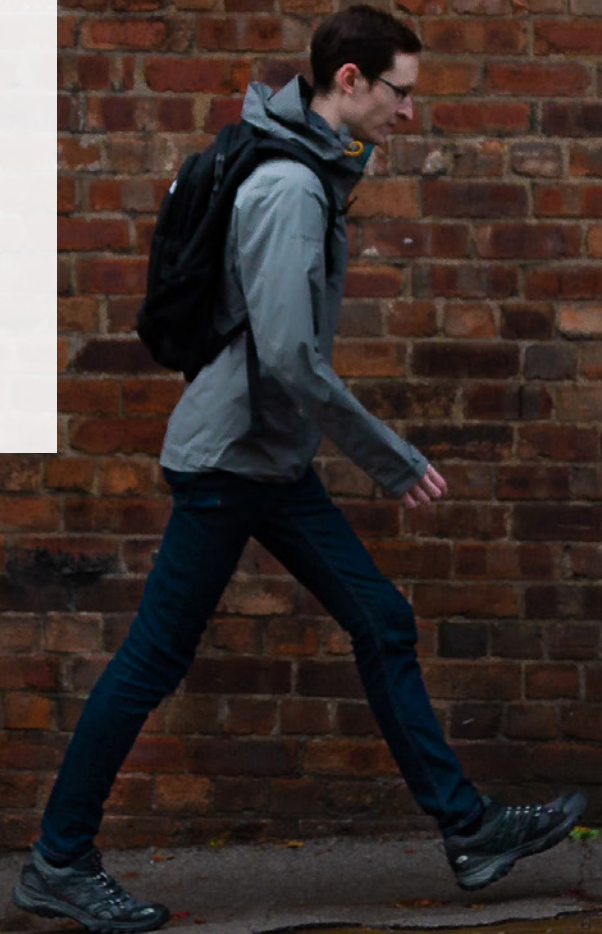
**Appendix A  
Methodology**

17

**Appendix B  
Bibliography**

## Key Findings

- Neurodivergent workers face many barriers to employment and career progression. Chief among these barriers is a lack of awareness and understanding about neurodiversity, as well as associated stigma and bias. The majority of neurodivergent workers and employers in our interviews mentioned a lack of awareness as the most frequent workplace challenge that neurodivergent employees face.
- Other common barriers include facing difficulties obtaining required accommodations, receiving unclear or ambiguous communication from managers and co-workers, having to mask behaviours to meet social norms, and feeling uncomfortable disclosing or unable to disclose their neurodiversity status.
- To help reduce these barriers and create workplaces where neurodivergent workers thrive, employers can implement company-wide awareness training on neurodiversity, alternative hiring processes, improved accommodation processes, a people-first management style, and a sense of community for neurodivergent workers.
- Employers who have already implemented neurodiversity inclusion initiatives cite improved company culture and morale, more diverse perspectives, increased retention, better managers, and more diverse talents and skills.
- Putting in place supports for neurodiversity in the workplace can be easy, inexpensive, and beneficial for all employees, not just those who are neurodivergent.



# Introduction

Canadian companies have a lot to gain from embracing neurodiversity in the workplace. Yet neurodivergent Canadians continue to face barriers to employment and career progression.



Neurodivergent employees offer many advantages to organizations.<sup>1</sup> Employers who have embraced neurodiversity report few challenges and many benefits, including improved communication, innovation, and company morale.<sup>2</sup> When teams are diverse, their members bring together different perspectives and strengths to achieve goals more effectively.<sup>3</sup> Neurodivergent individuals contribute to this diversity and make teams stronger. Creating a work environment where all individuals, regardless of their neurodiversity status, feel comfortable to participate and bring their authentic selves to work is clearly advantageous.

Despite the many benefits of a neurodiverse workplace, neurodivergent individuals encounter barriers to employment and career progression. For example, only 33 per cent of adults on the Autism spectrum were employed in 2017, compared with 79 per cent of adults with no disability.<sup>4</sup>

The unemployment and under-employment of neurodivergent Canadians might be partially due to an undervaluing of strengths, 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.

1 Austin and Pisano, "Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage"; Dujay, "'Autism Advantage' to Neurodiverse Employees"; Moeller, Ott, and Russo, "Neurodiversity Can Be a Workplace Strength"; and Twaronite, "How Neurodiversity Is Driving Innovation."

2 Ibid.

3 Hewlett, Marshall, and Sherbin, "How Diversity Can Drive Innovation"; and Levine and Thought Leaders, "Diversity Confirmed to Boost Innovation."

4 Public Health Agency of Canada, "Infographic: Autism Spectrum Disorder."

These biases likely stem from a lack of awareness about what neurodiversity is and how it manifests in the workplace. With many Canadian companies experiencing significant labour shortages,<sup>5</sup> employers can benefit from implementing practices and policies aimed at diversifying the workforce. Broadening recruitment and retention efforts to expand the talent pool to include those who have been historically unemployed or under-employed, such as neurodivergent individuals, will be crucial in addressing labour shortages.

Although many companies highlight the importance of inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility (IDEA), participants in our interviews indicated that these efforts rarely include neurodivergent people. Given that “neurodiversity” is a relatively new concept (though neurodivergent individuals and ways of thinking themselves aren’t new), there can be lack of understanding and support in the workplace for neurodivergent employees.<sup>6</sup> Many employers might not know where to begin or how to create neuroinclusive workplaces.

Through an online survey and a series of 40 one-on-one interviews (with 25 neurodivergent workers and 15 employers of neurodivergent workers; see Appendix A for a detailed methodology), this research explores best practices for building and supporting a neurodiverse workforce. We aim to improve understanding of what neurodiversity in the workplace means and to provide an opportunity for employers to re-evaluate whether their current IDEA policies and practices reflect the needs and perspectives of neurodivergent employees. This research also allows organizations to consider a strengths-based approach to workforce development—one that recognizes and champions the many ways that people’s brains process and interpret the world around them and re-evaluates existing systems and structures as barriers to inclusion and accessibility.



## What Is Neurodiversity?

The term *neurodiversity* was coined in 1998 by sociologist Judy Singer and refers to neurological variations in how some people naturally think, understand information, interact, and communicate with others. Many different types of people fall under the neurodiversity umbrella, including those who identify with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyscalculia, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and Tourette syndrome as well as certain mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).<sup>7</sup> Given that neurodiversity encompasses many different types of conditions, not all neurodivergent individuals will present in the same way or have the same support needs.

<sup>7</sup> Autism Awareness Australia, “In Conversation With Judy Singer.”

<sup>5</sup> For example, C.D. Howe Institute, “Canada Faces a Serious Shortage in Digital and STEM Skills”; Statistics Canada, “Survey of Employers on Workers’ Skills, 2021”; and Saba, “Canada’s Economy Lost Nearly \$13B.”

<sup>6</sup> Participant interviews.



# Barriers to Employment and Career Progression

## Lack of Awareness and Understanding

The vast majority of neurodivergent workers and employers we interviewed cited a lack of awareness and understanding as the most important workplace issue that neurodivergent individuals face today.

This limited awareness and understanding acts as a significant barrier to neurodivergent employees as it allows unfounded biases about neurodiversity to persist. For example, many neurodivergent individuals prefer not to make eye contact while conversing with others. During a job interview, an employer with limited understanding of neurodiversity may assume that the lack of eye contact is “unprofessional” and bypass an otherwise highly qualified candidate. As another example, a neurodivergent employee with a direct communication style, or one who prefers not to socialize with their co-workers, may be perceived as “rude” or “unsociable,” which could result in their being overlooked for promotions or other workplace opportunities despite their skills and experience. Biases related to the way that neurodivergent workers may present themselves and/or communicate in the workplace can limit opportunities for employment and career advancement and cause employers to lose out on skilled and qualified talent.

This general lack of awareness and understanding could contribute to the many other barriers that neurodivergent employees experience in the workplace, including limited supports and accommodations, communication challenges with managers and co-workers, the need to mask behaviours to meet social norms and expectations, and the fear of disclosure. Without first increasing awareness and understanding of neurodiversity in the workplace, neurodivergent employees may continue to feel stigmatized, undervalued, isolated, and limited in their opportunities for employment and workplace advancement.

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“I think that people’s lack of understanding of what neurodiversity is leads to their formulation of assumptions, which means that they will automatically write you off from something rather than looking at the opportunity and thinking about ways that that opportunity could be modified.”

**Neurodivergent worker**

## Accessing Appropriate Accommodations

Many interview participants highlighted a lack of support and a daunting and/or rigid accommodation process as significant barriers for neurodivergent individuals in the workplace. This finding is further supported by our survey data, in which only 22 per cent of neurodivergent employees reported that their organization provides tools, training, or supports to assist them in their day-to-day work activities and/or communications with managers and co-workers.<sup>8</sup>

Interview participants noted that accommodations in the workplace are typically geared toward workers with physical disabilities and that employees with less-visible disabilities that typically fall under the neurodiversity umbrella have fewer opportunities to formally request supports. For instance, some employers require an official medical diagnosis before providing accommodations. This poses a major barrier to neurodivergent workers, as receiving a neurodiversity diagnosis in Canada is prohibitively difficult. For example, the wait time to receive an adult ADHD diagnosis in many parts of Canada can be longer than one year and can carry many out-of-pocket expenses.<sup>9</sup> Many Canadians with ADHD and other neurodiverse conditions might not have the time or money to navigate the process of obtaining an official diagnosis, therefore limiting their access to accommodations. Even without an official diagnosis, many employees who self-identify as neurodivergent would still benefit from workplace supports.

The specific types of accommodations and supports required will depend on the person, as each neurodivergent individual is unique. Interview participants suggested that workplaces should provide more opportunities for neurodivergent workers to voice their specific needs and more openness and flexibility in the accommodation process to meet these needs. Providing accommodations that allow neurodivergent workers to do their best work benefits not only the individual, but the employer as well.<sup>10</sup>



“It’s a lot harder when [a disability is] not visible to get accommodations, or even to understand what accommodations you would need.”

**Neurodivergent worker**

## Communication Challenges

Many neurodivergent workers and employers of neurodivergent workers we interviewed indicated that neurodivergent workers would benefit from improved communication in the workplace. Interview participants suggested that workplace communication should be clear, direct, and free of ambiguity, sarcasm, and colloquialisms. When managers provide vague or inconsistent feedback and aren’t clear about their expectations, neurodivergent workers find it particularly challenging to determine what they’re expected to do.

Neurodivergent workers can also have different communication styles than their neurotypical colleagues, which can contribute to miscommunications and misunderstandings at work. For example, many neurodivergent individuals tend to be literal and can sometimes misunderstand others’ intentions. According to those we spoke with, common workplace phrases—such as *take the bull by the horns*, *go by the book*, *my hands are tied*, and *learn the ropes*—should be avoided. Interview participants suggested that managers and co-workers of neurodivergent workers should instead try to communicate as plainly as possible by simply saying what they really mean.

<sup>8</sup> Hutchison and Robertson, *Building Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Workers Thrive*.

<sup>9</sup> Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada, *ADHD: A Significant Health Risk*; and Drolet, “Adults Have ADHD.”

<sup>10</sup> Solovieva, Dowler, and Walls, “Employer Benefits from Making Workplace Accommodations.”



While honesty in the workplace is a valuable trait, many neurodivergent individuals tend to be starkly honest and up front. Their feedback can sometimes be perceived as negative, rude, or hurtful to others. The solution isn't for neurodivergent workers to be less truthful but for neurotypical workers and managers to better understand neurodivergent communication styles and appreciate how these differences can be an asset to the team. For instance, more direct and honest communication in the workplace can help teams to avoid miscommunications and to complete projects more efficiently.

“The first word that comes to mind is communication, miscommunication, misunderstanding on different points of reference. The challenge is speaking from another point of view than what is common.”

**Neurodivergent worker**

## Social Norms and Masking

Interview participants suggested that current workplace systems and cultures weren't built with neurodivergent individuals in mind. As a result, many neurodivergent individuals feel that they can't be their authentic selves at work.<sup>11</sup> Some interview participants cited issues related to social norms and having to mask to meet those social norms as a significant barrier that neurodivergent workers face in the traditional workplace.

Masking occurs when a neurodivergent individual feels that they must suppress their natural behaviours and tendencies to fit in with what's expected in the workplace.<sup>12</sup> For example, while traits such as organization and productivity are highly valued in the workplace, without the right supports, some neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with ADHD, may struggle to stay on task and get the job done. These individuals may have to put in extra effort and hours behind the scenes to maintain the appearance that they're keeping up. The time and

emotional costs associated with masking can be incredibly damaging to an individual's workplace productivity and well-being.<sup>13</sup> Given the limited understanding and acceptance of neurodiversity in the workplace, neurodivergent individuals may choose to continue to mask, rather than being up front with their employer about their need for support, for fear of negative repercussions.<sup>14</sup>

“I think there is inherent value in having a very specific type of interaction and very specific types of relationships within the workplace and it puts neurodivergent individuals in a position of having to grin and bear it and adapt and mask, which can be incredibly draining for a lot of people.”

**Neurodivergent worker**

## Fear of Disclosure

A few interview participants highlighted the fear of disclosure as a significant barrier in the workplace. Additionally, half of neurodivergent employees we surveyed felt that informing their employers about their neurodiversity status might limit their opportunities for career progression or have other negative repercussions, such as being viewed differently in the workplace.<sup>15</sup> Together, these findings suggest that many neurodivergent employees don't feel comfortable sharing their neurodiversity status in the workplace. Those we spoke with suggested that while disclosing is a personal decision, neurodivergent workers deserve a workplace environment in which they feel comfortable about whatever choice they make.

“[Neurodivergent workers] don't want to disclose because it puts them in a vulnerable position. And I can speak from my own experience as well, that in disclosing things, it's been weaponized against me and used in order to not allow me the same opportunities as other people in the workplace.”

**Neurodivergent worker**

<sup>11</sup> Participant interviews.

<sup>12</sup> Sivayoganathan, “The Reality of Masking.”

<sup>13</sup> Participant interviews.

<sup>14</sup> Hutchison and Robertson, *Building Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Workers Thrive*.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



# Fostering Neurodiversity Inclusion in the Workplace

## Start With Awareness Training

When we asked interview participants about how to improve the workplace experience for neurodivergent employees, the most popular response was awareness training in the workplace. The concept of “neurodiversity” has only recently begun to gain traction in the workplace, and the term is still relatively new to many. More than half of the workers and employers (both neurodivergent and neurotypical) we surveyed had become aware of the term only within the past five years.<sup>16</sup> Employers have an opportunity to take the first step in becoming more inclusive of neurodivergent workers by incorporating more awareness training into the workplace.

Neurodivergent workers, as well employers with experience hiring or managing them, suggested that this type of awareness training should be company-wide and provided on an ongoing basis. They also suggested that neurodiversity awareness training should provide managers and co-workers with the opportunity to dig deeply into what neurodiversity is, to understand the benefits of a neurodiverse workplace and the barriers that neurodivergent workers face, and to develop strategies for becoming more inclusive of neurodivergent employees.

Importantly, those we interviewed suggested that neurodiversity awareness training should be delivered by those with experience, either lived or professional. For example, when starting out with their neurodiversity initiatives, many of the employers we interviewed had partnered with external organizations, such as Specialisterne Canada and Orbital Learning, that have expertise in employing neurodivergent workers. These types of organizations often provide company-wide awareness training as well as hiring and job-coaching support.

Partnering with experts to raise more awareness and understanding for neurodiversity in the workplace is a critical first step in breaking down the many barriers that neurodivergent workers face.

## Find Alternatives to Traditional Hiring Processes

Existing hiring processes and systems weren’t built with neurodivergent individuals in mind.<sup>17</sup> The traditional hiring process often doesn’t allow neurodivergent people to accurately showcase their skills and demonstrate why they’re a good fit for the job.<sup>18</sup> Because of biases related to the way that neurodivergent individuals may present themselves

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Participant interviews.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

and/or communicate with others during the interview process, neurodivergent candidates are often overlooked.<sup>19</sup> For these reasons, many of the neurodivergent workers and employers of neurodivergent workers we interviewed highlighted the importance of providing alternatives to the traditional hiring process.

Ways for employers to make their hiring process more inclusive of neurodivergent candidates include:

- providing interview questions in advance;
- providing multiple options for participating in an interview when appropriate (e.g., in person, virtually, over the phone, over e-mail);
- avoiding abstract and/or behavioural questions (e.g., “If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?”);
- focusing on a skills match rather than a personality match;
- providing job seekers with hands-on opportunities to demonstrate their skills;
- writing clear, skills-based job postings that avoid ambiguous language such as “good culture fit.”

Almost all of the employers we interviewed who have experience hiring or managing neurodivergent employees have begun to implement these changes to their hiring processes with remarkable success. By incorporating these changes, employers can demonstrate to applicants that their organization is inclusive and potentially attract more applicants, including neurodivergent talent.



<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Drolet, “Adults Have ADHD.”

## Develop Flexible Accommodation Processes

The majority of interview participants indicated that neurodivergent workers would benefit from more open and flexible accommodations processes. Given the many barriers to diagnosis in Canada,<sup>20</sup> employers might want to consider allowing self-identified neurodivergent workers without a formal diagnosis to pursue accommodations when needed. According to those we interviewed, employers can also make the accommodation process easier for neurodivergent employees by taking the onus off the individual and being clear about what supports are available and how to access them.

Employers that have already implemented neurodiversity inclusion initiatives have all created an easy-to-navigate accommodation process available to all employees, regardless of their neurodiversity status. For example, a widespread practice among these companies is to provide all new hires with a checklist of available supports from which they can choose. Doing so allows for both neurodivergent and neurotypical workers to immediately identify and access the supports they need without having to navigate a complex or onerous accommodation process. Frequently, accommodations involve only small, informal changes to how an employee performs their work. As well, many of the supports that benefit neurodivergent workers are inexpensive and easy to implement. For example, neurodivergent workers and their employers mentioned that the most frequently requested accommodations include:

- flexibility in terms of work location and schedule;
- access to a private office if required to work on-site to minimize distractions;
- noise-cancelling headphones to minimize distractions;
- assistive technology;
- soft lighting;
- alternative communication methods (e.g., e-mail, direct message) when appropriate.

The specific accommodation requested will depend on the unique needs of the individual. By offering flexibility and openness to understanding neurodivergent workers' needs, employers can create an environment where all workers, regardless of their neurodiversity status, can thrive.

## Build Trust: People-First Management

A large share of interview participants noted that to support neurodivergent workers, managers should be kind and compassionate and put people first. Fear of negative repercussions is a major barrier to disclosure.<sup>21</sup> By creating a trusting employee–manager relationship, neurodivergent workers may feel more comfortable talking openly about their neurodiversity status with their manager and accessing the supports that they need.

A people-first manager prioritizes the overall well-being of their employees, not just their employees' productivity.<sup>22</sup> Not only is this type of management beneficial for neurodivergent workers, but it can also have positive impacts for the whole team. Employees who feel valued and seen by their managers tend to lead happier lives, perform better at work, and be more likely to stay at their current organization.<sup>23</sup>

To put people first and improve the workplace experience for both neurodivergent and neurotypical employees, managers can take steps such as:

- offering regular check-ins that allow employees to express their thoughts, concerns, and need for support;
- being flexible and allowing employees to work from home (if applicable) or take time off when needed;
- celebrating successes such as promotions or positive job performance;

- providing a reasonable workload and actively ensuring that employees don't burn out;<sup>24</sup>
- advocating on behalf of their employees in terms of accessing supports, promotions, and other workplace opportunities.

By adopting a people-first leadership style and forming trusting relationships with employees, managers can create a supportive environment that allows neurodivergent (and neurotypical) employees to thrive.

## Foster Community Through a Neurodivergent Employee Resource Group

Some neurodivergent interview participants noted that being neurodivergent in the workplace can feel isolating and that they would benefit from having a community with whom they can openly share their struggles and seek advice and support. One way for employers to create a stronger sense of community among neurodivergent workers is to implement an employee resource group (ERG) that focuses on the experience of being neurodivergent in the workplace.

ERGs are a critical part of any IDEA initiative as they provide a safe place for members of equity-deserving groups to share their thoughts and concerns.<sup>25</sup> ERGs allow employees to advocate for themselves and can help them feel more confident and engaged in their work.<sup>26</sup> Creating an ERG for neurodivergent workers can help to raise more awareness about neurodiversity and help neurodivergent workers feel more engaged and supported in the workplace.

21 Hutchison and Robertson, *Building Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Workers Thrive*.

22 Hougaard, "The Power of Putting People First"; and Rogers, "Do Your Employees Feel Respected?"

23 Ibid.

24 According to the World Health Organization, burnout is described as "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed." It's characterized by "feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy": World Health Organization, "Burn-Out an 'Occupational Phenomenon.'"

25 Janes, "Back to Basics on Employee Resource Groups."

26 Ibid.



# Employer Perspectives: Advantages of a Neurodiverse Workplace

Employers have overwhelmingly positive feedback to share about neurodiversity in the workplace.

Employers who have already implemented neurodiversity inclusion initiatives report many benefits and very few costs. According to those we interviewed, employers who embrace neurodiversity in the workplace see a boost to company culture and morale, more diverse perspectives, improved retention, better managers, and above-average talent and skills. Many of these benefits have also been reported in previous studies on neurodiversity in the workplace.<sup>27</sup> Incorporating more supports for neurodiversity in the workplace is beneficial not only for neurodivergent employees, but for the entire organization.

## Boosting Company Culture and Morale

The majority of employers that we interviewed stated that since providing more supports for neurodiversity in the workplace, their companies have seen a boost in company culture and morale.

By incorporating more awareness training for neurodiversity in the workplace, co-workers and managers may become more accepting of differences in personality, communication, and working styles and come to understand that these differences are an asset. Creating a culture of inclusivity allows all employees to bring their authentic selves to work and feel more engaged and satisfied in their jobs.<sup>28</sup>

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“We’ve ... found that neurodivergent employees on a team bring the team closer together, because of a variety of things like increased awareness and understanding and empathy of differences, but also the clearer communication that the manager, leadership, and teams tend to apply when a neurodivergent person joins their team.”

**Employer of neurodivergent workers**

<sup>27</sup> Austin and Pisano, “Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage”; Dujay, “‘Autism Advantage’ to Neurodiverse Employees”; Moeller, Ott, and Russo, “Neurodiversity Can Be a Workplace Strength”; and Twaronite, “How Neurodiversity Is Driving Innovation From Unexpected Places.”

<sup>28</sup> Brimhall and others, “Workgroup Inclusion Is Key for Improving Job Satisfaction”; and Wronski, “CNBC|SurveyMonkey Workforce Happiness Index.”

## Bringing Diverse Perspectives to the Table

Some of the employers we interviewed indicated that neurodiversity is beneficial because neurodivergent workers bring new perspectives and new ways of thinking to a team. Diverse perspectives are essential for innovation and growth.<sup>29</sup> Teams that are diverse can use their members' unique experiences and perspectives to find creative solutions to complex problems.

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"[Neurodivergent workers] can offer an ability to think about problems in unique ways and bring new perspectives to the table that then, ultimately, drive new ideas and innovation."

**Employer of neurodivergent workers**

## Fostering Retention

A large share of the employers we interviewed reported that creating a culture of inclusivity and support benefits retention. When employees feel valued and supported by their employer, they're more likely to stay at that company.<sup>30</sup> As labour shortages are at an all-time high and Canadian companies are struggling to recruit and retain skilled talent,<sup>31</sup> implementing policies to recruit and support neurodivergent individuals can help to fill and/or avoid skills gaps.

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"Retention, definitely retention [is a benefit of neurodiversity in the workplace]. Really great employees that know that you're backing them up and you'll do whatever you need to do to support them. And we get that loyalty and support back from individuals. So, I'd say retention is probably the biggest piece."

**Employer of neurodivergent workers**



## Improving Manager–Employee Relations

Some employers noted that neurodiversity training among leadership is beneficial because it improves the manager–employee relationship for all employees, regardless of their neurodiversity status. Managers who undergo awareness and management training for neurodiversity are more empathetic and understanding toward employee needs, and this empathy and understanding usually extends to neurotypical workers as well.

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"We know from research [that] what's inclusive to those that are [neurodivergent] is going to be inclusive for everyone, so we've seen education and learning opportunities for our leaders actually enhance their ability to be great leaders in general, not just for those that may be on the spectrum. So, I would say that's honestly probably one of the biggest things."

**Employer of neurodivergent workers**

29 Hewlett, Marshall, and Sherbin, "How Diversity Can Drive Innovation"; and Levine and Thought Leaders, "Diversity Confirmed to Boost Innovation."

30 Hougaard, "The Power of Putting People First"; and Rogers, "Do Your Employees Feel Respected?"

31 C.D. Howe Institute, "Canada Faces a Serious Shortage in Digital and STEM Skills"; Statistics Canada, "Survey of Employers on Workers' Skills, 2021"; and Saba, "Canada's Economy Lost Nearly \$13B."



## Leveraging Above-Average Talent and Skills

The majority of employers we interviewed stated that neurodiversity inclusion is beneficial because of the above-average skills that many neurodivergent workers bring to the workplace. While each neurodivergent individual has their own unique strengths, interview participants and prior research have shown that many neurodivergent individuals excel in areas such as creativity, resilience, pattern-recognition, memory, and mathematics.<sup>32</sup> These skills are conducive to workplace success across many different industries. Historically, neurodivergent individuals have been pigeonholed into science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) roles. However, neurodivergent individuals have the skills to succeed across many different areas, and neurodiversity inclusion initiatives need to extend beyond STEM-related fields.

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“We’re finding talent that we unconsciously were screening out versus screening in.... We’re finding tremendous talent.”

**Employer of neurodivergent workers**

# Conclusion and Recommendations

According to the employers who participated in this research, implementing supports to create a more neuroinclusive workplace is easy, inexpensive, and beneficial for the entire organization. While neurodivergent employees in Canada have much to contribute to the workforce, they continue to face many barriers to employment and career progression. Employers play a vital role in breaking down these barriers and creating an environment where neurodivergent workers can thrive. Actionable steps that employers could consider to improve the workplace experience for Canada’s neurodivergent workers include:

- implementing company-wide awareness training on what neurodiversity is and how it benefits the workplace;
- providing alternatives to the traditional hiring process;
- improving the accommodation process and access to available supports;
- implementing a people-first management style;
- creating a sense of community for those who are neurodivergent.

<sup>32</sup> Austin and Pisano, “Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage”; Dujay, “‘Autism Advantage’ to Neurodiverse Employees”; Moeller, Ott, and Russo, “Neurodiversity Can Be a Workplace Strength”; and Twaronite, “How Neurodiversity Is Driving Innovation.”

## Appendix A

# Methodology

### Background

This project was developed to better understand the experiences of neurodivergent individuals in the workplace and how employers can better support them. The research was conducted in two stages. First, a comprehensive survey was completed by 171 self-identified neurodivergent employees and/or job seekers and 139 managers (54 of whom also self-identified as neurodivergent). The survey was designed to better understand perspectives, attitudes, and ideas for supporting neurodiversity in the workplace. Key findings from this survey, as well as the survey methodology, were shared in a recent issue briefing.<sup>1</sup> Next, to build on survey findings, 40 interviews were conducted with neurodivergent Canadian workers (n = 25), as well as with employers with experience hiring and managing neurodivergent workers (n = 15). Insights from these interviews were shared in this report with the goal of providing Canadian employers with actionable steps toward becoming more neuroinclusive.

The research design and protocols were reviewed and approved by Veritas, a third-party ethics review organization.

### Research Questions

1. What barriers do neurodivergent employees face?
2. What supports and opportunities currently exist for neurodivergent employees?
3. What steps can employers take to better support neurodivergent employees in the workplace?

### Interview Sample

Twenty-five and a half hours of interviews were recorded and transcribed, yielding 402 pages (232,565 words) of text. One participant opted not to be recorded; their responses were noted manually and included in the analysis. Of the 25 neurodivergent workers that we spoke with, 10 identified as having ADHD, three identified as having ASD, four identified as having both ADHD and ASD, one identified as having dyslexia, one identified as having both ADHD and dyslexia, and six identified as having mood-related disorders such as depression, anxiety, OCD, and/or borderline personality disorder. Of the 19 participants who identified as having ADHD, ASD, and/or dyslexia, six also identified as having mood-related disorders.

The 15 employers we spoke with represented organizations that have already implemented neurodiversity inclusion initiatives across various industries:

- professional services (5)
- banking (2)
- information technology (2)
- non-profit (2)
- medical equipment
- municipal government
- insurance
- food retail

### Interview Methodology and Analysis

One-on-one interviews ranged between 20 minutes and 1.5 hours and were completed virtually over Microsoft Teams. The interviews were semi-structured and organized according to seven different topics:

1. General understanding and awareness of neurodiversity
2. Function of organization and knowledge of neurodiversity inclusion initiatives
3. Job search process
4. Benefits of neurodiversity in the workplace
5. Challenges of neurodiversity in the workplace
6. Tools training and supports for neurodiversity in the workplace
7. Overall effectiveness of organizational neurodiversity support and areas for improvement

To ensure that interviews were accessible to those who are neurodivergent, all participants had the option to receive the interview questions in advance and were provided with opportunities to take breaks and/or end the interview early if necessary.

<sup>1</sup> Hutchison and Robertson, *Building Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Workers Thrive*.



Interview participants were recruited by advertising the study online (CBoC website; Autism Canada website; Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada website; Twitter; LinkedIn; Facebook) and by providing an option to sign up for an interview at the end of the online survey. Employers with experience hiring and managing neurodivergent workers were contacted directly and asked if they would like to participate in this research.

All interviews (with the exception of one) were transcribed and recorded. Transcripts were anonymized and analyzed in NVivo. Coding themes were developed based on the research questions and literature review, as well as an exploratory examination of the interview transcripts. One researcher was responsible for coding the transcripts, and themes were examined based on how frequently they were noted.

### Sample Interview Questions

1. What challenges or barriers do neurodivergent workers face?
2. What types of tools, training, or supports do you think would improve the workplace experience of neurodivergent employees?
3. What types of tools, training, or supports do you think would be helpful for managers of neurodivergent employees?
4. How has your organization benefited from hiring neurodivergent talent? (employers only)
5. What challenges has your organization faced in terms of hiring and supporting neurodivergent talent? (employers only)
6. How can neurodiversity inclusion at your organization be improved?

## Appendix B

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