



# Creating Their Own Path

Unlocking Self-Employment for Neurodivergent Canadians



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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## Key findings

- Neurodivergent self-employed participants work across diverse sectors, roles, and professions. They represent a broad and dynamic segment of Canada's workforce, challenging stereotypes and highlighting strong entrepreneurial and professional capacities.
- Many neurodivergent participants chose self-employment as a way to leverage their unique strengths, gain autonomy, and work in ways aligned with their values and preferences.
- For some, self-employment became a necessity, arising after having encountered exclusion or barriers in traditional workplaces that have limited access to meaningful and sustainable employment.
- Stakeholders working in the supported employment sector emphasized that current programs continue to prioritize traditional jobs. Self-employment, they said, remains underrecognized as an inclusive pathway for neurodivergent Canadians seeking career support.
- Existing entrepreneurial support programs—including training, mentorship, accelerators/incubators, and coaching—are often inaccessible or misaligned with neurodivergent needs, consequently limiting opportunities for success.
- Financial barriers (e.g., difficulties accessing start-up funding) and persistent stigma regarding neurodivergent skills and capabilities are seen by neurodivergent workers and self-employment stakeholders as key obstacles to sustainable self-employment.

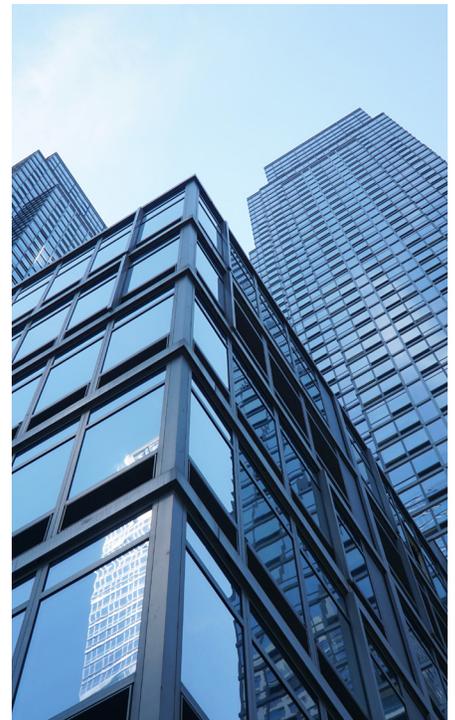


## Actionable insights

Creating inclusive opportunities for neurodivergent entrepreneurs will require coordinated action from government, education, advocacy networks, and the wider business community. Those who wish to develop and support an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem for neurodivergent Canadians can consider the following:

- 1. Establish neuroinclusive accelerators and incubators:** Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED) in collaboration with provincial/territorial economic development ministries can fund and support accelerators and incubators designed to help neurodivergent entrepreneurs. These programs can provide tailored mentorship, accessible training, and adaptive resources that address diverse cognitive, sensory, and communication needs.
- 2. Champion mentorship and peer networks:** Entrepreneurial support organizations, post-secondary business programs, supported employment programs, and neurodivergent advocacy groups can develop and offer mentorship opportunities and peer networks. These initiatives are best led by people with lived experience, ensuring neurodivergent entrepreneurs receive guidance, skill development, and support grounded in neuroaffirming approaches.
- 3. Provide neuroinclusive networking and business development opportunities:** Municipal governments and entrepreneurial support organizations can organize events and initiatives that accommodate diverse accessibility needs, including sensory-friendly spaces, structured networking sessions, and asynchronous or virtual options to support varied communication and processing styles.
- 4. Develop centralized resource hubs:** ISED, in collaboration with chambers of commerce and entrepreneurial support organizations, can establish centralized, user-friendly resource hubs for neurodivergent entrepreneurs. Hubs play an important role in consolidating information about accessible programs, services, training, and networking opportunities across Canada.

5. **Implement neurodiversity awareness training:** Business associations, chambers of commerce, and entrepreneurial support organizations can provide neurodiversity awareness training for ecosystem stakeholders. Training and information sharing should be guided and delivered by neurodivergent-led steering groups and training providers to ensure content reflects the lived experience, needs, and priorities of the neurodivergent community.
6. **Expand experiential learning to include self-employment:** Post-secondary leaders, together with career services, can develop internships, co-ops, project-based learning, and mentorship opportunities focused on self-employment. These hands-on experiences can help neurodivergent learners build skills, test ideas, and gain confidence in running sustainable ventures.
7. **Integrate self-employment into K-12 career education:** Provincial and territorial ministries of education and school boards can incorporate self-employment into K-12 career education during curriculum development cycles, promoting access to inclusive and alternative career pathways.
8. **Reform disability benefits:** Employment and Social Development Canada together with provincial/territorial social service ministries, can raise income thresholds and reform clawback policies for disability benefits. This would enable neurodivergent entrepreneurs who receive this support to increase earnings without losing essential benefits during start-up periods.
9. **Restore and expand income stability programs:** Provincial and territorial social service ministries can implement, restore, or expand provincial basic income initiatives that provide income stability during self-employment start-up periods. These programs could help reduce financial risk and enable neurodivergent entrepreneurs to pursue self-employment with greater confidence.
10. **Prioritize accessible financing:** ISED, in collaboration with banks, credit unions, and other financial institutions, could support programs providing low-interest loans and grants for neurodivergent entrepreneurs. Such initiatives would help reduce financial risks and improve access to start-up capital.



# Empowering neurodivergent potential

Neurodivergent Canadians continue to face barriers to traditional employment.<sup>1</sup> This leaves valuable skills underused in the labour market.

As Canada grapples with critical skills gaps<sup>2</sup> and strives to enhance productivity and prosperity,<sup>3</sup> neurodivergent underemployment represents a missed opportunity to tap into a diverse and skilled talent pool.

Self-employment offers a powerful yet largely underexplored solution for increasing the workforce participation of neurodivergent Canadians. By enabling autonomy, flexibility, and alignment with individual strengths, self-employment can unlock new opportunities for innovation, economic participation, and professional fulfillment.<sup>4</sup>

To better understand the pathways and barriers to self-employment for neurodivergent Canadians, we conducted focus groups and interviews with 75 neurodivergent Canadians engaged in this type of work. These were complemented by interviews with 31 stakeholders working within entrepreneurship and supported employment, offering system-level perspectives on barriers to and opportunities for inclusion.

Preliminary insights from these conversations were discussed in follow-up focus groups with 39 leaders and professionals across the entrepreneurial, supported employment, and policy landscape. This collaborative process allowed for deeper exploration of the challenges and helped shape practical solutions rooted in the current system's realities, ensuring they are feasible and impactful.

The diverse and actionable insights presented here are meant to advance inclusion in self-employment and to create more-meaningful and sustainable opportunities for neurodivergent engagement in the Canadian workforce.

## Defining key terms

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 ADHD or learning disabilities, experience sensory or processing differences, are gifted, or face mental health challenges.

The **supported employment sector** refers to programs and services that help people with disabilities or diverse support needs find and maintain paid work through individualized assistance and inclusive workplace practices.

**“Neurodivergence is not a disability. It’s not that you can’t do something, you just inherently do something very differently from how the traditional system expects you to. [Neurotypical] expectations are what is disabling.”**

**Entrepreneurial program manager**

1 Hutchison, *Breaking Down Barriers: Improving the Workplace Experience for Neurodivergent Canadians*.

2 Conference Board of Canada, *The Skills and Productivity: Which Skills Shortages Are Impacting Canadian Productivity?*

3 Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, “Mandate Letter,” May 2025.

4 Klangboonkrong and Baines, “Disability entrepreneurship research: Critical reflection through the lens of individual opportunity nexus.”

## Defining self-employment and entrepreneurship

**Self-employment** is working for oneself, including operating a business, farm, or professional practice, alone or in a partnership that can be either incorporated or unincorporated.<sup>5</sup>

**Entrepreneurship** is a concept that generally implies innovation and the goal of creating and growing a business.<sup>6</sup>

While entrepreneurs are generally self-employed, not all self-employed individuals are entrepreneurs.

## Why self-employment?

**Self-employment presents unique opportunities for neurodivergent Canadians to harness their individual strengths, set flexible schedules, and design work environments that align with their needs.**

Statistics Canada does not collect data on Canadians who identify as neurodivergent, and estimating this population is difficult due to limited data on adult prevalence and research that is largely focused on single diagnoses (e.g., ADHD, autism).

Although we lack specific data on the number of neurodivergent individuals in Canada, existing Canadian data does help us to estimate prevalence:

- Approximately 2 per cent of Canadian children and youth aged 1 to 17 years have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.<sup>7</sup>
- It is estimated that 4 to 6 per cent of adults and 5 to 7 per cent of children in Canada have ADHD.<sup>8,9</sup>
- 5.6 per cent of Canadians report having a learning disability.<sup>10</sup>

These incidence rates suggest that a substantial portion of Canadians are neurodivergent, underscoring the need for inclusive, purpose-built employment opportunities that leverage their strengths and improve their employment outcomes.

The neurodivergent individuals we spoke with followed diverse paths to transform their strengths into sustainable work. Their experiences highlight the

wide range of skills and the meaningful contributions they make to the Canadian economy. Their contributions span across sectors, including:

- **Knowledge and professional services:** advisors, consultants, grant writers, researchers, speakers, and advocates;
- **Employment services:** career advisors, life coaches, neurodivergent employment service providers, and corporate neurodiversity trainers;
- **Creatives and makers:** artists, creators, designers, and photographers;
- **Educational services:** tutors, alternative and outdoor education providers, specialized skills instructors, and educational content creators;
- **Mental health services:** therapists, counsellors, social workers, psychologists, and recovery and wellness service providers;
- **Business and digital services:** retailers, administrative and virtual assistants, IT support specialists, media and marketing specialists, and social media content creators;
- **Skilled trades:** horticulture specialists, culinary workers, and craftspeople;
- **Gig economy work:** rideshare drivers and food and grocery deliverers.

5 Statistics Canada, "Data and definitions."

6 Statistics Canada.

7 Public Health Agency of Canada, "Autism Spectrum Disorder: Highlights from the 2019 Canadian health survey on children and youth."

8 Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada, "About ADHD."

9 Espinet and others, "A review of Canadian Diagnosed ADHD Prevalence."

10 Statistics Canada, "Canadians with learning, developmental and memory disabilities."



The stories participants shared highlight self-employment as a powerful and inclusive pathway, one that empowers neurodivergent individuals to thrive on their own terms while enriching Canada’s labour market with diverse skills, perspectives, and innovation.

## Self-employment as a preferred choice

The majority of neurodivergent individuals we spoke with identified the ability to leverage their unique strengths—such as creativity, pattern recognition, hyperfocus, and attention to detail—as central to their success in self-employment. Many noted that self-employment suits “spiky” skill profiles, where pronounced strengths coexist with pronounced challenges.<sup>11</sup> While these profiles are common among neurodivergent individuals, they can make traditional employment difficult, as workplaces often expect consistent performance across a wide range of tasks. Participants emphasized, however, that these same traits frequently drive the innovation and unconventional thinking that are essential to entrepreneurial success.

**“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, I think, is the key to whether or not you’ll succeed.”**

**Neurodivergent entrepreneur and business owner**

Some participants highlighted the flexibility of self-employment as a key advantage. They value being able to set their own pace, to structure tasks around energy levels or health needs, and to charge by deliverables rather than by hours as key factors contributing to their success.

**“I get to pursue my special interests, my passions, the way that works for me, not for somebody else. I get to be more flexible with my needs and be able to accommodate myself better than someone else could because I understand myself and what I need.”**

**Neurodivergent sole-proprietor and consultant**

**“I don’t have to work based on hours. If one day something took forever, it didn’t matter. The client still paid the same, so I didn’t feel like I was penalizing anyone. If another day I am really efficient, I’m not penalized either. I am paid for the value of my work, not the hours, allowing me to follow my energy and adapt as needed.”**

**Neurodivergent sole proprietor**

For many participants, self-employment is more than a livelihood—it has provided a platform for meaningful impact. It has enabled them to turn traits once criticized in traditional workplaces into “catalysts for change,” creating businesses that improve inclusion, accessibility, and support for the neurodivergent community. The majority of self-employed participants drew on skills and insights gained from conventional employment to shape ventures that meet these needs. One participant described this as being able to work “both for and as myself.”

**“Another advantage [to self-employment] is that others in the social service field or mental wellness field can see that someone (me) with neurodivergence has their own business and is willing to be a catalyst for change.”**

**Neurodivergent business owner, educator, and content creator**

<sup>11</sup> Weinburg and Doyle, “Psychology at work: Improving wellbeing and productivity in the workplace.”; Bennett and Gibb, *Entrepreneurship, neurodiversity & gender: Exploring opportunities for enterprise and self-employment as pathways to fulfilling lives*.

## Self-employment as a last resort

While many neurodivergent participants described choosing self-employment as a deliberate and empowering choice, some arrived there out of necessity—after having felt excluded or “pushed” out of the traditional workforce.

These latter participants emphasized that traditional workplaces often expected them to conform to neurotypical norms. Rigid expectations sometimes led to workplace bullying and harassment, denial of accommodations, and being perceived as a less valuable employee. As a result, many felt they faced limited career and advancement options, with self-employment emerging as the most, and at times the only, viable path to success and fulfillment.

**“I loved my job at [autism organization]. I’d see 200 families a year and do presentations. A posting to deliver all training came up. Everyone in my office said to me, “You’re going to apply for it, right?” because I always received great feedback. But I was so anxious about having to validate my abilities in a panel interview. I requested accommodation. I told them that it is best practice in many situations to do a demonstration task, to show I can do the job, but it was refused.”**

**Neurodivergent self-employed consultant working with the autism community**

Family and caregiving responsibilities also pushed some participants toward self-employment. Neurodivergent parents—often raising neurodivergent children—described how the need to juggle advocacy, education, and support system navigation for their families made traditional work difficult. For a few participants, self-employment, and the flexibility and autonomy that comes with it, became the only way to balance caregiving with earning an income.

**“I became an entrepreneur out of necessity. I was fired for pushing for accommodation for myself and others after my diagnosis. Then my son who is autistic and non-speaking was kicked out of his daycare a few months later. So that’s why I started my business, to survive.”**

**Neurodivergent sole proprietor**

## How support needs shape career decisions

Differences in the level of the support needs emerged as a key factor influencing whether self-employment was a preferred choice or a necessity.

Those with higher support needs, often diagnosed in childhood or adolescence, described encountering barriers early in life—such as fewer opportunities to build work experience, low expectations from educators or employers, and limited access to workplace accommodations. These persistent barriers meant that self-employment often became a necessary alternative rather than a chosen path for this group.

**“In the autism community, a lot of teachers and parents are not presuming competence, they’re not giving [autistic youth] opportunities to try things and fail when they are young. And now they are 17-year-old teenagers who have never been given a chance to make their own decisions and see what they’re good at. There’s a lot of learned helplessness. So then how do you expect them to go out and go to university or go get a job? It’s impossible. They’re terrified.”**

**Neurodivergent consultant working with the autism community**

In contrast, participants with lower or minimal support needs, typically diagnosed in adulthood, had usually spent years navigating traditional workplaces. Their later diagnoses often came after periods of burnout, underemployment, or masking to meet neurotypical expectations. As a result, their move to self-employment was more often a strategic choice—a way to regain autonomy, align work with their strengths, and avoid the constraints of conventional employment.

**“I’ve always wanted to be creating my own work versus trying to function in the system, where I have to be somewhere for 9 am every day. Where I’ve never really been fully respected or supported in the job environment. I found that working for other people, I was always underpaid, underappreciated.”**

**Neurodivergent artist and business owner**



## Barriers to neurodivergent self-employment

Self-employment offers considerable potential for many. Yet, participants identified systemic barriers embedded in Canada’s supported employment programs and policies, as well as the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem, that constrain access to these opportunities.

### Self-employment is overlooked

Several participants highlighted that supported employment programs in Canada, which help people facing work barriers—such as disabilities, health conditions, or limited experience<sup>12</sup>—often fall short of meeting neurodivergent needs.

The majority of stakeholders working within or alongside these programs noted they are built around traditional employment models, inadvertently overlooking the unique skills and strengths of neurodivergent workers. According to them, self-employment is rarely presented as a viable career option for neurodivergent Canadians seeking career support.

**“There is nothing encouraging in our system for self-employment or well-organized enough to be useful. The not-for-profit system are the gatekeepers to programs, so if you need support, you need to work with [supported employment]. But once you’re there, they don’t have appropriate experience with entrepreneurship.”**  
**Neurodivergent employment program administrator, non-profit sector**

### Limiting beliefs

Several stakeholders observed that those supporting neurodivergent job seekers (e.g., supported employment programs, post-secondary career services) can sometimes view self-employment as too risky or complex for neurodivergent individuals. Yet, it is recognized as a viable and empowering pathway for other equity-seeking groups.<sup>13</sup>

They noted that restrictive assumptions about neurodivergent workers’ skills and capacity can unintentionally result in less guidance, fewer resources, and less training for self-employment.

**“We shouldn’t design programs and supports thinking that there’s a higher chance of client failure because they’re neurodivergent. That’s the criticism I have of many well-meaning supported employment programs. They require us to couch language and be overly careful to make everything ‘work out.’ But that’s not the reality of employment and self-employment for anyone, neurodivergent or not.”**

**Director of employment services, non-profit sector**

Some participants further highlighted that stigma regarding neurodivergent skills and capabilities can contribute to a narrow definition of success within employment programs. They explained that success is often measured primarily by job placement, without always considering whether the role aligns with a person’s strengths, interests, or potential for growth.

<sup>12</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada, “Employment Strategy for Canadians with Disabilities”; Canadian Association for Supported Employment, “Supported Employment Past, Present, and Future.”

<sup>13</sup> Tiasakul, Abdulzaher, and Bazan, “Accessibility of entrepreneurship training programs for individuals with disabilities.”

**“Supported employment organizations trot [neurodivergent people] out for photo ops as ‘success stories,’ like this one young adult who is multilingual and reads in multiple languages. I spoke to his mom about what he does for work. He’s in the back organizing products on shelves. He’s been given more and more responsibility within the warehouse but is still making minimum wage.”**

**Parent of a higher-support-needs neurodivergent young adult**

Many participants noted that this bias begins early in education and persists into adulthood, reinforcing a limited view of what neurodivergent individuals can achieve. When neurodivergent individuals internalize these limiting beliefs, they may restrict their own aspirations and confidence to pursue independent careers. Participants emphasized the importance of shifting from a deficit-based perspective to one that assumes competence when supporting neurodivergent job seekers and future workers.

**“We need visibility without pity. Don’t see us just as disability inspiration, the one who somehow overcame their challenges. Our challenges may be the secret to big innovation. We are business owners and professionals and people with specialized skills just like anyone else.”**

**Neurodivergent sole proprietor**

## Inaccessible training and support

The majority of neurodivergent participants identified the lack of accessible and inclusive training and support as another barrier for aspiring entrepreneurs. Current support programs—including coaching, mentorship, accelerators/incubators, and business resources—are primarily designed for neurotypical brains. They often rely on generalized learning models, fixed pacing, and one-size-fits-all approaches that can overlook diverse learning needs.

**“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**

One area emerged as both a particular concern and a potential avenue for support and development, if appropriately designed. For neurodivergent individuals, executive function challenges—such as difficulty with planning, organization, time management, and self-regulation—are often more pronounced.<sup>14</sup> Executive function skills are essential for successfully managing daily business operations like budgeting, scheduling, and meeting deadlines. Yet, neurodivergent individuals told us that when supports were available in these areas, they often missed the mark.

**“I was told I should go to this priority and time management class, but it was built with neurotypical cues, which didn’t work. A lot of these tips and tricks that [neurotypical] people give us don’t work for the way that we work. We need supports for us, designed by us.”**

**Neurodivergent sole proprietor**

## Financial risks and funding gaps

Many neurodivergent participants and stakeholders described financial barriers as an obstacle to self-employment. Unlike traditional employment, self-employment requires individuals to manage irregular income without access to benefits such as paid sick leave, health insurance, or workplace accommodations. For some neurodivergent individuals, these supports are not optional—they are essential for managing healthcare needs, accessing therapies, maintaining predictable routines, and navigating sensory or cognitive demands. Without them, the uncertainty and instability of self-employment can pose risks to both financial security and overall wellbeing, making self-employment a less viable or sustainable path.

<sup>14</sup> Doyle and McDowall, “Coaching for neurodiversity.”; Pasarín-Lavín and others “Neurodivergent students. A continuum of skills with an emphasis on creativity and executive functions.”

Some stakeholders also pointed to a notable systemic gap: While some equity-seeking groups can access targeted grants or funding programs,<sup>15</sup> there are no comparable financial supports specifically designed for neurodivergent entrepreneurs. These stakeholders added that misconceptions about neurodivergent individuals' abilities and the absence of neuroinclusive financial resources further limit access to support. Consequently, many self-employed neurodivergent participants reported being unable to access the financial and institutional resources that other entrepreneurs rely on.

**“Because there is no neurodivergent-specific entrepreneurship fund, they have to navigate a system that’s not built for them, that doesn’t have any supports in it for them. The best we can do right now is to encourage them to take a look at current programs or supports or whatever it is that exists and then help them navigate it as best we can.”**

**Neurodivergent SME owner working with neurodivergent clients**



## Building a neuroinclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem

Participants highlighted strategies to improve access to self-employment for neurodivergent Canadians, such as inclusive training, flexible programming, and tailored financial supports.

These approaches were developed through collaboration with leaders and professionals working across the relevant systems—supported employment, entrepreneurial support, government, and education—to ensure practicality and feasibility.

### Government assistance and financing

Many neurodivergent participants noted that when starting their businesses, they were relying on social assistance or other income supports to cover basic needs. However, current policies can create unintended barriers to growth.

Some participants expressed that income thresholds and dollar-for-dollar clawback policies for disability benefits mean that even small increases in earnings can reduce or eliminate benefits. Rather than supporting entrepreneurship, this structure can discourage risk-taking and business growth—a concern echoed by many professionals in policy and supported employment.

**Reforming social assistance policies** to allow for a gradual, supportive tapering of benefits was highlighted by stakeholders as a critical step to better enable neurodivergent Canadians to pursue self-employment.

15 Indigenous Services Canada, “Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Program: Access to Capital”; Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, “Black Entrepreneurship Program Ecosystem Fund.”

Some neurodivergent participants described provincial programs offering guaranteed basic income specifically for entrepreneurs as their most important support. These programs, available for a limited period when starting a business, provided a financial safety net that allowed individuals to focus on building a strong foundation rather than making decisions based on immediate financial need. However, participants noted that many of these programs are no longer available.

Professionals in policy and supported employment reinforced this point, emphasizing that **broader universal basic income programs** could play an important role in improving long-term employment outcomes for neurodivergent individuals.

**“Government assisted income for people with disabilities, if they reach a certain monthly cap, it’s a dollar-for-dollar clawback. It really disincentivizes them to try to grow any further. Adjustments to the clawback would really help, both with self-employment and general employment.”**  
**Supported employment coordinator, autism services**

**“My greatest support was the Soutien aux Travailleurs Autonomes (STA).<sup>16</sup> The STA allowed me to start my business and build a stronger foundation without having to make decisions just to bring in money. I could focus on discovering what I really wanted to do and sometimes say ‘no’ to things, if they didn’t align, just to eat and pay rent. I’m not even sure I’d be self-employed without it.”**  
**Neurodivergent business owner**

Access to traditional financing also presents challenges. Some participants noted how high-interest loans from financial institutions place disproportionate risk on neurodivergent entrepreneurs. These risks stem from factors such as income instability, difficulties with financial management, and limited access to tailored financial guidance. In contrast, **low-interest loans and grants** were consistently identified as more accessible and effective. Neurodivergent participants highlighted that these supports allowed them to launch and sustain businesses without taking on excessive financial risk.

## Case Study: Reducing barriers to self-employment support

Rise is a national organization that supports people with mental health and addiction challenges to achieve social and economic inclusion through entrepreneurship. It provides **low-interest loans**, free training, mentorship, and tailored supports to help Canadians build small businesses and strengthen their communities. Importantly, Rise programs do not require a formal diagnosis, ensuring access for those unable to obtain one.

## Targeted start-up programs

Many neurodivergent participants and stakeholders emphasized the value of **targeted start-up programs** (e.g., accelerators, incubators, and entrepreneurship workshops) that address accessibility and learning needs. Modelled after initiatives for other equity-seeking groups—such as women, Indigenous peoples, racialized communities, and persons with disabilities<sup>17</sup>—these programs can provide tailored coaching, access to peer networks, and resources that support neurodivergent learning styles, communication preferences, and strengths.

Beyond supporting individual entrepreneurs, these programs can play a broader role in strengthening the entrepreneurial ecosystem by fostering inclusion, diversifying participation, and expanding access to innovation and economic opportunity.

<sup>16</sup> Support for Self-Employed Workers.

<sup>17</sup> Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada, “Women Entrepreneurship Strategy”; Pacific Economic Development Canada, “Entrepreneurs with Disabilities Program in British Columbia.”

## Case Study: Pilot Program for Autistic Innovators, Systemisers, and Social Entrepreneurs

In 2025, the Australian social enterprise Community Capacity Builders piloted a [program supporting autistic participants](#) in applying their innate ways of thinking to entrepreneurship. This program was delivered online at a self-paced rate with twice-monthly facilitated sessions and, according to participant feedback, its success lay in being accessible, neuroaffirming, and grounded in lived experience.

## Mentorship and peer networks

Supportive mentorship and peer networks were identified as key components of a neuroinclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem. Several participants emphasized that **mentorship** led by successful neurodivergent entrepreneurs offers credibility, practical guidance, and authentic understanding, thereby helping neurodivergent entrepreneurs navigate challenges and strengthen skills. Neurodivergent **peer networks** were also seen as valuable as they create spaces for knowledge sharing, collaboration, and mutual support.

**“I felt pretty anchorless professionally until I joined this neurodivergent therapist group. We meet once a month but then have also started to do work for and help each other. For example, if one of us is struggling with something in our practice, we can contract it out to one of us who is actually good at that particular thing. It’s been my biggest support.”**

**Neurodivergent self-employed clinical practitioner**

One participant described how their organization is creating supportive communities for neurodivergent entrepreneurs:

**“One of the things that we implemented was a closed group for [entrepreneurial] mentorship and networking. We understand that especially with our neurodivergent clients, they might need a check in, get the services they need, leave, and then come back and say, ‘You know what? Now I’m having trouble with bookkeeping.’ We meet them we’re they’re at.”**

**Program manager for entrepreneurial services, equity seeking clients**

Chambers of commerce were highlighted as valuable partners for developing inclusive professional development programs, offering access to mentorship opportunities, training resources, and platforms to amplify the visibility of neurodivergent entrepreneurs.

## Case Study: Recognizing neurodivergence within the business community

The [Colorado Neurodiversity Chamber of Commerce](#) is a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing neurodivergent representation in business. The Chamber provides virtual strengths-based training for neurodivergent entrepreneurs in common areas of challenge, such as communication and networking, executive functioning, financial management, self-advocacy, and burnout prevention.

## Networking and business development

Some participants emphasized the need for **more-inclusive networking and business development** opportunities. Traditional professional environments—such as conferences, trade shows, association meetings, co-working spaces, and supply chain interactions—often reflect neurotypical norms. This can include fast-paced social interactions, unspoken communication expectations, and limited accessibility.

Inclusive alternatives that accommodate diverse needs—such as sensory-friendly spaces, structured or small-group networking sessions, asynchronous or virtual engagement platforms, and flexible participation formats—were seen as important for fostering meaningful connections, collaboration, and professional growth.

“Help us build our path because self-employment can be the most valuable way of helping somebody who’s disabled on assistance. Working 40 hours a week for those with a disability or who are autistic can be challenging. Can’t we help guide them to learn how to create work? Small business is such a huge driver of the economy, but it’s an area that we are locked out of.”  
**Neurodivergent sole proprietor and employment coach**

### Case Study: Creating inclusive business communities and supply chains

The [Inclusive Workplace and Supply Council of Canada \(IWSCC\)](#) is the national certifying body for disabled- and veteran-owned businesses. Serving as a vital network, it connects peers, organizations, and diverse suppliers with the public sector to expand opportunities for its members. In the fall of 2025, the IWSCC launched The Canadian Accessible Marketplace, linking Canadians with disabled- and veteran-owned businesses to advance accessibility and inclusion in the business community.

### Centralized resources hubs

Some self-employed participants highlighted the value of **centralized, easy-to-navigate resource hubs** for neurodivergent entrepreneurs. Participants described how these hubs could consolidate information on self-employment programs, supports, and training, making it simpler to find relevant resources. Participants also stressed that these initiatives should address barriers to formal diagnoses—such as costs and limited availability—and extend access to individuals without formal diagnoses. This ensures that support is available to all who could benefit, not only to those able to navigate lengthy or expensive assessment processes.

### Case Study: Creating a one-stop shop for information and resources

The online [Neurodiversity Hub](#) is a community of practice, based in Australia, that engages with broad stakeholders to create and promote a sustainable employment ecosystem of neurodivergent young adults. On its Innovation and Entrepreneurship page, the hub offers substantive, neuroinclusive, and supportive information, guidance, and connection to self-employment knowledge, skills, and partners in a highly accessible format.

### Ecosystem-wide awareness training

Most participants emphasized the value of targeted **neurodiversity education and training** for all actors in the entrepreneurial ecosystem—including those working in supported employment programs, higher education, accelerators/incubators, and policy.

Training on neurodiversity, accessibility, and equity ensures stakeholders can engage with neurodivergent entrepreneurs in ways that recognize strengths, respect needs, and create real opportunities for success. Participants stressed that without this awareness, well-intentioned programs or supports may inadvertently replicate the barriers they seek to remove.



### **Case Study: Creating partnerships to address stigma and systemic exclusion**

To address gaps in neuroinclusivity in Canada's entrepreneurial ecosystem, the Sinneave Family Foundation partnered with [Concordia's District 3 Incubator](#) to deliver neurodiversity training that goes beyond surface-level inclusion. The sessions focus on redesigning environments, programs, communication, and expectations through a neuroinclusive lens, equipping staff, program designers, and communities with the knowledge and skills required to enhance inclusion.

### **Case Study: Post-secondary and social enterprise partnerships**

Launched in 2025, the [Sapphire program](#) was designed by students for autistic post-secondary students. Expanding on traditional career readiness models, it adds a self-employment module alongside career and workplace training, delivered through an inclusive, interactive platform. Participants also receive one-on-one coaching and access to a peer network via [ND Connect](#), a neurodivergent-owned social enterprise and social media platform for neurodivergent students and professionals.

### **Early exposure to self-employment**

Several participants noted that self-employment is rarely presented as an option in traditional career guidance settings, leaving many unaware of its potential as a viable pathway. Introducing self-employment and entrepreneurial pathways during K-12 education can help students explore diverse career opportunities, develop practical skills, and challenge limiting beliefs about their professional potential.

Some participants emphasized the value of experiential learning for exposing students to self-employment as an achievable pathway. These opportunities can allow students to test ideas, run small-scale projects, or manage simulated business ventures in a low-risk environment. Examples include student-run microenterprises, freelancing projects, entrepreneurship workshops, or mentorship programs where learners can shadow self-employed professionals.

## Appendix A

# Methodology

### Aggregate terms used in this report

Throughout the report, we use the following terms to quantify the percentage of interview/focus group participants echoing similar sentiments:

**Table 1**

Aggregate terms used in this report  
(per cent)

Aggregate terms	Percentage
Some/a few/several	< 30
Many	30–40
Almost half	41–49
Half	50
Most/majority/over half	over 50

Source: Signal49 Research.

### About the research

This project was designed to identify best practices for creating accessible self-employment pathways for neurodivergent entrepreneurs. By providing evidence-informed insights for policymakers and organizations, this research aims to inform strategies that better support the workforce participation and success of neurodivergent Canadians.

A total of 145 individuals from across Canada took part in the study, which was conducted in two phases:

#### 1. Phase one

- Seventy-five neurodivergent individuals pursuing or engaged in self-employment participated in one of 16 online focus groups (n=50) or in a one-on-one interview (n=26).
- Thirty-one leaders and professionals from supported employment and the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem participated in individual interviews.
- These conversations aimed to better understand the barriers and opportunities neurodivergent individuals face in pursuing and sustaining self-employment.

#### 2. Phase two

- Thirty-nine stakeholders, including leaders and professionals representing the entrepreneurial, supported employment, and policy sectors participated in five focus groups. This phase built on the insights gained from phase one by sharing and discussing

preliminary findings with participants. The focus groups provided an opportunity for collaborative group discussions, enabling participants to reflect on, validate, and refine emerging themes. This process allowed for deeper exploration of the challenges identified in phase one and helped to shape practical, contextually grounded solutions that reflect the realities of the current system—ensuring they are both feasible and impactful.

- Six participants participated in both phase 1 and phase 2.

For both phases, focus groups were completed in English, while individual interviews were offered in either English or French.

Transcripts from all focus groups (n=47) and interviews (n=56) were systematically analysed, yielding empirically derived findings to guide policy and ecosystem change.

### Ethics

The research design, protocols, and materials were reviewed and approved by Veritas, a third-party independent research ethics board. All participant responses and information were treated as confidential. To protect identities, interview transcripts were anonymized and delinked from participant records prior to analysis. Participants were informed of these protections and of their voluntary right to withdraw from the study at any time.

### Participant recruitment

Recruitment for this study encompassed all Canadian provinces and territories, targeting the following groups:

- Neurodivergent Canadians who were currently self-employed or working towards self-employment. A clinical diagnosis was not required to participate, recognizing that many individuals face barriers to obtaining formal assessment and that self-identification provides a meaningful basis for understanding neurodivergent experiences.<sup>1</sup>
- Self-employment stakeholders including leaders and professionals working in the following areas:
  - supported employment (e.g., employment coaches, case/program managers, directors);
  - higher education (e.g., career advisors, employment coaches, instructors, faculty, and administrators);
  - entrepreneurial/business support programs and accelerators/incubators (e.g., program/operations managers and or directors);
  - policy professionals in the areas of employment, equity diversity and inclusion, and disability. (e.g., analysts, legislative aides, government relations coordinators, directors).

1 Overton and others, "Understanding the self-identification of autism in adults: A scoping review."

We identified potential participants by:

- sharing a call to participate through LinkedIn, our marketing newsletter, partner organizations, non-profit organizations working with neurodivergent clients, and social media;
- conducting internet searches of publicly available email addresses for neurodivergent self-employed Canadians and Canadian self-employment stakeholders;
- asking members of the research team, the research advisory board (RAB; see Acknowledgements), and study participants to recommend or share recruitment materials with their networks.

The research team sent email invitations to potential interviewees over a five-month period (February to June 2025). In total, 332 individuals (107 neurodivergent entrepreneurs and 225 self-employment stakeholders) were contacted by email regarding participation in the study.

The response rate was 44 per cent, resulting in 145 participants.

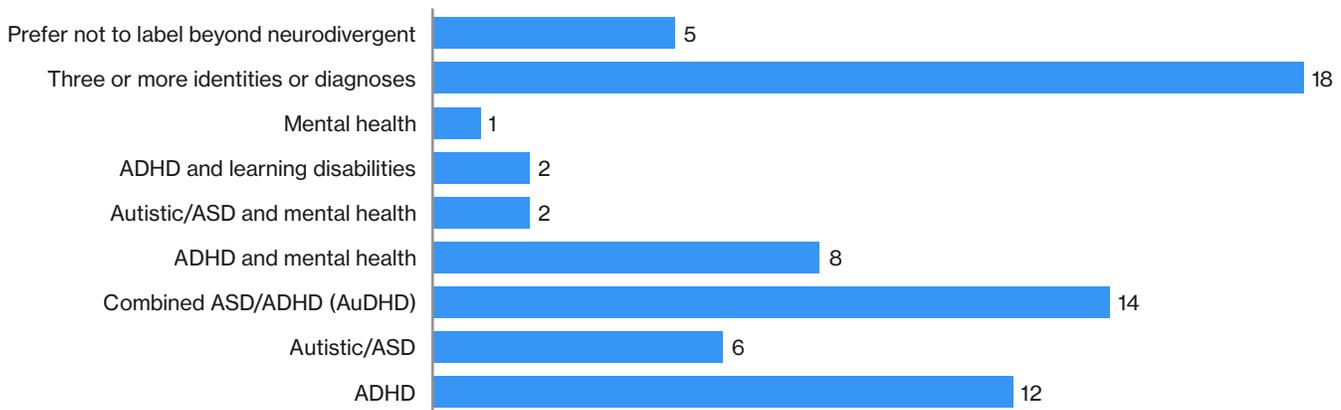
## Sample demographics

### Neurodivergent entrepreneurs

Seventy-five neurodivergent entrepreneurs participated in either a focus group (n=50) or a one-on-one interview (n=25). Of these, 60 were currently self-employed, 14 were working toward self-employment, and one was currently employed while also working toward self-employment. All participants either self-identified as neurodivergent or were clinically diagnosed with at least one neurodivergent identity/condition. Neurodivergent participants were asked to respond to a demographic questionnaire ahead of their scheduled interview/focus group; 68 completed it.

### Chart 1

Neurodivergent identity/diagnosis  
(number of participants, N = 66)



Source: Signal49 Research.

Of those who responded to the questionnaire, the majority had a clinical diagnosis (71.0 per cent ), while the remainder were either awaiting diagnosis (9.0 per cent ) or self-identified as neurodivergent (20.0 per cent).

The breakdown of reported neurodivergent identities/diagnoses is shown in Chart 1.

In terms of gender, 62 per cent of respondents identified as women, 25 per cent as men, 11 per cent as non-binary/gender queer, and 3 per cent chose not to disclose their gender identity.

The geographic breakdown of the sample is shown in Table 2.

### Self-employment stakeholders: phase one

Thirty-one self-employment stakeholders participated in one-on-one interviews during the first phase of data collection. The majority of the interviewed stakeholders worked in the non-profit sector (45 per cent), followed by the private sector (32 per cent ) and higher education (23 per cent).

Although participants were not recruited for their neurodivergent status, more than half of this sample (55 per cent) identified as being neurodivergent and/or as having a disability.

The geographic breakdown of this sample is shown in Table 3.

### Self-employment stakeholders: phase two

Thirty-nine self-employment stakeholders participated in five focus groups during the second phase of data collection. The majority of these participants worked in the non-profit sector (46.0 per cent), followed by the private sector (15.0 per cent), government (13.0 per cent ), higher education (13.0 per cent), and entrepreneurship support (i.e., accelerators/incubators; 13.0 per cent ).

**Table 2**

Geographic Distribution of Participants by Province  
(number of participants, N = 68)

Province	Number of respondents
Alberta	15
British Columbia	15
Manitoba	0
New Brunswick	1
New Foundland and Labrador	0
Nova Scotia	1
Ontario	23
Prince Edward Island	0
Quebec	6
Saskatchewan	5

Source: Signal49 Research.

**Table 3**

Self-employment stakeholders by geographical region  
(number of participants, N = 31)

Province	Number of respondents
Alberta	3
British Columbia	4
Manitoba	3
New Brunswick	0
New Foundland and Labrador	1
Nova Scotia	3
Ontario	12
Prince Edward Island	1
Quebec	3
Saskatchewan	1

Source: Signal49 Research.

## Accessibility and inclusion in the research process

- **Accommodations:** Participants were offered a range of accommodations when accepting an invitation to participate in an interview or focus group. We invited participants to request additional considerations or accommodations that would support their participation. These included receiving the questions in advance, scheduling breaks, slower pacing, writing responses instead of responding orally, and having a support person join the research activity.
- **Compensation:** Neurodivergent self-employed participants were remunerated for their participation in this study, recognizing that many equity-seeking participants face systemic barriers that take up their time, expertise, and lived experiences without recognizing the value associated with having these attributes.
- **Research team:** This research study was conceived and led by a neurodivergent researcher and supported by a neurodiverse research team.
- **Research Advisory Board:** This research study was guided by a neurodiverse research advisory board (RAB) (See “Acknowledgements”) that included members with identities and diagnoses that included autism, ADHD, and learning disabilities.

## Qualitative analysis

Between March and June 2025, the research team conducted virtual focus groups and interviews with participants across Canada. These discussions produced 1,060 pages of transcribed material—over 205,000 words of qualitative data—providing rich insights into the experiences and perspectives of neurodivergent entrepreneurs and stakeholders.

Interviews were coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Initial coding themes were developed based on the research questions and the literature review, followed by an exploratory analysis of the preliminary data. Three researchers independently coded the interview transcripts, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus to ensure consistency in interpretation. Interrater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, which produced a coefficient of 0.84, indicating strong agreement among coders. Themes were then examined according to their frequency and the intensity of the participants' observations.

## Focus group and interview questions

The focus group and interview guides were developed based on existing literature and conversations with stakeholders.

### Sample questions for neurodivergent entrepreneurs included:

1. When or how did you first become aware that self-employment might be a good fit for you?
2. What has been your biggest source of support in your self-employment journey so far?
3. Are there strengths related to your neurodivergent identity that have helped you succeed in self-employment?
4. Are there particular tasks or responsibilities within self-employment that you have found to be particularly challenging as a neurodivergent individual?
5. Are there any types of supports that would be helpful to you right now in your self-employment journey?

### Sample interview questions for phase one self-employment stakeholders included:

6. In your experience, what is the biggest barrier that neurodivergent individuals face when starting or maintaining self-employment?
7. In your work, do you find that the barriers faced by neurodivergent students/clients differ from those of other students/clients from equity seeking groups?
8. Are there any existing supports that you think do a particularly good job at supporting neurodivergent individuals with self-employment?
9. From your perspective, how can business or local community support the inclusion of neurodivergent self-employed individuals?

### Sample focus group questions for phase two self-employment stakeholders included:

10. What are your initial reactions to these findings? [after presenting preliminary findings from phase one]
11. Are there any current policy priorities or mandates that address some of the barriers or challenges identified in this research? Could you describe them?
12. What do you see as the key obstacles in implementing policies to support self-employed neurodivergent individuals, and how can these challenges be addressed?

## Appendix B

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