

# Putting Neurodiversity To Work: A Five-Step Guide



There are approximately 500,000 neurodivergent adults<sup>1</sup> of working age (15–64 years old) in Canada. Eighty-eight per cent of these individuals are underemployed or unemployed. Yet, this talent pool has exceptional potential and is eager to contribute.

The Azrieli Foundation has assembled this action-oriented resource to motivate Canada’s employers to expand their equity, diversity and inclusion efforts to embrace hiring neurodivergent people.



1. The neurodivergent community in North America prefers to use “identity-first” language – that is, to lead with a description, e.g., “autistic person.” This approach understands neurodivergence as an inherent part of an individual’s identity; it is impossible to separate people from their autism, just as it is impossible to separate people from the colour of their skin. The Ontario Human Rights Commission defines a disability as a complex, evolving matter.



# Getting Started

## 1. Connect with those in the know

Specialized services like [Liberty Co](#), [Ready, Willing & Able](#), and [NEUROinclusive Workforce Solutions](#) can coach, guide and support you in enhancing your inclusive employment practices. Their experience and expertise will help employers make the changes needed to create a truly inclusive and accessible workplace – one tailored to meet the needs of all your employees. These services can also help employers understand and communicate the importance of neurodiversity in the workplace and show them how to optimize the contributions of neurodivergent employees.

It is important to consult and collaborate with neurodivergent individuals working in an inclusive employment setting. Doing so helps employers learn from them, understand the barriers they face, and promote the idea that neurodiversity belongs in all sectors and fields – at all levels.

## 2. Speak up and speak out

The neurodivergent population includes people with a wide range of intellectual and developmental disabilities<sup>2</sup> – such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia and Down syndrome. Employers can make several meaningful changes to create an inclusive and comfortable work environment, including developing hiring practices and writing job descriptions encouraging candidates with disabilities to apply.

Processes can also be implemented to make workplace accommodations a constant consideration. This allows employers to create an environment where employees feel they can disclose their disabilities openly. It also improves retention, performance and productivity and ensures others are comfortable applying to the organization.

Consider establishing internal resources like professional and social networks, identifying and solving technology-related challenges, addressing potential

physical and sensory challenges within workplace environments, allowing adaptive clothing policies, and even providing support to help overcome transportation challenges neurodivergent adults sometimes face. Hybrid work policies can also play a positive role in promoting neurodiversity.

2. The term “disability” covers a broad range and degree of conditions. A disability may have been present at birth, caused by an accident, or developed over time. To respect the varying definitions and preferences, the Azrieli Foundation uses identity-first language and “disability” in our work related to the neurodiverse population.

# Getting Started



## **Be intentional in recruiting**

Tailor recruitment initiatives to enable neurodivergent job seekers to find employment where they can make the most of their strengths and creativity. Consider partnering with academic institutions and school boards or using employment agencies that specialize in helping neurodivergent candidates. Experts also recommend adjusting how job interviews are conducted to make candidates feel more comfortable.

## **4. Compensation and opportunity**

Despite the growing number of incentives motivating employers to recruit, retain and promote neurodivergent people, employment rates remain low. Many employees work in positions that underutilize their skill sets or don't provide competitive wages. Employers offering opportunities to neurodivergent employees should examine compensation plans that meet or exceed the minimum wage, provide benefits (including paid vacation and holidays) and provide professional development and career advancement opportunities.

## **5. Make your workplace a place for everyone**

To create an inclusive workplace, office environments must accommodate everyone. Universal design principles can be applied, including providing quiet spaces in open office layouts and addressing fluorescent lighting discomfort. Open concept layouts can also be adjusted to create "low traffic" areas, helping to reduce social anxiety and cater to different work styles. Remote work options, webcams and flexible schedules can also help alleviate stress for neurodivergent employees. These adjustments can enhance the work environment and foster a culture of employee well-being.

# Source Guide

## Accessible Employers

Accessible Employers is led by President's Group, a network of 25 change-driven BC business leaders who are champions for more accessible, inclusive workplaces. Their team works directly with business leaders to support their growth in inclusive employment practices, offering free online resources and online training on the benefits of an inclusive workplace and encouraging leaders to commit to creating accessible employment opportunities.

## The Inclusive Workplace

The Inclusive Workplace is a leading resource hub for up-to-date resources, education and tools that can help:

- Businesses learn how and why to hire inclusively ;
- Job seekers and employees find and keep good jobs and
- Employment agencies and support professionals learn more about supporting individuals.

Creating an inclusive workplace requires a commitment to nurturing an inclusive culture. The resources on this site provide concrete steps for building an inclusive workplace culture, including critical practices for promoting inclusivity, disability awareness training, flexible work and recruitment arrangements, accommodations for employees with disabilities, and working with organizations that specialize in providing employment services for individuals with disabilities.

## Liberty Co

Liberty Co is a consultancy focused on increasing neurodiverse employment with a particular emphasis on autism due to founder Wanda Deschamps' own diagnosis at midlife. Her approach is centered on the IDEA (Inclusion-Diversity-Equity-Accessibility) framework and highlights inclusive leadership, entrepreneurial thinking and employee retention.

## NEUROinclusive Workforce Solutions

NEUROinclusive Workforce Solutions is a free national service offered by The Sinneave Family Foundation. They provide resources and insights to make workplaces more inclusive for neurodivergent team members, assistance for those seeking to enhance their workforce inclusion strategy and policies, opportunities to learn more about neurodiversity in the workplace, support for recruiters looking to diversify their talent pool, and job matching and job search support for prospective neurodivergent employees.

## Ready, Willing & Able (RWA)

RWA is a national partnership of Inclusion Canada (formerly the Canadian Association for Community Living), the Autism Alliance of Canada (formerly Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance), and their member organizations. Funded by the Government of Canada, RWA is designed to increase the labour force participation of people with intellectual disabilities or who are on the autism spectrum. They offer a downloadable 12-page booklet highlighting their work with employers nationwide.

## Worktopia

Worktopia is a national network to change the odds of employment success for neurodivergent people. They offer resources, services and the opportunity to connect with other network members. Resources include short reads providing practical, action-oriented information on inclusive workplaces and neurodiversity, an Employer Quick Guide highlighting strategies and adjustments for each phase of the employment life cycle, and a Neurodiversity Employment Action Guide with links to a variety of toolkits and service providers that can support inclusive hiring.

# Suggested Reading

## Conference Board of Canada: Building Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Workers Thrive

This research was prepared with financial support provided through the Future Skills Centre to help improve the workplace experience for neurodiverse Canadians.

## The MaRS and CIBC Inclusive Design Challenge Research Report

This report includes an overview of the barriers to finding fulfilling work and a journey map to finding meaningful employment.

## Embracing Neurodiversity at Work: How Canadians with Autism Can Help Employers Close the Talent Gap

This resource, prepared by Deloitte and Auticon, focuses on helping companies engage with autistic talent through deployment, education, training, and coaching.

## Workplace Accommodation Consultation Series

The series is a three-part presentation for managers to learn about workplace accommodation, adaptive technology, and accessible procurement in the federal public service. Managers can directly engage with functional experts and ask questions about accommodation-related processes.

## A framework for developing employer's disability confidence

Compiled by Sally Lindsay, Joanne Leck, Winny Shen, Elaine Cagliostro and Jennifer Stinson, this framework explores the concept of disability confidence from two perspectives: employers who hire people with a disability and employees with a disability.

## Help Wanted: Ending Sheltered Work in Canada

Written by the Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society, this resource aims to build

awareness about the ongoing realities of sheltered work across Canada, create alternatives, and build capacity to shift away from this model to fully inclusive employment approaches.

## The advantages and challenges of neurodiversity employment in organizations

This resource, by Anna Krzeminska, Robert D. Austin, Susanne M. Bruyère and Darren Hedley, explores the hiring processes that define talent too narrowly, especially the reliance on job interviews, which are biased against people with atypical manners of interaction.

## Social Return on Investment of an Innovative Employment Option for Persons with Developmental Disabilities

Written by Frances Owen, Jingyu Li, Lisa Whittingham and Jennifer Hope, this resource examines social return on investment to determine the value of program impacts related to quality-of-life changes for enterprise partners and their families.

## Disability as a Source of Competitive Advantage

Published by the Harvard Business Review, this resource suggests that having employees with disabilities in its workforce can build a firm's competitive advantage in four ways: (1) Disabilities often confer unique talents that make people better at particular jobs; (2) The presence of employees with disabilities elevates the culture of the entire organization, making it more collaborative and boosting productivity; (3) A reputation for inclusiveness enhances a firm's value proposition with customers, who become more willing to build long-term relationships with the company; and (4) Being recognized as socially responsible gives a firm an edge in the competition for capital and talent.