



WORKTOPIA™

Assembling a
National Employment Network

Discussion Guide

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Background

Context

The Worktopia Project funded in part by the Government of Canada and under the leadership of the Sinneave Family Foundation and Autism Speaks Canada, brought together 11 leading disability service agencies from across Canada, to deliver employment readiness programs for individuals with autism, over 4 years (2015-2019).

Worktopia programs were designed to build skills to **improve the odds** of employment success. Worktopia served 961 participants and engaged 328 employers across Canada. Of 279 participants surveyed one year after program completion, 32% were employed and 8% had returned to school.

Leaders from participating agencies came together in Toronto in October 2018, to consider how they could extend their work together at the community and **system** level to **change the odds** of employment success. A proposed initiative emerging from the meeting is to assemble a National Employment Network collaboratively focused on **building community capacity** and **informing policy**.

The framework presented on the next page has been drafted to begin a conversation and explore how this network could be extended to other stakeholders with a shared goal to **change the odds** of employment success for people with autism. It offers a position statement of the Network as well as strategies, proposed outcomes and potential activities in moving toward improved employment opportunity and outcomes for Canadian youth and adults with autism.

Additional background information has been provided in Appendix A, including a definition for all words annotated in **blue** throughout the document.

Worktopia National Employment Network Framework

POSITION STATEMENT

It is a human right for all people to benefit from meaningful work

Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
 - Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations General Assembly

GOAL

Changing the odds of employment for individuals with autism

STRATEGIES

Build Community Capacity

- Develop and strengthen knowledge, tools, resources and processes in communities that promote successful employment
- Engage broadly to collaborate on specific actions intended to shift the culture of neurodiversity and employment

Inform Policy

- Collect and disseminate data related to autism and employment
- Use data to build a compelling case that influences change
- Engage in policy dialogue with broad stakeholders

OUTCOMES

For Individuals

- Reduced barriers to labour market participation
- Equal opportunities to contribute skills and talents to workplaces
- Access to credible information and resources

For Employers

- Access to credible information to enable appropriate supports or modifications
- Include and value individuals as employees and co-workers
- Advance accessible and inclusive workplace policy

For Network

- Platform to share knowledge and community based learnings
- Platform to network and collaborate
- Platform to consolidate national data
- Access to credible information to use in policy dialogue

For Families

- Access to credible information to contribute to policy dialogue
- Access to credible information to enable appropriate supports

For Policy Makers

- Policy dialogue informed by national data set
- Engaged employers leading inclusive employment policy
- Tangible activities focused on shifting culture of neurodiversity and employment
- Access to credible information to inform policy

ACTIVITIES

- Invite broad sectoral network including 1st person perspective to assemble network
- Identify specific initiatives intended to shift the culture of neurodiversity and employment
- Hear from and support employers to advance accessible and inclusive policy
- Create consensus on what relevant data is needed to support policy dialogue (by stakeholder group)
- Provide data to stakeholder groups to inform policy dialogue

Invitation

We welcome your engagement as we move forward to co-design a National Employment Network with a shared goal to **change the odds** of **employment** success for people with autism.

The meeting being convened on April 1, 2019 in Ottawa will focus on discussing the strategies identified in the draft Worktopia National Employment Network Framework (page 2), as well as offer an opportunity to identify other priorities that would benefit from the Network's collective attention. The intent of this meeting is to provide a forum to share your experience, knowledge and thoughts related to advancing **labour force participation** for autistic adults. The highlights of this initial discussion will be captured and shared with meeting attendees and other interested stakeholders.

Guiding principles that inform the approach and work of this network are:

- **Person Centered:** ensure every person is respected, acknowledged to have insight, and seen as an equal network member in planning, developing and identifying priorities to advance the shared goal of changing the odds for employment success.
- **Collaborative:** open to engagement of diverse stakeholders to foster connections and build relationships that catalyze opportunities for people to work together in achieving results.
- **Respectful:** ensure that stakeholders' unique and diverse perspectives, time and contributions are valued.
- **Outcome Driven:** identify and use data to help make decisions and to prioritize efforts and activities.

Meet the Conveners

The Sinneave Family Foundation

The Sinneave Family Foundation (Sinneave) is a charitable operating foundation, created in 2008 to address the challenges experienced by emerging adults with autism.

Sinneave's **vision** is that individuals with autism are supported in the transition to adulthood to realize their highest quality of life.

Sinneave aims to build a case that will influence practice and policy discussions and result in **improved outcomes** for youth and adults with autism.

Our work includes providing services and collaborating with partners in activities focused on enhancing transition support, sharing promising practices, building system capacity and fostering policy development in the areas of **continuing education, employment, and independent living**.

We aim to be **collaborative, respectful, innovative, and accountable** in our work, promoting confidence in Sinneave as an ethical, credible, and trusted advisor and facilitator in the field of autism. We leverage our shared impact for **sustainable** change.

Autism Speaks Canada

Autism Speaks is enhancing lives today and building a spectrum of solutions for tomorrow.

Autism Speaks Canada is dedicated to promoting solutions, across the spectrum and throughout the lifespan, for the needs of individuals with autism and their families by supporting and working with community partners; enhancing resources and services; increasing understanding, acceptance and inclusion of people with autism spectrum disorder; and advancing research into causes and better interventions for autism spectrum disorder and related conditions.

Together with Autism Speaks, we have invested over \$500 million to scientific research, \$9.5 million directly to Canadian science grants. Since 2010, Autism Speaks Canada has granted over \$5.5 million to service organizations across Canada promoting collaboration and building capacity to support individuals with autism spectrum disorder and their families.

OUR IMPACT:

- Increasing Global Understanding & Acceptance of People with Autism
- Increasing Early Childhood Screening & Timely Intervention
- Improving the Transition to Adulthood & Employment
- Being a Catalyst for Research Breakthroughs
- Ensuring Access to Reliable Information & Services Throughout the Life Span

Meet our Speakers

Bruno Hache

I am a former resident of NB now living in Thurso, Quebec. I have been working as a field service engineer for a major financial equipment manufacturer since 2007. I am also an Asperger mentor/life coach and am working on starting an ASD driving school. Despite my ups and my downs throughout my 36 year life, I am a devoted and passionate person towards my community and those I hold dear to my heart.



What I want to tell is that many people in the autistic community are ready, willing and capable to do anything that they are passionate about. In regards of the workforce, a combination of passion and talents will set one for a very long productive career and a valued member of the workforce.

Terry Batley

Terry has been employed at the City of Kawartha Lakes since January of 2005 in the Information Technology division. Terry is currently serving as a delegate for CUPE 855 on the Lindsay and District Labour Council, on the Joint Health and Safety Committee as the Worker Co-Chair for the City of Kawartha Lakes, as a member of the Workers with Disabilities Committee for CUPE Ontario, he is also a member of the Communications, Social and Ways and Means Committees for CUPE 855.



Terry is certified in First Aid, Mental Health First Aid, and has a certificate for PEERS Social Skills training.

Terry has been raising three children on the autism spectrum ages 18, 20, & 22 with his wonderfully supporting wife Joanne. Terry is also a volunteer in the community serving as an elected board member for Autism Home Base Durham, running D&D on every Tuesday night at Dueling Grounds in Peterborough and Co-ordinating activities for Autism After 18 Peterborough social club (Autism Home Base Durham).

Terry is also on the autism spectrum.

David Maloney

David Moloney has been working for CIBC in various retail roles since May 2007. Thanks to his ongoing commitment to the inclusion and diverse beliefs of the bank David has also volunteered with the CIBC WorkAbility Employee Network, a support group of CIBC employees with disabilities and their supporters who advocate for the removal of all barriers in the workplace. During his time with WorkAbility David has been involved in the following:



Meeting and/or introducing many leaders in the disability community including retired Paralympians, Politicians, and Legal Advocates.

Participating in a variety of external events such as numerous Job Fairs, Development Services Ontario events, and through his role as a member of the Board of Directors for Autism Ontario, represented CIBC at multiple disability-centric events. Been featured by CIBC through both internal and external media stories (including CTV News, City News, and The Toronto Star, to name a few).

Through all of his work David remains a passionate supporter of the Disability Community. Since first becoming involved with the Aspergers Society of Ontario in 2001 David has never ceased to believe in the vital nature of what people with disabilities can do (up to and including working in senior ministries in Government).

Sonia Merdjanian

Sonia is currently employed full-time, as a frame inspector, at an international company that manufactures eye-wear.

How to use this guide

This guide is intended to help interested stakeholders to prepare for conversations about priorities and actions for a National Employment Network focused on **changing the odds** for employment success for individuals with autism in Canada.

The guide outlines five key topic areas in which your feedback is sought. The questions in each topic area can be used as a starting point for reflection and discussion.

There are a variety of ways to participate:

1. Input can be provided at the in-person meeting on April 1, 2019 in Ottawa (register here <https://autismspeaks.ca/worktopia>)
2. Input can be provided through an online forum on Autism Speaks Canada CONNECT (<https://connect.autismspeaks.ca>)



3. Input can be emailed to info@worktopia.ca.

Discussion Topics

#1: Building Community Capacity

In the context of this National Employment Network, [community capacity building](#) is defined as the process of developing and strengthening the knowledge, tools, resources and processes needed by stakeholders and communities to support successful employment for individuals with autism. It is about promoting the “capacity” of local communities to develop, implement, and sustain solutions to challenges.



Capacity building through a network involves:

- Building relationships for sharing knowledge and experiences and learning from each other
- Sharing resources and learnings with network stakeholders
- Facilitating the spread of innovative approaches throughout the [ecosystem for employment](#)

Conversation starters:

- What do you need to build capacity in individuals, families, employers, co-workers, employment support personnel, and others in your local community?
- What do you have in your local community that has built capacity for individuals, families, employers, co-workers, employment support workers, and/or others?
- Who needs to be involved in capacity building in your community (individuals, families, organizations, government, etc.)?
- Do you know of any local leaders in your community that this network should connect with and/or learn from?
- What changes would you like to see in your local community regarding employment and autism?

#2: Informing Policy

Effective policy should always be informed by the reality of frontline experience. The National Employment Network could have a role in informing policy development on a range of issues extending far beyond the actions of government. A brief example of a policy dialogue event has been summarized in Appendix A to demonstrate an example of how individuals or a network of this nature can identify policy considerations and options to inform.



Key issues related to policy development may include:

- The availability of provincial/territorial or national data or research evidence to inform policy
- The ability to respond to policy opportunities when they emerge
- Identifying where to start or what to champion

Conversation starters:

- Based on your experience, what employment policies are working well?
- Are there any policies preventing autistic adults (or if relevant, you or your family member) from participating in the labour force in the way that you/they would like to participate?
- What policies need to be changed or developed to break down barriers to employment?
- Do you know of any policy opportunities (e.g., strategies, ideas, connections, etc.) that would advance our collective work in moving forward?
- What would you identify as the top (most needed) workplace policy to change?
- What employment policy most needs data to inform or influence change?

#3: Other Priorities

In an earlier discussion related to developing a framework for the Worktopia National Employment Network, key priorities that emerged were **building community capacity** and **informing policy**.



Are these relevant priorities to you? What other priorities, if any, should be addressed by our national network?

Conversation starters:

- In your experience, what is the most important thing supporting or hindering employment success for individuals with autism?
- What do you believe most hinders employment for autistic adults?
- What do you believe would change the odds of employment for autistic adults?
- What role(s) should a national network play in changing the odds of employment?

#4: Data Priorities

Data can help translate ideas into action.

Almost every person, company, organization and institution produces data on a daily basis. What data or information could be collected and shared to help our National Employment Network seek the most informed policies, innovative ideas and impactful solutions?



Conversation starters:

- Do you have a pressing question (or have been asked a pressing question) about autism and employment that you wish you had data to support a response?
- What data would help us to make a compelling case to move to action and change as it relates to autism and employment?
- What national data would support autistic adults and families to participate more fully in policy dialogue?

#5: Sharing Information and Staying Connected

Our goal is to connect a network of stakeholders with a shared goal to change the odds of employment success for people with autism.

We envision the Network being made up of individuals, families, organizations, researchers and other stakeholders that are committed to sharing time, knowledge, talent and skills to advance identified priorities through tangible action.



Considerations for staying connected and communicating could include:

- Having a shared understanding of objectives and priority actions
- Availability of time to contribute and engage
- Opportunities and methods to share information between network members.

Conversation starters:

- Based on your experience with how you receive and share information, what has worked best for you?
- What frequency of communication would you prefer from a National Employment Network?
- Do you have suggestions about how to define clear objectives and priority actions for the Network, and how to confirm that they are shared among Network members?
- Do you have any recommendations on how to best engage employers to participate in this dialogue?

Appendix A

Definitions of Key Terms and Concepts:

Employed – persons who work, part or full-time.

Unemployed – persons who would like to be employed, and are actively seeking work, but cannot find a job.

Not in the Labour Force – persons who are neither employed nor unemployed.

These persons:

- (i) do not have a job and are unable to start a job in the near future due to school, illness/disability, personal or family responsibilities; or
- (ii) are not looking for work.

Labour Market Participation Rate – the total number of working age persons (age 16 to 64) currently employed or in search of a job.

The School of Public Policy at the University of Calgary examined the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability and found that labour force participation (employed and unemployed) of persons with developmental disabilities (34.5%) is the lowest of any other disability category (63.4%). Of those with developmental disabilities, persons identifying with ASD had a lower labour force participation rate (21.5%), meaning that 78.5% were not neither working nor looking for work.

These findings indicate that rather than unemployment, a greater barrier that exists is actual participation in the labour force. Some survey respondents indicated that they are able to work but do not work because of employer and work place related issues such as workplaces that are physically inaccessible, discriminatory hiring practices, needing training or needing workplace modifications. Further information on their findings can be found on the School's website [here](#).

System – a system of components that interact with one another to function as a whole.

Ecosystem - a network of interconnected parts. When applied to employment for individuals with autism it considers all the critical intersecting elements: the individual with autism, their family, support agencies, the workplace, the broader community, and supportive public policy – all elements that need to work together to influence, impact and improve employment success.

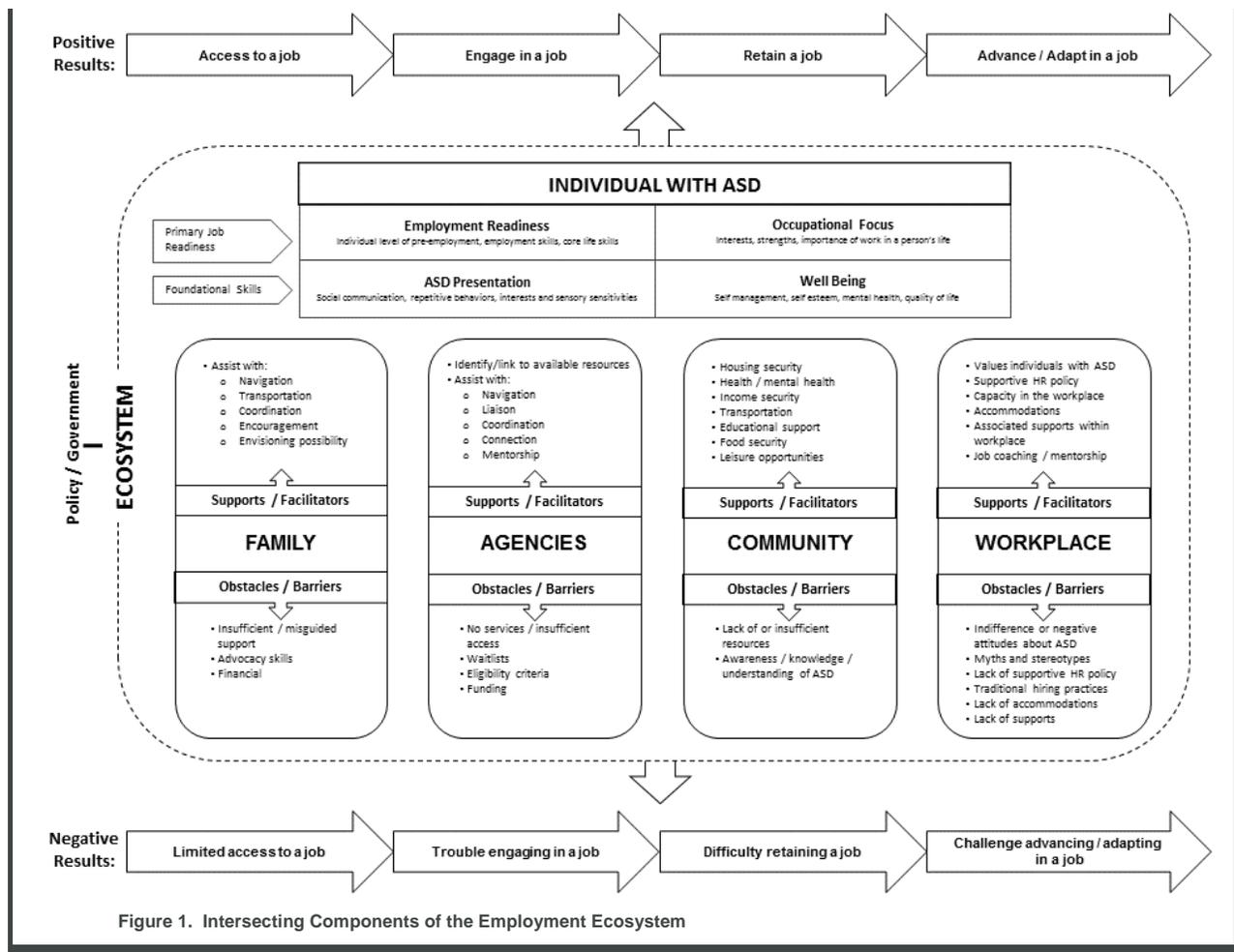
Systems Change – a shift in the way that a community makes decisions about policies, programs, and the allocation of its resources.

The Ecosystem for Employment and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

In comparison to the general population and other disability groups, adults with ASD demonstrate the lowest rate of employment. This is unfortunate given that employment has many benefits to one's health and well-being such as improved self-confidence, life purpose, improved finances, increased independence and social connectedness. We're learning that getting and keeping a job for someone with ASD involves many components within one's social world. It therefore seems important to consider not only the individual with ASD but the surrounding "ecosystem".

What is an Ecosystem?

As indicated on the previous page, an ecosystem is defined as a network of interconnected parts. The employment ecosystem (Figure 1) illustrates the critical intersecting elements: of the individual with ASD, their family or natural supports, supportive agencies, the workplace, the broader community, and policies / government.



Why is the Employment Ecosystem Important?

Successful employment is often a result of the interaction of multi-layered, intersecting systems, resources and individuals. The extent of employment opportunity and potential are often inextricably linked to both internal resources and the broader system of family, agencies, community, workplace and policy. Collectively these stakeholders and systems play an integrative role that can either positively or negatively influence access to and retention of employment. Actions taken to enhance and support different areas of the ecosystem can have a positive impact on employment outcomes. To read more about the ecosystem in an employment and ASD context, see the [published paper](#) by Nicholas and colleagues (2017).

Key Elements of the Employment Ecosystem

The Individual with ASD:

The employment profiles of individuals with ASD are unique and consist of a range of foundational traits. Motivation, social abilities, cognition, behaviours, sensory sensitivities, health, happiness and job readiness skills are all unique traits that influence employment readiness.

Family:

Family members and friends can play a central role in the employment experience for individuals with ASD. Advocacy, providing transportation and navigating services likely represent only a few ways that families or significant others support a youth or adult with ASD.

Agencies:

Employment support services may be pivotal to job access and sustainability for individuals with ASD, yet the availability of appropriate and accessible services is often limited. Ideally, these services offer assessment of job fit, training, placement, job coaching, customized employment and employer capacity building.

Community:

Community-level needs for individuals with ASD include quality housing, transportation, health and mental health services, income sufficiency, food security and leisure opportunities. The availability of community services to address these needs is critical; if absent, such gaps negatively influence employment.

Workplace:

Employers, co-workers and the work environment are workplace factors that are critical in the employment experience. Awareness and openness of employers and co-workers to individual diversity as well as an array of organizational supports cumulatively may increase job access and retention.

Policy/Government/Societal Values:

Individuals living in the community are surrounded by a broader systemic infrastructure including social, economic and health policies that variably support engagement in employment and community life. One's context matters, as illustrated by emerging data suggesting that individuals and families with lower income and education levels are at greater risk for poorer employment outcomes.

An Example of a Policy Dialogue Event

A policy dialogue event convened in Calgary in June 2017 identified and discussed different policy options to address challenges and opportunities relating to employment that Albertans with developmental disability are facing. The event featured both presentations and facilitated discussions between a wide range of stakeholders including persons with developmental disability and their families and caregivers, vocational training professionals, not-for-profit organizations, decision makers, employers and academics.

Key Findings

Barriers to Employment:

During the event all participants reached a consensus on the following three key barriers to employment of persons with a developmental disability:

1. Employer attitude, misperception, knowledge, and management practices
2. Limited early work exposure and experiences, and vocational training/ education among youth
3. Stigma

Policy Solutions:

Potential policy solutions were discussed during the event, and two rounds of an online survey were conducted following the event. This dialogue identified participants' top five policy solutions (in ranked order of importance) as below:

1. Promoting employer training and knowledge
2. Promoting better education (building employability and job skills into education) in high school to enable smooth transition to post-secondary or employment
3. Changing income supports to remove barriers and disincentive to work
4. Increasing employment opportunities
5. Education on inclusion, acceptance and human difference to be taught early on in both school and workplace

Criteria:

Event organizers sought participants' views on criteria to assess/evaluate policy solutions. The top five criteria identified were as follows:

1. Number of employers who participate or hire persons with developmental disabilities
2. Labour force participation rates
3. Employer satisfaction
4. Measures of follow up with employees and employers including awareness
5. Sustainable employment

An article providing more comprehensive information on this event is available [here](#). Akram Khayatzadeh-Mahani, Krystle Wittevrongel, David B. Nicholas & Jennifer D. Zwicker (2019): Prioritizing barriers and solutions to improve employment for persons with developmental disabilities, Disability and Rehabilitation, DOI:10.1080/09638288.2019.1570356