

Project Insights Report

Atlantic Autism Supports and Employment Network (AASEN)



PARTNERS

Autism Nova Scotia



LOCATIONS

Across Canada



INVESTMENT

\$340,079



PUBLISHED

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Executive Summary

Although research has shown that neurodivergent individuals can be highly engaged and productive employees, autistic individuals in the Atlantic Region are significantly underrepresented in the labour market. To address this issue, Autism Nova Scotia created the Atlantic Autism Supports and Employment Network (AASEN).

In addition to hosting biweekly gatherings among service providers for knowledge exchange and coordination, the network jointly provided an online supported job search group named Career Quest (CQ) and an online discussion forum for autistic employees/job seekers named COVID-19 Employment Support Group (ESG).

The CQ and ESG programs were effective in increasing participant confidence and support, but job seekers still struggled to find employment due to broader systemic barriers. Current employer practices made it difficult for neurodiverse individuals to acquire and keep a position and the lack of wraparound services (e.g. transportation access, mental health support) offered in Atlantic provinces also created challenges.

Going forward, project staff recommend increasing engagement with employers and local employment agencies to introduce the practices needed to enhance employment among autistic individuals. Initiatives working with autistic adults should continue to emphasize personalization and autonomy since autistic participants in the project's evaluation noted that they often feel they have little control over their professional pathways.

KEY INSIGHTS

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Participants in a virtual job-search group felt more confident in self-disclosing their disability status with employers and asking for a workplace accommodation if needed.

- 2 Many employers lack awareness of autism and often, incorrectly fear that a large accommodation will be needed.
- 3 Neurodiverse individuals can feel they have little input on their career pathways.

▶ The Issue

Autistic individuals in the Atlantic Region are significantly underrepresented in the labour market. Even before the pandemic, project partners estimated the unemployment rate among this community at approximately 80% and COVID-19 only aggravated pre-existing inequalities with the creation of new barriers.

Each province in the Atlantic Region faces barriers engaging neurodivergent adults in the labour market. New Brunswick, for example, has challenges with a lack of coordination among service providers, while Newfoundland and Labrador is challenged by the rural and remote nature of its population. Autism Nova Scotia saw an opportunity for support organizations across the Atlantic region to exchange practices and learnings given their different contexts and to collaborate on initiatives to better serve job seekers on the autism spectrum.



🔧 What We Investigated

Autism Nova Scotia created the Atlantic Autism Supports and Employment Network (AASEN) program to support Autistic adults in accessing employment by improving coordination between provinces and addressing employment service and support gaps within the Atlantic region. The regional partner organizations in the network were:

- Autism Connections (Fredericton, N.B.)
- Stars for Life (Charlottetown, P.E.I.)
- Autism Nova Scotia – Cape Breton Chapter (Sydney, N.S.)
- Autism Society of Newfoundland (St. John's, NL)

In addition to hosting biweekly gatherings among service providers for knowledge exchange and coordination, the network jointly provides an online supported job search group named Career Quest and an online discussion forum for Autistic employees/job seekers named COVID-19 Employment Support Group.

To allow facilitators to adapt their sessions to unique participant needs, the Career Quest program did not prescribe structured lessons. Instead, the curriculum initially involved searching and applying for two jobs each week with the support of the facilitator.

For the COVID-19 Employment Support Group program, regular sessions were co-facilitated by program staff and by “first voice leaders,” participants who volunteered to help facilitate. Semi-structured discussions were held for peers with lived experience to talk about their lives and struggles and to share strategies for navigating the employment landscape.

As part of FSC's Accelerator program, Autism Nova Scotia surveyed service providers and participants near the end of its project to identify opportunities for further enhancing its support. Group discussions were also held with people on the autism spectrum. While Autism Nova Scotia originally sought to establish a community of practice for service providers to iterate on its work, the accelerator program enabled the project team to ensure participant voices were also included in this continuous improvement process.

What We're Learning

Career Quest and the COVID-19 Employment Support Group reached 58 individuals on the autism spectrum in Atlantic Canada.

An online survey of 10 participants in Career Quest showed that all became more confident in self-disclosing their disability status with employers and half of respondents were willing to ask for a workplace accommodation if needed. All respondents reported that Career Quest helped them to advocate for their needs and feel more confident with an independent job search.

Site managers and participants felt the COVID-19 Employment Support Group offered an important forum for building confidence and self-advocacy, as there were few other peer-driven spaces where participants could discuss issues of self-disclosure, feelings of isolation, and strategies for addressing challenges.

Virtual programs can reduce regional service gaps

Career Quest and the COVID-19 Employment Support Group addressed gaps in the support offered to autistic job seekers in Atlantic Canada. Previous work from project partners showed that local employment agencies often lacked the skills to support individuals on the autism spectrum with their job search. Most facilitators and site managers interviewed over the course of the project agreed that Career Quest and the COVID-19 Employment Support Group helped to address these needs.

In-job support services are needed to maintain employment

Some Career Quest participants became discouraged after learning skills and building confidence only to encounter barriers in obtaining and sustaining employment. Similarly, some participants in the COVID-19 Employment Support Group were frustrated by the lack of support outside of these two programs. For example, participants who secured a job required ongoing support to succeed in their new roles, but a lack of in-job support resulted in some returning to the programs. Project partners felt there were a high number of participants who returned to the program and online survey participants also indicated that despite their increase in confidence from Career Quest, finding and keeping a job still proved difficult.

Networks support knowledge sharing and referrals

Biweekly gatherings between facilitators and program coordinators in different provinces were effective in promoting collaboration. Network participants interviewed felt meetings were an excellent way to share resources and best practices. Most facilitators and site managers felt the network provided them with the resources, skills, and partnerships they needed to support participants. The growth of the network, and the increasing strength of the bonds between its members were felt to have diversified the referral pathways available to meet complex needs.

Listen, learn, adjust, repeat

Network staff stressed the importance of continuous adaptation and listening to participants to provide the support they actually need, instead of the support that the program logic was based on. For example, program facilitators discovered that asking participants to apply to two jobs per week in Career Quest was not realistic and adapted their expectations to the goals of each person. Program staff learned that not all participants are well-served by the expectation that program success is employment. In some cases, participants did not want to jeopardize their income support by working beyond a specific number of hours per week. Program success for this group included gaining confidence and self-advocating on their skill-building journey.

Why It Matters

Other [research on neurodiversity in the workplace](#) has highlighted the contributions that autistic individuals bring to the workplace. However, only 33% of adults on the autism spectrum were employed in 2017 and those who were employed tended to earn lower wages and endure extended periods of joblessness. Many sectors and industries are looking to diversify their workforces to address labour and skills shortages. Attracting and retaining neurodivergent workers should be a part of those strategies.

This project adds [further evidence](#) that employers lack awareness of autism and often, incorrectly fear that a large accommodation will be needed. Greater training and awareness will help reduce the uncertainty and hesitancy associated with hiring persons on the autism spectrum. This project also illustrates the need for a holistic, systems approach to inclusivity including behaviour changes among employers. If employers are to make the most of the skills and talent within the autistic workforce, companies cannot expect participants alone to shoulder the burden of adapting — employers must adapt their practices beyond legislated accommodation. Similarly, support organizations partnering with employers should try to affect change among employers, not simply participants.

An inclusive economy has wraparound supports to address barriers to success in the labour market, including for autistic individuals. In most areas of the Atlantic provinces, there is no access to on-the-job support, poor access to transportation (especially in rural areas), and limited access to mental health services focused on autism. Many participants in this project prioritized mental health before seeking employment but numerous individuals struggled to find adequate support services. Networks of community service organizations should be supported to strengthen referral networks and support coordination, especially across rural and remote regions.

► What's Next

[Autism Nova Scotia](#) is continuing to work with network members to make service improvements, prioritizing ideas from participants. The network will also explore opportunities to deepen its advocacy among policymakers and employers.



State of Skills: Enhancing Career Prospects and Well-Being for Canadian Youth

To stem the recent downturn in labour market conditions of youth and to lay the groundwork for them to play a pivotal role in fostering growth and inclusion, it is imperative to address and dismantle the multiple and intersectional barriers they encounter.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

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