



Advancing Pathways to Neurodivergent Self-Employment

A Resource for Supported Employment Providers

The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We partner with policymakers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. We are founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and Signal49 Research, and are funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

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Help your neurodivergent clients discover self-employment opportunities that leverage their strengths, fit their needs, and create pathways to success.

For many neurodivergent professionals who encounter barriers in traditional workplaces, self-employment is more than an alternative. It can provide a way to work that aligns with their needs, draws on their strengths, and reduces environmental stressors. Yet many supported employment programs do not routinely include self-employment as a career option for clients.

This resource draws on insights from 75 self-employed neurodivergent Canadians and 70 stakeholders in supported employment, adult education, and entrepreneurship. It provides practical, actionable guidance for employment providers who want to better understand the neurodivergent population and confidently support clients who are considering alternative career paths. (See “Key terms for neuroinclusive practice.”)

Key terms for neuroinclusive practice

The **neurodiversity** movement positions differences in thinking, learning, communication, and processing as natural and valuable rather than as deficits.

Neurodivergence refers to having a brain that functions differently from what is considered typical.

Neurodivergent describes people whose cognitive, learning, or communication styles differ from the norm. In this study, the term includes individuals who are autistic, have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or learning disabilities, experience sensory or processing differences, are gifted, or face mental health challenges.

Co-occurring identities and disabilities: Neurodivergent individuals may have co-occurring disabilities or intersecting identities and may access supports across multiple education and employment service streams. As a result, supported employment providers may encounter neurodivergent clients in any program area, not only disability-specific services.

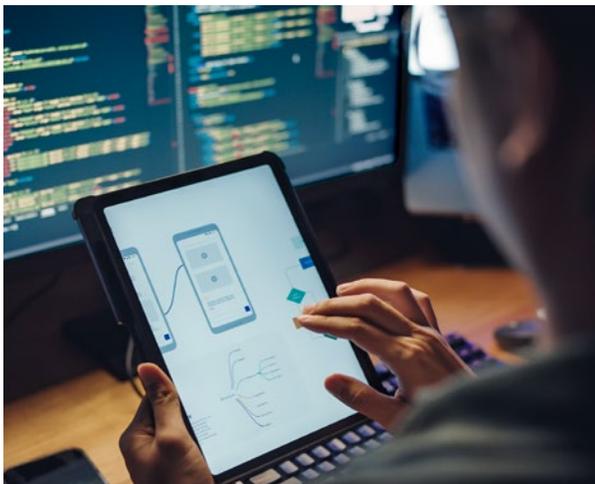


Neurodivergent strengths and entrepreneurial potential

Neurodivergent clients often have unique strengths that can be well suited to small business and freelance opportunities. These unique strengths include:

- **Pattern recognition and deep focus:** Freelance work in data analysis, programming, research, or design.
- **Systems thinking and efficiency:** Businesses that help others plan, organize, or optimize workflows.
- **Problem-solving and persistence:** Ventures in innovation, product development, consulting, or coaching.
- **Creativity and visual thinking:** Opportunities in graphic design, marketing, multimedia production, or handmade products.

“Understand yourself and your skills. They are different for neurodivergent individuals. The exact same skills that are a hindrance or got you in trouble in a traditional workplace may actually be your selling point as an entrepreneur, a unique value proposition for your business. Understanding that difference is the key to whether or not you’ll succeed.”
Neurodivergent entrepreneur and business owner



Neurodivergent diversity: What the data shows

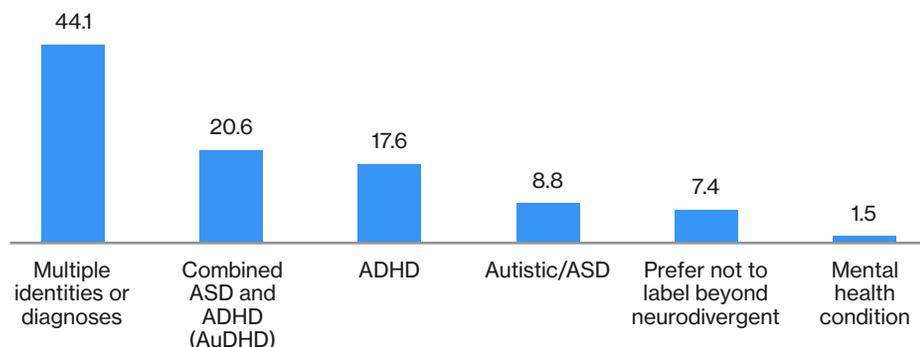
Neurodivergent individuals differ widely in how they think, learn, and work. Many have multiple, overlapping identities (e.g., ADHD + autism + learning disability; see Chart 1), which can lead to:

- varied learning needs and preferences;
- mixed executive function strengths and challenges;
- different levels and types of support needs.

When resources, programs, and training account for this diversity, supported employment providers are better able to meet the needs of a neurodivergent client.

Chart 1

Almost half of participants reported multiple neurodivergent identities or diagnoses (n = 66; per cent)



Notes: ASD (autism spectrum disorder); ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).
Source: Signal49 Research.

Some neurodivergent professionals do not have, or want, a formal diagnosis due to cost, waitlists, stigma, or personal preferences (29 per cent). Accepting self-identification alongside a needs assessment as valid eligibility criteria for services removes unnecessary barriers and ensures that anyone who needs support can access it.

“I did try an accessible entrepreneurship program. They assigned me a business advisor to teach me how to do my financials, but it did not help because of my math learning disability. A lot of the time the supports offered do not align with the disabilities that we have. They forget that some people have learning disabilities coexisting with autism.”

Neurodivergent and disabled identifying sole proprietor



Strengthening neurodivergent self-employment pathways

The following actions can strengthen self-employment pathways by making entrepreneurial supports more inclusive, flexible, and neuroaffirming.

1. Create inclusive training opportunities

Neurodivergent entrepreneurs shared that many mainstream entrepreneurial training programs are not designed with their learning styles, communication preferences, or support needs in mind. Supported employment providers can play a key role in enhancing the accessibility and inclusivity of employment supports for neurodivergent clients.

To strengthen training and support, supported employment organizations and service providers can:

- **Co-design or deliver training with neurodivergent entrepreneurs** to ensure content is relevant, neuroaffirming, and grounded in lived experience.
- **Provide flexible learning formats** such as self-paced modules, written materials, recordings, or virtual options to match a client's processing and energy needs.
- **Break down content into clear, concrete steps** using visual supports, templates, and practical examples rather than abstract or generalized instruction.

- **Integrate executive function supports** by including structured planning tools, guided scheduling, budgeting templates, and optional one-on-one coaching.
- **Offer accessible financial and business administration training** for essential self-employment skills (e.g., creating a business plan, registering a business, filing taxes) that consider diverse learning needs.
- **Create low-barrier entry points**, such as introductory workshops, brief learning modules, guided activities, and microgrants that allow entrepreneurs to pilot products, build skills, or validate a market before scaling. (lower financial risk).
- **Use strengths-based approaches** that assume competence, reduce anxiety, and build trust.

Alongside inclusive supports, participants highlighted several key skills that are critical to building confidence and independence in self-employment. (See “Top skills for self-employment.”)

Top skills for self-employment

In addition to their unique strengths, participants identified five core skills as important to their success as entrepreneurs. Professionals supporting them can focus training and coaching on these areas to help build confidence and independence:

1. **Self-awareness:** Understanding strengths, needs, and preferred work style;
2. **Critical thinking:** Approaching challenges strategically and flexibly;
3. **Drive and dedication:** Maintaining motivation and adapting to change;
4. **Leveraging technology:** Leveraging digital tools to manage tasks, workflow, and client communication;
5. **Business planning:** Setting goals, managing finances, and organizing workflow.



2. Promote inclusive networks and mentorship opportunities

Entrepreneurial spaces – such as conferences, trade shows, association events, co-working spaces, and mentorship programs – often reflect neurotypical social norms. These spaces often involve fast-paced social interactions, unspoken communication expectations, and limited accessibility.

Supported employment providers can help clients navigate these spaces and advocate for greater accessibility by:

- **Preparing clients in advance** with clear expectations, agendas (when available), social scripts, and strategies for managing sensory or communication challenges.
- **Coaching clients on how to participate in structured ways**, such as setting networking goals, identifying priority contacts, or preparing questions ahead of time.
- **Advocating with event organizers or entrepreneurship programs** to request accommodations, such as quiet spaces, written instructions, visual supports, or alternative formats for encouraging participation.
- **Supporting flexible engagement** by helping clients identify virtual, hybrid, or asynchronous options when in-person participation is difficult.

3. Connect neurodivergent clients with low-risk financing options

Traditional financing can feel risky for neurodivergent entrepreneurs due to income instability, challenges with financial management, and potential impacts on government benefits.

Supported employment providers can reduce risk by:

- **Connecting clients with microgrant programs or community-based lenders** that accept nontraditional applicants. Community based organizations like [Rise](#) demonstrate how tailored, low-barrier funding can open doors for entrepreneurs facing mental health or social barriers.
- **Advocating with funders or partner agencies** to develop low-barrier financial supports within supported employment services where possible.
- **Offering or referring clients to benefits navigation support** to understand how self-employment income may affect disability benefits.



4. Participate in and advocate for ecosystem-wide awareness training

Training on neurodivergent strengths, approaches, and working styles helps everyone in the entrepreneurial ecosystem engage with neurodivergent entrepreneurs in ways that recognize their unique abilities, respect their individual needs, and create meaningful opportunities.

To strengthen training and support, service and employment providers can:

- learn about neurodivergent experiences and common workplace barriers;
- foster inclusive communication and collaboration practices;
- provide flexible access to resources, mentorship, and networking;
- advocate for policies and programs that promote equity and accessibility.



Foundational research and resources

This resource is informed by research that aimed to identify best practices for accessible self-employment pathways for neurodivergent Canadians. It's based on a two-phase qualitative study with **145 participants across Canada**, including **75 neurodivergent self-employed Canadians** and additional stakeholders from supported employment and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Learn more about our research on neurodivergent Canadians:

- [*Creating Their Own Path: Unlocking Self-Employment for Neurodivergent Canadians*](#)
- [*Navigating Self-Employment: A Guide for Neurodivergent Entrepreneurs*](#)

Explore our additional resources:

- [*Mapping Self-Employment Resources for Neurodivergent Canadians*](#)



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