

# Autism CanTech!: Social return on investment and policy review



## PARTNERS

NorQuest College



## LOCATIONS

Alberta



## INVESTMENT

\$87,017.00



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## Executive Summary

Autism CanTech! (ACT!) was a 6-month program for young people with autism to receive skills training and paid work placements in entry-level data management positions. Through interviews, this project sought to better understand the work experiences of ACT! program participants, the impacts of assured income policies on employment outcomes of participants, and the overall social return on investment of the ACT! program itself.

The findings included the need for more awareness among supervisors and managers of strategies to work effectively with young people with autism; the desire for job and schedule flexibility given the lack of supportive social infrastructure, like transportation and housing; and the barriers that assured income policies pose to young people with autism.

Employers who are looking to neurodivergent workers to fill labour shortages need to educate themselves first on how to support these workers effectively, and consider changes to workplace policies to ensure these workers are successful and thriving.

### KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Young people with autism thrive in supportive, predictable work environments that have transparent policies and protocols.
- 2 Many young people with autism interviewed for this project felt they needed to choose between assured income programs and job prospects.
- 3 Researchers concluded that every \$1 invested in ACT! at NorQuest College generates a social value of \$1.61.

## ▶ The Issue

Young people with autism face barriers to employment, including difficulty in the interview process, decoding workplace communication and being supervised by managers with little understanding of autism.

Autism CanTech! (ACT!) was an Employment and Social Development Canada-funded program that supported the development of inclusive and accessible workplaces and removed barriers to work for youth with autism. Successful applicants with autism were enrolled in a 6-month program that prepared them to perform data processing roles for a variety of businesses in the digital economy including those in education, finance, government, or health. The program included 4-months of skills training and a 2-month long paid work experience in an entry-level data management position.

Many of the program participants who have been a part of the ACT! program reported that the existing employment opportunities were of low quality: they were low-paying, had poor protection policies, offered unpredictable hours and untrained management. Many participants reported quitting these jobs due to inadequate support from management, training, and advancement opportunities.



## What We Investigated

This project sought to increase the AI knowledge and skills of professionals working in Canada, with the hope this research project sought to better understand the work experiences of ACT! program participants, and what good quality of work meant to them.

The research also wanted to better understand the dimensions of income support programs for those with disabilities, and how these impact the work experiences of young people with autism who participated in the ACT! program.

Guided by an advisory committee, the research team conducted interviews, focus groups, and a photography photo voice project with 29 young people with autism who were participants in the ACT! program. The research team also reviewed administrative data from 393 ACT! program participants, and conducted a policy review of assured income policies from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario.

In addition to this qualitative work, the project also attempted to calculate the estimated social return on investment for the ACT! program using administrative data from autistic youth who participated in ACT! from April 2021 to January 2023.

## ✔ What We're Learning

At the end of this project, partners had developed nine MOOCs on six different topics and more than 3,000 ACT! participants interviewed for this project valued security, health benefits and regular wages, while also desiring flexibility in the number of hours daily and the ability to schedule the hours, to accommodate. The young people interviewed raised several questions about elements of meaningful work including the role and importance of autistically-informed supervision, transparent and concise communication, inclusive work environments and adequate governmental safety nets.

### **Informed, engaged supervisors**

Young people interviewed described experiencing anxiety when not given clear instructions at work, too much idle time or not knowing when idle time is expected. Ambiguity, lack of transparency and perfectionism with little coaching create poor quality of work for young people with autism. To combat this, many young people desired meaningful mentorship with a skilled supervisor that understands autism.

**Social infrastructure impacts quality of work.** 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 cannot drive). This impacts work and housing choices. Remote work options and centralized work sites that prioritize diverse transportation and housing ease this barrier.

**Assured income programs can be barriers to work.** Many of the young people interviewed expressed fears of losing assured income while employed since these policies place numerous restrictions on young people with autism, including limiting the number of hours worked, maximum amount of income, limitations on property ownership and savings. Assured income programs also claw back earnings, acting as a deterrent for people with autism to get and stay in jobs. All of these restrictions create stressful situations for young people with autism because they may feel forced to choose between work prospects or remaining eligible for assured income assistance. Given how unpredictable employment can be for young people with autism and how important it is for them to have some stable source of income, it is a very difficult choice.

## ★ Why It Matters

As labour shortages grow, many industries and sectors are looking to attract more individual workers from groups who have been historically marginalized in the labour market, including people who are neurodivergent, like people with autism.

This research provides insights to employers, policy-makers and program developers on how to support young people with autism to be successful at work. Most importantly, it highlights the need for employers to learn more about autism and neurodiversity, and to review workplace policies (i.e. health benefits and work hours) to ensure they support these workers in their roles. Employers looking to include more neurodiversity in their workplaces should ensure supervisors and managers are trained to support these workers appropriately, and in how to create inclusive environments where these workers can thrive.

These are similar conclusions to other projects that explored the experiences of marginalized groups in the workplace. While employers are looking to these groups to fill labour shortages, many employers need to first educate themselves and make policy changes that create more inclusive and welcoming workplaces for these groups of workers.