

SUCCESS IN THE WORKPLACE

EMPLOYER TOOLKIT

Strategies from
Autistic Employees

AUTISM AND NEURODIVERSITY

It is challenging to find a good definition of autism. Many of the definitions, including those used by autism organizations, are too clinical for the average person to understand. Many websites use outdated definitions of autism that are based on old diagnostic criteria or use inappropriate language.

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong, neurodevelopmental disability characterized by challenges in social interactions, verbal and non-verbal communication, and restricted or repetitive patterns. Autistic persons frequently have other diagnoses, which are highly individualized but may include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Sensory Processing Disorder, anxiety disorders and/or learning disabilities.

More frequently diagnosed in childhood, many autistics are not diagnosed as such until adulthood, and some are never formally diagnosed, either by choice or due to a lack of resources to seek a diagnosis, which can be expensive, especially for adults. Autism is simply a unique way of approaching the world; it is not a disease, and therefore it doesn't need to be cured, but should instead be embraced and accepted. Being autistic can and does present its share of challenges, but neurotypical people experience their share of challenges in life as well.



Neurodiversity is a relatively new concept that embraces the idea that **everybody is unique and diverse in their own way**, and there is no such thing as "normal."



Neurotypical is defined as not displaying or characterized by autistic or other neurologically atypical patterns of thought or behaviour.¹

What is neurodiversity?

"Neurodiversity is the concept that humans don't come in a one-size-fits-all neurologically 'normal' package. Instead, this recognizes that all variations of human neurological function need to be respected as just another way of being, and that neurological differences like autism and ADHD are the result of normal/natural variations in the human genome."

Maureen Bennie, Author and Autism Awareness Centre Founder



At least 1 in 10 people are neurodivergent; information, tools and strategies in this toolkit will likely benefit many employees.²

The language of autism

As mentioned in the introduction to this toolkit, the language of autism is ever-changing. While many autistics don't like change, they are nonetheless at the forefront of movements pushing for changes in our language, and why not. We have changed how we describe other things and people, so why shouldn't we change the way we describe autism? It seems that each new decade brings a new set of vocabulary. There is good reason for this.

The people these terms referred to did not coin many of the old terms that most of us now find offensive. They were used by doctors, scientists, educators and even governments to describe behaviours and ways of thinking that contrasted with the societal norms of the day. Today, much of our language is developed by the people in those groups and not by the rest of society.

In May 2020, **Sinneave and the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism (CIRCA)** conducted a survey of autistic workers from across Canada. In that survey autistic workers identified as:

- 50%** autistic person or autistic self-advocate (identify-first language)
- 31%** person with autism (person-first language)
- 12%** neurodiverse
- 8%** other



As mentioned in the introduction, this toolkit respects the majority's wishes and uses identity-first language, except when quoting people who have expressed a preference for person-first language.

Part of respecting neurodiversity means respecting the language of the neurodiverse communities you serve. There are some great resources available to help you do just that.



Autism Canada and the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance (CASDA) have produced up to date language guides, and both were written by autistic self-advocates.

Autism and neurodiversity in the workplace

"Neurodiversity recognizes that everyone thinks in different ways and has their own unique set of strengths and weaknesses. By learning to recognize and use the strengths of an individual, they can become great advantages for the business."

Danielle, autistic self-advocate

Why are autism and neurodiversity important in a workplace context?

There are numerous reasons why, but the most relevant reason is that a neurodiverse workplace is good for the bottom line. It is not about charity or being nice; it is merely good business.



Each neurodivergent employee brings a unique skill set to the job.



Harvard Business Review writers **Robert D. Austin and Gary P. Pisano** note that *"Everyone is to some extent differently-abled (an expression favoured by many neurodiverse people) because we are all born different and raised differently. **Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage,**" Austin and Pisano write, "Because neurodiverse people are wired differently from "neurotypical" people, they may bring new perspectives to a company's efforts to create or recognize the value."*³



Many large companies and organizations, including Deloitte, Hewlett Packard Enterprise and Caterpillar, have started neurodiversity programs, desiring to reap the benefits that come with a neurodiverse labour force.



Neurodiversity Hub, a global community, working to support diversity initiatives for autistic persons reports, *"In early 2018, a major Australian bank commenced their **Autism@Work Program**. Their initial cohort of nine trainees was proficient four months earlier than expected, returning 12 months' value in five months and delivered an over 50% increase in productivity."*⁴



A quick web search on "autism and neurodiversity in the workplace" will reveal other websites with compelling statistics.

The crux of the matter is that with the right supports, **a neurodiverse labour force significantly improves an employer's performance, increasing productivity and profits.** Even non-profit organizations with neurodiverse employees benefit from decreased labour costs and increased revenue due to increased employee performance.



RESOURCES

Words Matter: A collaborative language and communication guide in the autism field
Autism Canada

CASDA Language Guide

Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance (CASDA)

The Neurodiversity Hub (Australia)

The Untapped Group (Australia)

Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage

Harvard Business Review

Tips for Supporting Neurodiversity in the Workplace

Forbes



REFERENCES

- 1 **Oxford English Dictionary**
Definition for "neurotypical"
- 2 **What is Neurodiversity?**
November 2020
- 3 **Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage**
Harvard Business Review Robert D. Austin and Gary P. Pisano, 2017
- 4 **Neurodiversity Hub Webpage**
November 2020