

SUCCESS IN THE WORKPLACE

EMPLOYER TOOLKIT

Strategies from
Autistic Employees

EASY PRINT FILE

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INTRODUCTION

1 IN 66
Canadians have an autism diagnosis¹



percent of small and medium-sized businesses are having difficulties finding new workers.²

Once considered quite rare, **Autism Spectrum Disorder** (also referred to as "ASD" or simply "autism") has dramatically increased in prevalence in recent years. With such a high prevalence rate, there is an excellent chance that **an employer will eventually have at least one autistic employee working for them.** With an aging population, Canada is currently facing a labour shortage. Many employers are looking to tap into a previously untapped talent pool to combat this problem, which includes autistic Canadians. **Autistic persons can make great employees but often need additional support and workplace adjustments** to provide them with an equal chance of success to their non-disabled colleagues.

PURPOSE

Success in the Workplace: Strategies from Autistic Employees, is designed to be an **easy to read, user-friendly toolkit to help employers and HR professionals meet the needs of autistic employees** while still meeting the business needs of the organization or company they represent. The ultimate goal is to increase the odds of successful and sustained employment for autistic adults. The resources provided in this toolkit have been identified and developed based on information gathered through surveys of both autistic workers across Canada and Canadian employers, large and small, and have been informed by pre-existing resources on inclusive workforces.



Increase the odds of successful and sustained employment for autistic adults.

ABOUT THE TOOLKIT

This toolkit is the product of a collaboration between the **Adult Autism Stakeholders Group** and **The Sinneave Family Foundation (Sinneave)** and is supported by an **Autism Speaks Canada's Family Services Community Grant**. To inform the toolkit, Sinneave, in collaboration with **The Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism (CIRCA)**, conducted surveys of both autistic workers and inclusive employers. To ensure this toolkit meets both employers' and autistic employees' needs, Sinneave hired an actually autistic self-advocate as the project lead and the primary author of this toolkit and engaged with autistic employees, employers and human resources professionals across Canada to inform the content.



A NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

The guidelines around inclusive language are always evolving, and the autism world is no exception. Some autistics express a preference for person-first language and prefer to be referred to as a "person with autism." In contrast, others prefer identity-first language and ask to be referred to as autistic. While there is no complete consensus, more self-advocates prefer identity-first language, including the project lead for this toolkit.



This toolkit will primarily use identity-first language; however, the author intends no disrespect for those who prefer person-first language.



¹ [Public Health Agency of Canada, Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children and Youth in Canada, March 2018.](#)

² [Business Development Bank of Canada, Labour Shortage Here to Stay, 2018.](#)

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USER GUIDE



Information highlight



Big idea



Resource for additional information



Reference



Tool



Additional information in another section of the toolkit

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AUTISTIC WORKERS SURVEY

Success in the Workplace: Strategies from Autistic Employees Toolkit is a toolkit of resources that specifically meet the needs of autistic adults and the businesses that hire them. To support the development of the toolkit, surveys of both autistic workers and inclusive employers were conducted.

The **Autistic Workers Survey**, developed in collaboration with the **Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism**, gathered input from autistic people about what they feel makes an inclusive, welcoming and supportive work environment.

What makes a work environment inclusive?

from autistic employees

"A supportive and understanding person such as a boss or mentor who can ease you into the job and the pre-existing co-worker group situation."

"Accommodations for different work styles/needs being a part of the overall culture so that asking for accommodations does not feel bothering/shaming."

"Clear, direct instructions and clear explanations in a form that works for the individual (written for me)."

5 *supports that make a work environment inclusive, welcoming and supportive for Autistic employees:*

- ✓ welcoming & non-judgemental environment
- ✓ familiar with autism or willing to learn
- ✓ supportive management
- ✓ having a mentor
- ✓ clear communication of expectations

RESPONDENT PROFILE

171 Autistic Canadians

- All 10 provinces & the North West Territories
- 22 responses from outside of Canada
- Self-identified as having autism spectrum disorder or had a formal diagnosis

Self-Identity

There are varied preferences in the autism community regarding the use of 'person first' language compared to 'identity-first' language.

47%

Identity First
Identified as autistic

31%

Person First
Identified as person with autism

12%

Neurodiverse
Identified as neurodiverse

Employment History

88%

HAVE BEEN EMPLOYED AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIVES

HAVE DIFFICULTY STAYING EMPLOYED

56%

Most common reasons for not staying employed:

- social & communication challenges
- bullying & harassment
- trouble fitting in
- stress, anxiety & burn out
- inadequate training & employer support

64%

SHARED THEIR DIAGNOSIS WITH THEIR EMPLOYER

DURING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

33%

29%

AFTER THE FIRST THREE MONTHS

11%

Non-Binary

39%

Male

47%

Female

OVER 60%

respondents were under 40 years old



While there is a higher prevalence rate of autism in males than females, more females participated in the survey.

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Strategies from Autistic Employees

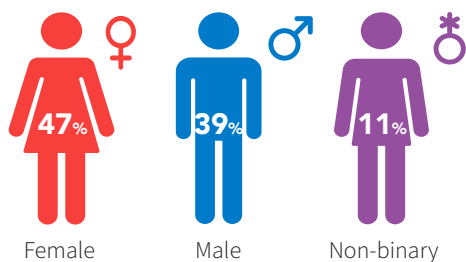
Part of a toolkit* for employers to help create opportunities for autistic people in the workplace

Autistic Workers Survey:** Highlights and Key Learnings



All provinces and NWT represented

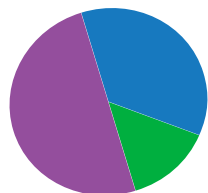
Age and Gender



60% were under the age of 40

Language and self-identity

47% identified as autistic (identity first)
31% identified as person with autism (person first)



12% identified as neurodiverse



Something to think about:

Language evolves and preferences are personal. Learn more about autism language in the toolkit.

Employment History

88% have been employed at some point in their lives

56% have difficulty staying employed

The most common reasons for not staying employed:

- Social and communication challenges
- Bullying and harassment
- Trouble fitting in
- Stress, anxiety, burn out
- Inadequate training and support from employer



Something to think about:

The most common reason for **NOT** disclosing autism was **fear of discrimination or judgment.**

Disclosure

64% shared their diagnosis with their employer

33% during the application process

29% after the first three months

What makes a work environment inclusive?

“Values quirky, out-of-the-box thinkers.”

“Clear, direct instructions and clear explanations in a form that works for the individual (written for me).”

“A supportive and understanding person such as a boss or mentor who can ease you into the job and the pre-existing co-worker group situation.”

TOP 5 supports that make a work environment inclusive, welcoming and supportive:

1. Friendly and non-judgmental
2. Familiar with autism or willing to learn
3. Supportive management
4. A mentor
5. Clear communication

*SUCCESS IN THE WORKPLACE: Strategies from Autistic Employees Toolkit.

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**The AUTISTIC WORKER SURVEY, developed in collaboration with the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism, gathered input directly from autistic people about what they feel makes an inclusive, welcoming and supportive work environment. The goal is to contribute insights that support successful and sustained employment for autistic adults.

For more information or to view the toolkit, visit: www.worktopia.ca
If you have any questions or comments, email: info@worktopia.ca

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INCLUSIVE EMPLOYER SURVEY

Success in the Workplace: Strategies from Autistic Employees Toolkit is a toolkit of resources that specifically meet the needs of autistic adults and the businesses that hire them. To support the development of the toolkit, surveys of both autistic workers and inclusive employers were conducted.



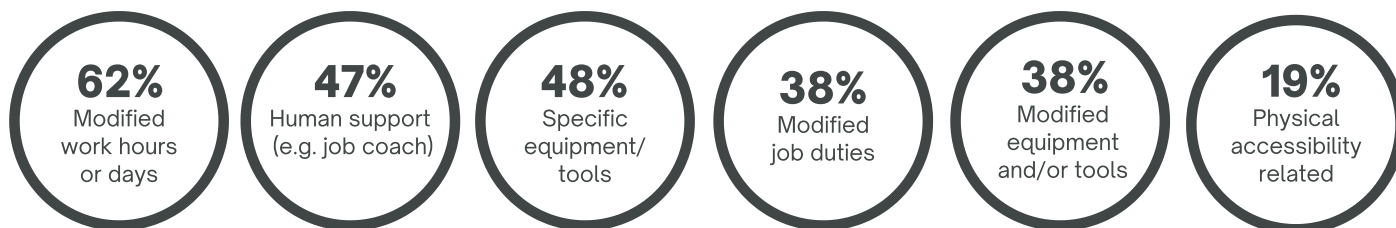
The most common motivation to create an autistic-inclusive workplace was to increase talent in the workforce by tapping into an untapped labour pool.

The inclusive employer survey aims to learn more about what companies are and are not doing to create autism inclusive workplaces. **Normalizing conversations about what "adjustments" a person might need to be successful was viewed as a preferred approach to "disclosure."**



All employees can benefit from adjustments (remote work, flexible schedules, etc.)

Most Common Adjustments Provided for Employees:



Autistic Inclusive Environment

1/3

of employers do not think they provide an autistic-inclusive work environment and indicated it is not on their company's radar.



Did you know? Neurodiversity is common. Include information about autism and other neurodiversity differences including ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia and motor and phonic tics as a part of your organization's standard learning processes.

Top 3 strategies for creating an autistic-inclusive workplace

Employer	Autistic Employee
Staff training on autism and autistic-inclusive workplaces	Welcoming and non-judgemental environment, where people are familiar with ASD and/or willing to learn about it
Internal expertise on inclusion specific to autism	Supportive management/having a mentor to ask questions
Advice and information from other autistic-inclusive businesses	Clear communication of expectations and communication adjustments provided

Primary concerns about hiring an autistic employee:

1 difficult to manage, and awareness and attitudes of customers

2 unfamiliarity with autism, the employee won't be able to perform the required tasks



Information, strategies and tools in this toolkit will address these concerns.

RESPONDENT PROFILE

Employers from every province and territory completed the survey, along with four employers from outside of Canada.

Business size:

1-50
50.0%

51-100
8%

101-500
15%

501+
27%

Top sectors were:

- Non-profit
- Service industry
- Majority non-union

Type of employers:

- Primarily business owners
- Hiring managers
- Senior leaders

Organizations that had employed an autistic person:

44% Yes **24%** No **32%** Not sure

36%

of organizations had participated in an employment program that supports autistic workers through a non-profit or agency. All rated the experience as positive.

85%

of organizations have provided accommodations and/or supports for an employee.

SUCCESS IN THE WORKPLACE:

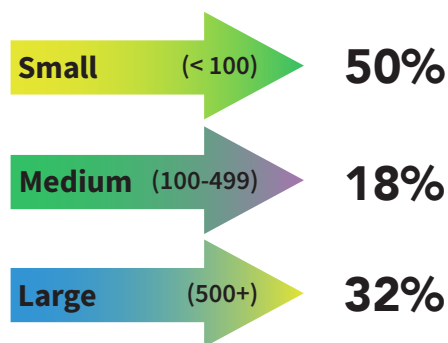
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Inclusive Employer Survey:** Highlights and Key Learnings

Who filled out the survey?

Size of Employer, by number of employees:



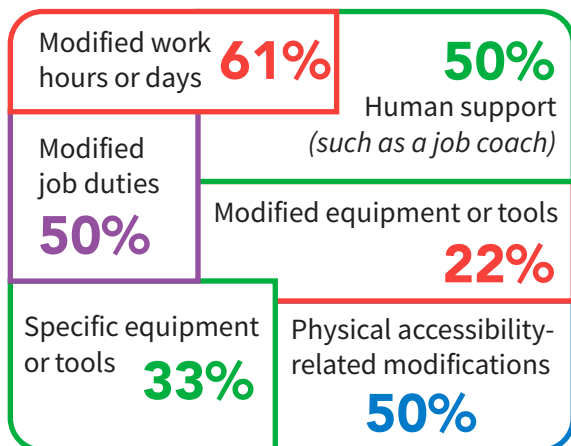
Non-profit organizations and the service industry were represented **most**.

40% had employed an autistic person

80% have provided adjustments and/or supports for an employee

All provinces and NWT represented.

Most common adjustments:



Most common **motivation** to create an autistic-inclusive workplace was to **increase talent in the workforce by tapping into an underutilized labour pool.**



Disclosure

Autistic employees' most common reason for **NOT** disclosing was **fear of discrimination or judgment.**

Only **9%** of organizations rated themselves proficient at supporting disclosure of a disability.



Something to think about:

Normalizing conversations about what adjustments a person might need in order to be successful was viewed as a preferred approach to "disclosure".

Strategies commonly identified as autistic-inclusive

Employers already have or would be **very likely** to implement the following strategies:

1. Flexible working hours
2. Adjustments to the traditional interview
3. Internship trials
4. Communication adjustments
5. Sensory modifications
6. Adjustments to physical setting
7. Job coaching through partnership
8. Support for workers to be autistic-inclusive

Inclusive companies are more productive, more profitable and have more satisfied employees and customers.

*SUCCESS IN THE WORKPLACE: Strategies from Autistic Employees Toolkit.

A toolkit of resources that specifically meet the needs of autistic adults and the businesses that hire them.

**The INCLUSIVE EMPLOYER SURVEY asked companies to share what they are and are not doing to create autism-inclusive workplaces. The ultimate goal is to increase the odds of successful and sustained employment for autistic adults.

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KEY OPPORTUNITIES

What we heard from employers:

33% do not think they provide an autistic-inclusive work environment and indicated it is not on their company's radar.

organizations indicated that "greater awareness and information" about autism would help them become more autistic-inclusive.

50%

TOP3 Resources Best Suited to Employers



Online learning resources such as webinars and learning modules

Accessible reading materials



Partnerships with autistic-inclusive employment programming organizations

3 Areas employers told us they were not proficient:

- 1** Understanding autism and related disorders.
- 2** Providing accommodations during the hiring process.
- 3** Accessing local external resources, services and supports for autistic employees.

Autistic-inclusive workplace strategies

What works for employers:

- Teaching and learning on autism and autistic-inclusive workplaces
- Internal expertise on inclusion specific to autism
- Advice and information from other autistic-inclusive businesses



What works for autistic employees:

- Welcoming and non-judgmental environments
- Co-worker or employer familiarity
- Supportive management with autism or a willingness to learn
- Mentorship
- Clear Communication

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Key Opportunities for Employment Agencies and Service Providers

Autistic-Inclusive Work Environment

What we heard from employers:

33% do not think they provide an autistic-inclusive work environment and indicated it is not on their company's radar

50% of organizations indicated that "greater awareness and information" about autism would help them become more autistic-inclusive

Teaching and Learning Opportunities

Employers told us they were not proficient at:

- Understanding autism and related disorders
- Providing accommodations during the hiring process
- Accessing local external resources, services and supports for autistic employees

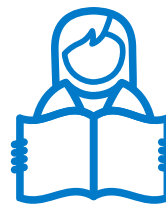
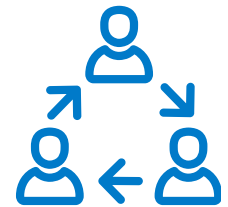
Resources Best Suited to Employers

Top 3



Online learning resources such as webinars and learning modules

Partnerships with autistic-inclusive employment programming organizations



Accessible reading materials

Autistic-inclusive Workplace Strategies

What works for employers

- Teaching and learning on autism and autistic-inclusive workplaces
- Internal expertise on inclusion specific to autism
- Advice and information from other autistic-inclusive businesses.



What works for autistic employees

- Welcoming and non-judgmental environments
- Co-worker or employer familiarity with autism or a willingness to learn
- Supportive management
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INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES



“An inclusive workplace is a working environment that values the individual and group differences within its workforce. It enables a company to embrace the diversity of backgrounds and perspectives of the employees, which in turn increases their talent, innovation, creativity and contributions.”¹



In the case of autism, an inclusive workplace is one that meets the unique physical, sensory, social, communication and emotional needs of an autistic employee.

What is an inclusive workspace?

“To me, an inclusive workspace is a space where I am free to be me. I don’t have to hide my autism, and in fact, my autism can serve as an advantage because I can help my employer better serve the autism community. I can engage with other autistics more easily than a neurotypical person can.”

Corey, autistic self-advocate

Why have an inclusive workforce?

More businesses than ever are becoming aware of the strong business case for hiring inclusively. There is specific research showing the business benefits of employing autistic people.



The Global Impact Sourcing Coalition (GISC) reports that “In fact, research and employer experience indicate that using autistic employees in roles for which they are well-suited can lead to greater productivity, fewer errors, and lower costs. When successfully matched with jobs that align with their interests, autistic employees can often hyper-focus on the task at hand, which enhances performance, workflow and productivity for the business.”²

2017
Canadian
Survey on
Disability
Reports

1 IN 5 people 15
and over
have at
least one
disability³

or nearly 6.2 million Canadians, many of whom are able and willing to work. This is a large talent pool to leave untapped, especially when there is a labour shortage in Canada.⁴



According to Sinneave's employer survey, the most common motivation to create an autistic-inclusive workplace was to increase talent in the workforce by tapping into an untapped labour pool.

3 important ways workplace inclusion benefits business:

1

Inclusive workplaces value all their employees and the unique talents and contributions each one makes to the organization. This creates **happier employees**, bringing out the best in everybody, thereby increasing productivity and profits.

2

Inclusive workforces allow employers to access valuable and overlooked talent pools, giving employers a **larger labour pool** to choose from, thus ensuring they are hiring the best candidate for each job.

3

Hiring inclusively is good for a company's image and supports the business by attracting **broader customer and client markets**.

"The more inclusive my employer is, the less stressed I am at work, allowing me to devote more energy to my job tasks than I can in a non-inclusive environment."

Corey, autistic self-advocate

How does an inclusive workspace help?

Culture - acceptance, not awareness

As companies become more interested in diversity and inclusion, they embrace the idea of autism awareness or disability awareness.

While awareness is important, it's even more critical to create a culture of acceptance.

Building an inclusive culture and understanding the value of hiring from a diverse candidate pool, including autistic individuals, requires a full commitment from an organization's senior leadership. Disability awareness and, more specifically, autism awareness means you know of autism's existence.

Autism acceptance means your organization understands the business advantage of a diverse workforce and has openly embraced the unique characteristics and challenges of autism, which is far more inclusive than merely practicing awareness.

By practicing autism acceptance, your business is more likely to get the best performance from your autistic employees. Looking at this from a strictly business perspective, higher-performing employees contribute more to your company's bottom line.



Are you running a non-profit organization? Inclusive employers are generally viewed more favourably by granting agencies.

Awareness thinking:

- Autism is a condition
- Autism is very common
- Autistic employees require supports
- Autistic employees exhibit challenging behaviours

Acceptance thinking:

- Autistic employees are valued team members that bring a unique perspective

How does an inclusive workplace help?

"It (Autism acceptance) enables me to be accepted and appreciated as I am; for my fidgety, solutions-focused, analytical self – without asking me to compromise or hide who I am."

Krys, autistic person



Not sure how to move from awareness to a culture of acceptance at your company? Use [Section 5.1 - Acceptance Check-In Tool](#) to reflect on where you and your organization are in the journey to hiring autistic individuals.



RESOURCES

If your organization is still discovering the benefits of hiring inclusively, the resources below can help support your journey from awareness to acceptance.

The Business Case for Hiring Autistic Team Members

Auticon is an international IT and compliance consulting business.

Benefits of Ready Willing and Able

Ready, Willing and Able (RWA) is a national partnership of Inclusion Canada (formerly the Canadian Association for Community Living), the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance (CASDA) and their member organizations.

Business Case

The President's Group is a network of 25 change-driven British Columbia business leaders who are champions for more accessible, inclusive workplaces.



REFERENCES

- 1 **Characteristics of an Inclusive Workplace**
Siyana Sokolova
- 2 **Impact Sourcing in Action - Autism Empowerment Kit**
Global Impact Sourcing Coalition
- 3 **Canadian Survey on Disability Reports**
A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017
- 4 **Labour Shortage: Here to Stay**
Business Development Bank of Canada, 2018

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Not sure how to move from awareness to a culture of acceptance at your company? Use the autism acceptance check-in to reflect on where you and your organization are in the journey to hiring autistic individuals.

Autism acceptance check-in:

I practice autism acceptance, if I believe in the following:

- Autistic employees bring a unique perspective to my organization
- Autistic employees are loyal
- Autistic employees are valued team members
- Autistic employees have low rates of absenteeism
- Autistic employees are attentive to details
- Autistic employees are good for the bottom line
- Autistic employees add diversity to the workplace
- I believe in empowering individualism amongst my employees

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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

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ADJUSTMENTS NOT ACCOMMODATIONS



85% of organizations surveyed for this toolkit project have provided accommodations and/or supports for an employee.

What is an accommodation?

An accommodation is a modification or adaptation made to an employee's work environment or how an employee performs their tasks.

Accommodations are simply adjustments to help an employee succeed, and that's the way we should approach them. Some common examples of everyday on-the-job adjustments include: **providing a flexible work schedule to accommodate childcare or school drop-off and pick-up schedules or buying a larger chair for an employee who needs one.** When thinking of adjustments in this context, it is not onerous for employers to provide adjustments for a qualified autistic employee.

Adjustments & COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many **employers implemented adjustments for all employees virtually overnight**, including flexible working hours, the ability to work from home, and increasing the number of services offered virtually. While these adjustments were borne out of necessity, it **proved that adjustments could be made for any employee**, often at little or no expense and with no negative impact on the business.



"Accommodation" implies special treatment for people with disabilities, whereas the term "adjustment" recognizes you're making simple changes to ensure an employee can perform at their best. Accommodation is the term used in legal contexts.

Most adjustments cost nothing

When employers hear the word “disability” disclosed by a job seeker, one of the first things that may cross their mind is, “Will the employee require accommodations?” Employers sometimes hesitate to hire qualified autistic candidates out of concern the candidate will require expensive accommodations. While it’s true that most autistic employees require some adaptations to their work environment, the cost is usually much lower than employers expect.

In a 2019 US study of **776 employers** by the **Job Accommodation Network (JAN)**, employers reported that:

58% of accommodations cost absolutely nothing
the rest of the accommodations made had a typical cost of only **\$500**¹

Adjustments - low cost, high impact

While the **cost of providing adjustments to an autistic employee is usually low, the positive impacts the employer receives in return are relatively high.**

In the **Job Accommodation Network** study, employers mentioned they received three main direct benefits from supporting an employee with a disability: ¹

- 1** allowed the company to retain a valued employee
- 2** increased the employee’s productivity
- 3** eliminated the costs of training a new employee

The Presidents Group, a British Columbia based leadership table of inclusive employers, reaffirms the **high impact of the business case**. Hiring and supporting employees with disabilities, including autism, employers were **“2x more likely to reach or exceed financial targets, 6x more likely to be innovative, and 6x more likely to anticipate change.”** ^{2 3}



An example of an easy, sensory adjustment is initially talking in a soft tone of voice.

Legal responsibilities

The Canadian Human Rights Act states that employers have a legal duty to accommodate employees with protected status, including those with disabilities, up to the point of undue hardship. Most employers accommodate employees because it's good for their business, but it's worth noting the legal aspects of providing accommodations. If an employer fails to provide reasonable accommodations and cannot prove that providing those accommodations would create an undue hardship, they risk being fined by the jurisdiction's human rights tribunal. Each province and territory has its own human rights statutes, so it's a good idea for employers to familiarize themselves with the obligations they have in their jurisdiction.⁴

Return to work policies & practices

Most employers already have experience offering adjustments that align well with the adjustments autistic employees may request. Many employers have policies and practices for employees returning to work after having time off for medical reasons. Usually, these policies require the employer to provide workplace adjustments to employees as they transition back into the workforce. While these adjustments will vary depending on the company and the individual employee's needs, standard adjustments may include flexible working hours, time off for medical appointments, and possibly physical adjustments to the employee's work environment.

Employers have been providing these and other adjustments for years to employees returning to work. Many of these same adjustment policies and practices can be easily implemented for autistic employees throughout their employment lifecycle. It requires a simple change in thinking to realize that autistic employees' needs are supported just as easily as the needs of employees returning to work from medical leave.



To inform the toolkit Sinneave in collaboration with the Centre For Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism (CIRCA), conducted surveys of both autistic workers and inclusive employers.

Some examples of **common physical and sensory adjustments** mentioned by respondents in the **Autistic Workers Survey** include:

- 1** Control over their work environment, including being “able to wear loose-fitting clothing” and the “ability to listen to music.”
- 2** Sensory adjustments, such as noise-cancelling headphones, “being able to wear sunglasses on shift indoors” and the ability to control the temperature (use a space heater, wear a blanket, use a quiet fan etc.)
- 3** Assistive devices, such as the “option of [a] headset for phone calls,” and the “ability to wear earplugs.”



RESOURCES

[The Diversity and Inclusion Revolution: Eight Powerful Truths](#)

Juliette Bourke and Bernadette Dillon

[Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism \(CIRCA\)](#)

Based out of the University of British Columbia

[Presidents Group](#)



REFERENCES

- 1 [Accommodation and Compliance: Low Cost, High Impact](#)
Job Accommodation Network, October 2020
- 2 [Why is Hiring People with Disabilities Good for Business](#)
Accessible Employers, January 2021
- 3 [New Deloitte Research Identifies Key to Creating Fair and Inclusive Organizations](#)
Deloitte, May 2017
- 4 [Employer Obligations Webpage Accessed November](#)
Canadian Human Rights Commission, January 2020

SUCCESS IN THE WORKPLACE

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WEAVING INCLUSION INTO THE EMPLOYEE LIFE CYCLE

What is an employee life cycle?

It is a model used by many human resource professionals to track the pathway an employee takes with a company: from the time they first apply for a job until the time they leave the company. Many organizations are weaving inclusion throughout the entire employee life cycle in order to increase performance and productivity.

Six phases of the employee life cycle:



This section provides a high-level overview of how to incorporate autism inclusive practices throughout the employee life cycle. These concepts will be explored in detail in [**Section 8.1 - Employee Life Cycle Tool.**](#)

Attraction

Inclusive workplaces attract qualified individuals that might otherwise be overlooked. By taking steps to **create a positive and fully inclusive workplace culture**, your organization will quickly develop a reputation as being an excellent place for autistics to work. This will result in more autistic job seekers applying for positions with your organization.



For background information refer to [**Section 5 - Inclusive Workplaces.**](#)

For more details on attracting autistic employees, refer to [**Section 9 - Attracting Autistic Employees.**](#)

Recruitment

There are some **simple ways to make your organization's recruitment process more autism inclusive**. Use concrete, not abstract language in your job descriptions, and focus only on the essential qualifications for the position being advertised. **Include an inclusive hiring statement in all job postings**. Be creative and flexible in the ways you interview possible candidates.

- provide interview questions ahead of time
- conduct performance-based interviews
- keep interview questions concrete and directly related to the position you're interviewing for



Look ahead to the **[Section 10 - Recruiting Autistic Talent](#)** section for more information.



The recruitment stage is an ideal time to start a conversation about any adjustments your new employee will require to be successful in your organization. Remember, many adjustments are small and easy to implement.

Onboarding

Attracting and recruiting autistic employees are only starting points. **Successfully onboarding an autistic employee is a critical stage in the employee life cycle.**



"the degree [to which] managers make new hires feel welcomed into the team and prepared for their new roles, the faster that they will be able to contribute to the organization's mission successfully."¹

- **As much as possible, have any agreed-upon adjustments ready for the new employee's first day.** This shows your new employee that you're committed to their success.
- Find an experienced employee who's willing to mentor the new employee, and empower the mentor, through training and education, to assist the employee throughout the onboarding process.
- Allow the new employee to have a job coach on-site if requested.
- Make sure the rest of the team is ready to welcome and support the new employee in any way they can.



Read more about how to onboard in **[Section 11 - Successfully Onboarding Autistic Employees](#)**.

Learning and development

Once you've onboarded your new autistic employee, there is both initial and ongoing learning and development.

- Give your new employee time to learn your organization's policies and procedures.
Autistics learn better when they understand the reasons behind things.
- **Take time to answer their questions** about why your organization does things the way they do; this will help you receive employee "buy-in," which will result in better performance from your autistic employee.
- **Be sure to provide advanced notice about any upcoming changes to policies and procedures**, as sudden changes are very stressful to most autistic individuals. Support them throughout the change process to reduce their anxiety and avoid performance issues.
- **Ensure your employee has equal access to professional development opportunities**, and provide adjustments as needed to support them in their personal and professional growth.



To learn more about learning and development, please look ahead to **Section 12 - Learning and Development**.

Retention

In the beginning, you implemented some workplace adjustments to help your employee thrive in their new job. Taking steps to ensure your employee's continued success is key to retaining autistic employees for the long term.

- **Review adjustments regularly** with the employee to make sure their needs are still being met, and modify the adjustments as needed.
- **Ask the employee how they like to receive feedback and how often.** The frequency of feedback can be adjusted as they feel more comfortable.
- **Provide feedback in a way that respects their individual needs.** Don't wait until a performance review to bring up concerns, as this will increase their stress, likely increasing performance issues.

Use strategies discussed throughout this toolkit to create and maintain a positive, fully inclusive and diverse workplace culture, encouraging autistic employees to stay longer. Make sure you show all your employees how well you appreciate them.



Read more in the **Section 13 - Retaining Autistic Employees**.

Separation

Separation is inevitable, whether it be through an employee's retirement because they've found opportunity elsewhere or because you've terminated the employee's position. Regardless of the reasons for separation, take the time to conduct an exit interview (if the employee is willing). This is an excellent opportunity to receive honest feedback from the employee regarding your efforts to support and include them. **Take the opportunity to learn from the employee's feedback about what worked and didn't work, and be prepared to make changes if needed, based on that feedback.**



Positive feedback from an outgoing autistic employee helps reinforce the great work you've been doing in being inclusive.

If you terminated the employee because they were not "a good fit," then it's time for an honest reflection of workplace culture. Learn from this experience, and revisit all your policies and procedures at every stage of the employee life cycle. Make changes as needed to provide a better experience for future employees and to avoid the costs associated with employee termination and turnover.



You can learn more [***Section 14 - Employee Separation.***](#)

Conclusion

This section provides a very high-level overview of the topic of weaving inclusion in the employee life cycle. We will delve into more detail on each phase of the life cycle in later sections of the toolkit, so be sure to read them for additional ideas on how you can be an autism inclusive employer.



REFERENCES

- 1 [**Six Stages to Success with the Employee Life Cycle**](#)
Miles Burke 6Q Blog, November 2020

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EMPLOYEE LIFE CYCLE



The employee life cycle is the term human resource professionals use to describe the employment journey an employee follows from their initial interest in seeking employment with an organization until they leave an organization.



Attraction

A company or organization catches the attention of a job seeker and gets the job seeker interested in considering an employment opportunity with that company or by demonstrating inclusion.

Recruitment

A job seeker expresses interest in working with a particular employer, usually by submitting a résumé or employment application. This stage also includes shortlisting and interviewing prospective candidates and typically ends with an offer of employment to the successful applicant. Recruitment is a good time to start a discussion about adjustments.

Onboarding

A new employee begins working at your organization. Identify and implement on-the-job adjustments to ensure your employee is successful. Some of the common actions during the onboarding stage include helping the new employee set up their workspace, introducing them to the team, and familiarizing themselves with the duties and responsibilities of their new role.

Learning & Development

This stage includes ongoing learning and professional development, ensuring your employees are kept abreast of changes in their field of work, such as new policies or new technology. This stage continues throughout the employee's time with your organization and ends only with their separation from the company.

Retention

This is another stage that ends only with the employee's separation. It involves taking ongoing steps to ensure an employee remains happy and successful in their role. Creating a positive, diverse, and inclusive work culture is a big part of successfully retaining employees for the long term.

Separation

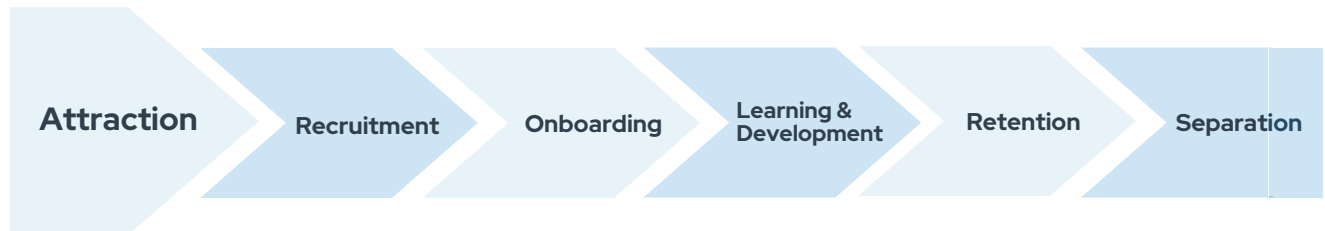
An employee leaves their position with your organization. Reasons for separation could include employee retirement, moving to a new role within the same organization or a different organization, or employee termination. Possible activities within this final stage could include an exit interview where appropriate, or, in the case of a long-term employee retiring, holding a retirement party to celebrate the end of that employee's long career.

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ATTRACTING AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES



If companies want to hire good employees, the first step is getting them interested in working for your company. This is why “attract” is the first stage of any employee life cycle.



With Canada experiencing a labour shortage many employers are looking at ways to attract job seekers with disabilities to their company or organization. ¹

411,600 Canadians with disabilities are unemployed
Almost half are post-secondary graduates ²



See [Section 9.1 - Attracting Autistic Employees Tool](#) for a list of ideas to help attract autistic employees.

Demonstrating an organization is autism-friendly and inclusive will increase your organization’s attractiveness to talented autistic job seekers. This section provides specific strategies in five key areas that employers can use to make themselves more attractive to autistic job seekers.

Company website & social media

Consider how you portray your organization online, particularly on your company website and social media. **Do these platforms showcase you as an inclusive employer, and in particular, an autistic-inclusive employer?** Here are some strategies to better leverage these platforms:

- **Include an inclusive hiring statement on your website and social media** that clearly expresses your organization's commitment to hire employees with disabilities.
- **Clearly state your company supports applicants with disabilities** throughout the application process.
- Provide easy to understand, up to date information on your company's inclusive hiring and employment practices. **What sets your business or organization apart from other companies similar to yours?**
- **Reference any formal recognition your company has received for being a diverse and inclusive employer.** Whether this recognition is a national HR award or participation in a local initiative, it's worth including prominently on your company's online platforms. This will help you attract clients or customers as well, and in the case of non-profits, it can also appeal to potential donors and funders. You earned this recognition, so make sure you're leveraging it to convey your commitment.
- **Include stories from employees with different disabilities** about why they like working for you. Personal stories have an even more significant impact than any award your company could win.
- **Use images that reflect the diversity in Canada.** Including images of people with disabilities.



By highlighting your company as an inclusive employer online, you will find it easier to attract high-quality autistic job seekers to work for you.

Company storefront/office/worksite

Your storefront, office or worksite represents your company. Think about whether it currently presents the image you want it to. Here are two simple actions you can take to ensure your company's physical site represents you well.

➤ **Feature stickers or signs indicating you welcome people with disabilities.**

This may be more challenging to do for a manufacturing facility or in the field but would look good on the entrance to your front office or on the front window of your retail store. Presenting your company as a safe and welcoming place will attract more autistic job seekers and encourage them to pursue career opportunities with your organization.

➤ **Ensure your worksite is autism accessible.** Take steps to make as much of the worksite as possible sensory-friendly. You can find more information on that later in the toolkit, but some examples include:

- keeping background music low and quiet (this includes while callers are waiting on the telephone.)
- replacing flickering lights, with new lights etc.
- take a look at your signage: does it mean what it says, or could it be confusing to an autistic person who interprets signs literally?

If an autistic person visits your worksite as a customer, client, or vendor, make sure their first impressions are positive.



Taking these simple steps to make your physical worksite autism-friendly and fully inclusive, whether it be an office, a retail store or something else, will increase your organization's attractiveness to talented autistic job seekers.

How employees represent your company

Your employees are your company's ambassadors. In addition to your company's physical presence, your employees play an integral role in creating the first impressions a customer, client or vendor has when they interact with your company for the first time. If you want to make a positive impression on an autistic job seeker, the following page offers two strategies to reflect on.

- Think about how your employees represent your organization. Are they happy, and is it obvious that they enjoy their jobs? This is especially important for any autistic or otherwise disabled employees because they are the ones an autistic job seeker will focus on. **From an autistic job seeker's perspective, if your current employees don't look happy, chances are the job seeker won't be happy working there either.**
- Consider how well your employees communicate with autistic customers, clients or vendors in person, over the phone or by e-mail? **If an autistic person finds your employees' communication styles confusing, they may not consider your company to be autistic-inclusive** and will look elsewhere when they're considering their next career change.

Company's reputation in the community

Finally, think about your company's reputation in the community or communities that it serves. If your **company has a reputation for being the right place for autistics or otherwise disabled people to work**, you will be more successful in attracting interest from qualified autistic job seekers. Here are some suggestions to consider in building a positive reputation for your company.

- **Find out what your current and former customers, clients and/or vendors are saying about your company.** Pay attention to in-person feedback and online reviews, and promptly follow up with any concerns that could impair your organization's reputation as an inclusive and attractive employer to ensure the concerns are reasonably and fairly addressed.
- **Learn what your former employees are saying about your organization** as well. [Section 14 - Employee Separation](#) will provide specific recommendations for creating positive separation experiences for autistic employees.

Your company's reputation, if positive, can be your biggest asset. If your company is known as a great place for people with disabilities, including autistics, to work, you will find it easier to attract interest from other skilled autistic workers in the future.

Implement universal design principles

A final way to make your company more attractive to autistics and other disabled job seekers is to **implement universal design principles** both in your place of business and on your online platforms.



"Universal Design is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability." ²

An example of universal design that many people are familiar with is sloped curbs that make sidewalks and street crossings accessible to people in wheelchairs and help people push strollers or those using rollerblades. **Examples of universal design relevant to autistics include clear signage, speech to text, closed captioning, etc.**



By implementing universal design principles, you will make your organization more attractive to everybody, including autistic job seekers.

Conclusion

These strategies are simple, cost-effective solutions to the ongoing problem of attracting interest from the untapped labour pool. Making your company more attractive to autistic Canadians is an excellent way to access this hidden and underutilized talent, making your organization or business even stronger than it was before.



RESOURCES

7 Principles of Universal Design

National Disability Authority

Accessible Social Media Guide

City of New York



REFERENCES

1 **Hire for Talent**

Business Case

2 **Canadian Survey on Disability Reports**

A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017

3 **What is Universal Design**

National Disability Authority, 2019

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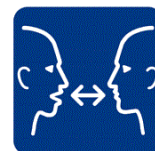
ATTRACTING AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES



Demonstrating an organization is autism friendly and inclusive will increase an organization's attractiveness to talented autistic job seekers.

A list of ideas to help attract autistic employees:

- Include an **inclusive hiring statement** on the company website.
- Ensure the **website and materials on the website are accessible**.
- Communicate in easily accessible, plain language.**
- Most people are familiar with the wheelchair accessible symbol. **Learn more about the [communication access symbol](#).**
- Consider **universal design principles when developing policies and processes**. Examples of universal design relevant to autistics include:
 - clear signage
 - speech to text
 - closed captioning, etc.By implementing universal design principles, you will make your organization more attractive to everybody, including autistic job seekers.
- Highlight recognition your company has received for being a diverse and inclusive employer.**
- Collect and **share stories from employees with different disabilities** about why they like working for you.
- Feature **stickers or signs indicating you welcome people with disabilities**.
- Take steps to **make as much of the worksite as possible sensory-friendly**.
- Take a look at your signage**: does it mean what it says, or could it be confusing to an autistic person who interprets signs literally.
- Support employee learning about disabilities including neurodiversity like autism**. An autistic person that has a good customer experience is more likely to expect that they would have a good employee experience.
- Emphasize clear communication**. If an autistic person finds your employees' communication styles confusing, they may not consider your company to be an autistic-inclusive company.
- Share information about inclusive initiatives (i.e.) sensory-friendly shopping hours.**



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RECRUITING AUTISTIC TALENT



The second phase of the employee life cycle is the recruiting stage. Successfully recruiting autistic job seekers to join your company or organization is not as difficult as it sounds. This section of the toolkit will provide you with tools to create inclusive job postings and application forms, and to hold inclusive interviews.

Inclusive job postings and application forms

Every day, thousands of employers across Canada advertise job postings for newly available positions, be it online or in another format. Some job postings are well-written and autism-inclusive, but many are not. Common problems with job postings and applications: vague descriptions of job duties and required skills, listing educational and experience requirements not absolutely required for the position, and the lack of an inclusive hiring statement that expresses your company's commitment to hiring inclusively and to providing adjustments throughout the hiring process.



Use [**Section 10.1 - Job Posting Reflection Tool**](#) to assess your posting application forms.

Encourage neurodivergent applications

"In the application description, include a line about welcoming neurodivergent applications (this also includes being open to talking about it during the interview). I feel more inclined about opening up about being autistic when those lines are included and more at peace in the interview knowing that I don't have to pretend to be neurotypical. (Extra points to the company if they are running a recruitment event for autistic people.)"
autistic employee



For examples of both an inclusive and non-inclusive job posting refer to [**Section 10.2 and 10.3.**](#)

Interviews

For many autistic candidates, the traditional interview format is a terrifying and stressful experience. Many high-quality candidates never make it past this stage, and employers are losing out on talented employees because of this. Here are some tips to consider when planning your next employee interview.

- **Provide ALL shortlisted candidates with a checklist of available interview adjustments** that they may choose from if they need them. This could include things like having the interview questions in advance, having a sign language interpreter, having closed captioning provided on video interviews, etc. This would benefit all candidates, and not just autistic candidates, and eliminates stigma because these options are available to all candidates, meaning nobody is singled out.
- Hold the interview in a distraction-free, **sensory-friendly environment** that's free of background noise, flickering lights, visual clutter, etc.
- Consider **limiting the number of interviewers**. Too many interviewers can be overwhelming to many candidates.
- **Inform candidates in advance about what to expect.** For example, knowing who will be in the room or on the call, the interview format, dress expectations and estimated timeline is helpful.
- Have a **skills demonstration or competency-based interview** instead of a traditional interview where possible.
- **Recognize and accept individual differences in interaction style.** For example, many autistic people struggle with eye contact. Embrace each candidates' unique traits rather than judge them by it.



For more information and tips for interviewing refer to the **[Section 10.4 - Interview Tips.](#)**

Conclusion

Implementing inclusive recruitment practices is a straightforward and effective way to recruit from a larger talent pool, to find the best person for the job. While this toolkit focuses primarily on supporting autistic job seekers and employees, these tools will benefit all applicants, not just autistic applicants. By using these tools, your company is well on its way to becoming a fully inclusive workplace where everybody has an equal chance to not just succeed, but thrive.



For information on the next stage of the employee life cycle, visit [**Section 11 - Onboarding Autistic Employees.**](#)



RESOURCES

Autism Friendly Hiring and Retention Practices

Focus Professional Services

How to Hire People with Autism

Focus Professional Services

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RECRUITING AUTISTIC TALENT



Job posting reflection

Reflect on how inclusive your job postings/application forms are:

- Am I using clear, succinct language that can be interpreted literally?
- Am I only including skills that are essential for the job?
- Am I including a clear, but succinct description of the physical and social environment for this job?
- Am I only asking for education and experience that is necessary to succeed in this job?
- Am I asking only the questions I need to ask on the job application form?
- Am I including an inclusive hiring statement and offering to provide adjustments and supports throughout the hiring process to those who need it?



Avoid statements like “reasonable accommodations are available as required by law.” This tells a prospective employee that you only provide adjustments because it’s your legal duty, not because you’re striving to create an inclusive workplace. **Instead, consider something like “Adjustments are available upon request to all candidates throughout the selection process, as well as on the job.”**

Why is the application description important?

“In the application description, include a line about welcoming neurodivergent applications (this also includes being open to talk about it during the interview). I feel more inclined about opening up about being autistic when those lines are included and more at peace in the interview knowing that I don’t have to pretend to be neurotypical. (Extra points to the company if they are running a recruitment event for autistic people.)”

autistic employee

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Sample of not inclusive job posting

Compensation \$16 to \$17 Hourly
Benefits Offered Dental, Life, Medical, Vision
Employment Type Full-Time
Hours: 9 am - 6 pm
Why Work Here? Great Benefits, Amazing Work Environment, and Room For Growth

Position Overview:

We are looking to hire a reliable entry-level administrative assistant for our trading firm, who is willing to perform a wide range of administrative, telemarketing, and office support tasks in an office setting for the department and/or managers to facilitate the efficient operation of the company.

Requirements:

- Works effectively in a team environment
- Proven ability to meet deadlines
- Understand the importance of maintaining confidential information
- Proactive, and takes ownership of responsibilities and shows initiative
- Excellent verbal and written communication skills
- Excellent problem-solving skills
- Fluent in the English language

Responsibilities:

- Contribute to the growth of the company
- Establish and maintain relationships with prospective suppliers and customers
- Prepare and modify documents including correspondence, drafts, and emails
- Participation in operations
- Collecting and entering data in databases
- Responding to emails and preparing documents and invoices
- Maintaining accurate records of valuable company information
- Maintain electronic and hard copy filing system
- Computer proficiency in Microsoft Office software
- Must work collaboratively in a team environment

Benefits:

- Full-time permanent position
- We are asking for AT LEAST a two-year commitment
- Hours are 9 - 6 daily
- Health coverage

Experience:

- Customer Service
- Office Administration
- Telemarketing and Logistics experience would be an asset

Administrative Assistant WXYZ Company Northville, PEI

WXYZ Company, a global supplier of recycled auto parts was in established in 1999. We are committed to reducing automotive waste by creating markets for quality, second-hand auto parts.

2 Key Competencies:

- Proficient in MS Office: Word, Excel, and Outlook
- Strong communication and interpersonal skills
- Detail-oriented, problem-solving and ability to multitask
- Ability to maintain the highest level of confidentiality
- Excellent verbal and written communications skills

Key issues:

- 1 Many of the key responsibilities, competencies and requirements are vague.
- 2 The lack of distinction between key competencies and requirements would be confusing to many autistics.
- 3 Many job seekers, not just autistic job seekers, would be turned off by the explicit demand for a minimum two-year commitment. This discourages applicants, especially literal thinkers like autistics, from applying because they don't feel comfortable making this commitment.

Finally, the job posting does not contain an inclusive hiring statement, so there is nothing inviting qualified applicants with disabilities to apply for a job with this company.

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RECRUITING AUTISTIC TALENT



Sample of inclusive job posting

Compensation \$15.75/hr
Employment Type Full-Time

Housekeeper

ABC Industry
Small Town, AB

Position Overview:

Grow your career with a company that shares your passion! ABC Industry has an exciting new opportunity to join our team as our next Housekeeper! ABC Industry is the global leader in services that improve Quality of Life, an essential factor in individual and organizational performance. Operating globally we serve millions of consumers each day. We pride ourselves on being committed to the highest standard of Employment Equity and Diversity.

1 HOW YOU'LL MAKE AN IMPACT:

As a member of our housekeeping team, you will provide the highest quality of customer service at all times, while maintaining the premises in a clean and orderly manner, including:

- Maintains bunkhouse accommodations
- Cleaning light fixtures, ceilings and vents, walls and mattresses
- Cleans washrooms, shower/tub rooms and laundry rooms
- Dusting, mopping, vacuuming, sweeping, polishing floors and replenish supplies
- Moving furniture, hanging draperies, and setting up tables and chairs
- Emptying trash and garbage containers
- Makes and changes beds
- Minor maintenance repairs or notify supervisor concerning repairs

2 What You'll Need to Succeed:

- One year of experience preferred
- Ability to use tools and equipment and to perform physical aspects of the job
- Demonstrated exceptional customer service skills, willing to go beyond the basics
- Ability to work under supervision and follow standard procedures, and compliance with all health and safety standards

3 What ABC Industry Can Offer You:

- Flexible work environment
- Competitive compensation & great employee benefits
- Training and development programs
- Countless opportunities for growth
- Corporate responsibility & sustainability
- Canada's Greatest Employers Magazine Top 30 Inclusive Employers

4 ABC Industry is committed to Employment Equity and Diversity.

We do not discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of national origin, race, religion, ethnic group, age, disability, gender, sexual preference, sexual or gender identity, status as a veteran or any other federal, provincial or local protected class.

We welcome and encourage applications from people with disabilities. Accommodation is available on request from candidates taking part in all aspects of the selection process.

Key strengths:

- 1 The job duties are clear and specific, making it easy for a literal thinker, such as an autistic applicant, to understand.
- 2 While the description of tools required could be more specific, the rest of this section is clear and only lists essential skills and experience. This is more inviting to an autistic job seeker than a lengthy wish list of "nice to have," but non-essential skills and experience. It also lists the one year of experience as "preferred" instead of "required".
- 3 The job posting mentions how the company was recognized for its inclusive employment practices by an external party. This could be very interesting to an autistic applicant.
- 4 The job posting includes an inclusive hiring statement and clearly identifies the employer as an inclusive employer who welcomes applications from people with disabilities. This is welcome news to an autistic applicant.

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Interview tips adapted from Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism (CIRCA) professional development modules on autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Interview Tips

- Provide **ALL shortlisted candidates with a checklist of available interview adjustments** that they may choose from if they need (i.e.) interview questions in advance, demonstration interview, closed captioning for a virtual interview, physical site access needs like elevator or ramp
- Provide a **sensory-friendly environment** or host a virtual interview
- Limit the number of interviewers
- Set the stage by **informing candidates in advance about who will be in the room or on the call**, what format the interview will take and what the dress expectations are
- Have a **skill demonstration or competency-based interview** instead of a traditional interview
- Recognize and accept individual differences in interaction style. For example, **many autistic people struggle with eye contact**. Embrace each candidates' unique traits rather than judge them by them
- Provide an estimated timeline for the length of the interview** so the candidates can be prepared
- Ask clear questions instead of soft questions** (see examples below)



Autistics are often literal thinkers, so asking questions that target the information you want is helpful.

Typical interview questions:

- Tell me about yourself.
- What are your strengths?
- What skills do you think you need improvement on?
- What motivates you?

Try these instead:

- What interests do you have that relate to this job?
- Tell me about your previous related work/volunteer experiences.
- Tell me one or two things that you are good at that will help you in this job.
- In your last job, when you were challenged or not very good at something, what did you do to improve your skills in that area?
- Aside from making money, what do you like about this job?

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Autistic Employees

ONBOARDING AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES



The strategies and tools in this section will help you better understand and successfully onboard your new autistic employee so that they get off to a strong start.

The onboarding stage of the employee life cycle is your company's chance to welcome your new autistic employee by providing an experience that is inclusive, welcoming and supportive. By following inclusive onboarding practices, you are setting your employee up for long-term success. To inform the toolkit, **The Sinneave Family Foundation (Sinneave)** in collaboration with **The Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism (CIRCA)** conducted surveys of both autistic workers and inclusive employers.

#1 support request by autistic workers surveyed is a welcoming and non-judgmental environment in which staff and management are knowledgeable about autism.

80% of organizations have provided adjustments and/or supports to an employee.

90% of autistic employees value a welcoming environment

"Accommodations for different work styles/needs being a part of the overall culture so that asking for accommodations does not feel othering/shaming."

autistic employee

Supporting the new employee



Your autistic employee may act differently than other employees. Be curious and ask yourself what drives their unique behaviour. Don't simply draw conclusions that may, in fact, be wrong, and reflect unconscious bias.¹

Providing a mentor

Providing the right support to your new autistic employee is key to a successful onboarding experience. A great way to support your employee during the onboarding process is to **provide an understanding co-worker to serve as an “on the job” mentor**. A mentor can help your new employee in a number of ways, including clarifying company procedures, explaining the culture of that specific workplace, and most importantly, navigating the complex social maze that can challenge any new employee but can be especially challenging for an autistic employee.

“A supportive and understanding person such as a boss or mentor who can ease you into the job and the pre-existing co-worker group situation.

autistic employee

43% of autistic workers said that a mentor would be helpful



For more information refer to [Section 11.1 - The Role of a Mentor and How to Choose One Tool](#).

Providing a job coach

Another great support strategy is to partner with an employment agency to provide the new employee with a job coach. A job coach is an outside person who temporarily supports and assists a new employee during the employee's onboarding with a new job. The job coach does not take the role of the employee's supervisor, but can act as a liaison between the employee and the employee's supervisor(s) and co-workers.

71%

of employers stated they were likely or very likely to partner with a job coach. In most cases, partnering with a job coach comes at no additional cost to the employer.

24%

of employers reported they actively partner with an employment agency to provide a job coach for a new employee.

A job coach can help the employee and employer with problem-solving during the employee's first days on the job, solving little problems before they have a chance to become big problems.

How can a job coach help?

"Having a job coach when I started each new job would have been very helpful to me, as they would be an objective person that could help me navigate the social maze of the workplace."

autistic employee

A job coach can also provide autism training to staff and management, ensuring the entire team is well-equipped to support an autistic employee throughout the employee's entire employment with the organization. Finally, the job coach can provide encouragement to a struggling new employee, motivating the new recruit to persevere and remain in the job, thus allowing the employer to avoid the cost of re-hiring for the same position a short time later.

"I shouldn't have to tell everyone I am autistic to gain respect. If I can be myself without discrimination and drawing attention to myself it would make life easier everywhere."

autistic employee

Why does educating coworkers help?

Planning and implementing adjustments early

A new autistic employee may require some adjustments to their job and/or their work environment, in order to be successful. These **adjustments should not be viewed as special treatment, but simply as a way of levelling the playfield** so that the new employee has the same chance of success as their co-workers.

Most of the time, the adjustments required for autistic employees are relatively simple and inexpensive. Sometimes, they cost nothing at all. As outlined in **Section 7 - Adjustments Not Accommodations.**



Many of the adjustments employers implement in support of autistic employees will actually benefit the rest of the team as well.



See **Section 11.2 - Easy Adjustments for Employees to Make Tool.**

While some adjustments can be implemented after the new employee begins employment, it's important that the employer and the employee work together to plan ahead, so that key adjustments can be implemented ahead of the employee's first day. **An inclusive employer empowers their new employee to request needed adjustments as soon as they're offered the job.**

Work with the employee on the adjustments plan, and involve them in every step of the decision-making process. This will ensure the autistic employee's buy-in to the final plan, and that their needs are being met, while also meeting the needs of the employer.

"An environment that presumes competence and asks what I specifically need to work well."

"Ask your employees what they need. For me, it was the ability to work in the library instead of an office."

"The worst thing that a workplace can do for an employee on the autistic spectrum is to ignore their feedback or their requests to make the workspace more manageable. It's bad enough if you are placed in a work situation that's over bearing for them, it's even worse if they can't do anything about them. Not only does this create a situation where they are trapped in circumstances that are beyond their control, it makes them feel like their voice doesn't matter."

autistic employees

By planning ahead, your new employee can have a smooth start to their employment experience with your company or organization. Remember that first impressions are lasting impressions, and a poor first impression of your company will discourage your new employee from remaining with you for a long time.



Autistic employees are known for their loyalty to one employer, and making a strong first impression is one way to earn that loyalty.²

Finally, it's important to review the adjustments at a later date, to see if they're working well, or if changes need to be made. It's a good idea for both the employer and the employee to agree on a review timeline, and for that review date to be included in the adjustments plan. This will encourage both parties to stick with the original review date.

Supporting Managers and Supervisors

Autism Training for Leaders

While it's important for managers and supervisors to support their new autistic or neurodiverse employee, it's equally important that the managers and supervisors receive support too.

54% of employers surveyed said they were not at all proficient or only somewhat proficient in their understanding of autism & related disorders.

"A better understand[ing] for management of autism, how to best create an ideal environment for autistics to succeed, the impact on organization and culture."

employer

How do we support an autistic employee?



It's important for staff in leadership roles to learn about autism.

Many autism organizations, including local, provincial and national, have resources to help employers better understand autism, so they can better support their autistic team members. Some organizations provide affordable, or even no-cost training to employers looking to become more inclusive. If your nearest autism organization doesn't offer this training, chances are they know someone who does, be it another non-profit organization, a private trainer or a business organization like **President's Group**.

By developing a better understanding of what autism is and how you can support an autistic employee, managers and supervisors will better meet the needs of their neurodiverse team members.

#1 requested support by autistic workers was identified as supportive management. "a supportive manager who understands your difficulties and strengths."

Play to employee's strengths

Like every other employee, each **autistic employee brings their individual strengths to the job.** They also bring a unique lens that can **offer valuable perspectives on their company's work not offered by their colleagues.** Take advantage of this, and look for ways you can play to your autistic employee's strengths which may include attention to detail, systematic approach to tasks, pattern recognition, or sustained concentration. Look for ways their unique lens can be an asset to your organization. Play to their strengths, and allow them to work independently where possible.

What makes a good supervisor?

"A supervisor who trusts me, lets me get on with my work without interruption, does not push me into areas of work I am not good at, and runs interference for me, making sure my work conditions contribute to my doing my best work."

autistic employee

By learning more about autism, and by identifying and playing to your new employee's unique strengths, managers and supervisors will help create a successful onboarding experience for their new autistic employee, equipping the employee for long-term success and encouraging their loyalty to your company or organization.

Supporting co-workers

While supporting both the autistic employee and the staff that supervise or manage the employee is very important, so is supporting the rest of the team. In most jobs, the new employee will be part of a larger team that includes one or more co-workers. Supporting the rest of the team is another key part of the inclusive onboarding process.

Training for co-workers

One of the first things managers can do is to **provide autism and sensitivity training to the entire team,** especially the team members who will work closely with the new employee. Employees can learn about autism, and how they can be sensitive and attuned to their new team members' unique needs. A good trainer will help the co-workers understand that their new autistic employee's differences aren't a bad thing at all.

Our brains are like computer operating systems

"All you know when you first meet an autistic person is that the[ir] brains run on a different operating system. Windows and Mac run on different OS's and they're both good. They both can get almost every job done though each has their strengths and weaknesses. All you know is the OS, not the support needs or individual traits."

autistic employee

By providing colleagues with quality autism and sensitivity training ensures the autistic employee's co-workers are understanding and ready to help their new team member any way they can.

"The people in the workplace are understanding of you."

"Understanding that I have many strengths."

autistic employees

How I feel most supported

Empowering employees

Having an autistic co-worker will be a new experience for many people, and discussing the preferred ways to ask questions about autism or find out more about an autistic employees' preferred adjustments can be helpful. Some autistic employees will like and appreciate their colleagues asking them questions, and others do not feel comfortable. **Supervisors should ensure an autistic employee is not overwhelmed or prevented from completing their work due to an overload of co-workers' questions.** However, if handled correctly and with sensitivity, empowering employees to learn from each other can be a great way for co-workers to learn more about supporting their autistic colleagues. The author has experienced first-hand the value of answering questions and having the freedom to explain his needs to his co-workers.

Autistic does not mean not qualified

One common myth that some employees may buy into is that their autistic colleague is not qualified for the job they're doing because of their disability. This is definitely not the case, as many studies have shown. Managers need to assure the rest of the employees that the new hire, while autistic, is fully qualified for the job, and was hired for the job because of their qualifications, not because they were autistic.

Finding common interests

A final tip to help the new neurodiverse employee build a strong rapport with their team members is for the new employee and the rest of the team to find the common interests that they undoubtedly share. For example, if both the autistic employee and a co-worker share a common interest in ice hockey, they can use that to build a rapport. Even if the new hire doesn't want to attend a live hockey game due to sensory issues, the two employees can spend some of their break times talking about last night's game or which teams they think will make the playoffs. Once they've established a rapport based on common personal interests, they will likely find it easier to work together for their employer's good.

Everybody has a role to play in onboarding a new employee, whether they are autistic or not. By ensuring co-workers are supported and familiar with autism, they can assist the managers and supervisors in welcoming and supporting their new team member. This will help the new hire feel at home in their new job, ensuring they are loyal to their employer and productive in their work.

Conclusion

Whether autistic or not, onboarding any new employee is a challenging but important part of the employee life cycle. However, this is increasingly important for an autistic employee who may take longer to adjust to a new job, new employer, and co-workers. That's why it's so important for the entire team to be knowledgeable about autism and be sensitive to the new employee's needs.

An autistic team member can be a valuable asset to their employer, and keep in mind that most of the adjustments an autistic employee may require cost little or nothing to implement.

For more information on this, refer to **[Section 7 Adjustments Not Accommodations](#)**, which includes a brief business case for hiring autistic employees.

By providing a successful onboarding experience, your new employee will want to work hard for your organization, creating a win-win situation for both the employee and the employer.



REFERENCES

Facts and Helpful Tips – Autism in the Workplace

Focus Professional Services

8 Tips for Hiring and Onboarding an Employee with Autism

American Express

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A good mentor can increase a new autistic employee's chance of success.

The role of a mentor

- Introduces the new employee to the new employee's colleagues
- Helps the new employee learn the culture of the new workplace
- Assists the new employee with navigating the social dynamics of the workplace
- Provides tips on how to interact with specific employees
- Helps the new employee understand the expectations of their new role, including how to complete specific tasks
- Guides the new employee in the use of company-specific IT, including any proprietary hardware or software the employee may be unfamiliar with
- Models appropriate dress for the new employee
- Answers new employee's questions about company policies and procedures
- Supports the new employee at company social events
- Serves as a liaison between management/supervisors and the new employee

**Ideal values
most
appreciated
in a mentor:**

"Mentorship - having someone else the Autistic employee can ask for help."

"Access an individual who can help sort out problems I have at work with the work environment, other coworkers, and or the tasks of the job itself."

autistic employees



While a mentor may serve as a liaison between the new autistic employee and company management and/or other employees, they should never speak on behalf of the new employee, unless the employee gives them explicit permission to do so.

Here are some good qualities to look for in choosing a mentor. Remember to involve the new employee in choosing their mentor.

How to choose a mentor

- Knowledgeable about autism, and someone who wants to help
- A model employee, both in performance and attitude
- Patient and willing to take the time needed to help the new employee
- Familiar with the job requirements of the new employee's job
- Familiar with company policies, procedures and systems, including technology
- Compassionate and sensitive – considers others' needs as well as their own
- Excellent communication skills
- Respected by the whole team, including managers, supervisors and staff
- Understanding of the company's culture, including unwritten social rules
- Available when the new employee needs them

These tips should help an employer and autistic employee choose a suitable mentor to help the new employee with their onboarding. This list is not exhaustive; the employee may identify additional responsibilities and qualities during the mentor selection process.

Be open to this, as the employee's needs in a mentor must be met as fully as possible, so that their onboarding experience can be successful and positive.

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Easy adjustments for employers to make

Many of the adjustments that an autistic employee may need are simple, and cost little to nothing to implement.

Every autistic individual is different, so not all autistics will need the same adjustments.

Implementing adjustments ahead of the employee's start date will prevent the employee from being frustrated and overwhelmed on their first day of the job.

Here are some examples of easy adjustments that employers can make in advance of the autistic employee's first day on the job:

Commonly requested physical and sensory adjustments:

- Ability to have time between tasks
- Being able to take off my shoes while sitting down for long periods of time
- Being able to have a blanket with me
- Having access to a dark room
- Being able to wear sunglasses on shift indoors
- Being able to get up and wash my hands when I feel like it needs to happen
- *Closed captioning for meetings
- *Ability to ask my boss for written direction

autistic employees

**counts as sensory because of auditory*

Other physical and sensory adjustments frequently requested:

- Access to a quiet workspace that's free of visual and auditory distractions
- Permission to wear noise-cancelling headphones
- Ability to control temperature, fans, ventilation etc. for their immediate workspace
- Access to fidget toys
- Ability to get up and move when needed
- LED lighting or lighting that doesn't hum and flicker
- Flexible working hours
- Scent-free environment
- Access to weighted blankets, vests or lap pads
- Access to different chair/seating options

Providing **communication adjustments** ahead of time is also important.

Commonly requested communication adjustments:

- Text to speech software. I like both reading and listening at the same time for better retention.
- Instead of expecting me to verbally describe my challenges and history on the job with a new supervisor, being able to provide them with written information about what works well for me, what I need support with, areas that I know need improvement and what I've done so far about that.
- Having time to just work alone without being constantly interrupted.
- It is most helpful that instructions are given in a written list in the order of priority.
- ... My daily tasks having step by step instructions would be very helpful.
- Not being expected to have a meaningful response immediately. Need lots of time to process and think.
- It's not enough for others to understand my communication style, it needs to be given equal status with theirs. Because it's always me that 'has to learn to do things differently' not them. And since I can't, that's a big problem. I am looked down on because of my communication style instead of being respected for having a novel perspective and a positive attitude and a solution-orientated way of thinking.
- Not being judged by, or expected to make 'small talk'.

autistic employees

The above list is not exhaustive and does not include adjustments for social situations, or anxiety and emotional regulation, which are covered in the retention section. However, this list does cover the most commonly requested items to address both sensory and communication adjustments in a survey of 174 autistic employees. If requested, these are the most important adjustments to have in place for the employee's first day on the job.

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LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT



Organizations receive many benefits when they provide ongoing learning and development opportunities for their employees. For-profit companies remain competitive by ensuring their employees have the latest skills and knowledge relating to their jobs. Non-profit organizations are able to keep their services relevant to the changing needs of their clients, ensuring they remain attractive to donors and funders. In addition to remaining relevant and competitive, an organization's employees feel valued because their employer is investing in their learning and professional development.

This encourages greater employee engagement and can support building a more inclusive workplace.

There are two components to learning and development as they relate to autism. The first component supports **ongoing employee learning and development about autism and inclusion**, and the second component is **supporting the learning and professional development needs of autistic employees**.

Learning about autism and neurodiversity

#1 recommendation to make a work environment welcoming, inclusive and supportive

Employers and employees who are familiar with autism, or willing to learn. It's essential for an employer to provide their employees with ongoing opportunities to learn about autism and related neurodiversities.

co-workers who are familiar with autism

"The more education about autism my co-workers have the more safe the work environment will be."

autistic employee

Weave learning about inclusion in all employee-learning programs. Examples of diversity and inclusion training can include:

- Learning about why diversity matters.
- The workplace and business benefits of an inclusive workplace culture.
- Understanding unconscious bias and its effects on workplace interactions.
- Providing employees with an overall understanding of what autism is, and the easy to implement sensory and communication adjustments that may help an autistic employee or even an autistic customer or client feel supported.

Consider providing these learning opportunities as part of regular employee training rather than waiting until the company has hired an autistic employee.

Waiting to offer autism training until you have hired an autistic employee singles the employee out, possibly making them feel uncomfortable. Chances are, even if a company has never employed an autistic individual, they have likely served or interacted with autistic clients or customers. Providing this training on a regular basis benefits all stakeholders involved with the business. Providing diversity and inclusion training including autism-specific training can boost an employer's reputation in the community as well.



Section 12.1 - Accessing Diversity and Inclusion Training Tool offers ten ideas for ways to access training and information about autism, diversity and inclusion.

Supporting an autistic employee's learning and development

It's important to provide autistic employees with equal opportunities for professional development. This way, they can be just as skilled and productive as their non-autistic co-workers and feel just as valued. If performance reviews identify areas for professional growth, support finding professional development opportunities that would help the employee achieve this growth. Remember that autistic employees may require support in order to benefit equally from professional growth opportunities. When working with the employee to identify learning and development opportunities, consider how inclusive these opportunities are.

For example, **if an employee has to attend training delivered by a third party, is the trainer or training agency open to the employee wearing sunglasses and headphones in the session.** If the answer is no, then consider exploring other opportunities and vendors that provide a more inclusive learning environment.

Empower the employee to be open and honest about their needs, and work with them to determine what supports and adjustments will help them maximize the benefits they receive from these important opportunities. In most cases, these adjustments will be straightforward

and free or inexpensive to implement, just like the adjustments that support them in their regular work duties. Often, they can use the same tools during any professional development that they use for their regular job.

For example, **if the employee is attending a workshop in a classroom with bright, fluorescent lighting that flickers and hums, they can use the same sunglasses and headphones they normally wear at work.**

This adjustment is simple to implement and won't result in added costs to the employer.

Be prepared to "think outside the box" when it comes to supporting an employee's personal and professional growth.

As an example, **if an employee has difficulties managing their work schedule, set aside time to find a scheduling app that meets both the employee and employer's needs.** Allow the employee to use professional development time to set-up and learn the new app. This will address the schedule management issue and ultimately improve the employee's performance.

Another example could be **finding a relaxation app for an employee that lives with high anxiety.** Providing the employee with the time and support they need to achieve personal and professional growth will not only make the employee stronger in their role but will make the employer stronger too.

Learning and development is a two-fold concept. **Weaving inclusion and autism learning into an employer's regular employee training programs equips the entire team to support autistic employees, as well as autistic customers and clients.** Providing regular training prevents specific individuals from being singled out and made to feel uncomfortable. At the same time, it's important to provide autistic employees with the same access to professional development opportunities as their non-autistic co-workers. This supports the personal and professional growth of all employees and creates a stronger, more inclusive and more cohesive team. The stronger the team is, the stronger the business or organization, and the better their reputation.

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LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT



Accessing diversity and inclusion training.

Ideas for accessing training and information on autism, diversity and inclusion

1. [Canadian Association for Supported Employment](#)
2. [President's Group](#)
3. [Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work](#)
4. [LinkedIn Learning](#)
5. [Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion](#)
6. [Ready, Willing and Able Canada E-Learning](#)
7. [aide Canada](#)
8. [Hire for Talent](#)
9. Reach out to a local autism organization
10. Google diversity and inclusion training

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RETAINING AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES



The second last phase of the employee life cycle is retention. After successfully onboarding an autistic employee and supporting the learning and development of the employee and colleagues, employers want to retain their employees for the long term, reducing the costs associated with frequent employee turnover.

The President's Group, a British Columbia based roundtable of accessible employers, reports that **employers who hire employees with disabilities have:**

72% higher staff retention¹

According to an inclusive employer survey performed for this toolkit, many employers already have or are open to implementing adjustments that support and encourage long-term employee retention.

46% of employers reported being very likely to implement sensory modifications.

50% were very likely to allow the employee time to practice self-calming strategies.

21% of employers already had communication adjustments in place.

80% would be likely to implement them.

These statistics are very encouraging and show a trend towards employers becoming more autism inclusive.



The strategies and tools in this section will help employers support their autistic employees over the course of their employment, in turn encouraging long-term employee loyalty.

Providing ongoing support

Many autistic employees will require some level of ongoing support for the duration of their employment with the company.

Every autistic employee is a unique individual; therefore, the needs of each employee are individualized. Not all employees require the same type or level of support.

A survey of autistic employees conducted for this toolkit identified 3 supports that were commonly requested. Each of these common supports is summarized in its own subsection as follows:

- Communication supports - [Section 13a](#)
- Anxiety and emotional regulation supports - [Section 13b](#)
- Supportive access to informal social situations, such as planned or unplanned employee social events - [Section 13c](#)



REFERENCES

- 1 [Business Case, Why Hiring People with Disabilities is Good for Business In the New Normal](#)
The President's Group

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RETAINING AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES



13a Communication supports

Despite everyone's best efforts, misunderstandings and communication breakdowns sometimes occur.

One way to reduce the occurrence of these stressful situations is for employers to learn and respect the communication preferences of their autistic employee(s).

While many autistic employees are visual learners and prefer some form of written communication, others may prefer telephone, face-to-face, or video communication. This subsection provides strategies for managing communication breakdowns, breaking larger tasks into smaller tasks, helping employees prepare for meetings, and helping employees process information.

Autistic communication preferences

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) includes all forms of communication (other than oral speech) that are used to express thoughts, needs, wants, and ideas.¹

"Text to speech software. I like both reading and listening at the same time for better retention."

"Being able to phone people or speak to them in person. (Not everyone with autism hates the phone.)"

"Alternatives to oral communication (e.g. use of an AAC application, e-mails)."

"If instructions are only given verbally - recorded is best. It is most helpful that instructions are given in a written list in the order of priority."

autistic employees



For more information and tips for communication preferences refer to **Section 13.1 Communication Strategies Tool**.

Managing communication breakdowns

Despite an employer's best efforts, sometimes it's not possible to communicate in a preferred manner. For example, an employee may prefer telephone communication with all their supervisors, but if the company just hired a new supervisor who stutters, the supervisor may find it easier and more comfortable communicating by e-mail. When an employer or co-worker is unable to communicate with an autistic employee in the employee's preferred manner, explain the reason(s) for the change to the employee. This will show the person knows and respects the employee's communication style, even though they aren't always able to communicate that way, which may help reduce the employee's anxiety around the change in communication methods.

A good strategy to navigate communication breakdowns is for the autistic employee to have a "go-to" person who can assist both parties in successfully navigating the communication breakdown.

Ideally, this person would be another autistic person (when available), but otherwise, should be an employee familiar with autism, and with how the autistic employee communicates and interprets others' communication.

Also, if the change in communication is temporary, or just one time, reassure the employee that the change is temporary; this may also ease their anxiety. For example, if a co-worker phones an employee who prefers e-mail communication because the co-worker's internet is temporarily down, the co-worker will help ease the autistic employee's frustrations by explaining this and assuring their team member they will resume e-mailing the employee once their internet is working again.

Breaking down large tasks into small tasks

When it comes to communicating large complex tasks, many autistics find it easier to process and follow instructions that are broken down into smaller, individual tasks.



Consider creating checklists for employees to follow for tasks that have multiple steps or components to them. Airline pilots have long followed checklists to safely operate complex aircraft.

"Clean backroom' has too many instructions in one. It would need to be broken down into steps for me to do it correctly."

autistic employee

How are checklists helpful?

Breaking down large complex tasks into smaller individual tasks not only helps the employee complete the tasks correctly, but it gives the employer a better sense of the size of the task, allowing them to realistically estimate how much time the employee needs to complete the task.

Providing advanced notice of meetings

Meetings are often an essential part of a job, but they can be stressful for autistic employees.

One effective way of mitigating that stress is to provide advanced notice of meetings and also to provide the agenda a few days in advance.

This allows the employee time to mentally and physically prepare for the meeting, making the experience more likely to be a positive one instead of a stressful one.

How does advanced notice help?

"Having advance notice for meetings and an agenda and being able to take notes at meetings or having notes provided. Being able to ask questions during instruction or take notes. Being able to ask questions after instruction."

autistic employee

Processing information

Finally, understand that some autistics process information slower than a non-autistic person does. **It's important that the person communicating with the autistic employee allow them time to process information at their own speed, without pressuring them.** This is especially true if the employee is overwhelmed or upset.

"Slower processing speed in conversation; severe social anxiety and limited oral communication ability when overwhelmed."

"People not being patient with me when they ask a question. I need extra time to process what they've said, formulate a response, and put that response into the appropriate words."

"It's hard for me to communicate when I'm frustrated and not allowed enough time to calm down and think rationally again. At times in the past, my employer didn't give me enough time to calm down before expecting decisions or responses from me, and this was frustrating."

autistic employees

What can cause communication frustrations?

Keep in mind that autism is a highly individualized disability, and every autistic employee will communicate differently. An inclusive employer will ideally be prepared to support a variety of communication preferences if they have multiple autistic employees. While this may require a little extra effort from the employer, it will pay dividends in the long run by having successful, productive employees.



REFERENCES

- 1 **Augmented and Alternative Communication**
AAC. Kennedy Krieger Institute
- 2 **Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA)**
Career Pilots: Checklists and Discipline

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Strategies from Autistic Employees

RETAINING AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES



13b Anxiety and emotional regulation supports

Many autistics require extra support in managing their anxiety and emotions. Contrary to popular belief, autistics are not emotionless creatures. They have the same emotions as the general population but aren't always as good at managing them, especially when emotions are triggered by high anxiety.

5

supports that employers can provide their employees to assist with anxiety and emotional regulation:

- Supporting employees during times of change
- Supporting employees during performance reviews
- Providing freedom in scheduling
- Providing freedom of movement
- Providing flexibility in break times



For more information and tips for supporting employees with anxiety refer to [***Section 13.2 for Managing Anxiety Tool.***](#)

Dealing with change

Many autistics struggle with change, especially if change is constant and the reasons for it are left unexplained. Change, especially constant change, is a major source of anxiety identified in the autistic workers survey.

2

barriers to emotional regulation identified in the survey:

- Lack of advanced notice about change
- Not knowing the reasons for change

Change management strategies

"Being allowed control over changes or at least asked and given time to process instead of being forced to change quickly."

"Routine, familiarity. Ability to control sensory/physical environment."

autistic employees

It's important for employers to provide autistic employees with continuous support during times of change.

Many autistics love routine and thrive with familiar environments, so a constantly changing workplace will be very stressful to them, especially if they don't feel supported by their employer or colleagues during times of change.

- Provide the employee with as much advanced notice as possible about any upcoming changes.
- Include information about the reasons for the change and how the employee and the rest of the team will benefit from the change.
- Include details on the timeline for the change (i.e., the different dates for each individual change that is happening as part of the bigger change).
- Take the time to answer all the employee's questions, and be patient and understanding of them during this difficult transitional time.

Another strategy is to actively involve the employee in the change management process from the beginning, whenever possible.

This way, the employee will have first-hand knowledge of what's happening, so there's an opportunity for reduced confusion. The employee will also have a "buy-in" to the change and may even become a change management champion for the organization, at least for that particular change.

Avoid surprising the employee with changes, and allow them as much time as needed to process and come to terms with the change. Managers should have an open-door policy so that the employee(s) may come to them anytime, with any questions or concerns they may have.

These strategies will often help reduce an autistic employee's stress during terms of change, thereby minimizing the impact on their performance and reducing the likelihood of them leaving the organization to seek employment elsewhere. However, keep in mind that no matter how much support an employer provides to their autistic employee, the employee may still feel some stress during this time, so a little patience and understanding goes a long way.



For more information and tips for supporting employees with change refer to **Section 13.3 for a Supporting Employees During Change Tool.**

Performance reviews

Respondents to the autistic workers survey identified performance reviews as a significant source of anxiety for them and the second-highest barrier to their emotional regulation.

Provide advanced notice to employees about performance reviews, and be fully transparent about what's involved with them.

Many survey respondents noted they prefer to receive regular feedback from their supervisors and have a chance to address any concerns before their performance review. This avoids the extreme anxiety caused by surprises.

"The first time I went through a performance review in a job, I had my probation extended for another three months. My boss told me my performance was around a B, and he wanted to see it become an A. He hadn't raised any concerns with me over the past month, so I mistakenly thought everything was good. Needless to say, I was very stressed and anxious at work for the next little while after the performance review because I was worried about what else I was doing wrong that he was going to wait another three months to tell me."

Corey Walker, autistic self-advocate

"Clear continuous work performance feedback."

"Someone higher up to tell me I am doing good and that I am following the rules well."

autistic employees

Feedback strategies

If an employer cannot avoid conducting a performance review, keep the process informal. Provide a draft of the performance review to the employee in advance to provide an opportunity for the employee to better understand the information. This will help the employee formulate questions and responses to the information and reduce anxiety. Allow the employee plenty of time to process the information during the actual performance review and work with the employee to achieve a consensus on the assessment of their performance.

This is a good time for the employer and employee to review the adjustments being provided for the employee and to determine if any adjustments would be beneficial. If inadequate supports and/or adjustments are or could be a contributing factor to poor employee performance, then the employee should not be terminated or disciplined. Instead, revise the adjustments and supports and give the employee a chance to succeed with these changes in place.

By providing transparency, flexibility, and support during any performance review process, both the employer and the employee are likely to find the experience less stressful. Keep in mind that the employee may still experience some level of anxiety no matter what adjustments the employer provides, so ensure the employee has the time and tools they need to manage that anxiety, so it doesn't become overwhelming.

Scheduling

Many autistic employees struggle with unstructured environments and a lack of control over their schedules. Providing a structured work environment with a consistent schedule will further support the employee to thrive.

Remember, many autistic employees struggle with frequent change, so a frequently changing schedule would be a nightmare for those employees. Work with the employee to develop a schedule that meets both the employee's and the employer's needs, and keep that schedule consistent as much as possible, again providing advanced notice of any schedule changes. Should the schedule need to change, support the employee during this transition using the strategies mentioned earlier in this section.

*"Having a set schedule that does not change unless *I* ask for the change."*

Schedule success

"Creating my own schedule. Being able to complete meetings and communication when it best suites me and working on paperwork when I'm not capable of meetings. Being able to schedule interactions as often or little as I need."

autistic employees

Providing consistency in scheduling doesn't have to be an onerous task. It should be a collaborative task that meets both the business needs of the employer and the employee's needs. One thing to consider is asking the employee to agree to a periodic schedule review. This provides both parties the opportunity to discuss and agree upon scheduling changes if the current work schedule no longer meets the needs of one or both parties.

Also, keep in mind that some autistic employees will prefer flexibility over consistency so that they can request schedule changes based on their own life needs. Even though some of these needs may not be work-related, it's important for employers to support all their employees in maintaining a good work/life balance. This holistic support provides employees with less stress, allowing them to thrive and perform their best for their employer.

Allowing freedom of movement

In the autistic employee survey, the third most requested support to help regulate emotions and reduce anxiety was the freedom to move around as needed. This helps autistic employees reduce stress and anxiety, helping them to better regulate their emotions. This, in turn, reduces conflict and improves employee performance.

This could include:

- Freedom to stretch or to engage in activity that best meets the employee's needs to decompress.
- Using a tactile object like a fidget spinner.
- Repetitive movements like flapping hands, or something else.

While this may be easier to implement in some jobs than others, a supportive employer will consider the needs of their employees to have some freedom of movement and identify a way or incorporate that adjustment with them.

Flexibility in taking breaks

For many autistics, the social aspects of the job can be stressful and, at times, emotionally draining.

For many autistics, the social aspects of the job can be stressful and, at times, emotionally draining. This is why the fourth most requested support for emotional regulation was the ability to take breaks as needed. Ideally, employees should be empowered to take short unscheduled breaks as needed, but of course, this is not always possible. For those situations where it isn't possible to provide sporadic unscheduled breaks, ensure employees have regularly scheduled breaks and encourage them to take advantage of those breaks. Reducing employee stress reduces the costs associated with sick days and lost productivity. Sometimes, autistic employees don't always know in advance when they need a break but will benefit from the flexibility of being able to request one when they need one.

"Being allowed to step away from an activity because I am not mentally capable of participating."

"Work alone time. Taking unscheduled breaks as needed, especially if the weather is good enough to go outside and there is a nearby more natural area to walk through."

"Specific break time that I can take as needed is better than scheduled breaks. It's easiest to hyperfocus when I can and regulate when it is needed. "

autistic employees

Benefits of a break

Just like with communication, every autistic employee will regulate emotions and anxiety differently. The strategies described above are the strategies most requested by respondents to the autistic workers survey, but remember that some employees may have different needs than those listed above. If the employer and the employee are willing to collaborate on exploring individualized strategies for emotional regulation, the results will be a happier employee, fewer sick days, and lower employee turnover, all of which saves the employer money.

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13c supportive access to social situations

Autistic employees are not anti-social, but nonetheless, many find navigating the social maze of the workplace to be a daunting task.

Unplanned and informal social situations, including events like employee picnics and Christmas parties, can be a very stressful experience for many autistic employees.

Four key strategies employers can use to support their employees:

- Freedom to skip social events
- Providing advanced notice of social events
- Involve the employee in planning a social event
- Providing access to a mentor to support them during a social event



For more information and tips for communications, strategies refer to [Section 13.4 for Supporting an Employee During Social Events Tool](#).

Freedom to skip social events

Provide autistic employees with the option to not participate in social events. If they want to attend them, provide guidance on what's expected of them during social events.

The option to not participate in social situations is the number one social support requested by participants in the autistic workers survey.

What social supports make a difference?

"Being able to choose whether I want to participate or not; being able to come to a social, if I missed a session, without reprimand."

"Freedom to socialize in the ways that work for me, and freedom to socialize or not."

autistic employees

While many employees, including some autistic employees, enjoy social events, they should never be made mandatory, and employees should not be disciplined by management or ostracized by their co-workers for choosing not to attend informal social events that are too stressful for them. This could lead to negative outcomes, including a decrease in communication and an increase of anxiety of people in the workgroup.

Provide advanced notice of social events

Provide advanced notice of all planned social events, and keep unplanned social events to a minimum, or preferably avoid them altogether.

This was the second-highest requested social support identified in the autistic workers survey. Ensure autistic employees have time to mentally and physically prepare for any social events they may wish to attend. Again, provide information on what will happen at the event, when it starts and ends, and reassure the employee they can leave when they wish.

Planning their own social event

Allow and even encourage autistic employees to plan their own social events if they wish.

If the organization has a social committee that's responsible for planning events, then invite the employee to join the committee. This way, they can plan an event that's within their comfort zone, allowing them to participate without undue stress and anxiety. This also provides the opportunity for them to learn more about their co-workers and possibly discover shared interests.

Support and encourage autistic employees to fully participate in the planning of office social events. Provide an opportunity for autistic employees to take the lead in suggesting themes or social activities that fall into their scope of comfort and familiarity and potentially expand the workplace experience in activities. Ensure autistic employees have a full seat at the planning table, supporting them to participate in the planning and activities with lower stress and anxiety. This provides a mutually supportive environment to learn about co-workers and discover shared interests.

“One thing that I feel would [help] an autistic employee [feel] more welcome is the ability to personally plan a social event. Doing so would allow them to meet with other employees without stepping out of their comfort zone. It also gives them a chance to share their interests with other employees.”

Event planning

autistic employee

Provide a mentor

Simply put, a mentor can assist an autistic employee in preparing for social events and be available as a support person during events

Many organizations and businesses offer periodic informal social events for their employees. While many employees enjoy the laughs and conversations, many times these events are a nightmare for autistic employees due to challenges with social engagement. For these reasons, it's important to keep these events optional for everybody, with no pressure to attend. If an autistic employee wants to attend, these strategies, along with other strategies the employee may identify, are important tools in ensuring everybody has a good time at these events.



for more information about how a mentor can support an autistic employee in navigating the complex social aspects of the workplace, refer to section **Section 11.1 - The Role of A Mentor and How to Choose One Tool.**

Conclusion

Hiring an employee is a significant cost to employers. For that reason, employers are keen to retain their employees for many years and keep the costs of employee turnover to a minimum. These strategies, identified by autistic employees themselves, offer some good first steps to supporting autistic employees, encouraging them to remain with their employer for the long term. Keep in mind that, as with all the strategies, the above list is comprehensive but not exhaustive. Individual employees may have additional or simply different needs than those identified above. Always keep an open mind and be willing to collaborate with the employee on identifying their support needs.

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Learning more about an employee's communication preferences can help employers avoid misunderstandings and communication breakdowns.

Supporting employees

Communication strategies

- Respect employee's communication preferences as much as possible.
- Have a "go to" person employee can seek help from during a communication breakdown.
- Inform employee when change in communication method is temporary.
- Communicate complex tasks by breaking them down into smaller tasks.
- Provide advanced notice of meetings.
- Allow employee time to process and respond to new information.

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Many autistics benefit from extra support in managing their anxiety and emotions.

Managing anxiety

Feedback and performance reviews

- Provide feedback throughout employment; don't save it for performance reviews.
- Allow employee to address concerns before a performance review.
- Be transparent about what's involved in the performance review.
- Provide employee a copy of the performance review draft to support need to understand information and generate questions or response to the information.
- Review supports and adjustments with employees and change as needed.
- Provide opportunity for employee to succeed with revised supports and adjustments.

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Many autistics benefit from extra support in managing their anxiety and emotions.

Schedules, breaks and movement

- Keep employee's schedule consistent. Avoid changing it without their consent where possible.
- Provide advanced notice of schedule changes where possible.
- Allow employee to request schedule changes when life events require it.
- Support employee to take unscheduled breaks as needed.
- Allow employees freedom to move around and decompress as needed.

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Many autistics struggle with change, especially if change is constant and the reasons for it left unexplained. There are a number of strategies that can be used to help reduce stress during times of change.

Supporting employees

Strategies for managing change

- Minimize change as much as possible.
- Provide employee with advanced notice of change.
- Explain reasons for all changes.
- Answers all questions about the change.
- Provide timelines for change.
- Allow employee time to process & respond to the change.
- Negotiate a mutually acceptable timeframe to process change and review regularly with the employee.
- Involve employee in change management process.
- Be patient, understanding, and flexible during any change.

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Many autistics find navigating the social maze of the workplace daunting. There are a number of strategies that can be used to help reduce the stress of formal and informal social situations.

Supporting employees

Social events strategies

- Allow employee to skip social events without repercussions.
- Allow employee to attend only part of an event without judgement.
- Empower and encourage employee to participate in social committees, or plan their own social event, if they wish.
- Provide advanced notice of social events.
- Provide employee with a mentor to help them prepare for and navigate social events.

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EMPLOYEE SEPARATION



Separation is inevitable; all employees will eventually leave their employer, but for different reasons. An employee may be retiring after a long, successful career, they may be moving to a new employment opportunity, they may be leaving for medical reasons, or the employer may be terminating the employee for one or more reasons.

56% of respondents to the autistic workers survey conducted for this project have difficulties staying employed.

Learning from employee separation

Sometimes, an employer terminates an employee because the employee is deemed to be a “poor fit” for the company. An employee may separate voluntarily for the same reasons. If this is the case, it’s a good idea for employers to use this experience as a learning opportunity. One of the most effective ways of accomplishing this is to hold an exit interview with the outgoing employee if the employee is willing.



This section will explore questions the employer may wish to ask the former employee, and questions they may wish to ask themselves, in order to use this separation as a learning experience.

Exit interviews

Whether an employee is leaving voluntarily or involuntarily, ask if they’re willing to participate in an exit interview. Do this not just for employees terminated by their employer. Even a long-term employee retiring after many years of happy employment with the same company will have feedback to share that an employer may learn from. However, an exit interview is especially important when an employee is leaving (voluntarily or involuntarily) because they or the employer felt they were a poor fit for the company.

Asking the right questions during an exit interview will help employers get the information they need to learn from an outgoing employee's experiences, so they can provide a better experience for the next employee.



See **Section – 14.1 Suggested Exit Interview Questions Tool** for six good questions to ask an outgoing employee during an exit interview.

If the employee offers critical feedback, this can be difficult for an employer to hear, but it is valuable nonetheless and ideally, the employer would not get defensive, but would instead be grateful for the feedback, and commit to learning from it. In order to learn from a separation event, an employer may want to reflect on their own workplace culture and practices.



Look at **Section 14.2 - Reviewing Inclusion Practices After Employee Separation Tool** for questions employers may want to ask themselves after an employee leaves, or is terminated due to being a poor fit for the organization.

It's important for employers to ask themselves hard questions, and equally important for employers to be honest with themselves. An employer may need to talk with others to get all the answers they need, including the employee's direct supervisor(s), co-workers, and the employee's mentor if they had one. This will ensure the employer has all the facts they need to learn what worked and what didn't.



If the employers finds themselves answering no to most of their critical questions, then it's a good idea to revisit their policies and practices on inclusion and to provide their employees with autism and neurodiversity learning opportunities.

Conclusion

Always take the time to learn from an employee separation. Even if an employee is retiring after a long, successful career, there are always things an employer can learn from them. If an employee is leaving or being terminated because they were a poor fit for the employer, then it's a good idea for the employer to learn from the separation, and take steps to become more autism inclusive. This will reduce the costs associated with high employee turnover in the future.

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EMPLOYEE SEPARATION



Asking the right questions during an exit interview will help employers get the information they need to learn from an outgoing employee's experiences, so they can provide a better experience for the next employee.

Exit interview questions

Questions an employer may wish to ask an outgoing autistic employee:

- What did the employee enjoy most about their job, and why?
- What did the employee enjoy least about their job, and why?
- If the employee's separation is voluntary, why are they leaving?
- What more could their supervisor(s) have done to support them?
- What more could their co-workers have done to support them?
- What is one piece of constructive advice you have to offer the organization?
- What recommendations does the employee have for the employer regarding supporting autistic employees?

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When an employee is leaving or being terminated because they were a “poor fit”, take the time to learn from an employee separation and reflect on how autism inclusive practices are being used in the organization.

Some critical questions an employer may want to ask themselves if an employee left, or was terminated due to being a poor fit:

Examining inclusion practices following employee separation:

- Why was the employee a poor fit?
- What efforts, if any, did the employer make to support the employee?
 - What was the employee’s response to those efforts?
 - What was the outcome of those efforts?
 - Did the employee’s performance improve or worsen?
 - Did the employer periodically review the adjustments they were providing for the employee? If yes, how often? If not, why not?
- How was the employee treated by their co-workers or immediate supervisors?
 - What could the employer have done differently to prevent this?
- Did the employee ask for supports, or did the employer ask how they could support the employee?
- Did the employer do everything feasible to provide adjustments for the employee?
- Was the employee’s job description clear? Did it include all required skills and responsibilities?
- Did the employee have a chance to ask questions about their job description, if they had any?
- Did the employer provide a mentor during the onboarding process?

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CONCLUSION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is becoming more prevalent

Many employers are seeking resources and user-friendly tools to support autistic employees throughout the employee life cycle.

1 IN 66 Canadians have an autism diagnosis.¹

52% of employers reported being only somewhat proficient or not at all proficient in their understanding of autism or related disorders.²

33% of employers indicated that they do not currently have an autistic inclusive work environment, and have no immediate plans to create one.³

56% of autistic respondents reported having difficulties staying employed.

Success in the Workplace: Strategies from Autistic Employees is designed to fulfill that need. This toolkit is designed with employers in mind. In addition to being written by an actually autistic author, the content was reviewed by autistic employees, employers and HR professionals to ensure the strategies are both helpful to autistic employees and useful to both small and large employers.

While these strategies are comprehensive, they are by no means exhaustive.

Every autistic employee, like every non-autistic employee, is a unique individual and their workplace needs will vary.

Some autistics will require more supports than those discussed in the toolkit, while others may require fewer supports. Use the resources in this toolkit as a guide to enabling and encouraging long-term employee engagement, productivity and loyalty. An inclusive employer will take the time to work with the employee and their support team to identify and support the unique needs the employee may have and to ensure that they bring their best to the workplace. These strategies are both helpful to autistic employees and useful to both small and large employers.

Call to action

The author hopes that the tools in **Success in the Workplace: Strategies from Autistic Employees** will help empower employers to advance employment and career opportunities for autistic individuals. Employers big and small are encouraged to use the resources in this toolkit to not only become a champion for autism inclusion but to make Canada a leader in inclusive employment.



REFERENCES

- 1 **Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children and Youth in Canada.**
Public Health Agency of Canada
- 2 **Autistic Workers Survey**
- 3 **Autistic Workers Survey**

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Toolkit Author

Corey Walker, Autistic Self-Advocate, Project Coordinator,
[The Sinneave Family Foundation](#)

Project Manager

Amy Lonsberry, Policy and Privacy Officer
[The Sinneave Family Foundation](#)

Jillian McDonald, **Former Innovation and Impact Officer**
[The Sinneave Family Foundation](#)

Steering Committee

Karen Bopp, Director of Provincial Outreach, Adjunct Professor
[Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism \(CIRCA\)](#),
University of British Columbia

Anjela Godber, Employment Works Coordinator
[Pacific Autism Family Network](#)

Danielle Griffin, Autistic Self-Advocate

Tanya McLeod, President
[The Sinneave Family Foundation](#)

Rod Miller, President and CEO
[CPHR Alberta](#)

Advisory Group

Terry Batley, Autistic Self-Advocate, Vice-President
Autism Home Base

Florence Chapman, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Human Resources and Business Process Manager
[Sobeys Canada](#)

Bruno Hache, Autistic Self-Advocate

Joy Hewitt, National Director of Employment
[Auticon Canada Ltd.](#)

Debbie Irish, Chief Operating Officer
[Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work](#)

Trish Kelly, Senior Accessibility Consultant, Strategy and Engagement
[The Presidents Group](#)

David Moloney, Self-Advocate on the Autism Spectrum | Mutual Fund Indexer
[CIBC](#)

Dawn O'Connor, Chief Focus Bubbles Host
[Focus Bubbles](#)

Tamara Shaw, Employment and Community Coordinator
[WorkBC Prince George Centre](#)

Chris Vainio, Labour Market Facilitator
[Inclusion Yukon](#)

Prince George Adult Autism Stakeholder's Group

Debra Burns, Navigator, Services to Adults with Developmental Disabilities
[Ministry of Children and Family Development](#)

Heather Kwitkoski, Former Spoke Manager
[Pacific Autism Family Network](#)
Prince George Spoke

Doye Odunsi, Quality Service Analyst
[Community Living BC](#)

Tamara Shaw, Employment and Community Coordinator
WorkBC Prince George Centre

Shannon Wagner, Dean, Human and Health Sciences | Professor
[School of Health Sciences, University of Northern British Columbia](#) | Registered Psychologist/Clinician

Marcia Waller, Parent

Michael Watt, Former Regional Manager
[Sources Community Resource Society](#)
Northern BC

Courtney Wickstrom, Prince George and Northern BC Regional Manager
[Pivot Point Family Growth Centre Inc.](#)