

# CLEAR TRANSPARENCY:

Quality of Work Factors for Autistic Youth in the Digital Economy



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## Executive Summary

*This study had three distinct features: defining good quality of work for Autistic Youth from the Autism CanTech! and Technology North employability programs, understanding how to create a social return on investment for these programs, and assessing the impact assured income policies have on quality of work for disabled Canadians.*

Autistic youth thrive in supportive, predictable work environments that have transparent policies and protocols. Key to creating a positive environment is a preliminary understanding of autism and employer willingness to co-create environments that are both flexible and predictable with regular check-ins that mutually benefit both parties. Autistic workers are diverse in their needs for in-person or remote work, and whether they work regular or flexible hours.

However, Autistic workers demonstrate a consistent need for clear expectations of tasks, timelines and possibilities for ongoing and consistent mentorship. Transparent pathways to promotions, skill-building or knowledge transfer are key. Socially, Autistic workers appreciate like diverse, friendly and positive teams that provide clarity regarding make clear what tasks and conversations are appropriate for work. Overall Autistic workers want secure and meaningful employment.

Employers lack knowledge regarding their staff's use of external assured income programs and broadly disability and autistic culture. Maintaining both employment and benefits from assured income without supports impact worker's anxiety levels, contribute to negative mental health, poor quality of life. Autistic youth require holistic supports and workplace environments that factor in diverse living, housing and transportation models. They also require health benefits that feature consistent and robust health supports.

Assured income for disabled and Autistic youth is defined as monthly regular income legislated and administered by provincial governments such as ODSP in Ontario, or AISH in Alberta, help and hinder employment. Assured income policies allow Autistic youth to find meaningful, adaptable employment but are also cumbersome and causes anxiety. Onboarding, offboarding and clawbacks processes cause great stress. Assured income policies could aid employment by being more transparent with funding eligibility, allowing more flexible reporting and funding, as well as offering gradual offboarding or the ability to regain assured income with ease if needed. The Social Return on Investment notes that employment programs geared toward Autistic youth have significant social and economic benefits and the investment "pays for itself."

*Note about language: as was suggested by Autistic Self-Advocates Network (ASAN) while advising Autism CanTech!, this project uses identity-first language (disabled person). For many, this is preferred, as being autistic is not distinct from their identity nor something to be de-prioritized. Our research team also recognizes, people first language (person with a disability) is preferred by some members of the community too. We also use the term Autistic worker to speak broadly of Autistic in the workplace in all contexts.*

# Introduction

*Autistic youth (ages 18-30) face chronic underemployment due to incompatible work environments (Simmons, 2019; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020). Autistic youth face particular workplace communication and environmental challenges and a lack of supports and awareness of Autism (Lorenz et al., 2016; Flower, Dickens and Hedley, 2019; Szechy, Turk and O'Donnell, 2023). A need exists to create effective policy documents at all levels to ensure inclusive employment practices (Flower, Dickens and Hedley, 2019; Johnson, Ennis-Cole and Bonhamgregory, 2020; Kwon and Archer, 2022; Fisher, Gendera and Kayess, 2023). Service agencies and government require specific, evidence-backed programming guidelines to advocate for more funding to advance inclusive employment (Autism Alliance of Canada, 2019).*

The first step to creating an inclusive workplace is to understand what work is considered meaningful and how employers can then accommodate Canadians with disabilities. In connection with Autism CanTech! (ACT!) and support from Future Skills Centre, our team conducted the research on an Autistic perspective and definition of good quality of work: what conditions this unique cultural group for good employment settings. Autistic youth and their definition can be incorporated into a larger conversation of good quality of work that is inclusive to Autistic youth. This is distinct as current definitions or qualifiers of quality of work, do not take this population in account. For both Autistic youth and employers in the ACT! Program, concerns around quality of work and its impact on quality of life are paramount.

Our report outlines for employers and government agencies what Autistic youth define as meaningful employment criteria for their perspective of good quality of work. Autistic participants spoke with researchers about what elements contribute to meaningful work, the role and importance of supervisors who have knowledge and accept autism, the need for transparent and concise communication, what creates an inclusive work environment and what constitutes adequate governmental safety nets and holistic supports. The hope is for the Autistic perspective to be included within a general understanding of the good quality of work, creating truly inclusive workspaces. Advocacy and educational resources were then created from the data we collected in order to build awareness regarding n Autistic-led work culture and facilitate changes that will lead to better quality of work and life for Autistic people. The team also analyzed what impact programs like ACT! and assured income policies have on quality of work factors and calculated the estimated social return on investment for employment training programs.

From the conducted disability-based assured income policy review, recommended changes include: allowing a and the pan-disability community to find suitable employment without losing access to funds for necessary care, housing, and health benefits. The report concludes with new support possibilities through federal initiatives to create a better life for disabled Canadians.

## Research Project Overview

*Disabled Canadians are chronically under-employed. According to the Canadian Federal government, 22% of Canadians have a disability (Government of Canada, 2022). This only includes those with formal diagnoses, so this number may be more with barriers to diagnoses or access, particularly for historically underdiagnosed groups (Lopez, 2022). Among them, 59% between the ages of 25-64 are employed. Overall, both employed and unemployed disabled Canadians, this group earns less and experiences greater levels of poverty than other Canadians. (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022; Government of Canada, 2022; Sarangi et al., 2023).*

Autistic youth specifically face unique challenges of discrimination within workplace. Autism is a diagnosis that encompasses communication difficulties, ability to read social situations, repetition, environmental sensitivities and challenges with executive functioning ('DSM5 Diagnostic Criteria Autism Spectrum Disorder', 2013). This impacts the entire employment cycle, from gaining access to education to maintaining employment (Stephanie Dunn, Krystle Wittevrongel, and Jennifer Zwicker, 2018; Flower, Dickens and Hedley, 2019). The biggest barriers are stigma, social interaction and communication differences (D. B. Nicholas et al., 2019; Soeker, 2020; Raymaker et al., 2023; Szechy, Turk and O'Donnell, 2023). Education to gain skills and experience become compounding (Lorenz et al., 2016; Bross et al., 2021). Training programs and career coach interventions like Autism CanTech! give youth confidence and self-advocacy skills (Flower et al., 2019; Soeker, 2020; Bross et al., 2021). Additionally, employers and supervisors lack basic understanding of Autism within employees (D. B. Nicholas et al., 2019). Employers understanding Autism and other disability, and creating supportive relationships allows for a shift (Booth, 2016; Martin et al., 2022; McVey et al., 2023). Career coaching and assistive technology for all parties can also help in particular situations (Scott, 2019; Soeker, 2020; Martin et al., 2022). Despite a wealth of literature on Autistic employment and education supports, little exists for impact of quality of work and autistic people's lived experience at work or impact of training programs (Flower et al., 2019; Doyle, McDowall and Waseem, 2022).

Assured income enables autistic youth and other disability groups to cover basic needs; however policies are designed with particular societal biases creating stigma and dependency (August, 2020; Lahey et al., 2021; Collie, Sheehan and Lane, 2022). Assured income access is increasing in correlation the decrease of secure employment (Stapleton, 2014; Lahey et al., 2021). While people with various diagnoses may wish for employment, supports to maintain employment do not exist. Caseloads are high and are often the only way to pay for medical costs with precarious employment (Stapleton, 2014; August, 2020; Lahey et al., 2021). The need for more medicalization

## “ Autistic workers face employment barriers including lack of transportation, housing and adequate workplace accommodations

with burdens of paperwork also create difficulties for the disability community (Collie, Sheehan and Lane, 2022). Assured income becomes a stigmatized poverty trap (August, 2020; CBC, 2021). Literature on impacts of assured income on the Autistic community, particularly youth, is not documented. There is also little literature on national review and impact of each provincial policy.

Quality of work assessment involves many facets, appropriate pay, security, ability to advance skills, autonomy and work life balance (Antonella D’Andrea, 2019; Chen and Mehdi, 2019). Digital economies, in their fast evolution, are still evolving new collective ideas of well being (Antonella D’Andrea, 2019). Quality of work assessment factors and human resources assessments rarely factor disability and neuroinclusion thus the need for new frameworks (Dwyer, 2022; Kwon and Archer, 2022; McVey et al., 2023).

This project originated from the Autism CanTech! (ACT!) project funded by the Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). ACT! was a 6-month training program for Autistic youth to gain skills and experience in the digital economy. It featured 4 months of learning entry level data skills and employment skills, and a 2-month paid internship. Throughout and after the process, autistic youth and employer partners are supported by career coaching and mentorship. Employer partners also received training on Autistic traits and emerging practices. During the ACT! research data collection on barriers faced and ideal supports, and program evaluation processes, the research noticed that many Autistic workers face employment barriers outside of strictly employment requirements and scope of responsibilities, these include: inadequate public transportation, lack of work accommodations, and the ambiguity of assured income policies. Additionally shared, if youth gained previous employment, they reported that existing employment opportunities present low quality of work: they are low-paying, offer poor protection policies, schedule unpredictable hours, do not have adequately trained management, etc. Many Autistic youth participants quit these jobs due to inadequate support from management, training and advancement opportunities. They then applied for assured income and faced new challenges keeping and retaining assured income while attempting new employment training and procurement. We specifically assessed socio-economic factors and assured income policy impacts on quality of work, as well as conducted a cost-benefit analysis of Autistic employment programs in order to calculate a social return on investments (SROI).

One of the focus areas was the complicated and cumbersome nature of assured income policies in many jurisdictions across Canada and the world (August, 2020; CBC, 2021). From our previous work with ACT!, we knew that assured income played a crucial role in participants’ quality of work. On one hand, monthly payments (even if they were small) were important to maintain for Autistic workers so that they could maintain some financial stability given the precarious nature of their work history. On the other hand, rigid requirements and limitations on how much they can earn and ambiguity about owning property virtually excluded any possibility for career growth and accumulation of wealth.

This project was approved in April 2022 and data collection lasted from January to June 2023. It employed a variety of methods to collect data including interviews, and focus groups. 29 participants took part in focus groups and interviews. Additionally, as secondary data, the project team analyzed 393 records gathered from the ACT! barriers and supports research transcripts and photography submission (photovoice) and project evaluation data. Program alumni, Technology North Autistic employees, and their familiar or natural supports, and employer partners participated in semi-structured focus groups and interviews. Other factors such as age, gender were not analyzed at this time due to too small sample sizes for interpretive patterning. This research then is an overview of an emerging culture. More research needs to occur with an intersectional lens regarding greater analysis and changes in Autistic perspective based upon class, gender, age, etc (Doyle, McDowall and Waseem, 2022).

Interpretive description was employed to define the Autistic definition of quality of work and in the ethnographic portion of an assured income policy review. Using this approach, researchers have provided thematic and integrated descriptions of phenomena in ways that honour the complexity of situations, the truth of a situation being

different depending on many factors: environment, background, etc. This approach places value of all perceptions but does not assume that these perceptions are objectively “true.” This approach foregrounds interpretations that are situated in both individual and collective representations of the data, while seeking to demonstrate how general patterns are born of individual instances and how they can inform insight and shape future practice (Thorne, 2016). This research project also draws on the theories of action research through an interpretive description lens. Centering Autistic lived experience and asking participants what actions need to be taken to alleviate barriers is key in conducting ethical research with the Autistic community (Gowen et al., 2020). Together, the methods collected diverse data and allowed space for multiple perspectives and rich analysis through interpretive description.

Secondary data collected supported research findings by providing giving more disaggregated data regarding surrounding factors such as income levels, supports accessed, barriers to good quality of work. It also was assessed for the impact assured income policies have on the disabled workers and employer’s ability to maintain employment and good quality of work. The secondary data was used to measure outcomes from the program for SROI estimation purposes. Estimated monetary value from literature and government databases were used as financial proxies to value outcomes achieved by program participants and other stakeholders (Government of Alberta, 2020; Joven, 2022).

Our methods and approach are grounded in both the social and community lenses of looking at disability. Our research team uses both a social model of disability when addressing describing the Autistic community as well as a community-based, anti-oppressive model to guide our work. The social model of disability conceptualizes disability not as inherent deficits problem of people with disabilities but rather a result of barriers to accessing society caused by larger societal environments and structures including sensory background, societal and educational norms, attitudes, and expectations. ((Oliver, 2013; Shakespeare, 2021). This model posits that the world can adapt and grow to accommodate people with different bodies, sensory experiences, cognitive abilities, logics, and mood shifts((Oliver, 2013; Shakespeare, 2021) . To understand, how society at large can accommodate neurodivergent people, an anti-oppressive model was also used. This model also states that since the disability, Deaf (American Sign Language as the primary language), neurodivergent and Mad (a reclaiming word for certain mental health diagnoses) communities are a cultural minority, they have their own values, norms, preferences and status hierarchies, similar to any distinct community (Mercer, G., 2012; Snyder and Mitchell, 2014). However, pan-disability and Autistic communities are often forced to adapt to the norms of the dominant culture which leads to misunderstandings, pain, discomfort and confusion for disabled people, while. Whereas society at large is generally unaware of the norms or barriers disabled communities face, and thus the need to adjust to each other’s needs and expectations is unequally distributed with the burden often falling on disabled people to accommodate the norms and expectations of non-disabled culture (Scott et al., 2017; D. Nicholas et al., 2019; Buckley, Pellicano and Remington, 2021). All cultures, however, can and (to a certain extent) do engage in dialogue to accommodate each other and correct the power imbalances with curiosity and a desire to transparently set new norms to centre the most marginalized communities so they may gain access to cultural spaces and this shift is key for Autistic inclusion (McVey et al., 2023).

An advisory committee was comprising of 5 members: two were representatives from the government institutions who are also involved in policy-making, a self-advocate, a representative from academia, and one from an autistic employment organization. They advised on research questions and stated what knowledge gaps exist regarding our research topics. Stakeholders expressed a lack of knowledge about how assured income impacts quality of work as well as the distinct factors that contribute to an Autistic definition of quality of work. Not only did members of the advisory committee want to help the Autistic youth community, but they also were eager to find ways to extrapolate the findings and recommendations for the wider pan-disability community. Stakeholders provided recommendations for changes to assured income policies that will benefit Autistic youth and other disability communities. The committee requested end products and findings to be tangible, concrete approaches management can adopt to support Autistic youth and help them experience good quality of work. The research is descriptive, building upon pre-existing understandings of quality of work and highlighting Autistic needs for successful employment. Past studies express the need for Autistic supports but do not contextualize the requirements for good quality of work.

## Findings

*Previous to ACT!, many youth report that existing employment present low quality of work: they are low-paying, offer poor protection policies, schedule unpredictable hours, do not have adequately trained management, etc. They quit these jobs due to inadequate support from management, training, and advancement opportunities. Many other program participants lacked any employment experience, finding barriers to training and recruitment processes. Findings below express Autistic youth specifically connected to the entry-level digital economy and may not represent the full culture that is emerging or the vast experiences of autism.*

### An Autistic Definition of Good Quality of Work

According to participants, quality of work is an important and complex phenomenon. In general, Autistic workers ask for continuous supervision, a transparent and inclusive social environment at work, as well as an adequate income or life supports safety net. Reliable supervision translated into the need to have meaningful mentorship with a skilled supervisor who understands how to work with Autistic workers. Meaningful and constant supervision are essential because many neurodivergent employees have limited work experience due to difficulties in securing employment (Martin et al., 2022). Autistic workers require a combination of flexibility and predictability with work: some respondents were looking for full-time employment and others desired only part-time work. Everyone, however, acknowledged that flexibility in the number of hours worked every day and the ability to collaborate regarding their hours was very important. At the same time, Autistic workers need to have a stable income and work routine in order to feel comfortable at work. Some participants noted needing tasks or roles that had concrete measurable goals to feel productive. In addition, some participants emphasized that the work should be meaningful, with aligned values, purpose and making societal impact, to ensure that they stay motivated and perform well. Lastly, the opportunity to stay on assured income and use its benefits when needed while working is also important; the financial security assured income offered reduced their anxiety about losing or reducing employment.

### Real or Perceived Barriers to Good Quality of Work

Autistic workers face declining quality of work with a lack of supports, both structural and internal to their specific work cultures (D. B. Nicholas et al., 2019).

Internal cultural barriers expressed were a lack of clear expectations and productivity thresholds, and some perfectionist work cultures. Autistic workers experience anxiety when not given clear instructions, too much idle time or not knowing when idle time is expected. As with many workers, Autistic individuals prefer or require clear, explicit communication regarding work and benefit from adequate and constructive feedback. For example, they want to know why they didn't get a role or promotion, so they can understand and improve. The ability to ask questions and the reasoning of decisions can also be important. They also desire opportunities to learn and grow as well as opportunities for advancement. Ambiguity, lack of transparency and perfectionism with little coaching create poor quality of work. In addition to this, not being paid a living wage (no matter the hourly wage) creates a barrier to acquiring quality of work for Autistic and other disability groups.

## “ Autistic workers require a combination of flexibility and predictability with work ”

Autistic workers perceive themselves as lacking experience. They need recruiters to recognize the knowledge and skills they possess from volunteer, educational and personal pursuits. For example, running live streams of gaming and gaining hundreds of followers may only be perceived as a personal endeavor however multiple transferable skills, are developed and executed from this activity: marketing, experience with emerging media streams, quick attention to detail, strong hand-eye coordination and problem-solving skills within the gaming structure. Knowing the value of transferrable skills will be key within the fast changing digital economy such as experience with emerging media streams, marketing personal brands, communication skills, etc.

In ACT! Research and other research findings, Autistic youth face barriers to employment that echo these findings from recruitment to employment retention. In the recruitment process, Autistic youth struggle with resumes, impromptu interview questions, and no feedback when not hired for positions (Smith et al., 2021). Once hired, Autistic youth struggle with inadequate onboarding, unpredictable scheduling, unclear instructions and frustrated and at worse angry and alienating work environments (Soeker, 2020). Supervisors and other employees lack knowledge regarding stimming, overstimulation, meltdowns and burnout (D. B. Nicholas et al., 2019; Flower, Dickens and Hedley, 2019; Flower et al., 2019). More research needs to be done regarding Autistic burnout and other experiences and their relationship to work environments (Raymaker et al., 2020; Higgins et al., 2021).

## Socioeconomic Factors that Play into Autistic Quality of Work

External societal barriers include lack of adequate transportation and affordable housing close to work. Autistic workers and other disability groups disproportionately rely on public transportation or private transportation support (such as rides from family members). The lack of consistent and reliable transit to employment creates undue stress and greater commuting times. Autistic and other disabled workers disproportionately lack means of independent private transportation (they do not and/or cannot drive). Lack of access to reliable and adequate transportation impacts work and housing choices which in turn limits employment choices. Remote work options and centralized work sites that are accessible by diverse transportation and from-home options help to remove this barrier. A national transportation and public housing strategy to ensure housing and transportation options for disadvantaged populations would greatly benefit the disability community.

Autistic youth interviewed often rely on their familiar or natural supports (such as parents, siblings and spouses) for life skills assistance. Autistic youth can feel overly dependent on natural supports or natural supports can interfere with the Autistic individual's independence at work. For example, parents may feel the need to contact their adult Autistic child's workplace when they are experiencing stress due to interpersonal conflict or ambiguity regarding tasks. This interference complicates both work and family relations. As with employment, scaffolding supports that gradually ease to support independence may help Autistic youth with both work and personal goals.

## “ It takes energy to navigate poverty, budgeting both very limited time and money.

While some cultures prefer living intergenerationally, not all Autistic youth can or want to rely on familiar or natural supports. Especially while living independently, or without support, energy needed to sustain life with precarious or limited income, housing and transportation impacts quality of work. It takes energy to navigate poverty, budgeting both very limited time and money. Having such limited income impacts available housing and transportation, which may not be close to employment. For example, places of employment may assume their workers can drive, and thus don't situate by reliable public transportation. In focus groups and interviews, youth noted barriers with complicated commutes, or reliance on transportation by familiar supports. Youth in our study also noted various degrees of ease with lifeskills. For example, access to healthy food is difficult on severely limited income and lack of access to large discounted supermarkets located far from public transit.

## Understanding and Building Good Quality of Work that is Sustainable

Both employers and Autistic workers expressed the need to establish a strong, skilled, supportive and friendly team. Meaningful work that connects to personal values and makes a difference matters to Autistic youth. Having variety and choice with what tasks they work on allows Autistic employees to adjust their energy levels to maintain productivity. Predictability and flexibility regarding hours and hybrid work environments can also aid in creating a sustainable, productive and supportive work environment. Scheduling and work location can be mutually agreed upon as well as allow for sick days, negotiated for paid or unpaid, and open communication regarding needs. Job carving, with very specific task delineation and overlap, can also assist. This can assist many workers with disabilities or illnesses to navigate sick days or low energy. Employers are encouraged to take an individualized strength-based approach with all employees and consider this knowledge when assigning tasks, as well as recognizing opportunities for workers to share what they know (either from their lived or learned experience).

## What Could Positively Change Quality of Work

Good quality of work can be fostered by creating clear expectations, increasing confidence by developing competencies and sharing knowledge. Adequate guidance and effective leadership for all staff is also key. This can look like clearly established processes as well as ongoing and explicit mentorship. Autistic workers would also benefit from being encouraged to actively foster professional community building opportunities.

Supportive and Autistic-friendly teams are fostered by transparent and clear boundaries regarding the social environment at work. There was an expressed desire for more social interaction and relationship building with a variety of co-workers over mutually agreed upon topics, while not distracting to the paid tasks to complete. For example, the youth interviewed spoke to disliking random social interactions about personal matters at work, but welcomed making friends through shared interests or diverse work sanctioned events.

Connected to our focus group findings is the current federal development of accessibility standards implementing the Accessibility Canada Act passed in 2019. The goal of the Act is an accessible Canada by 2040. Employers knowing about the Act and its implications for their employment practices, and cultivations of accessible environments for employees and clients. In implementing standards, workplace practices could shift attitudinal and communication barriers.

## Policies that Impact Good Quality of Work

This report specifically focused on disability-based assured income policies and the intersection of these policies with Autistic workers. Assured income in this particular context referred to a monthly amount given to provincial citizens for daily living expenses since many applicants experience difficulty with maintaining employment due to a disability. This study did not look at other assured income policies in the federal domain (such as Employment Insurance or Old Age Security). Disability-assured income is provincially mandated and meant for permanent residents. Our particular study skews toward Alberta residents since Technology North and NorQuest College are both located in Alberta.

All provinces offer funds to cover basic needs such as shelter, medical equipment and health benefits to eligible people. Provinces have diverse payment schedules. All provinces pay rates that fall below the poverty line. Eligibility requirements are also generally consistent: they require recipients to be of adult age, have a severe long-term medical impairment, and present evidence that they are not financially independent and that they need financial support. Eligibility relies on medical assessments and official diagnoses for lasting impairment. Most provincial policies center physical disabilities rather than neurological or behavioural/mental-based disabilities. This creates discrimination on both sides for Autistic youth, by the employment sector and the medical sector, with Autistic youth having greater difficulty in proving their work eligibility or lack thereof. Assured income could be updated regarding eligibility for all types of disabilities, and checked for biases.

Inconsistencies arose regarding disbursement amounts, and what personal benefits are covered. As well, the details concerning eligibility requirements also vary between provinces. The differences appear to be based on individual need instead of listing the benefits that are offered. Most notably, Saskatchewan is the only province that permits applicants with a behavioural diagnosis to be medically eligible. Variations between how the policy is titled exist and highlight underpinning philosophies about disability. Specifically, words like “severely handicapped” (AB) are outdated and add to existing stigma about disability. “Assured income”(SK) , “disability assistance”(BC), and “disability support” can be vague for Autistic logics. Manitoba’s “Employment and Income Assistance for Persons with Disabilities” is the most clear and least stigmatized. Our research team encourages renaming these policies to encourage understanding and destigmatizing.

“ Supportive and Autistic-friendly teams are fostered by transparent and clear boundaries regarding the social environment at work.

Assured income allows Autistic youth a state-provided safety net. This is similar to other mental health diagnoses relationship with work and assured income: a stop gap between jobs with adequate supports or a safety net that is difficult to overcome (Lahey et al., 2021). Recipients noted that receiving provincial disability-based assured income allowed them to find suitable employment without losing access to funds for necessary care, housing, etc. Autistic youth noted gratitude for assured income while also noting great anxiety and difficulties. The anxiety was related to a fear of losing assured income and not being able to qualify for it again once employed. Since assured income policies universally set multiple restrictions on how much the income recipients can earn and are ambiguous about the assets they can own, Autistic workers always have to be conscientious about their work and are posed to choose the limited financial stability of insufficient assured income payments over growing their career and wealth. There is also difficulty and anxiety regarding budgeting a small amount received once a month. Autistic youth noted regularly borrowing from natural supports for basic needs and emergency purchases.

Development of specific policies for youth or people living with disabilities that can have variable work may have the best impact. In addition increasing the amount of funds given under assured income or the “clawback” cap, and annual reporting could allow greater ease and better quality of life.

Outside of the scope of our policy review are additional separate policies governing supports for intellectual disabilities and severe disabilities that require institutional or professional care costs beyond the individual assured income amount. Our study also recognized a limitation of immigration status and eligibility but could not collect significant data to fully understand impact.

Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a framework for measuring the value of the activities created by an investment. The analysis involves the following steps:

1. Defining scope and identifying stakeholders;
2. Developing a theory of change and impact map;
3. Evidencing outcomes and giving them a value;
4. Establishing impact;
5. Calculating SROI ratio; and
6. Reporting

The scope of our SROI analysis was Autistic youth who participated in ACT! from April 2021 to January 2023. We valued input and outcomes from the perspectives of ACT! participants, employer partners, technology providers and program funder (Government of Canada). We relied on survey data, administrative data, stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and government databases for our analysis.

Our preliminary analysis showed that even under stringent assumptions, ACT! generates social value that more than offsets the value of money invested in the program by stakeholders. In other words, the program pays for itself over time and hence it is an investment that is worth pursuing by governments and other funders. For every dollar spent on Autism CanTech!, a \$1.16 of economic and social benefit was generated.



## Implications and Future Directions

*Assured income allows Autistic youth a government-funded safety net. Recipients noted that receiving the provincial disability-based assured income allowed them to find suitable employment without losing access to funds for necessary care, housing, etc. Assured income, however, keeps disabled Canadians in poverty (Parsons, Paige, 2019; CBC, 2021). It distributes very little and has grave consequences when recipients access it over a longer term, creating dependency and anxiety (Stapleton, 2014; August, 2020; Lahey et al., 2021). Our report wishes to amplify other organizations such as Disability without Poverty and other national initiatives to advocate for more funds and lasting support. Maintaining and establishing employment that provide income (wage subsidies, tax credits) and supports to keep employment is recommended to foster lasting change (Stephanie Dunn, Krystle Wittevrongel, and Jennifer Zwicker, 2018). Increasing the income cap, or changing reporting mechanisms also allows for greater ease into the labour market.*

Having good employment is tied closely with high quality of life and aids greatly in creating confidence and better mental health (Markham, 2009; Lorenz et al., 2016). Good quality of work, secure employment that allows for health benefits, work/life balance can also decrease the increasing amount of Canadians collecting disability-based assured income (Stapleton, 2014; Lahey et al., 2021).

As Equity, Diversity and Inclusion initiatives mature, disability and neuroinclusion are distinct communities to support (Kwon and Archer, 2022). The mindset regarding Autism to be merely accommodated or assimilated into normative culture must also be reflected upon (Kwon and Archer, 2022; McVey et al., 2023). Including neuroinclusion into the larger quality of work conversations, allows greater inclusion and enriched work environments. Through our findings, this report recommends clear transparency for Autistic youth regarding assured income onboarding and offboarding, reporting and eligible expenses. In addition to this, clear expectations in tasks and timelines need to be communicated in the workplace. Work culture policies must offer Autistic workers predictability in their work. Autistic youth also desire full-time work with full benefits but require flexibility regarding their work environments. Some Autistic workers thrive with set hours while others require more flexible, task-based work depending on their health, sleep schedules or medical appointments. Transparent and regular supervisory meetings can help to

## “ Employers are encouraged to learn more about Autism and neurodiversity as well as expand their policies to accommodate intergenerational families, irregular hours and work schedules

curate a mutually beneficial work environment, which in turn can create a supportive work environment for all. General quality of work definitions can adjust to include neuroinclusion and other disability communities. Employers are encouraged to learn more about Autism and neurodiversity as well as expand their policies (i.e. health benefits and work hours) to accommodate intergenerational families, irregular hours and work schedules. Workplaces can also create more opportunities for inclusion and higher quality of work by accounting for transit and housing needs, as well as diverse workstyles. Autistic and disability specific employment programs enrich society and give back to the economy. Investing in such programs is investing in empowering disabled citizens.

This project can have a wide range of implications for a variety of stakeholders. It gives voice to Autistic workers and their concerns regarding removing barriers to inclusive workplace and the importance of assured income. Second, the project uniquely provides recommendations for employers on how to construct a more inclusive environment for neurodivergent workers. At the same time, the report aims to show that the financial investments companies would need to make for accommodating Autistic workers would be compensated by the outstanding work that Autistic workers can perform (given that the right accommodations are

in place). Moreover, many of the accommodations discussed do not require any significant investment but can make a significant difference in employment success for neurodivergent workers. Lastly, the findings of this report can be used by the government to institute new policies regarding how to create more inclusive workplaces. Most importantly, our analysis on the benefits and limitations of assured income policies can help inform governmental policies to make assured income more flexible and less prohibitive for neurodivergent employees so that they may grow their careers and wealth. Through the SROI, our report demonstrates that government investments in disability and Autistic specific employment programs generate positive outcomes. Our research team strongly encourages greater government and private sector investment in similar programs that subsidize wages and offer Autistic and neurodivergent youth the opportunity to gain initial work experience with the intention of long-term employment (Stephanie Dunn, Krystle Wittevrongel, and Jennifer Zwicker, 2018). However assured income programs buffer possible exploitation and low quality work. An example of greater investment is wage subsidies, or private sector commitment to hiring and supporting autistic and disabled employees due to economic benefits.

This report recognizes limitations in our data and knowledge gaps that create possible future directions for research and knowledge creation and dissemination. Additional research could include the impact of unions and an examination of the influence of the gig-based economy on the disability community. Many ACT! participants lacked sufficient employment experience to speak on specific impact of unionized and non-unionized environments, long-term full-time employment or gig-based short-term contracts. In our findings, ACT! participants valued security, health benefits and regular wages. Currently, this security is coupled with full-time permanent positions. An intersectional analysis that speaks to inequities and compounded marginalizations, such as racialized or gendered perspectives of Autistic employment is also key.

This project can have a wide range of implications for a variety of stakeholders. It gives voice to Autistic youth workers and their concerns regarding inclusive workplace and the importance of assured income. Second, the project uniquely provides recommendations for employers on how to arrange a more inclusive environment for neurodivergent workers. At the same time, the report aims to show that the financial investments companies would need to make for accommodating workers would be compensated by the outstanding work that Autistic

workers can perform (given that the right adjustments are in place). Moreover, many of the accommodations discussed do not require any significant investment but can make a difference for neurodivergent workers. Lastly, the findings of this report can be used by the government to institute new policies regarding how to create more inclusive workplaces. Most importantly, our analysis on the benefits and limitations of assured income policies can help inform governmental policies to make assured income more flexible and less prohibitive for neurodivergent employees so that they may grow their careers and wealth. Through the SROI, our report shows that government investments in disability and Autistic specific employment programs generate positive outcomes. Our research team strongly encourages greater government and private sector investment in similar programs that subsidize wages and offer Autistic and neurodivergent youth the opportunity to gain initial work experience with the intention of long-term employment. Assured income programs buffer possible exploitation and low quality work.

Employers are encouraged to learn more about Autism and neurodiversity as well as expand their policies (i.e. health benefits and work hours) to accommodate intergenerational families, irregular hours and work schedules. This report recognizes limitations in our data and knowledge gaps that create possible future directions for research and knowledge creation and dissemination. Additional research could include the impact of unions and an examination of the influence of the gig-based economy on the disability community. Many ACT! participants lacked sufficient employment experience to speak on specific impact of unionized and non-unionized environments, long-term full-time employment or gig-based short-term contracts. In our findings, ACT! participants valued security, health benefits and regular wages. Currently, this security is coupled with full-time permanent positions. However, this could shift in regards to permanent part time employment that provided adequate benefits, or flexibility in hours. These limitations also impacted the SROI factors, using minimum wage as the estimation, and the assumption of consistent employment, underestimating short-term contract employment or assured income. Families and natural supports were also excluded from the analysis, which could underestimate the social value created.

Our research was conducted with well-intentioned and progressive organizations. They had pre-existing equity, diversity and inclusion policies and understanding; however, they lacked knowledge regarding autistic culture and neuroinclusion. Successful employer partners were larger, well-resourced, organizations. They had the staffing capacity to train mentors and supervisors about autism and expand their skills so they may feel more confident supporting Autistic workers. Additional opportunities include inquiring about what makes workspaces less welcoming, what barriers to inclusion exist, and what conditions create good quality of work in traditionally marginalized work environments (such as transportation, policing, nursing, etc.).

New avenues open with the federal Disability Tax Credit, passed into law in early summer of 2022. The implications of this credit for disabled Canadians and their quality of work and life is still unclear. The Accessible Canada Act (passed in 2019) is in the initial phases of national implementation and will also impact the lives of disabled Canadians in ways that are currently unclear. Future research opportunities await to assess the impacts of these new policies and emerging protocols and new workplace standards. Our recommendations will also compliment the current National Autism Strategy, due to be legislated in Fall 2024. The National Autism Strategy will also aim to provide an Autistic specific framework for creating neuroinclusive environments and secondary supports for Autistic adults including approaches to assured income.

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## Supporting materials

[SRol report](#): draft of Alfred Appiah's Social Return on Investment

[Assured Income Report](#): an indepth findings of a national disability assured, impact on Autistic youth entering the workforce and recommendations

[Recommendation Summaries](#): recommendations for changes to quality of work standards and assured income policies for greater impact

Written knowledge dissemination materials: one pagers designed for employers and unions as Equity, Diversity and Inclusion educational tools for Autistic inclusion.



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