



Neuroinclusive Employment

Final Report

MAY 2025

SHAWN DE RAAF | NAOMI FRASER | LILY KAUFMANN

SRDC Board of Directors

Richard A. Wagner
Former Partner, Norton Rose Fulbright LLP

Tim Aubry, Ph.D.
Emeritus Professor, School of Psychology,
University of Ottawa

Gordon Berlin
Past President, MDRC

Satya Brink, Ph.D.
International Consultant, Research, Policy Analysis and
Strategic Policy advice
Education, Lifelong Learning and Development

Erica Di Ruggiero, Ph.D.
Director, Centre for Global Health
Director, Collaborative Specialization in Global Health
Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto

Marie-Lison Fougère
Former Deputy Minister, Ministry of Francophone Affairs
Former Deputy Minister Responsible for Women's Issues

Renée F. Lyons, Ph.D.
Founding Chair and Scientific Director Emeritus,
Bridgepoint Collaboratory for Research and Innovation,
University of Toronto

Andrew Parkin, Ph.D.
Executive Director of the Environics Institute

Nancy Reynolds
Managing Partner, Sterling Lifestyle Solutions

SRDC President and CEO

David Gyarmati

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) is a non-profit research organization, created specifically to develop, field test, and rigorously evaluate new programs. SRDC's two-part mission is to help policy-makers and practitioners identify policies and programs that improve the well-being of all Canadians, with a special concern for the effects on the disadvantaged, and to raise the standards of evidence that are used in assessing these policies.

Since its establishment in December 1991, SRDC has conducted over 550 projects and studies for various federal and provincial departments, municipalities, as well as other public and non-profit organizations. SRDC has offices located in Ottawa and Vancouver, and satellite offices in Calgary, Hamilton, Montreal, Regina, Toronto, and Winnipeg.

For more information on SRDC, contact

Social Research and Demonstration Corporation
55 Murray Street, Suite 400
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 5M3
613-237-4311 | 1-866-896-7732
info@srcd.org | www.srcd.org

Vancouver Office
890 West Pender Street, Suite 440
Vancouver, British Columbia V6C 1J9
604-601-4070

Remote offices:
Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba,
Ontario, Quebec, and Saskatchewan
1-866-896-7732

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Project Overview	1
Background	2
RESEARCH APPROACH	6
Employer Recruitment	6
Data Collection & Analysis	7
EMPLOYER SURVEY	9
Survey Findings	10
EMPLOYER INTERVIEWS	15
Interview Findings	16
LESSONS LEARNED & PATHS FORWARD	33

INTRODUCTION

The *Neuroinclusive Employment* project was a research and learning partnership between the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and The Sinneave Family Foundation (Sinneave). The project explored inclusive employment practices for people living with disabilities both broadly and specifically for neurodivergent people. The research focused on identifying evidence-based practices and real-world examples that employers use to support neurodivergent people and people living with disabilities, as well as uncovering opportunities to further advance these efforts. The aim of the research was to generate insights that can help Sinneave, other organizations, and policymakers strengthen employer-focused initiatives to support employment inclusion, with an emphasis on neuroinclusion.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The research was conducted in two phases:

1. A **knowledge synthesis** of existing evidence that summarized key characteristics, processes, and practices across the employee lifecycle (i.e., practices aligned to the stages of an employee experience from recruitment, development, retention, promotion, and exit). The goal was to establish a common understanding of the requirements and evidence-based practices that employers need to build inclusive workplaces.
2. **Research with employers** through surveys and interviews to identify employer needs, promising practices, potential gaps, and opportunities to enhance support for inclusive employment.

In addition to the research activities, this project incorporated a learning partnership approach as an intentional, collaborative method to support ongoing learning through regular exchange, reflection, and dialogue. Instead of solely generating findings, the learning partnership involved the research team regularly engaging with collaborators through a Learning Circle that brought together organizations, experts, and employers with an interest in inclusive and neuroinclusive employment. This process enabled deeper interpretation of emerging themes and allowed for more diverse perspectives to inform how the findings might apply across different work, training, and support contexts.

This report summarizes findings of the research with employers, exploring their needs, promising practices, and potential gaps in supporting neuroinclusive employment in Canada. By understanding what existing actions employers are taking, and exploring areas where further

progress can be made, this report highlights opportunities to continue to advance neuroinclusive employment across research, policy, and practice.

BACKGROUND

Neurodiversity is a concept that recognizes and respects the natural variation in how people think, process information, communicate, and experience the world (Hutchinson, 2023). As explored in this project’s knowledge synthesis, neurodiversity often includes and recognizes conditions such as autism, ADHD, and learning disabilities (among others), but extends beyond clinical categories or a medical view to emphasize different ways of thinking and learning, shaped by individual experiences, social contexts, and systemic barriers (Bernard, 2024). It is important to recognize that while diagnostic labels may capture certain shared traits or behaviours, there is considerable diversity within these categories. Individuals with the same diagnosis can have vastly different experiences, strengths, and support needs (Stevens et al., 2024).

A note on terminology in this report

The terminology used in this report aligns with neuro-affirming language principles, drawing on guidance from resources such as The Sinneave Family Foundation’s Neuro-affirming Language Guide (2024) and the STAR Institute’s Neurodiversity Affirming Language Guide (n.d.). However, it is always recommended to ask individual groups about their preferred terminology, as these vary (ESDC, 2024a; Walker, n.d.).

Neurodivergent: People who are neurodivergent are those who think, understand information, interact, and communicate with others in ways that are different than what is socially considered “typical”. Other synonymous terms include *neurodistinct* and *neurounique* (STAR Institute, n.d.; Disabled World, 2023).

Neurotypical: In contrast to the term neurodivergent, neurotypical people are those who exhibit socially normalized ways of understanding and processing information, cognition, interacting, and communicating with others (STAR Institute, n.d.).

Neurodiversity: The perspective that differences in brain functioning and neurological traits (e.g., ways of processing information, thinking, communicating, and behaving) are a normal part of human diversity (Hutchison, 2023; Disabled World, 2023).

Neuroinclusion: Neuroinclusion is the practice of creating environments that embrace and support neurodivergence, rooted in the social model of disability. This model holds that disability arises not from individual differences, but from barriers that exclude or disadvantage people (Bernard et al., 2024).

Masking: Many neurodivergent people have learned to perform socially normalized ways of behaving to avoid discrimination and better cope with social expectations, either consciously or unconsciously. This is often called masking which can come at a cost to expressing individual identity, and can contribute to burnout (STAR Institute, n.d.).

Neuroinclusive employment involves creating workplaces and employment conditions that remove barriers and embrace different ways of thinking, communicating, and interacting (Bernard et al, 2024). Neurodivergent employees bring innovative ways of working, thinking, and new perspectives to many types of employment. They can excel in a variety of tasks, demonstrate strong retention and performance, and can help organizations better understand and connect with more diverse customers or service users (Bernard et al, 2024).

Despite these strengths and abilities, neurodivergent people encounter barriers to employment and career advancement. According to the most recent Canadian Survey on Disability (with supplementary information from Canada’s Labour Force Survey), people living with disabilities in Canada represent a growing share of the population. In Canada, 8 million people (27 percent) reported at least one disability, up 5 percentage points since 2017. Among youth aged 15 to 24, prevalence of disability rose to over 20 percent, with mental health-related and learning disabilities being the most common (Vergara & Hardy, 2023).

Notably, these surveys include a social model of disability, identifying individuals as having a disability only if they report that difficulties in functioning limit their daily activities (Pianosi et al, 2023). As neurodivergence overlaps with functional categories such as learning, developmental (including autism), and mental health-related disabilities, data on the employment of neurodivergent people remains imprecise. Nevertheless, there is a persistent gap in the employment rate of people with disabilities aged 15 and older (47.1 percent) compared to those without disabilities (66.9 percent). This disparity is also pronounced among youth and core working-age (i.e., 25 to 64) groups. Additionally, employees with disabilities in Canada earned \$99.43 less per week on average and earned less per hour across all age groups compared to those without disabilities (Vergara & Hardy, 2023).

Additionally, available data indicates that adults on the autism spectrum face significantly lower employment rates (PHAC, 2020) and are more likely to experience underemployment, job precarity, extended periods of unemployment, higher turnover, and fragmented work histories (Deloitte & Auticon, n.d.; Hutchison & Robertson, 2022). Evidence reviewed for this project’s knowledge synthesis highlights the significant barriers neurodivergent individuals face in accessing, retaining, and advancing in employment, as well as significant negative impacts on their wellbeing experienced from navigating entrenched neurotypical norms, misconceptions about disabilities, and discrimination (Bernard et al, 2024).

Policy context

Government policy increasingly recognizes the need for both supply-side and demand-side interventions to improve employment outcomes for people living with disabilities. While supply-side strategies focus on equipping individuals with the skills and experience needed for work,

demand-side approaches address the role of employers by building their awareness, capacity, and accountability to create inclusive workplaces. This includes recognizing the economic benefits of inclusive hiring, providing supports to remove workplace barriers, and shifting employer behaviours to foster accessible environments and better tap into diverse talent (Celeste et al, 2022; Zizys, 2018).

In Canada, both provincial and federal levels of government recognize the need to identify, remove, and prevent barriers for people with disabilities across several priority areas, including employment. Federally, recent legislation includes the *Accessible Canada Act, 2019* and the *Canada Disability Benefit Act, 2023* to address financial security of people with disabilities and other barriers, including in employment. Many provinces have also enacted accessibility legislation, beginning with Quebec in 1978 and more recently New Brunswick in 2024. Governments also support skills training, employment opportunities, and broader efforts to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) for people with disabilities across society. Bilateral transfer agreements between the federal government and provinces and territories provide flexibility to address diverse local employment and training needs, including tailored supports for people with disabilities (ESDC, 2024b).

At the federal level, the Employment Strategy for Canadians with Disabilities has outlined priorities and actions for the federal government to close the gap in employment between people with disabilities and those without, aligned with the *Accessible Canada Act, 2019*. The strategy outlines three broad goals for people with disabilities to find and keep jobs or continue to advance or start a business; help employers create accessible and inclusive workplaces while hiring people with disabilities; and work with support organizations that advance the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace (2024b). Support for employers includes addressing low awareness and the need for practical tools to improve their disability confidence, connecting with other employers to develop their capacity, and including people with disabilities in decision-making to support their career advancement (2024b).

Additionally, Canada's Autism Strategy, which focuses on actions by the Government of Canada to support and include Autistic people from childhood to adulthood, has outlined additional priorities to support public awareness, employment, and economic inclusion (PHAC, 2024). For the priorities of economic inclusion, which incorporate employment, actions outlined in the strategy involve developing resources to promote autism-inclusive workplaces; educating employers on the strengths and needs of Autistic workers; supporting mentorship opportunities; and working in alignment with the federal government's other strategies and supports to strengthen workplace inclusion (PHAC, 2024).

At the federal level, the Opportunities Fund (OF) is Canada's main employment program for people with disabilities and an important component of the Employment Strategy for Canadians with Disabilities (ESDC, 2024b). Introduced in 1997, the OF supports people with disabilities in

increasing their economic participation and independence through a wide range of supports (e.g., providing employment supports, job search assistance, work experience, self-employment opportunities, skills development) to help them find and maintain employment. Over time, the OF has been expanded to include design and delivery of training programs, increase employer involvement in projects, and require mandatory employment experience of participants (ESDC, 2018; ESDC, 2020). The most common disability types among participants captured in the evaluation of the OF (i.e., 2011 to 2012 cohorts) were mental health (24 percent), developmental (13 percent), and learning disabilities (8 percent) (ESDC, 2018; ESDC, 2020). This might suggest a high proportion of neurodivergent people served through the program.

The OF also funds awareness and capacity building initiatives to encourage employers to hire and retain people with disabilities. The multi-year evaluation of the program concluded that the OF is effective in enhancing employers' awareness of the importance of inclusive employment and the value of employees with disabilities, with 97 percent of employers indicating that they were 'somewhat' to 'very likely' to hire people with disabilities in the future (ESDC, 2018; ESDC, 2020).

Despite this progress and positive results regarding employers' intention to hire people with disabilities, key disparities in the labour market participation of people with disabilities remain. An important aim of this project is therefore to consider the facilitators and challenges employers face in moving from *intention* to *action*. That is, the research, grounded in employers' own experiences, involved exploring the key lessons, promising practices, and potential opportunities for employers to move from initial awareness of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities to actively recruiting, hiring, and retaining diverse workforces in the long-term.

RESEARCH APPROACH

To probe deeper into the experiences, needs, and promising practices of employers engaged in various aspects of inclusive and neuroinclusive employment, the research approach used a mixed methods design through quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) data collection. The approach examined how inclusive employment conditions and actions identified in the knowledge synthesis were implemented across the employee lifecycle in practice with employers.

The research aimed to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are employers aware of the evidence-based practices and conditions to recruit, retain, and support people living with disabilities in the workplace?
2. What are employers' experiences implementing evidence-based inclusion practices/conditions and what are the lessons learned?
3. What are the enablers and challenges that employers face when moving from intention to action, and what are some exemplary ways that employers have advanced inclusion?
4. What potential opportunities exist to strengthen employers' inclusion efforts across the employee lifecycle?
5. What are some possible avenues for government policies and programs to support and enhance employers' inclusion efforts?

EMPLOYER RECRUITMENT

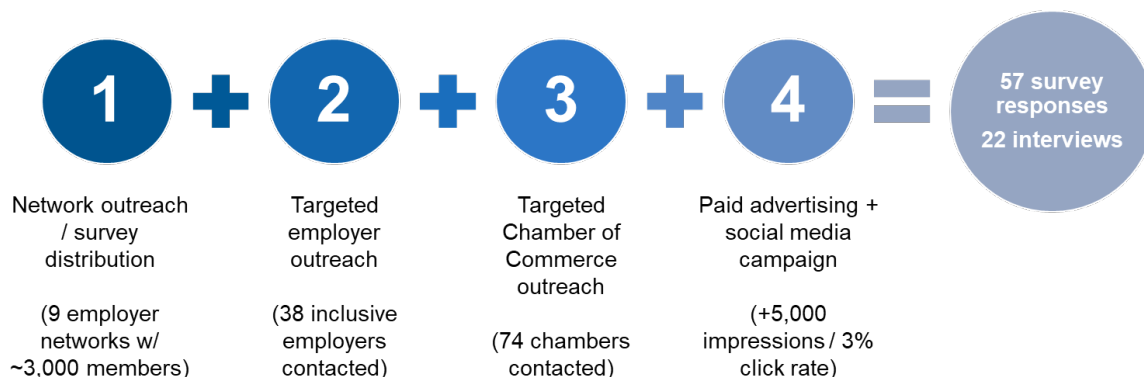
The research took a purposive sampling approach through a combination of staged and snowball recruitment. This began with outreach to established employer networks and partnerships that support accessibility and inclusion in Canada. As part of a network-based recruitment strategy, a brief survey was distributed with the help of these nine regional and Canada-wide networks, representing an estimated 3,000 employers across their memberships. Surveys were distributed via networks' email contacts, newsletters, or through social media channels such as LinkedIn. Respondents to the survey who expressed their interest in discussing the topic were then invited to participate in an in-depth interview.

Throughout the project, there were ongoing challenges recruiting employers to participate in the survey and interviews. The initial outreach through employer networks yielded a low response rate to the survey, with limited conversion from the survey to interviews. To address initial low recruitment, additional follow-up and distribution of the survey was conducted with network

partners, as well as additional promotion and distribution through Learning Circle collaborators and The Sinneave Family Foundation’s employer connections. The research team also reviewed the recruitment approach, both broadening and intensifying efforts (see Figure 1 for details).

To complement network outreach, a select group of employers received direct invitations to participate in interviews, requests to distribute the survey to colleagues, or both. Employers selected for targeted messages were derived from other publicly-available lists of inclusive employers. Additionally, targeted outreach was also conducted through invitations to 74 chambers of commerce across Canada to distribute the survey or promote a direct invitation to participate in an interview. Once these focused efforts were completed, the research team expanded outreach through broader advertising, including social media and select paid promotional efforts in partnership with three chambers of commerce, to further increase reach and engagement.

Figure 1 Recruitment Summary



DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Employer survey and procedures

The survey was designed to assess employers’ interest in, and experience with, inclusion and neuroinclusion, capturing high-level “pulse” findings on their knowledge and confidence in supporting employees. The survey served the dual purpose of identifying voluntary interview participants for follow-up. It included some basic information about respondents’ business/organization, geographic region, industry (as defined by the North American Industry Classification System), the structure and size of their business/organization, as well as respondents’ individual role in their business/organization.

The survey included primarily Likert scale questions about respondents' experiences with disability, inclusion, and neuroinclusion. It concluded with an open-ended question and an option to provide contact information for those interested in a follow-up interview. Participation was voluntary, with respondents free to skip any questions. No honorarium or reimbursement was offered.

Data collection took place online within SRDC's secure online survey program. Due to small numbers of respondents in each employer category by size, organizational model, and industry, data analysis was limited to the compilation of descriptive statistics and distribution summaries. Open-ended responses were compiled and summarized as well.

Employer interviews and procedures

A semi-structured interview protocol was designed to align with the research questions and tailored to individual employers based on their survey responses or any additional information, if provided. Interviewees were invited to participate in a virtual interview format of 45 to 60 minutes in length, conducted over Zoom between September 2024 and April 2025. Interviewees were offered a \$50 honorarium for their participation and verbal informed consent was provided prior to the beginning of each interview.

A thematic analysis of transcripts was conducted to identify patterns across the data, using both deductive and inductive coding methods. The research team collaboratively reviewed and refined the codebook, and case classifications were coded by key characteristics of the interviewee (i.e., business/organization size, industry, profit model, region, and role). Analysis followed a reflective approach to generate initial themes, which were iteratively revised (i.e., split, combined, or discarded) to develop coherent patterns of meaning grounded in central concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Given the limited sample of interviewees, cross-tabulation of interview data based on employer characteristics (case classifications) was limited, but noted where key differences did appear.

Learning Circle

Following the learning partnership model of this project, the Learning Circle met five times over the course of the research to engage collaboratively with findings from the knowledge synthesis and early data (e.g., preliminary survey findings, interview quotes and themes).

The Learning Circle provided a space for collaborators and researchers to interact with the research (e.g., asking questions, confirming interpretations, and offering feedback) in a reflective process. The Learning Circle fostered open dialogue, collective reflection, and shared meaning-making, valuing all collaborators' experiences and expertise. While not a formal method of data collection, these discussions informed the research by sharpening and deepening themes, surfacing real-world relevance, and challenging assumptions or gaps to ensure findings reflected both the data and practical contexts.

EMPLOYER SURVEY

A total of 57 participants responded to the employer survey. Respondents were from employers across Canada, where responses were from employers in Ontario (n = 23), British Columbia (n = 21), and Alberta (n = 14). Close to half of the respondents were working in the non-profit sector (46 percent). The remaining participants were divided between the for-profit (27 percent) and public or broader public sectors (27 percent).

There was a wide representation of organization size, with respondents from organizations with as little as 4 or fewer employees to larger organizations with over 500 employees. One third (30 percent) of organizations were small (less than 20 employees), 18 per cent were medium (20 to 99 employees), and 49 percent were larger employers with over 100 employees (16 percent between 100 and 499 employees; and 19 percent with 500 employees and up). Similarly, a wide range of industries were represented. The most common reported were professional, scientific, and technical services (19 percent), educational services (11 percent), and healthcare and social assistance (11 percent).

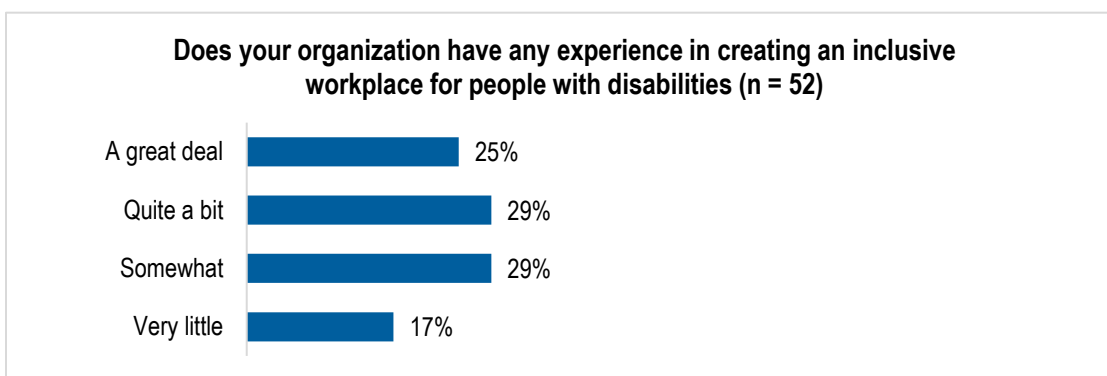
The respondents were largely in leadership positions, either as owner, founder, CEO, or director (28 percent), HR or EDI specialists (31 percent), or in managerial or supervisory positions (23 percent). Less than 20 percent of respondents were staff members (i.e., individual contributors).

SURVEY FINDINGS

Experiences with inclusive employment

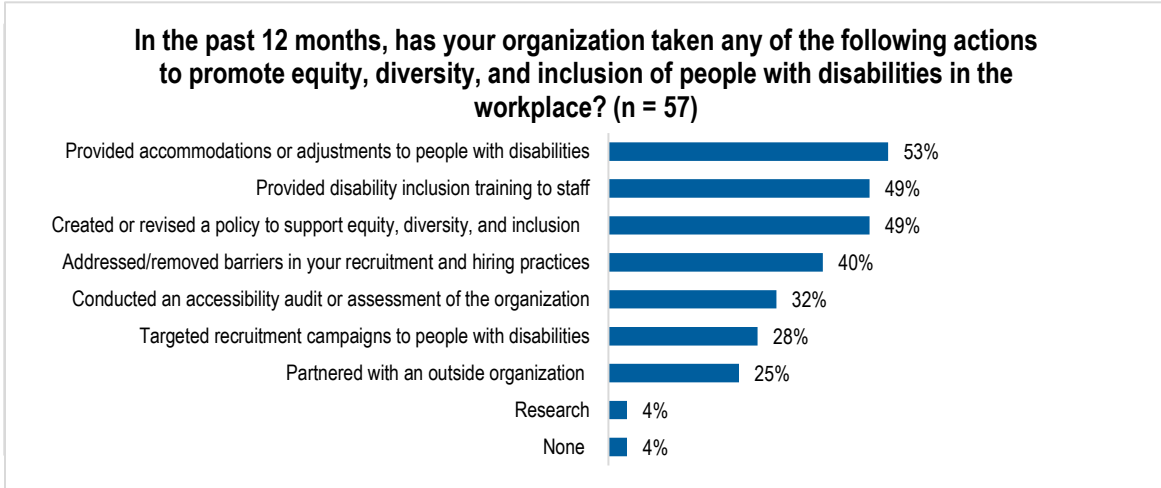
The survey began with questions regarding employers' overall experience creating inclusive workplaces for people with disabilities. As illustrated in Figure 2, respondents reported a fairly even distribution of experience, ranging from “very little” experience (17 percent), to “a great deal” of experience (25 percent).

Figure 2 Inclusion experience



Despite the range of reported experience, most respondents (90 percent) reported that their organization is either “very” or “somewhat” likely to implement initiatives to support the employment and inclusion of people with disabilities. Nearly all (96 percent) reported their organization had conducted at least one action related to disability inclusion in the last year (see Figure 3). The most common actions taken, reported by approximately half of respondents, were providing accommodations, providing disability inclusion training, and creating or revising a policy related to EDI. A quarter of respondents reported partnering with an outside organization for inclusion support.

Figure 3 Inclusion actions



Of the 14 respondents that reported engaging in a partnership with an outside organization, most did so for the purposes of inclusion training for staff (71 percent). As illustrated in Figure 4, partnerships also directly supported recruitment of people with disabilities (50 percent), addressed barriers in the recruitment process (36 percent), or supported employee accommodations (43 percent). Fewer respondents (i.e., only one or two for each response) indicated that partnerships supported other actions. These included an accessibility audit, a revised a policy, overall support or guidance, or had not resulted in an action taken by the employer to date.

Figure 4 Partnered inclusion actions



Experiences with neuroinclusive employment

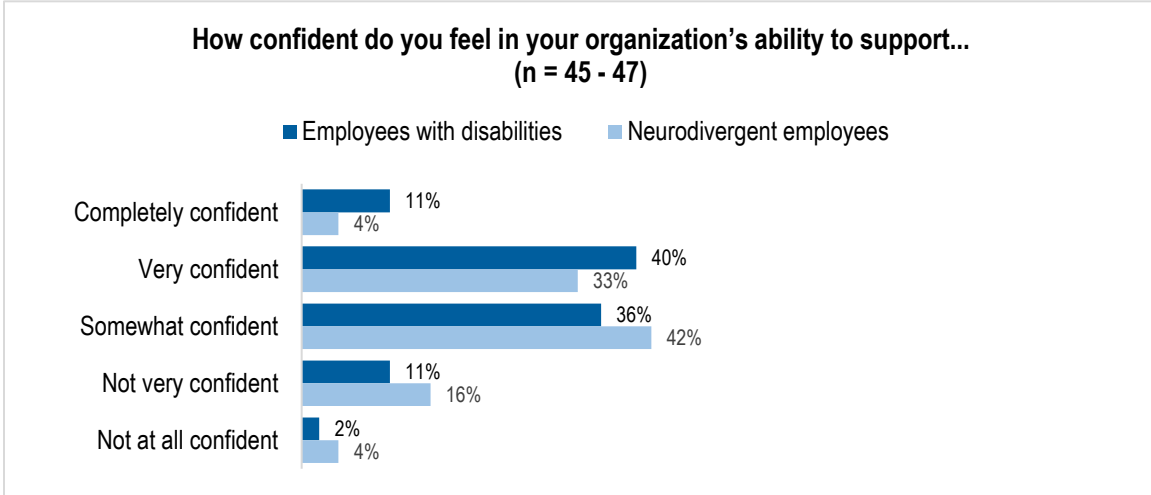
In addition to understanding employers' experiences with supporting all people living with disabilities in the workplace, the survey sought to capture the extent to which neuroinclusion was specifically addressed in their practices. Most respondents reported that neuroinclusion was not a specific area of focus for their organization (i.e., through a dedicated initiative, strategy, or action plan), but over half (54 percent) reported that it was a component of their EDI efforts. As well, about a quarter of respondents (26 percent) indicated an interest in learning about neuroinclusion.

Figure 5 Focus on neuroinclusion



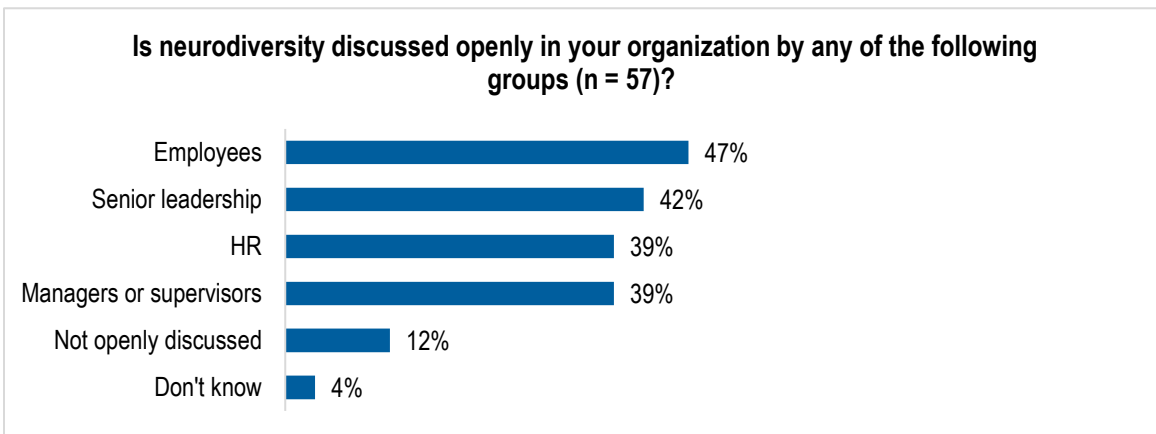
When exploring employers' confidence supporting employees with disabilities and neurodivergent employees, respondents were relatively less confident supporting the latter (see Figure 6). As with employers' overall experiences with inclusion in general, responses indicated a fairly equal distribution between high confidence and low confidence.

Figure 6 Confidence supporting employees



Despite these variations in experiences with inclusive employment and confidence in supporting employees, respondents indicated that neuroinclusion is a topic of discussion in many workplaces. Only 12 percent of respondents indicated that neurodiversity is not openly discussed, while most indicated that it was a topic of discussion, either among employees (47 percent), senior leadership (42 percent), HR, or managers and supervisors (39 percent respectively).

Figure 7 Discussion of neurodiversity



Finally, survey respondents shared additional reflections on inclusive employment for people with disabilities and neurodivergent employees, highlighting ongoing challenges neurodistinct employees face in navigating workplace expectations, environments, and support systems.

“It is scary for someone to come forward as Autistic, particularly when they are late diagnosed and have been working in an environment already when they are diagnosed. How should they come forward and suddenly ask for things to make their life easier when they've been masking and dealing all this time without support? It's hard for that person since it will feel like it is up to them to also educate their leaders on what autism is.” (Survey respondent)

In addition to the ongoing challenges associated with disclosure, respondents' comments highlighted difficulties in accessing accommodations, widespread misconceptions about neurodivergence and disability, and the complexities of providing effective supports given the highly individual and variable nature of neurodivergent experiences.

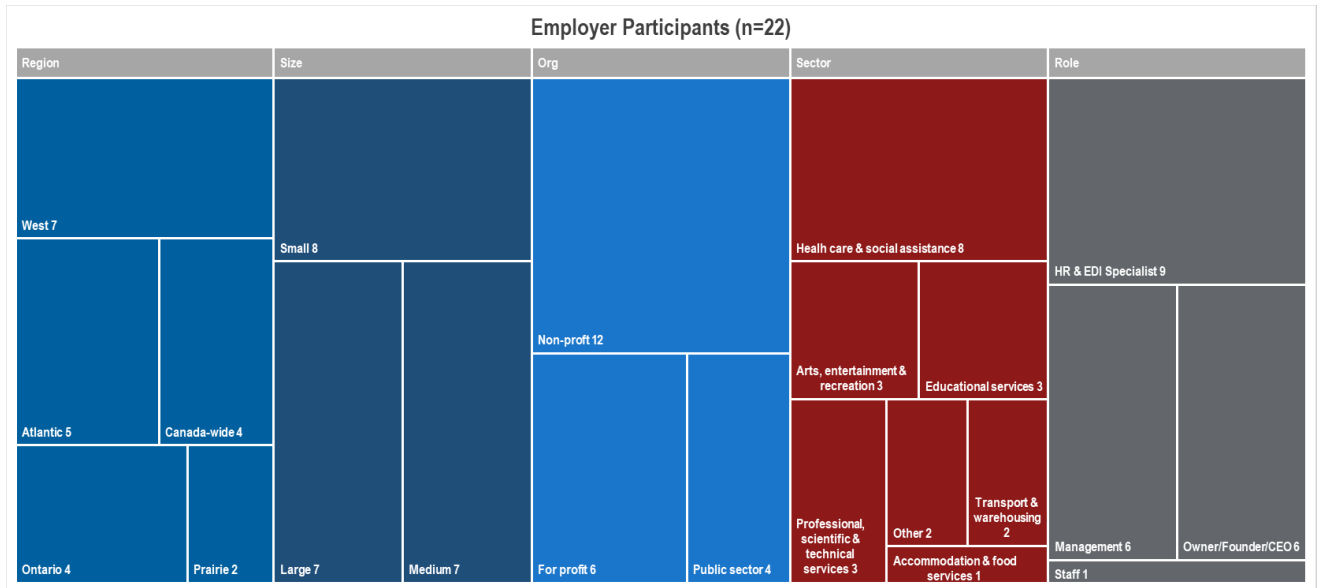
“I often irritate people for being disruptive. I don't think there are any kind of supports set up for me, but I know my manager has my back and wants me to succeed. I'm not sure what can be done as I struggle to figure out what helps me.” (Survey respondent)

EMPLOYER INTERVIEWS

To explore the research questions more deeply, interviews with employers focused on their current inclusion practices, key enablers and challenges they experienced, and opportunities to enhance inclusive employment across the employee lifecycle. Interviews also explored where employers identified potential areas for external support, either through government policy or programs, or through other types of resources, including access to resources, guides, and expertise on inclusion, or through partnerships with organizations that support people with disabilities.

In total, 22 employers from across Canada participated in research interviews, across eight provinces, with four also indicating that they operated on a national basis. Employers operated in seven different industries, with six for profit, twelve non-profit, and four from the public sector (including broader public sector organizations in education and health). Employers were evenly divided between small (under 20 employees), medium (between 20 and 99 employees) and large organizations (over 100 employees). Most individuals interviewed were either in management or a leadership role, or in an HR or HR-specialist role (i.e., EDI specialist).

Figure 8 Interview participant sample



INTERVIEW FINDINGS

The goal of the interviews was to understand what enables employers to move from the intention to be inclusive toward meaningful action, including adopting evidence-based practices on inclusion and neuroinclusion identified in the research and broader literature. The aim was to provide insights into employers' experiences by learning what is working, what is emerging, and where challenges exist to develop better responses — and potentially government policy and support — that are dedicated to employer awareness and capacity for inclusion.

As with the survey results, interviewees brought varied levels of experience and understanding of neuroinclusion, including those who conveyed an emerging interest or awareness, as well as those with deep expertise and experience. Interviewees included individuals who self-identified as neurodivergent, as well as representatives from both for-profit and non-profit organizations that either directly support the inclusion of people with disabilities or provide expertise to other employers on inclusive practices related to people, culture, and management. Given this diversity, the analysis grouped themes according to the research objectives and refined with the insights and experiences that employers shared.

What drives employers to adopt inclusive practices?

To understand enablers and challenges associated with neuroinclusive employment, the interviews explored employers' personal and professional interests and experiences with inclusion, including key motivations for creating inclusive workplaces.

Lived experience and professional background

Although not explicitly asked in the interview protocol, several participants voluntarily shared that they identified as neurodivergent (e.g., as Autistic, ADHD, and other learning disabilities), which added context to their perspectives as employers. Some of these included employers who, as entrepreneurs/founders of their businesses, had relied on their lived experience to create inclusive working conditions within their own organizations. In addition to those with direct lived experience, several also shared that their interests and motivations for inclusive employment were shaped through experience as a caregiver or family member of a neurodivergent person.

What makes my company unique is that we are 100% neurodivergent owned and operated, meaning we are no strangers to the challenges and paradoxical advantages that these diagnoses can have. I started it myself... three of them are employees, the rest are contractors. All of us have ADHD. I've got three [who] are on the autism spectrum... We all live with this stuff. (Interview #19)

Some interviewees also expressed motivation to advance inclusive employment through their professional experience. In these cases, they either had worked in a previous capacity in disability inclusion as career development practitioner, in workplace rehabilitation, or in educational settings. Present roles included those in HR, founder or leader of a business, as well as individual staff members. For these interviewees, their professional background either directly informed their current role (i.e., as HR or EDI specialist) or did so in a broad sense of providing them with the context to continue to engage in the topic.

Recognition of workforce diversity

Beyond personal and professional experiences, many interviewees also noted that their motivations to be inclusive were out of a recognition of the need for greater workforce diversity. For these individuals, diversity and inclusion were strong values of their organization, expressed through the recognition that their workforce should reflect the diversity of people living in Canada. Some also recognized that diversity was already an inherent reality of their current (and future) workforce and saw the need for intentional efforts towards more meaningful inclusion. For some interviewees engaged in a consulting or professional services capacity, they also noted that being able to model inclusion was important from a business perspective (i.e., to “walk the talk”) as they engaged with other businesses or organizations.

While several interviewees expressed a deep expertise and commitment to neuroinclusion, many others conveyed that they were interested in neuroinclusion by virtue of having neurodistinct staff, or a broader recognition that their sector might “naturally” be a good fit for neurodivergent workers (e.g., technology or cultural industries, education, and libraries). Additionally, interviewees had an awareness that employees may not disclose a disability for a variety of reasons, but that fostering inclusive workplaces had the potential to directly benefit all employees.

“What is it like 1 in 5 people who actually disclose but the numbers are much higher than that? [We are working with] people who actually would be neurodivergent... To create better spaces for those individuals. But that affects everyone else... and creates better spaces for everyone... I mean, it's a no brainer in my opinion.” (Interview #22)

How do employers recruit, support, and retain neurodivergent talent?

One area of inquiry for this research was to explore the extent to which employers from diverse industries, business models, and organizational sizes in Canada are implementing evidence-based practices in fostering inclusive employment. Given the breadth of existing information (e.g., research, reports, toolkits, and frameworks) designed to support accessible and inclusive

employment, the interviews aimed to explore how recommended practices are being applied in real-world settings and where there was potential misalignment or gaps in practice.

Organizational policies and strategies

Less than half of interviewees confirmed they had an explicit organizational policy, strategy or action plan to address inclusion or neuroinclusion in their workplaces. For those who did (e.g., accessibility policy), the reasons given included: compliance with provincial accessibility regulations, modelling what this looks like to clients/other employers, keeping up with best practices, and ensuring consistency for staff through documented policies and procedures.

A focus on formal accessibility plans or explicit inclusion strategies was more commonly observed among medium to large non-profit and public sector/broader public sector organizations. Some indicated that accessibility legislation in their province required a formal accessibility plan. For those subject to requirements, the process of developing accessibility plans was seen as beneficial, creating an opportunity to approach the topic more intentionally and systematically.

“So, we hit the 50-employee point, which put a lot more obligations on us under the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act] ... We had some [policies], but to be honest, they were just kind of boilerplate... So, we got a lot more into developing our whole [accessibility] philosophy, return to work programs, accommodation programs and things like that.” (Interview #14)

In contrast, small employers did not see a need for formalized plans or policies on accessibility and inclusion. Some expressed concern that written policies would introduce an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy that was not well-suited to the dynamics of smaller teams. Instead, these interviewees emphasized that inclusion was embedded in their day-to-day practices, highlighting that what mattered most is being accessible in practice, rather than documenting it in writing.

“The culture that we have right now, we are used to being very informal with everything... I've seen a little bit of resistance when it comes to creating policy... I've discovered that before I worked with big corporations or big organizations with lots of money. Now I'm working in a very small organization... So there have been sometimes where I've seen that policy, it's not the best way to go. So, if people are not feeling comfortable with something in writing, but we already have this understanding and that's the culture, I think that's even more important than having a policy that it's not being followed.” (Interview #21)

Training and awareness

As seen in the knowledge synthesis, while there is a growing awareness of the value people with disabilities bring to the workplace, interviewees emphasized that more education and awareness is required to understand the experiences of neurodistinct employees. While several interviewees noted that they had engaged in training, these initiatives were largely to establish a more “foundational” level of EDI awareness, cultural competence, or to address unconscious biases. To complement broad inclusion awareness building for all employees, some interviewees highlighted that their current focus was training managers or leaders, especially within the context of recruitment and hiring.

Only a small number of interviewees had engaged with training specifically designed to address neuroinclusion, and these interviewees noted that they were in the early stages of identifying appropriate resources to further develop their capacity.

We have an external consultant who comes in to do sort of various EDI topics once a month. So, we have a month we have focused on anti-racism, we have focused on anti-ableism. We're looking at providing some neurodiversity awareness training this year as well, putting that as a specific topic on our list.

(Interview #15)

Inclusive recruitment and hiring

In general, interviewees had the most experience with inclusive recruitment and hiring practices, demonstrating an understanding and appreciation of the importance of removing barriers at this stage in the employee lifecycle. They pointed to practices to ensure that recruiters and hiring managers understood inclusive hiring principles. In total, 17 out of the 22 interviewees expressed that they had engaged in practices to remove barriers in recruitment and hiring, and these were present across industries and employers of all sizes, as well as organizational types (e.g., non-profit, for profit, and public sector). Common practices observed included the following:

- reviewing and revising job descriptions and recruitment materials to remove barriers and ensure adherence to inclusive approaches (i.e., expressly inviting diverse candidates, outlining availability of accommodations, etc.);
- ensuring transparency about role expectations and working conditions, including salary and benefits to provide candidates with clear information to assess their own fit;
- removing barriers in the interview process, including removing behavioural-based questions, sharing interview questions in advance, and ensuring availability of accommodations; and

- building direct connections with disability and neurodivergent communities.

Some interviewees also demonstrated a very strong understanding that traditional interview formats often pose significant barriers to neurodivergent candidates. As outlined in the knowledge synthesis, the interview process may make it challenging for candidates to express themselves clearly, or interviews may occur in environments that add anxiety due to social context or other sensory inputs that limit neurodivergent candidates' success (Bernard et al, 2024).

“The more transparent you can be in the job description and in the interview [the better] ... Don't ask ‘tell me about yourself’, and ‘what's your biggest weakness?’... They throw neurodivergent people for a loop because, of course, they're not going to answer with what you actually want, because you weren't clear about what you actually wanted to know...” (Interview #7)

Consistent with findings highlighted in the knowledge synthesis, several interviewees recognized that traditional interview formats, such as those relying on abstract or behavioural-based questions, can pose significant barriers for neurodistinct candidates as they fail to explicitly align with the requirements of the role. Some highlighted innovative practices, including progressive approaches to create more predictability and comfort with the hiring process (e.g., group interviews prior to individual interviews; written tasks or questions prior to face-to-face interviews).

“We started out deconstructing our hiring methodology and of course found the behavioural interview to be the biggest culprit in that process... So, the model has evolved significantly over the past ten years, and we've had success as an early adopter in this space.” (Interview #8)

As well, some interviewees conveyed that they were engaging in practices that aligned with findings in the knowledge synthesis regarding the need to remove barriers in assessing potential candidates, including focusing on the individual's potential and alignment with organizational values over traditional “fit”. Another interviewee explained that their hiring model involved creating pathways from individuals who were in a contractor capacity and bridging them into permanent roles. In this example, the employer already had a strong understanding of the individual's potential and fit, while actively supporting their inclusion.

Workplace adjustments and accommodations

As with recruitment and hiring, there was strong alignment between knowledge synthesis findings and interviewees' experiences with accommodations and adjustments. Examples of adjustments and accommodations that were felt to benefit neurodivergent employees included the following:

- providing standard assistive technology (e.g., Grammarly, Otter AI) to all employees;
- ensuring accommodations follow the employee across the employee lifecycle or into different roles;
- offering workplace assessments to all new hires (e.g., via Neil Squire Society); and
- supporting sensory needs (e.g., control of lighting, reducing noise, or availability of quiet spaces).

Interviewees demonstrated an awareness of the need to move from a strictly medicalized framework of accommodations to providing universal access to a variety of supports without proof of a diagnosis or the need for disclosure. One innovative practice highlighted by an interviewee was their workplace “app store,” where an employee could download a range of assistive technology to enhance accessibility without approval.

Additionally, interviewees noted that fostering an informal and inclusive approach to flexibility and choice through hybrid work arrangements, flexibility in schedules, and adjusted timelines had become more widespread practices normalized following the COVID-19 pandemic. In many instances, interviewees who identified as neurodivergent highlighted that while these forms of workplace flexibility were not necessarily designed around their specific needs, they appreciated and benefited from them.

“Not just because I'm Autistic and I have ADHD, but also because I'm a woman and I'm getting to that point where I'm starting to have lots of hormonal changes, perimenopause... So, for me, having the flexibility of deciding if I'm going or not going or at what time I want to arrive, or if I want to work, maybe starting at 1 p.m. and I want to finish at 6 p.m. that's completely fine... [but] they were not designed because we were thinking about the neurodiverse community.”

(Interview #21)

While these flexible work arrangements were highlighted as important for neurodivergent staff, some interviewees also acknowledged that they are not conducive to all sectors or job roles. For example, there were fewer instances of flexible work arrangements for roles that required a physical presence or dedicated hours. Interviewees also conveyed that they lacked examples or solutions to support neurodivergent employees in these types of job roles. For example, one interviewee described not knowing what the needs and appropriate supports would be for neurodivergent staff in front-line health care positions. Several other interviewees expressed that in client-facing or service roles, it was challenging to provide flexibility and support to neurodistinct staff while simultaneously meeting the needs of the customers or the public.

Inclusive management practices

As emphasized in the knowledge synthesis findings, a key area for fostering neuroinclusive workplaces is in daily operations, communication, and collaboration amongst supervisors and coworkers (Bernard et al, 2024). Several interviewees identified how teams and daily work tasks were structured in more neuroinclusive ways, such as breaking down tasks to not overwhelm employees, creating predictable schedules and workflows which were additionally supported with written instructions, and building in time for review, reflection, and memory retention for neurodistinct staff.

For these interviewees, such management practices also emphasized flexibility in the workplace, recognizing the diverse ways in which individuals work, learn, and manage their time. For one interviewee, this was recognized through a longer, more intentional onboarding period to ensure new employees were supported effectively. For another interviewee, there was also a focus on a results-based management approach, prioritizing achievement of outcomes over a focus on process or time on task.

“Yes, people are on salary and paid to work 40 hours a week, but we’re not measuring that. For us, what matters is impact and results rather than how much time you’re sitting in your seat. Someone who might struggle a little bit with, you know, one of these types of challenges they have, they are empowered to make their schedule that works best for them.” (Interview #5)

Interviewees also identified taking a more intentional approach to team communications and meetings. Accessible and inclusive meeting practices included providing attendees with written material in advance, including an agenda to outline the meeting’s purpose or stated goals, and using closed captioning or having a scribe to record the discussions.

Other inclusive workplace practices

Given the diversity of interviewees in terms of industry, employer size, and experience with inclusive employment, a variety of practices were identified individually. A few interviewees had implemented formal mentoring programs, pairing new employees with designated mentors across the organization. Others described informal peer support systems, such as buddy arrangements, to help neurodistinct employees navigate workplace norms and foster deeper peer connections.

Some also identified adopting a universal design approach to accessibility, particularly in relation to the built environment and technology. Practices included normalizing the use of accessible technology and providing sensory-friendly spaces such as wellness rooms or quiet areas to support self-regulation. One interviewee noted that their focus on employee wellness was also formalized through employee benefits plans which included flexible absence policies (e.g.,

personal days, open leave policies) and expanded health supports, such as uncapped coverage for prescription medications.

Less commonly identified practices were committees or employee resource groups (i.e., to represent and share experiences of people with disabilities). Few interviewees reported data-driven approaches to tracking their efforts on representation, retention, or promotion. Only a small number of interviewees had engaged external partners for job coaching or role customization based on employee strengths. However, this may reflect the limited number of employers in this research.

What factors foster inclusive workplace practices?

In exploring the contexts and conditions that enabled inclusive employment practices, interviewees pointed to both cultural and structural factors in their organizations. Culturally, this included inclusive mindsets, leadership behaviours, changing workplace and societal norms, and overall organizational support of inclusion. Structurally, factors such as organizational profit orientation, size, industry, and availability of resources shaped the extent to which inclusive practices could be adopted and sustained.

Leadership commitment and workplace champions

A key enabler identified by many interviewees was strong leadership commitment and an interest in how to better support neuroinclusion in the workplace. Organizational leaders were seen as instrumental in championing initiatives such as training or more diverse recruitment, allocating dedicated resources, and ensuring flexibility and accessibility were built formally into organizational policy or informally through everyday workplace practices. Their influence was viewed as important for aligning organizational values and practices, but also in ensuring continued efforts for sustaining inclusive practices to the benefit of all employees.

“It’s one of [the president’s] main priorities. She sees accessibility as not only a compliance project, but really a project that is important. I think, because she wants people to feel welcome in a sense of belonging... I have seen her really go to bat for this project. I’ve been in meetings where she’s looked each of her VPs in the eyes and said, each of you are responsible for instituting this in your own portfolios... making sure this gets done. (Interview #10)

Additionally, leadership based on lived experience (i.e., leadership that is informed by, grounded in, and held by individuals with direct personal experience of being neurodistinct) was identified as important for establishing and promoting inclusive workplace practices. For interviewees who were founders/owners, their own lived experience with barriers in the workplace often provided a motivation to “do things differently” when establishing their own businesses. However, several

other interviewees noted strong leaders who had an awareness or understanding of neurodiversity as a driving factor to learn more and support employees in the most effective ways possible.

Many interviewees also highlighted that mindsets and attitudes towards neurodiversity and inclusion of people with disabilities were becoming more present in the workplace, and more broadly in society. Interviewees described changes in awareness and attitudes as emergent and evolving. They noted that as their organizations began engaging with more diverse talent, there was a growing recognition of the need for more inclusive workplace practices and go beyond “accessibility and inclusion 101”.

Emerging recognition and awareness

At a broader level, interviewees highlighted that because conversations about mental health had become increasingly normalized, so too had awareness of neurodiversity. Interviewees highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic had helped to accelerate the destigmatization of mental health conditions in the workplace, and that this shift was supported by long-standing advocacy and public campaigns such as *Not Myself Today* and *Bell Let's Talk*. Together, the broader societal shift in creating a more open and accepting environment to support workplace mental health provided a foundation for more interest and acceptance on disability inclusion and neuroinclusion. Interviewees commented that there was a greater openness towards neurodiversity, both in terms of greater employee comfort in self-disclosure, as well as in neurotypical employees' willingness to learn and provide support.

“Well, we are having more conversations... We're becoming more aware so we have a better idea of how neurodiversity can present. I have pushed the topic a little bit. I've arranged for a few opportunities for management and leadership to learn... and the team that was there seemed to really appreciate it.” (Interview #6)

Conditions and factors that enable inclusion

At the structural level, some interviewees highlighted that organizational characteristics, such as their size or industry, were a factor in facilitating more inclusive approaches. For example, many interviewees from small businesses/organizations highlighted the benefits of their size. In addition to the ability to be more flexible, smaller teams led to more internal coherence and acceptance of inclusive values, norms, and behaviours, as well as a willingness to support and include colleagues living with disabilities.

By contrast, larger organizations highlighted that having dedicated capacity from human resources or EDI specialists was beneficial to driving these practices. Additionally, the nature of

job roles that were more conducive to hybrid or remote work arrangements facilitated practices around employee flexibility and choice that in turn drove inclusion. For some employers, especially those who worked in technology or cultural industries, there was also a broader awareness of the importance of embracing different problem-solving abilities, valuing creativity, and bringing new perspectives to benefit both teams and the business/organization at large.

What gets in the way of advancing inclusion at work?

While interviewees described the actions that they were taking to promote inclusion and the factors that supported these efforts, they also identified a range of complex challenges that slowed their progress. These included key structural factors of their organizations or business models, persistent misconceptions on disability and neurodivergence, or growing resistance to workplace EDI efforts. As well, many interviewees described more complex tensions that managers and supervisors faced in reconciling the importance of accessibility and inclusion on one hand, with pressures to meet business objectives on the other.

Conditions and factors that create barriers to inclusion

Just as small businesses highlighted that their size gave them an advantage to be nimble and flexible to introduce new ways of working that support inclusion, they faced a range of challenges, especially with respect to lack of dedicated resources, expertise, and capacity to provide staff release time for training. The small size of teams also meant that for some interviewees, there was a feeling that there was not enough room to introduce practices like job carving or creating specialized positions. These employers were also often looking for versatile employees or “generalists” who could perform a range of functions.

Some interviewees spoke of rising business costs, from increased minimum wage, to increases in overhead, and felt the need to focus on operations. Many interviewees expressed a hesitation to draw staff time away from core business to participate in professional development activities focused on EDI or awareness-building.

“I need to understand what time commitment and that kind of thing would look like because every hour or minute not spent working towards product is just a higher burn rate and wages... You know, our timelines are very tight.” (Interview #3)

By contrast, large employers faced different challenges with respect to size, including navigating processes and systems that made change management more difficult. For large organizations that also had unionized staff, there were additional processes and policies to ensure employers were abiding collective agreements. For example, one interviewee noted that a

collective agreement stipulated the conditions for mandatory employee training, making it difficult to introduce awareness sessions on disability inclusion or neuroinclusion.

Interviewees from larger organizations also highlighted that navigating “layers of approvals” to change job descriptions, adopt new or more inclusive forms of interviewing, or securing accommodations for employees was a challenge. They noted that in organizations with dedicated HR staff, existing practices were often deeply entrenched, sometimes with HR professionals resistant to change or traditional ways of working. For example, one interviewee was advised to “stay in their lane” rather than advocating for more inclusive approaches. Navigating prescribed processes, especially when introducing what were seen as positive changes or intervening to support a neurodistinct employee, were seen as limits to their inclusion capacity as managers.

“I [was] reminded that I am not HR and I’m not employee wellness. I feel my recommendations can only go so far...I definitely got my hand slapped and was told that I was out of line and I wasn’t HR... They had consulted the union, they had consulted the lawyers, and they knew what they were doing. So, I feel there is so far I can go.” (Interview #6)

Like small businesses, large public sector (and broader public sector) employers noted that rising costs combined with funding cuts limited their ability to invest in inclusion efforts. Non-profit organizations also identified funding as a major barrier, often lacking the resources to support inclusive employment. In some cases, this was attributed to government funding bodies that did not recognize certain inclusion-related activities as eligible expenses. Non-profits also indicated that they relied on funding specifically for staff positions and that they were unable to hire inclusively due to limited resources.

Misconceptions, bias, and stigma

When discussing limited resources or organizational capacity, many interviewees emphasized that, despite a genuine commitment to inclusion, there are still prevailing attitudes that such efforts are discretionary rather than integral to core operations or business. This was often coupled with misconceptions regarding adjustments and accommodations as something outside of standard operating practices. Interviewees expressed challenges in addressing colleagues’ attitudes that flexibility is something that must be “earned” or that introducing new, more inclusive ways of working or hiring would “set a precedent” or would create an “unfair advantage” for a candidate.

Some interviewees also noted a growing trend of employee resistance to awareness-building efforts, where employees were refusing to engage in EDI training based on “personal beliefs” or “freedom of thought”. While described as a minority, these employees were perceived as more

vocal than in the past, contributing to situations where there was either direct push-back or more hesitation around inclusion initiatives.

Interviewees also noted that awareness of how neurodivergence presents in the workplace remains limited in many cases. Some described the concept of neurodivergence as being perceived by colleagues as “too abstract” or difficult to grasp, or reliance on stereotypes that continue to limit individuals’ understanding. These included stereotypes and stigma that Autistic people are “naturally gifted” in technology or mathematics, that learning disabilities primarily affect children or youth, or that all people with ADHD are disorganized. Others noted that they were still grappling with definitions. While employees and organizations had good intentions, lack of understanding was hindering neuroinclusion efforts.

“[People are] very confused about what's included in neurodivergence. What does that mean? How will it present itself? What are the expectations? How do we meet [accessibility] needs given that it's such a broad range? I think that makes people the most nervous... I think it just gets everyone's backs up because they don't know what it is. They don't understand it. It's complex, it's abstract. It's not they can visibly sort of see it and size it up so that really scares people, I think. And the bigger fear is that they'll find themselves in violation of someone's human rights.” (Interview #10)

One interviewee also highlighted that these misconceptions are compounded with other biases or attitudes towards individuals based on race and gender, requiring an intersectional lens to truly embrace neuroinclusive employment. For example, this interviewee described the many instances where equity-deserving groups are judged at a higher degree of “excellence” which creates pressure to overperform and mask. For many with intersectional experiences, seeking accommodations or support places them at risk of being perceived as “asking for too much”. These reflections also emphasized the importance of centering lived experience for others to fully understand the complexities of neuroinclusion, and that more space is required for people with intersecting identities to lead and contribute to effective solutions for neuroinclusive employment.

Managerial challenges in supporting neurodiverse teams

Many interviewees noted that even with organizational support and a general understanding of neurodiversity, managers often faced complex tensions in navigating and supporting neurodiverse teams. This included the need for greater patience, individualized approaches, and time to understand how each employee could best contribute. Interviewees expressed that managers were often already stretched thin and frequently lacked the “in-between” supports needed to bridge inclusive approaches with day-to-day operational demands.

“We realized we had a bunch of people on this project that were all [neurodivergent]... and how that just kept pushing deadlines and not making deliverables. And then we would get panicked... Well, that backfires when you have neurodivergent people because that can sometimes work for some people, but other people go, ‘Oh, yeah, I really suck at this. I’ve been late on all these things...’ That backfires on neurodiversity because they just beat themselves up more... And so, we learned a lot from that. And taking a step back and learning, how do we schedule projects?” (Interview #7)

Interviewees also shared that managers faced tensions in helping co-workers adjust their ways of working. Common challenges included managing time-sensitive tasks when an employee required additional time or support, limited team capacity to absorb workload, and coaching neurodistinct staff who did not know which adjustments and accommodations would help them best. In small teams without built-in redundancy for roles, this resulted in increased pressure on peers or the managers themselves. Some interviewees noted inclusive managers felt that they could reach a limit to support – either by encountering broader workplace or organizational barriers described above, or by reaching their own limits in capacity, such as taking on additional work that was unsustainable and leading to burnout.

What supports do employers say they are missing and who should provide them?

Access to (and navigation of) supports

Overall, interviewees confirmed that employers required further resources and supports to introduce and sustain inclusive practices in their organizations. Several saw funding as a key barrier. While only one interviewee raised the idea of wage subsidies, others saw broader opportunities to provide benefits to employers who had demonstrated efforts for inclusion. This could include having access to a wider range of tax credits or benefits, or other ways to fund accessible technology, building/workspace retrofits, or engaging in accessibility planning or other types of capacity building.

Interviewees from non-profit organizations expressed a clear need for increased resources to support inclusive efforts, especially with respect to funding staff positions and investing in professional development. Many pointed to limited government funding, noting that this constrained efforts to implement or sustain inclusive practices. One interviewee also raised concerns about inequities in funding distribution, noting that established organizations often receive most available funding, while organizations led by individuals with lived experience of disability remain underfunded and overlooked. This was especially true for people with intersecting identities of race, gender, and disability, where funding programs do not prioritize these organizations.

Many interviewees saw potential in greater collaboration and coordination of organizations and resources that support disability inclusion, such as pooling resources or co-developing initiatives as a strategy to overcome limitations in resources.

“Sometimes you do not need to re-invent the wheel... if we are lots of non-profits trying to create something around this, maybe we can all collaborate since we don't have many resources and create something amazing, something wonderful.” (Interview #21)

Cost was a common concern, with many interviewees noting that working external organizations — even those at no cost — requires significant investment on behalf of employers. While they indicated a preference for free resources (e.g., webinars, seminars, or other information), they often did not have the capacity to seek these out, evaluate them, or implement them. Despite knowledge of the large number of resources available to employers, interviewees noted that their organizations had difficulty understanding what would be appropriate for their unique workplace contexts.

Practical capacity building for employers beyond the “basics”

Interviewees expressed that most employers have an awareness of the importance of inclusion and their responsibilities to accommodate employees living with disabilities. However, they saw opportunities for deeper training to focus on practical solutions to effectively support neurodistinct employees.

“Autism can show up in very different ways. So as a manager, it's like, do they even really understand these labels? Like autism, ADHD and other things... Help them understand what someone is going through or what might be hard or easy for someone.” (Interview#5)

Many interviewees highlighted the importance of learning directly from people with lived experience to deeply appreciate and understand these perspectives. They expressed that hearing directly from neurodistinct individuals was important to appreciating their strengths, the varied ways in which they navigate workplace barriers, the toll that masking takes on their health and wellbeing, and the experience of living in environments not designed for them. Additionally, interviewees felt that learning directly from those with lived experience contributes a more nuanced understanding of intersectional experiences important for true inclusion in the workplace.

A key area identified for further awareness and capacity building was employers' legal responsibilities related to inclusion and accommodation. Several interviewees expressed a desire for clearer guidance on legal obligations, such as the duty to accommodate, or boundaries to better navigate employee expectations vis-à-vis employer responsibilities. These interviewees

expressed that a stronger understanding of employer responsibilities would help them build confidence, which was especially true amongst managers who might be sensitive to charges of discrimination. Additionally, some interviewees expressed hesitation in introducing initiatives out of concern about getting ahead of provincial or federal accessibility employment standards. They indicated a preference to wait for clearer guidance on standards before moving forward, citing uncertainty about compliance expectations.

A final area for capacity building identified was practical guidance that goes beyond the basics of the benefits of inclusion and a diverse workforce. As noted in the knowledge synthesis, many resources on neuroinclusion in the workplace focus on the early stages of employment, such as addressing barriers in job recruitment and hiring, but that there is a need for further guidance on other aspects of the employee lifecycle (i.e., career development, retention, promotion and job exit) (Bernard et al, 2024). For some interviewees, the lack of resources was particularly evident in supporting neurodiverse teams through performance management and employee transitions, including offboarding and employee departures.

“Generally, there seems to be a wealth of research and advice for employers on the hiring and recruitment this phase to address barriers. But it gradually peters out in terms of later stages and specifically when thinking about something like performance management... How someone who identifies as neurodivergent might experience traditional performance management conversation differently. Have you individually or as an organization thought about, well, what does neuroinclusion look like inside this conversation as well?” (Interview #12)

Partnership opportunities

Another goal of the interviews was to understand where there might be opportunities to strengthen partnerships between employers and those organizations that support employment of people with disabilities. As the evidence suggests, working with service and accessibility/inclusion organizations benefits employers by providing expertise, advice, and access to a broader network of resources, while helping to recruit diverse candidates (Bernard et al, 2024). Interviewees who had partnered with external organizations emphasized the value of accessing specialized expertise, as well as in offering new perspectives and problem-solving approaches. They highlighted that the combination of professional knowledge and lived experience offered by partners significantly enhanced their capacity to create more inclusive and responsive workplaces.

Interviewees with experience working alongside external organizations described the benefits of partnerships for the development of accessibility plans, conducting accessibility audits, and providing consultation on inclusive policies and processes. Additionally, some highlighted working with an organization to recruit and hire people with disabilities. This included

partnering on approaches to help people with disabilities gain employment experience through job shadowing, job term work placements, or other types of experiential learning and development. One interviewee had direct experience working with job coaches and noted that their organization benefited from having that specialized support, tailored to individual employee needs as well as the job requirements.

Partnership challenges

Despite these demonstrated partnership benefits, fewer than half of the employers interviewed for this project had experience partnering with an external organization. The primary reason for not pursuing a partnership was limited resources or funding to divert staff time towards training, capacity development, or other activities. Additionally, some interviewees shared that when they had attempted to establish partnerships to recruit from more diverse talent pools, they struggled to find candidates who met the specific qualifications they were seeking.

“They don't have the qualified candidates. I would love to have somebody in payroll, right? ... HR, labour relations... all these administration roles ... I know these people exist. I just don't know where they are.” (Interview #11)

Others noted that when accessibility or inclusion organizations focus on securing any form of employment for job seekers — which is often driven by government funding requirements — this results in job fit mismatches that have broader negative consequences. For employers, a mismatch can result in negative operational or business impacts; for job seekers, unsuccessful placements can reinforce barriers to inclusive hiring. For example, an interviewee expressed concern that a single negative experience could discourage future efforts to hire people with disabilities, reinforcing negative stereotypes or misconceptions that inclusive approaches are costly.

Some interviewees noted that while consulting support was broadly available, they found that it often lacked practical guidance for employers to implement. They described the advice as too abstract or disconnected from their day-to-day operational realities. Again, interviewees noted that while flexible work arrangements are appropriate for certain types of roles, these are not practical for many other types of employment where remote, hybrid, or flexible scheduling was not conducive to the role (e.g., healthcare, manufacturing, hospitality, etc.). Overall, employers were hesitant to invest in partnerships that did not clearly align with their specific business or organizational needs. Some interviewees also expressed frustration with being approached by organizations that did not deeply understand their industry or the operational realities of their business.

“There is a push that every employer should have a non-profit performing training for them, advising them how to hire. And there are challenges with that... In reality, as an employer, you're approached by many job seekers and many non-profit organizations... That can be a challenge in the system because

we have been approached by non-profits who have a Wikipedia level [of] knowledge of neurodiversity and everybody on our team has much more experience ... [It's] an unrealistic expectation of a job coach to require not only that they have to be an expert in all disabilities but also have to be an expert in all potential industries where their job seeker may get a job.” (Interview #8)

Other interviewees expressed that many external organizations appeared to offer similar approaches, making it difficult to assess or differentiate their levels of expertise. While many indicated that they had not ruled out future partnerships, they expressed that they would consider engaging an external organization if it had the specific expertise to meet their operational or business needs (i.e., rather than opting for more general accessibility or inclusion consulting). Additionally, one interviewee expressed confidence in their organization’s own internal expertise over external organizations, noting a preference for supporting employees through natural supports better aligned with day-to-day workplace realities.

LESSONS LEARNED & PATHS FORWARD

Neuroinclusive employment involves creating accessible, supportive, and barrier-free conditions and environments that recognize and value the contributions of neurodivergent individuals. Insights from research with a diverse cross-section of Canadian employers not only underscore the importance of fostering such conditions, but the practical ways in which they are creating and learning about them in real time. The findings identified both emerging and promising practices that can continue to guide efforts to advance neuroinclusion and better support neurodiverse workforces.

At the same time, the research highlights that for many employers, neuroinclusion remains a developing area. While some organizations demonstrated a deep knowledge and leadership in this space, others continue to navigate a variety of challenges. These include limited capacity to identify relevant resources while navigating organizational structures, financial pressures, and an emphasis on short-term operational outcomes rather than longer-term capacity building and change management.

Through this project's engagement with existing research, new data, and ongoing dialogue and reflection with Learning Circle collaborators, several key lessons and paths forward have emerged. These point to opportunities for future research, policy enhancement or innovation, and practical strategies for employers and organizations that support the inclusion of people with disabilities to build more neuroinclusive workplaces across Canada.

Normalizing neurodiversity

Within the interviews, many employers conveyed that the normalization of mental health conversations in the workplace has been an important factor in recognizing employers' role in removing barriers, supporting accessibility, and fostering inclusive workplace environments. While not be conflated with mental health, this "normalization" of the conversation provides a potential trajectory for emerging conversations around neurodiversity to continue to mature. For many employers, neurodiversity is still misunderstood, they are grappling with the highly varied and individual ways in which neurodivergence is experienced, and they are questioning what is effective in terms of providing employee support.

Here, there is potentially a parallel with how the emergence and recognition of supporting mental health in the workplace could provide lessons for advancing conversations around neurodiversity. Important investments into workplace mental health campaigns, combined with sustained investments in research and policy attention have helped to normalize the importance of mental health as key component of employee wellbeing, as well as organizational effectiveness and productivity (Howatt et al, 2018). For example, while many efforts on disability inclusion

have focused on the “business case” or benefits of inclusive workforces, employers need to also have a deeper appreciation of the tangible costs of inaction (i.e., lost retention, lost productivity, or lost access to diverse markets). This may help to move the conversation on neuroinclusion from a more personal issue to a business or organizational priority. For example, while this project undertook extensive recruitment efforts, employer engagement was limited, even among employers who had expressed their commitment to accessibility and inclusion. To foster meaningful change through employer engagement, employers must understand that inclusion is not a discretionary activity, but integral to their overall success and survival.

The normalization of workplace mental health discussions and investments, developed through a coordination between employers, policymakers, researchers, and support organizations, is potentially instructive in supporting such efforts. Lessons from mental health initiatives illustrate how to move “abstract” or stigmatized topics into the mainstream of business and organizational practice. These parallels also highlight the importance of sustained leadership, evidence generation, and inclusion of people with lived and living experience to both create and sustain change. For example, there is also an opportunity for more representative, national-level data collection on neurodivergent workers themselves. As findings from this project indicate, many neurodivergent people do not disclose their conditions to their employers, which is deeply contingent on trust and a workplace culture where their differences are supported and valued. There could be a role for more holistic insight from data collected directly from people with lived experiences of neuroinclusive employment as well.

Additionally, a more intentional investment in leaders who also have lived experience of disability requires funding and support for disability-led organizations, particularly those representing the intersecting experiences of race, gender, and other equity-deserving communities. Such organizations are important for contributing to policies and programs that reflect their own lived realities. To be truly effective, there is room for policy and program improvement to prioritize the meaningful involvement of people with disabilities at every stage, especially in leadership development and sustaining initiatives of a more diverse community of organizations and actors.

Inclusion through the employee lifecycle

The dominance of neurotypical norms and ways of working across the employee lifecycle — from job interviews, daily communications, team meetings, and organizations of tasks — continue to present significant barriers for neurodivergent people. Findings from this project highlight that there is a growing understanding and acknowledgment of inclusive hiring practices and non-medicalized approaches to providing adjustments and accommodations. Many employers are removing barriers to hiring and providing accommodations that are aligned with evidence identified in the knowledge synthesis.

However, there is also a need to extend employers' focus beyond these aspects of the employee lifecycle — especially with respect to the everyday practices that shape neurodivergent employees' experiences, job retention, and career advancement. For example, key themes that surfaced in interviews were the tensions and need for capacity development when it comes to managers and supervisors. People managers of all roles (i.e., those who engage with neurodiverse teams daily) lack the skills and resources to adequately support staff, engage in potentially sensitive conversations, and continue to meet organizational and business goals.

As demonstrated in this project, neuroinclusive management requires individualized approaches and skills to effectively work across different needs and preferences for daily communications, performance conversations, and work planning. In particular, the findings point to a gap in effective ways to navigate and support employee performance from a neuroinclusive lens, which is a critical factor in supporting employees' overall career development and advancement. However, businesses and organizations face different constraints in being able to foster inclusive management capabilities and the employers who contributed to this study signalled some reluctance to invest in this type of training or capacity building.

To address this gap, there are opportunities for organizations, researchers, and policymakers to collaborate in incorporating a neuroinclusive lens more explicitly within existing skills and competency frameworks, both for employees and more specifically for people managers. In this project, there were employers (who often included neurodivergent leaders) who demonstrated a deep expertise of how to support neuroinclusion across the employee lifecycle. Creating a forum to connect these leaders and bridge their own workplace innovations into broader research and policy discussions could also help to move other employers from intention to action.

Exploration of sectoral and organizational needs and responses

When exploring opportunities to enhance employer capacity and support, many interviewees in this project signalled a desire for tailored, practical resources and implementation guidance to remove barriers and advance neuroinclusive employment. These are aligned with the objectives and priorities of the federal government's Employment Strategy for Canadians with Disabilities and Canada's Autism Strategy, which both emphasize practical support for employers.

However, several interviewees expressed that they have difficulty differentiating among the many resources and offerings by support organizations, oftentimes finding them to be generic or not reflecting the realities of their industry, organizational model, or size. For example, small and medium enterprises may have more flexibility in implementing inclusive practices, but they are often constrained by limited capacity and rising operational costs. Likewise, large employers noted a limited understanding among third parties of their organizational cultures and internal processes. For example, being able to propose solutions in public sector/broader public sector

organizations that require navigating complex organizational structures or engaging with different internal stakeholders was seen as important, as was the appreciation of business risks for some industries (e.g., safety or other considerations that would limit on-site involvement of a job coach). Finally, interviewees pointed out that there were many job roles and industries where flexible approaches were difficult to implement, and there was a lack of broader sector-specific solutions.

Lack of specialized support was also felt among employers who could not find suitable candidates for job roles. Some emphasized that government programs that fixated primarily on employment outcomes of people with disabilities could be having unintended consequences of employers experiencing a lack of alignment between their workforce needs and supports or candidates on offer. This signals that again, a more holistic approach to measurement is required to recognize a range of outcomes associated with inclusive employment, recognizing important milestones towards organizational change beyond job seeker placement in any role.

Finally, employers saw an opportunity for greater coordination of existing supports, services and resources to reduce duplication and focus on scaling effective solutions. This presents the potential to strategically consolidate existing, well-established frameworks for inclusive employment while investing in research and testing of sector-specific solutions. Targeted sectoral engagement would not only address the gap employers have expressed for tailored solutions but could also prove to be a more effective way of broadening, deepening, and sustaining employer engagement in the longer-term. With this thoughtful coordination and collaboration, all partners can continue to create neuroinclusive conditions in which people can contribute, thrive, and succeed.

REFERENCES

- Bernard, A., Brooks-Cleator, B., de Raaf, S., and Fraser, N. (2024). Neuroinclusive employment: knowledge synthesis. Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. [Link](#)
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Vol. 3(2): 77-101. [Link](#)
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. [Link](#)
- Celeste, L., de Raaf, S., and Fraser, N. (2022). Increasing employment through inclusive workplaces: Interim report. Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. [Link](#)
- Deloitte and Auticon. (n.d.). Embracing neurodiversity at work: How Canadians with autism can help employers close the talent gap. [Link](#)
- Disabled World. (2023). What is: Neurodiversity, Neurodivergent, Neurotypical. [Link](#)
- Employment and Social Development Canada [ESDC]. (2018). Evaluation of the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities: Phase I. Government of Canada. [Link](#)
- Employment and Social Development Canada [ESDC]. (2020). Evaluation of the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities: Phase II. Government of Canada. [Link](#)
- Employment and Social Development Canada [ESDC]. (2024a). A way with words and images: guide for communicating with and about persons with disabilities. Government of Canada. [Link](#)
- Employment and Social Development Canada [ESDC] (2024b). Employment Strategy for Canadians with Disabilities. Government of Canada. [Link](#)
- Howatt, B., Bradley, L., Adams, J., Mahajan, S., and Kennedy, S. (2018). Understanding mental health, mental illness, and their impacts in the workplace. Mental Health Commission of Canada. [Link](#)
- Hutchison, J. (2023). Breaking down barriers: Improving the workplace experience for neurodivergent Canadians. The Conference Board of Canada. [Link](#)
- Hutchison, J., & Robertson, B. (2022). Building workplaces where neurodivergent workers thrive. The Conference Board of Canada. [Link](#)

- One Mind at Work. (2022, December). CHRO Insights Series Report: Neurodiversity. [Link](#)
- Pianosi, R., Presley, L., Buchanan, J., Levesque, A., Savard, S. and Lam, J. (2023). Canadian Survey on Disability, 2022: Concepts and Methods Guide. Statistics Canada. [Link](#)
- Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC]. (2020). Autism spectrum disorder: highlights from the Canadian Survey on Disability. [Link](#)
- Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC]. (2024). Canada's Autism Strategy. Government of Canada. [Link](#)
- Ready Willing & Able. (2024). Inclusive hiring works: The business benefits of hiring people with an intellectual disability or on the autism spectrum. [Link](#)
- Sinneave Family Foundation. (2024). Sinneave's Preferred Approach to Neuro-affirming Language. [Link](#)
- STAR Institute. (n.d.). Neurodiversity Affirming Language Guide. [Link](#)
- Vergara, D. and Hardy, V. (2023). Labour market characteristics of persons with and without disabilities, 2023. Statistics Canada. [Link](#)
- Zizys, T. (2018). Workforce Development, Demand-led Strategies and the Goal of Good Jobs. Prepared for the Ontario Centre for Workforce Innovation. [Link](#)
- Stevens, L., Stamp, J., Leblanc, K., and Mcfarlane, J. M. (2024). Neurodiversity. In J. M. J. M. McFarlane, A. L. Shi, D. Ramoo, & T. Yousef (Eds.), Introduction to Psychology Subtitle: Moving Towards Diversity and Inclusion. BCcampus. [Link](#)
- Universal Music. (n.d.). Creative Differences: A handbook for embracing neurodiversity in the creative industries. [Link](#)
- Walker, C. (n.d.). Success in the workplace employer toolkit: Strategies from autistic employees. Worktopia. [Link](#)

OTTAWA • VANCOUVER • CALGARY • HAMILTON

MONTREAL • REGINA • TORONTO • WINNIPEG



www.srdc.org • 1 866 896 7732 • info@srdc.org