



Neuroinclusive Approaches for Retention, Promotion and Career Mobility

What is the Neuroinclusive Employment Project?

In partnership with the Sinneave Family Foundation, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation is conducting research to explore how employers can create more neuroinclusive workplaces. The research aims to identify evidence-based practices and real-world examples that help employers support neurodivergent people and people living with disabilities to uncover opportunities to further improve workplace inclusion.

The following summary shares insights from the knowledge synthesis phase of research to help employers strengthen their capacity to foster inclusive workplaces. These evidence-based strategies and practices can help to increase employment opportunities and foster inclusion, with a special focus on neuroinclusion, in the workplace.

Neurodivergent employees often face shorter job tenures and limited career growth due to traditional approaches to retention, promotion, and job mobility that overlook their strengths and their needs. To improve retention and promotion, employers can adopt the following evidence-based strategies.

Retention

Retention is about creating a workplace where employees want to stay, which boosts productivity and employers' investments in developing talent. Traditional workplaces may not be designed with the needs of neurodivergent employees in mind, requiring employers to incorporate neuroinclusive strategies to foster retention. They include the following:

1) Create opportunities for input and shared decision-making.

Engaging employees by inviting their feedback and involving them in decisions that impact them increases inclusion. This can range from informal approaches (such as asking employees for feedback and suggestions) to more formal employee surveys or working groups (such as Employee Resource Groups). From a neuroinclusive perspective, research has also highlighted the importance ensuring that people living with Autism, and other neurodivergent people, have a seat at the table for making decisions that impact them. For these initiatives to succeed, there must be shared responsibility across the organization, with clear lines of accountability to ensure that input leads to meaningful action.



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2) Review and extend employee benefits.

Employees with disabilities often face higher healthcare costs, so extending benefits is key to retention. When possible, offer comprehensive health plans, personal days, extended leave, and mental health support. Ensure benefits cover neurodivergent needs, like psychological services for assessments and coaching. Implement an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to support employees through personal or mental health challenges, which can be helpful for neurodivergent employees.

3) Ensure fair and equitable compensation.

Studies show that people living with disabilities in Canada often earn less than their peers, making fair pay a critical focus for employers. At minimum, offer equal pay for equal work and ensure all roles meet or exceed minimum wage. Employers should also ensure that there are equitable opportunities for growth and advancement. For example, review job descriptions for higher-paying roles to remove unnecessary requirements or barriers that may exclude neurodivergent candidates.

Performance assessments

Research finds that standard performance reviews may wrongly target neurodiverse traits as “weaknesses,” highlighting the need for incorporating neuroinclusive strategies into these processes also. While feedback is often formalized in performance assessments or appraisals, employers can also foster inclusion through daily opportunities for learning by providing feedback that is constructive and respectful. Employers should also consider reviewing their performance assessment approaches to identify areas where they can better meet the needs of neurodivergent employees. Guidance for employers includes the following:

Review performance assessment process.

Before starting a performance review, ensure that appropriate and reasonable adjustments and accommodations are in place, so that employees have the support they need to perform to the best of their abilities. Assess performance reviews for barriers, especially for neurodivergent employees, as managers may misinterpret differences in social interaction or communication as performance issues. Standardize your performance review process to reduce bias and fairly evaluate all employees. Allow employees to share their views on their performance and ensure expectations are clear, with concrete examples and action plans for improvement.



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Provide feedback and proactively address performance challenges.

In instances where neurodivergent employee is not meeting performance expectations, managers and direct supervisors should seek to understand the situation and provide opportunities for learning before considering disciplinary action or termination. In addition, guidance for employers suggests the following:

- Monitor changes in performance and check in regularly to see if the employee requires any additional support or accommodation. Carefully consider if lack of neuroinclusive accommodations and supports are the reason for the underperformance prior to considering any sanctions.
- Present feedback in a neutral way, giving the employee with enough space and time to process the information. It is important that neurodivergent employees are not left to interpret social cues, so constructive feedback should be explicit with supportive examples.
- Consider implementing a performance tracker to keep a written record of performance management conversations to support a shared understanding. If improvement is required, consider a progressive approach, where the first level is a verbal warning, second level is a written warning, through to re-assignment or termination if required.
- Include recognition and rewards. While this may include symbolic forms of recognition such as thank you cards, celebratory events, and expressions of gratitude, employers should also recognize neurodivergent talent as talent. Many employee recognition programs fail when they are purely symbolic and not aligned with everyday employer behaviors of genuine reciprocity, appreciation, and trust, as well as opportunities for promotion.



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Promotion and career mobility

To effectively retain employees, it's essential they understand the potential career path within a specific organization. Senior staff members play a crucial role in helping others achieve their career development goals and serve as examples of career advancement. Employers should explore how sponsorship can support employees living with disabilities, going beyond traditional mentoring to actively foster their development and inclusion in higher-level positions within the organization. Additional strategies include the following:

- Tailor interventions to support career mobility and advancement for people living with disabilities to the individual. Foster both a self-directed and supportive environment.
- Develop personal development plans that address employees' long-term career goals and life goals. Be supportive to employee's aspirations, which may not involve a "typical" career path.
- Set stretch goals with adequate support. While neurodivergent employees may be sensitive to change, this should not hinder their progress. Employers should ensure they feel supported when taking on new opportunities.

Interested in learning more about the evidence that informs these actions?
Check out the full Knowledge Synthesis report [here](#).

You can also click [here](#) to learn more about no-cost resources and services that can help you implement practical strategies and approaches to neurodiversity, equity, and inclusion.

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