Trends Report 2025

•Future in Focus•

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Diverse Minds:
Creating Inclusive Workplaces for Neurodivergent Workers

Lauren Renaud*, Melissa Pagliaro*, Rachel Bath*, Michelle Willson*,
Noor Al-Azary*, & Vanessa Sinclair*

“Everyone has a different mind, a different way of being.”

– Vincent Camley, activist (Camley, 2005)[1]

The key to strong workplace performance isn’t always hiring a new employee or finding a better productivity tool. Sometimes, significant breakthroughs in innovation, productivity, and team culture can come from small—but meaningful—shifts in workplace communication and processes. For neurodivergent workers in particular, these changes can make it possible to show up as their authentic selves and excel at work.

Taking a proactive approach to workplace inclusion and accessibility includes investing in a **neuroinclusive workplace**. It might surprise some employers to learn that ‘business as usual’ can prevent many workers from fully participating. Common workplace norms, expectations, and practices can unintentionally exclude neurodivergent workers by contributing to burnout, social isolation, and other negative consequences. Employers can also miss out on valuable talent, as well as opportunities for innovation and growth.

To learn more about the value of creating inclusive workplaces, check out last year’s Trends report *Maximizing impact: The return on investing in workplace disability inclusion:*
Trends Reports | Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work

In this report, we will explain what neurodiversity and neurodivergence are, and why workplace neuroinclusion should be a high priority for all employers. We will also discuss common barriers experienced by neurodivergent jobseekers and workers, describe the importance of creating inclusive workplaces, and suggest strategies for employment professionals and employers to support the inclusion of neurodivergent workers.

What is **neurodiversity?**

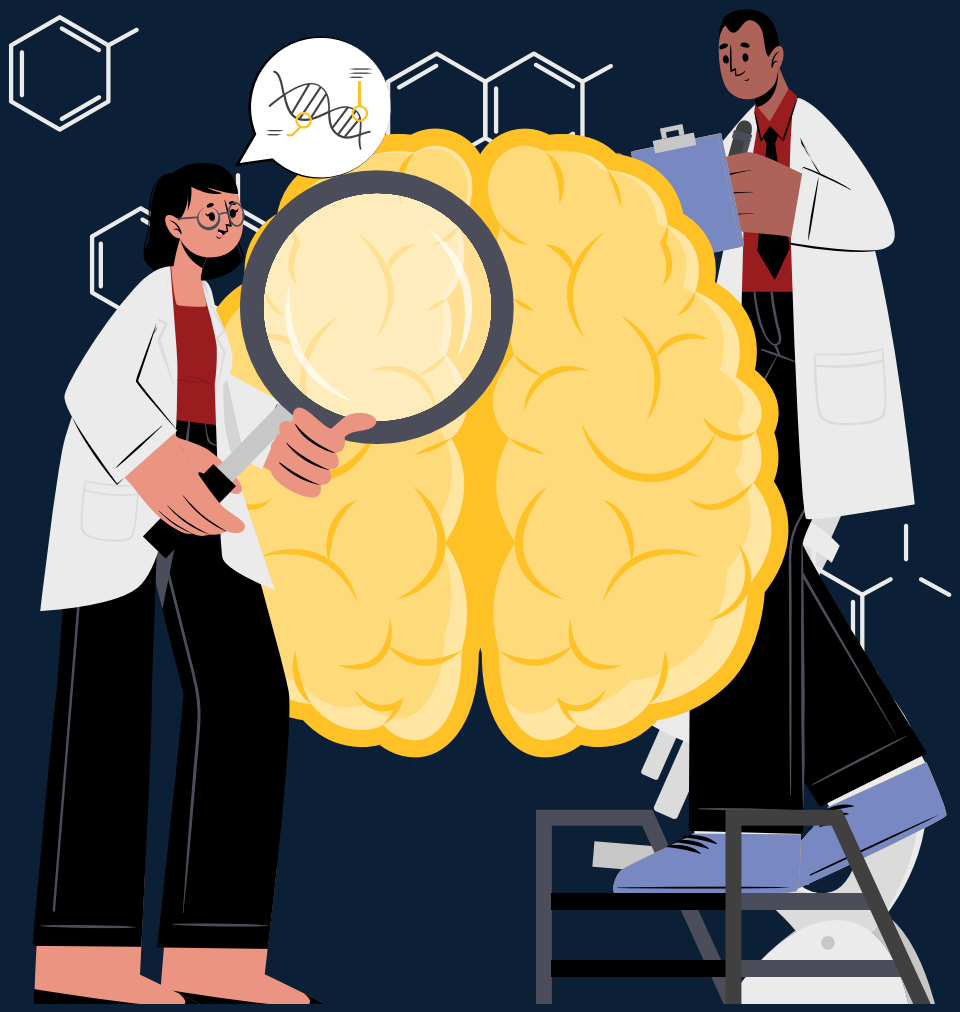
Neurodiversity refers to the normal variation in how people think, learn, and experience the world[2,3,4]. This can influence how people process information, respond to sensory input, communicate, move, feel, and/or connect with others. These differences are valuable and do not mean someone is lacking. Embracing this normal human variation can lead to greater acceptance and inclusion.

While the neurodiversity movement initially centered on Autistic[1] individuals and their experiences[5,6,] the movement now includes a broad range of neurological differences. Autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, epilepsy, mental health conditions, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's, apraxia, cerebral palsy, dyspraxia, and others [7] are examples of neurological differences[7]. Although Autistic people and people with ADHD, dyslexia, etc. may share some common experiences, it is important to recognize that each individual has unique ways of experiencing and interacting with the world.

The neurodiversity movement has given us terms for thinking about how normal human difference is understood. The term **neurodivergent** describes individuals whose neurological experiences differ from dominant societal norms[7]. **Neurotypical** refers to individuals whose ways of thinking, sensing, and interacting generally align with widely accepted social norms and expectations.

[1] At CCRW, we are committed to using language that reflects the values and preferences of the communities we serve. In this report, we adopt identity-first language (e.g., "Autistic individuals") to align with how many individuals in the Autistic community self-identify. We also capitalize Autistic to recognize autism as a central aspect of identity and culture – much like the capitalization of Deaf within the culturally Deaf community.

The term **neurodiversity** merges "neuro," referring to the nervous system (including the brain, spinal cord, and nerves), with "diversity," meaning natural variation. Together, neurodiversity reflects the many ways human brains function, process information, and interact with the world[8]. Rather than categorizing people as "normal" or "abnormal," neurodiversity views all neurological profiles as part of the natural spectrum of human variation. This includes both neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals.



Neurotypical refers to individuals whose neurological development and functioning align with dominant societal expectations in areas like cognition, sensory processing, communication, movement, and social interaction. For example, neurotypical people generally adapt easily to change, follow conventional patterns of speech and language development, and navigate social environments without heightened sensitivity or discomfort[9].

Neurodivergent describes individuals whose brains diverge from these prevailing norms[7,10]. There are many ways to be neurodivergent, but there are also some shared experiences. For example, many neurodivergent individuals have strong skills in some areas, but significant barriers in others; these patterns are sometimes referred to as 'spiky profiles'. Many neurodivergent individuals also experience heightened sensory sensitivity, which can present physically (e.g., muscle tension, fatigue) and emotionally (e.g., anxiety, overwhelm).

The **Neurodiversity Paradigm**

The **neurodiversity paradigm** offers a framework for understanding neurological differences as natural and valuable forms of human diversity[4,11-13]. This framework can be used to become more neuroinclusive. The neurodiversity paradigm encompasses the following guiding principles[13]:

Social Justice Orientation: Center neurodivergent voices in decisions around policy and systemic change[14-16].

Identity and Self-Acceptance: Acknowledge that neurodivergence is an important part of identity and should be valued rather than "fixed." Use identity-first language (e.g., *Autistic, neurodivergent*), if that is preferred. Acknowledge intersections with other marginalized identities such as race, sexuality, gender identity and expression, and age.

Strengths-Based Perspective: Focus on strengths such as deep focus, visual-spatial thinking, analytical abilities, technological skills, and passionate interests[17,18].

Difference, Not Deficit: Remember that neurodivergence is not inherently better or worse than neurotypicality—it's simply different.

Empowerment and Inclusive Support: Empower neurodivergent people by removing barriers such as stigma, inaccessibility, and rigid neurotypical social conventions.

Connection to the Social Model of Disability: Neurodiversity aligns with the social model of disability. Cure-focused approaches should be rejected. Instead, "accommodations, improved societal attitudes, and reduced stigma" should be the focus of inclusion efforts[19].

Beyond Autism: Initially centered on autism, remember that neurodiversity now includes a broader range of neurological differences, such as ADHD[20,21], dyslexia[17], and many more.

To learn more about the Social Model of Disability, check out CCRW's Blog post *Disability and Work Topics 101: Understanding "Barriers" for People with Disabilities:* *Disability and Work Topics 101: Understanding "Barriers" for People with Disabilities | Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work*

Spotlight on Autism

Autism is a form of neurodivergence. While no single experience defines autism, Autistic individuals may share common traits or patterns. These may include:

Strong interests and focus:
Some Autistic people may develop deep, sustained interests in specific topics or activities.

Attention to detail:
Many notice patterns or details that others might overlook, which can support unique problem-solving approaches.

Executive functioning differences:
This may include challenges with starting, switching between, or completing tasks, as well as making decisions.

Sensory sensitivities:
Some may experience heightened or reduced sensitivity to stimuli such as light, sound, textures, or internal cues like hunger or pain.

Overstimulation:
Intense sensory or emotional input can make it difficult to process thoughts or surroundings and may temporarily affect movement or speech.

Stimming:
Repetitive movements or sounds (e.g., rocking, humming, hand-flapping) are often used to self-regulate or manage sensory input and emotions.

Communication styles:

- Others may rely on scripted speech or Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools, such as typing or symbol boards.
- Not all Autistic individuals are verbal.

Social interaction styles:
These may include a preference for direct communication, limited eye contact, or different interpretations of body language and social cues.

Energy demands of navigating neurotypical environments:
Everyday tasks like working, cooking, or socializing can be more energy-intensive and may require additional support or recovery time.

Contextual independence:
Levels of independence can vary depending on the situation, environment, and energy levels[22].



Tensions Between **Neurodiversity and Disability Models**

The social model of disability, which aligns closely with the neurodiversity paradigm [6,23,24,] frames disability as arising not from the body or mind, but from inaccessible physical and social environments [25]. Both models challenge the **medical model's** view of disability as a defect or disorder within the individual that requires diagnosis, treatment, and/or cure[26].

Being neurodivergent does not necessarily mean one has a disability [13,27], as some neurodivergent people do not experience disabling barriers that require support or accommodation. However, disability can be part of the neurodivergent experience, especially when support needs are unmet or environments are not inclusive [28,29]. Some neurodivergent people identify as having a disability while others do not – and not all disabilities fall within the scope of neurodiversity [30,31].

Although the social model of disability is widely accepted, some argue that the removal of physical and social barriers may not lead to total inclusion. For instance, even with tools like scheduling apps or flexible deadlines, individuals with executive functioning challenges may still struggle[32]. Neurodivergence is also multi-dimensional, with support needs that vary depending on context, energy, and individual functioning.

Critics argue that the traditional social model may overlook the lived realities of those with higher support needs or significant communication and/or cognitive differences[33,34]. In other words, not all barriers are necessarily caused by the environment, and ignoring how bodily experience (e.g., chronic pain, chronic fatigue) can itself be a barrier excludes some people from the conversation[35]. Consequently, proponents of the neurodiversity paradigm advocate for a more nuanced approach that recognizes both individual traits and environmental factors[32]. This perspective supports personalized accommodations and promotes inclusion for those with more complex needs. Most importantly, in the spirit of nothing about us without us, a slogan of the disability rights movement, the voices and experiences of neurodivergent people themselves should guide what support is available[6,24,36].

To learn more about the slogan "*Nothing about us without us*" you can check out CCRW's blog post Understanding "*Nothing About Us Without Us*": Understanding "Nothing About Us Without Us" | Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work

Neurodiversity **in the Workplace**

Neurodiversity is often misunderstood and undervalued, including in the workplace. In this section, we discuss common workplace neuroinclusion barriers and the importance of creating an inclusive workplace for neurodivergent jobseekers and workers.

Workplace Barriers

Workplaces today are typically built for neurotypical individuals[37]. Social ideals and expectations contribute to barriers for neurodiverse workers. For example, media portrayals of the ideal employee are usually those who are highly social and extroverted. Some of these norms may be exclusionary to people who don't align with these behaviours[37]. Additionally, common workplace norms emphasize conformity, which can leave little opportunity for creating flexible environments where individual needs and skills can be accounted for and valued[37].

Practices, Policies, and Procedures: The Problem with 'Business as Usual'

Many common practices in the workplace go unexamined, to the detriment of both jobseekers and employers. Sometimes these 'business as usual' processes can prevent neurodivergent workers from applying to the job, excelling at work, and advancing their careers. In turn, employers can lose out on highly skilled workers, have low workplace morale and productivity, and miss out on opportunities to support the advancement of their current employees.

Job descriptions with unclear criteria, or that include requirements that are not necessary for completing the work, can inadvertently introduce barriers for neurodivergent jobseekers[38,39]. For example, criteria like "strong communication skills" are difficult to evaluate objectively, and can perpetuate biases against applicants whose communication styles differ from neurotypical norms.

Job interviews can also be inaccessible, especially when they take place in unfamiliar settings and pose open-ended or hypothetical questions[38,39]. In the workplace, neurodivergent workers may struggle with unspoken social rules and inflexible work locations and schedules[38-40]. And because it is common for advancement opportunities to be decided based on social factors, neurodivergent workers may also be overlooked for promotion if they are seen as less sociable[41].

Common Inaccessible Practices

- Job descriptions that are open to interpretation rather than specific[38,39]
- Job descriptions with requirements that are not necessary to do the job, like requiring a driver's licence when public transportation is a reasonable alternative[39]
- Open-ended or hypothetical interview questions like "Tell me about yourself"[38,39]
- Unfamiliar interview settings[38,39]
- Unspoken social rules[42]
- Expectations to complete work at specific times during the day, as opposed to allowing workers the flexibility to harness periods of high energy and motivation[40]
- Expectations to complete work on-site when it would be feasible to complete at home or remotely[40]
- Basing decisions about promotion on sociability[41]
- Inability to adjust the sensory environment[38,40,42]

Neurodiversity Awareness and Ableism

Neurodiversity is not well understood by the general population, and many common forms of neurodivergence are stigmatized. Both employers and employees may be unaware of what neurodiversity is or why workplace neuroinclusion is important, especially if they do not know anyone who is openly neurodivergent[42,43].

Ableism, or discrimination against persons with disabilities, is a systemic problem in society[44]. Ableism can be intentional, deliberately excluding persons with disabilities from participating in society; it can also be unintentional, where long-held assumptions about disability go unchallenged[44]. A specific form of ableism for neurodivergent individuals, known as **neuronormativity**, privileges neurotypical individuals and assumes their experiences are the standard[45]. An example of neuronormativity is the 'double empathy problem': when a neurotypical and neurodivergent worker struggle to understand each other, the blame is placed on the neurodivergent person for failing to communicate better[45].

Neuronormativity and a lack of awareness about neurodiversity can prevent employers from hiring neurodivergent workers, supporting them effectively in the workplace, and considering them for advancement. Some neurodivergent workers experience outright discrimination stemming from employers' lack of awareness[46]. Others might be stereotyped as unproductive or untrustworthy because of behaviours like avoiding eye contact or fidgeting[38,47,48]. Employers may fail to properly accommodate neurodivergent workers due to communication barriers[46]. Neurodivergent workers may also be seen as less capable, given less work or lower-visibility projects, and therefore passed over for promotion[48,49].

Impacts of Low Neurodiversity Awareness

- Employers may hold stereotypical views of neurodivergent people, which can be stigmatizing[42,46]
    - Neurodivergent behaviours (e.g., avoiding eye contact, fidgeting, preference for written communication) may be stereotyped as unproductive and problematic[47]
- Employers may not hire people who avoid eye contact, perceiving them as untrustworthy[38,48]
- Neurodivergent workers may be assigned "easier" or less interesting work[46]
- Neurodivergent workers may not be considered for more responsibilities because others underestimate their abilities[49]
- Neurodivergent workers may be seen as less capable, intelligent, or interested in the work, and for those reasons may not be considered for progression[48]
- Employers may assume they know what workers need based on their identity, regardless of what the worker needs[46]
- Employers may unfairly 'manage out' neurodivergent workers by slowly reducing workload and work hours until they quit or are fired[46,50]
- Neurodivergent workers may have lower self-esteem due to negative experiences with past workplaces[46]

Duty to Accommodate

Accommodations are changes made to a work setting or job tasks to create an environment where workers, including those with disabilities, illnesses, and injuries can thrive and do their work well. Although employers have a legal duty to accommodate per the *Canadian Human Rights Act*[51], neurodivergent workers often struggle to have their needs met. Employers and coworkers may be unwilling to accommodate neurodivergent workers, and their needs may not be taken seriously[42,46,48,50].

Difficulty Getting Needs Met

- Employers may be unwilling to provide accommodations during the interview process and in the workplace[42,46,48,50]
  - oIf they are willing to provide accommodations in the interview, they may not state this in the job advertisement[52]
- Accommodation needs may not be taken seriously, believing the needs are not significant enough, or may be improperly applied[50]
- Employers and coworkers may be reluctant to make changes and adjust their behaviour to accommodate neurodivergent workers[46,48]

These challenges can have a significant impact on neurodivergent workers. Constantly having to advocate for one's needs can lead to burnout[38,50] and neurodivergent workers who are not accommodated may end up leaving their job or taking sick leave[50].

The Burden of "Masking" as Neurotypical

People who are neurodivergent may feel they need to change their behaviour to appear neurotypical. This is known as **masking**. Masking can look like forcing oneself to make eye contact, concealing sensory overload, scripting conversations (e.g., writing a list of questions to ask new people or researching topics to bring up in conversation), and mimicking neurotypical communication styles[53,54]. Although neurotypical people may also sometimes feel they need to make an effort to present themselves in a way that is seen as more acceptable, or "mask," there are different motivations, contextual factors, and consequences of masking for neurodivergent people[41]. For example, masking can lead to significant burnout for neurodivergent workers[38,50]. Masking can also be a barrier to receiving accommodations, if others do not perceive a real need for workplace adjustments[41].

Despite the toll masking can take on neurodiverse workers, the consequences of not masking are also more severe than for neurotypical workers. For those neurodivergent individuals who prefer not to maintain eye contact or do small talk, social expectations in the workplace can alienate them. They also may not be considered for advancement or additional responsibilities, since as previously mentioned, these decisions are often based on social and emotional abilities[41,45].

There are also intersecting barriers for neurodivergent workers with other social identities. Black and racialized neurodivergent workers are disadvantaged by the need to navigate social and cultural norms related to both race and disability (e.g., Black people are often stereotyped as aggressive, and natural hair is stigmatized)[47].

Importance of **Removing Barriers**

In Canada, employers have a legal obligation to accommodate workers with disabilities[51]. This means changing any rules, policies, workplace cultures, or physical environments to ensure full participation of the worker or jobseeker[55]. Employers may not be required to accommodate if it means they will be unable to stay in business due to the cost, or it poses significant health or safety risks[55]. However, beyond legal obligation, why should employers try to create an inclusive workplace for neurodivergent workers?

Inclusive workplaces benefit all workers[53]. They also enable employers to benefit from the skills and knowledge of neurodivergent workers and reduced turnover of neurodivergent workers[37,56]. Employers also gain access to an untapped pool of talent.

Reasons for Creating Inclusive Workplaces

- Inclusive workplaces benefit all workers, not only those who identify as neurodivergent[53]
- Creating an inclusive workplace often means providing options and flexibility, which is something all workers can benefit from at some point in their careers
- Inclusive workplaces also benefit from the skills and insights of neurodivergent workers, including different ways of working and solving problems[37]
- Providing support for neurodivergent workers supports retention, work performance, and wellbeing[56]
- In a climate of labour shortages, workplaces that are inclusive gain a competitive edge – they are able to fill job vacancies by tapping an underutilized pool of candidates

Building an **Inclusive Workplace**

How do we go about creating a workplace that is inclusive for neurodivergent workers? In this section, we will provide recommendations for employers, including case studies of successful workplaces and available resources, as well as guidance for service providers who support neurodivergent job seekers and workers.

EY

Shape the future with confidence

Case Study: EY's Commitment to Neuroinclusion in the Workplace

Tammy Morris, Accessibility & Neuroinclusion Leader at EY Canada

More than a decade ago, EY took a pioneering step by launching its Neurodiversity Centres of Excellence, dedicated to studying and promoting the inclusion and support of neurodivergent professionals in the workplace. This initiative marked a significant shift in how employers perceive and engage with the neurodiversity community, listening to voices with lived experience, and collaborating to build a playbook for other organizations to follow.

In its quest to foster an inclusive environment, EY collaborated with universities and research advisors, drawing on existing literature from related disciplines, insights from other global businesses, and leading practices shared by the disability community and individuals experiencing neurodivergence in the workplace. This collaborative approach not only enriched EY's understanding of neurodiversity but also facilitated the development of tailored strategies that resonate with the unique strengths of all people.

EY distinguished itself as the first professional services firm to implement an intentional neuroinclusion program, which has since expanded to 13 EY global member firms. This program has cultivated a thriving community of 5,000 members in EY's internal Neurodiversity Business Resource Group, fostering a sense of belonging and support among neurodivergent employees.

Recognizing the limitations of traditional hiring methodologies, which often rely on behavioural interviews laden with implicit biases, EY reimagined it hiring practices to create a strengths- and skills-based hiring and support methodology. This innovative approach emphasizes diverse candidates' unique capabilities and incorporates casual individual and group setting interactions with candidates. EY has achieved an impressive retention rate of over 92% after five years in a role—an exceptional feat in the technology-focused industry, where turnover rates are typically high.

EY Canada was the first of the Big 4 professional services organizations to hire fully neurodivergent client-facing consultants. This initiative has successfully created high-performing neurodiverse teams across all EY service lines—Consulting, Tax, Strategy and Transactions, and Assurance — from entry-level positions to leadership roles.

The impact of EY's Neuroinclusion program is evident in its data-driven approach, which has yielded business rewards consistent with findings in literature while keeping humans as the central focus. Neurodivergent professionals demonstrate performance patterns and utilization levels comparable to their neurotypical peers in their same scope and practice. Further, neurodivergence has been recognized for delivering exceptional creativity and innovation, highlighting the unique contributions neurodiverse teams can bring to the organization.

EY's success illustrates many of the practical steps employers can take to foster neuroinclusive workplaces. Below, we outline some of these evidence-based practices and how employers can implement them, as well as some recommendations for community organizations and employment service providers.

Recommendations for **Employers**

There is no one checklist to follow that will guarantee an inclusive workplace. One of the most important parts of inclusion is flexibility. It is important to remember that not every change will work for every person – what is accessible for one person can pose a barrier to another. Instead of thinking about accessibility as a checklist, think of it as a toolkit with options available to workers to support their unique needs. To make workplaces more inclusive and productive for neurodivergent workers, employers can consider adding the following strategies to their toolkit:

Communication and Onboarding

- Explain the interview process, provide interview questions in advance, and introduce the candidate to the work environment prior to the interview to create familiarity and predictability[38]
- Provide options for the interview settings (e.g., one-on-one interviews, phone interviews, written interviews, or small group interviews)[38,57]
- Be explicit about workplace processes, expectations, and environments to help workers be more successful in their job and interpersonal life at work[38]

Communication and Information Sharing

- Ask neurodivergent workers about their preferred method of sharing and receiving information(e.g., written instructions; clear verbal communication)[42,57]
- Consider recording[57] and/or transcribing meetings

Work Environment and Flexibility

- Allow workers to work from home when feasible[53,56,57]
- Offer quiet spaces or decompression rooms[53,56,57]
- Offer flexible or consistent work hours, depending on worker preference[57]
- Offer flexible work locations (e.g., open workspaces and private spaces)[56]
- Ability to adjust the environment depending on individual needs (e.g., lighting, temperature, noise, visible distractions, scents)[53,56,57]
- Offer noise-cancelling headphones or other ways for workers to manage their sensory environment[53,56,57]

Culture and Inclusion

- Promote a ‘diversity climate’ wherein individual differences are appreciated[53]
- Seek out awareness opportunities and have neurodivergent representation among leadership[53]

Resources In Canada

CCRW has numerous resources to support disability confidence in employers, including a Disability Confident Toolkit and two associated courses - Disability Confident Employer and Disability Confident Leader:
Disability Confidence - CCRW-Disability Confidence
Disability Confidence Training

The University of British Columbia also offers a free, self-paced course on autism and neurodiversity in the workplace:
Autism and Neurodiversity in the Workplace | Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism

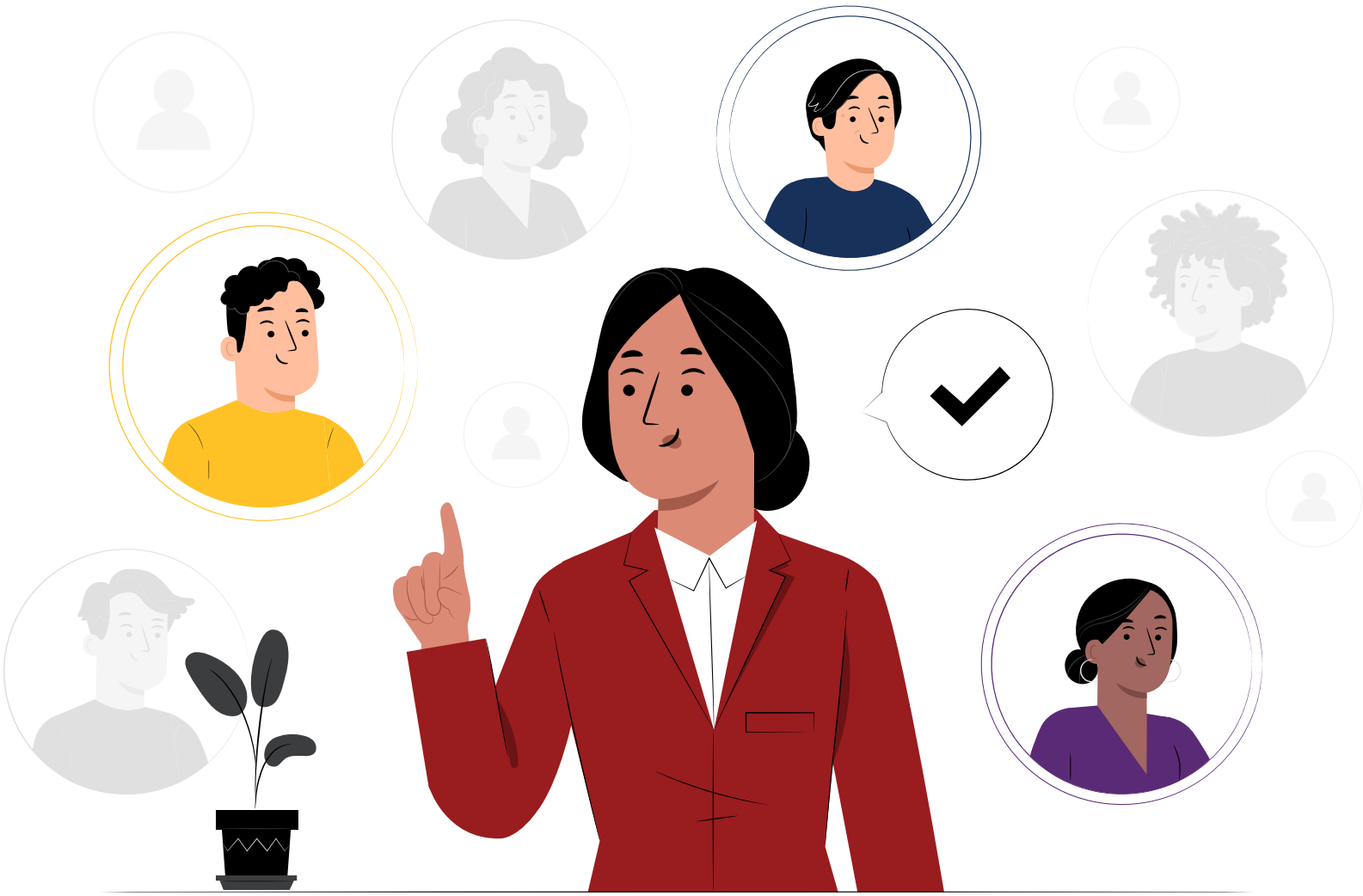
Ready, Willing, & Able provides resources for employers to support the employment of people with autism or an intellectual disability:
Resources – ready, willing, and able

Recommendations for **Service Providers**

Service providers who offer employment supports play an important role in supporting neurodivergent workers find and retain employment. There are numerous ways they can support neurodivergent workers and help create more inclusive workplaces. A key role for service providers is to promote awareness – about neurodiversity, creating inclusive workplaces, and accommodation options[42,46,50]. Service providers can also offer tailored support for neurodivergent jobseekers such as stress management and workplace etiquette training, mock interview practice, connecting jobseekers with inclusive employers, and conducting environmental assessments[42,49]

Service providers can also help support and advocate for neurodivergent workers by:

- Helping create awareness about neurodiversity, including the importance of creating inclusive workplaces as a social responsibility[42,46]
    - Awareness campaigns should be sure to highlight the variable experiences of neurodiversity to avoid reinforcing stereotypes[38]
- Educating and informing both workers and employers about accommodation options[50]
- Providing stress management training to workers[42]
- Identifying and platforming inclusive employers[42]
- Conducting mock interviews with jobseekers[42]
- Helping workers identify what accommodation options will help them based on their individual needs[42,50]
- Helping workers learn about informal rules and social conventions in workplaces (e.g., 'workplace etiquette', social hierarchies, and other unspoken norms)[49]
- Conducting environmental assessments of workplaces to help workers prepare



Conclusion

Neurodiversity is just one aspect of normal human difference. Neurotypical norms often go unquestioned in today's workplaces, creating barriers for neurodivergent jobseekers and workers.

Across Canada, businesses can take steps to promote inclusive workplaces for neurodivergent workers. Removing barriers for persons with disabilities is not just a legal obligation for employers; it also offers a competitive advantage in a climate of labour shortages, and promotes job satisfaction and retention.

In our third article from *Future in Focus*, our 2025 Trends Report, employers can learn further strategies for promoting inclusive employment through digital accessibility and leveraging technology.

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