

WHITE PAPER REPORT
PROMOTING WORKPLACE INCLUSIVITY:
IMPROVING THE ACCOMMODATIONS PROCESS FOR AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES

PURPOSE

To recommend that the federal government utilize Autism Alliance of Canada's *Inclusive Workplaces Discussion Tool* within all federally-regulated workplaces by December 31, 2023.

ISSUE

Canada is committed to creating a barrier-free country by 2040 through the Accessible Canada Act. However, workplace accommodations are currently not offered across workplaces in Canada ubiquitously. Among workplaces that do offer accommodations, more emphasis is usually placed on accessibility for people with physical disabilities, with little or no attention to invisible disabilities such as autism.

These inequities may represent a knowledge-to-practice gap where employers may not know the full range of accommodations that they can/should offer, or they may be relying on outdated and less relevant accommodation tools and resources. Likewise, Autistic employees may not be aware of the full range of accommodations that they are entitled to request or that might be helpful to them. As per sections 2 and 15 of the Canadian Human Rights Act, employers are legally obligated to provide accommodations by identifying and removing barriers that may hinder an employees' ability to perform their responsibilities.¹ In order to provide employers with guidance on effectively delivering accommodations to employees, this knowledge-to-practice gap must be filled by acknowledging and accommodating the holistic needs of Autistic workers.

BACKGROUND

Finding and retaining employment is a significant challenge for many Autistic Canadians. Many Autistics are unemployed, underemployed, or working part-time hours rather than full-time, and not by choice.² These challenges often have little to do with a person's ability to do the job and more to do with the barriers that they face in the workplace. Autism is a "genetically based human neurological variant that produces distinctive, atypical ways of thinking, moving, interacting, and processing".³ Thus, Autistic brains are wired to process communication, information, and sensory stimuli differently.

¹Secretariat, T. B. of C. (2011, July 18). Accommodation [Guidance]. <https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/health-wellness-public-servants/disability-management/accommodation.html>

²Berrigan, P., Scott, C. W. M. et Zwicker, J. D. (2020). Employment, Education, and Income for Canadians with Developmental Disability: Analysis from the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability. *J Autism Dev Disord.* 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04603-3>

³ Walker, Nick (2022). Neurodiversity: Some Basic Terms & Definitions. Available from: [neurodiversity: some basic terms & definitions](#)
• [neuroqueer](#)

Work settings can pose multiple difficulties; for example, challenging physical, social, and sensory environments, and a lack of comprehensive supports, or general awareness/knowledge of autism.⁴ When accommodation needs are met, Autistic employees can better manage their performance, and are more likely to remain with their employer.⁵

A recent survey of employers (n=171) showed that 60% of respondents worry about doing or saying the wrong thing to their Autistic employees, and that they do not know where to go for advice to provide the right support.⁶ During data collection for research at Autism Alliance of Canada (forthcoming) we learned that employers, including the Federal Government of Canada, have been using “Functional Abilities” or “Functional Limitation” forms along with letters from physicians to determine which accommodations will be provided to their Autistic employees. Functional Limitations/functional abilities forms focus on physical disabilities or temporary disabilities (i.e. injuries) and do not include common accommodations needed for many Autistic employees.

It is evident that employers need more education about autism, along with concrete information to assist with discussions about accommodations at work. Employers who have knowledge and awareness of autism and invisible disabilities are more likely to hire and retain Autistic workers, and foster a more inclusive workplace for all of their employees.

SOLUTION

Given the many intersecting identities of Autistic employees in addition to the diverse range of co-occurring conditions and social challenges experienced, we propose a new model for requesting accommodations which comprehensively captures workplace accommodations that are relevant for those on the Autistic Spectrum.

A working group composed of individuals who identify as Autistic, caregivers of Autistic individuals, and subject matter experts were consulted to holistically capture a broad range of accommodation needs, thus allowing greater inclusivity in the workplace for Autistic employees. The tool is useful for any employee seeking accommodation(s) for temporary and/or permanent disabilities or conditions and can feasibly be offered by any organization. We cannot guarantee that this tool considers the complete range of Autistic needs because each Autistic employee is unique. However, customization or agreements between the employee and the employer can be added within each relevant section. Reviewing accommodations annually or as needed is recommended

⁴ Nicholas, D. B., Attridge, M., Zwaigenbaum, L., & Clarke, M. (2015). Vocational support approaches in autism spectrum disorder: A synthesis review of the literature. *Autism*, 19(2), 235-245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361313516548>

⁵ Howlin, P, Alcock, J, Burkin, C (2005). An 8 year follow-up of a specialist supported employment service for high-ability adults with autism or Asperger syndrome. *Autism*, 9(5): 533–549. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361305057871>

⁶ Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism (CIRCA) & The Sinneave Family Foundation. (2020a). *Success in the workplace employer toolkit: strategies from autistic employees*. *Worktopia*. <https://worktopia.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Easy-Print-Version-Reduced-File-Size-for-Website-compressed.pdf>

We further recommend that those in recruitment, human resources, supervisory and managerial roles in federally-regulated workplaces 1) utilize our proposed 'Accommodations & Inclusive Workplaces Discussion Tool', 2) adhere to our implementation considerations, and 3) peruse the recommended employer training resources to promote appropriately accessible, equitable and inclusive workplaces for Autistic employees.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The tool has the added benefit of providing language and approaches that are rights-based, a helpful feature for employers who may not feel equipped to use the most appropriate language or provide advice on accommodations for a range of disabilities. We recommend the following implementation considerations to optimize the integration of the accommodations tool into a suitable request process, and to feasibly alter practices to address identified accommodation(s):

RECOMMENDATION #1: Employers should begin by asking the Autistic employee to identify up to 5 accommodations that they require immediately.

Beginning to implement accommodations by starting with up to 5 priority accommodations is a strategy for decreasing employer hesitancy about onboarding Autistic employees. Through the process, employers will come to realize that accommodations for Autistic employees are feasible, and often not costly. A strategy of starting with a manageable number of accommodation(s) needs will help all parties understand that the accommodation(s) required can be achieved with appropriate planning and time. In some circumstances an autistic employee may require more than five immediate accommodations. In these circumstances, additional accommodations should be made immediately.

RECOMMENDATION #2: Employers should offer structured, regular check-ins with the Autistic employee to gauge the effectiveness of the negotiated accommodation(s).

It is important to understand that the accommodation(s) request process does not end after the first conversation. Regular check-ins demonstrate recognition that needs may shift with time and with changes in the work environment. We recommend check-ins occur every 6 months to one year and as needed. During check-ins it will be important to ask questions that gauge the effectiveness of current accommodations, and provide modifications as required. This should also be an opportunity for the employer to ask whether the Autistic employee requires any additional accommodations, and to establish a norm demonstrating that the employer is someone the employee can talk to whenever they require accommodation(s).

RECOMMENDATION #3: Employers must proactively educate and reframe workplace attitudes and understandings toward accommodations.

Accommodations are not unique to Autistic employees. While it may not be formally recognized, all employees have their own types of accommodations. For example: on-site access to personal phones, ergonomic seating or work equipment, remote work arrangements, flexible scheduling or a personal space heater are some common workplace accommodations. Accommodations for Autistic employees is the same concept. Understanding this is the key to destigmatizing accommodations for Autistic employees, and this understanding should be shared with other employees in the workplace as a point of learning.

RECOMMENDATION #4: Employers should offer customized work to Autistic employees.

Customized work or job carving is defined as a process in which “[the employee] works with an employer to create a job that fits [their] skills and abilities.”⁷ Specific work arrangements can create the conditions for long-term employment for an employee with disabilities.⁸ This approach recognizes that Autistic employees have unique strengths and abilities, and tailoring their daily activities to align with these strengths can benefit both the employee and the employer. As such, even individuals needing 1:1 support can contribute to the workplace.⁹ By harnessing strengths, company productivity can increase while increasing the self-efficacy and self-esteem of the employee.¹⁰

RECOMMENDATION #5: If external "expert" resources (e.g., job coaches or other consultants) are engaged to facilitate the accommodations process, employers should exercise a high degree of caution and due diligence to engage someone qualified to address the unique needs of the Autistic employee.

Engaging an external "expert" who is not appropriately sensitive to neurodiversity concerns generally, or to individual needs of the employee specifically can result in risks including human rights violations.¹¹ It is the responsibility of the employer to ensure due diligence is exercised in identifying an appropriate "expert" or consultant. At a minimum, they should be identified from pro-neurodiversity sources and have neurodiversity expertise. Even experts with lived experience should avoid imposing generalizations about autism on the individual, and treat every Autistic person as unique. Consultation with the employee about bringing in subject matter experts may

⁷ Job carving – Everyone Can Work. (n.d.). Retrieved August 22, 2022, from <https://www.everyonecanwork.org.au/glossaryterm/job-carving/>

⁸ Ho, J. A., Bonaccio, S., Connelly, C. E. et Gellatly, I. R. (2022). Representative-negotiated i-deals for people with disabilities. *Human Resource Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22118>

⁹ Hagner, D. et Cooney, B. F. (2005). "I do that for everybody": Supervising employees with autism. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 20(2), 91-97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10883576050200020501>

¹⁰ Johnson, K. R. (2022). Using a strengths-based approach to improve employment opportunities for individuals with autism spectrum disorder. *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 34(1), 16-25. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/nha3.20321>

¹¹ Smith, J. (n.d.). Canada Post fails to deliver for autistic worker. Retrieved August 24, 2022, from <https://www.hrreporter.com/focus-areas/employment-law/canada-post-fails-to-deliver-for-autistic-worker/318501>



also be helpful to ensure that the "expert" doing the messaging has similar values and beliefs about autism to that of the employee being supported.

CONCLUSION

Current research has identified that employers lack confidence in providing support to Autistic employees.⁶ This brief provides policy makers with a synthesis of community-based research and recommendations on effective delivery of accommodations in order to make strides towards an inclusive workplace for Autistic employees.

Autism Alliance of Canada

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Employees**

Authors: Toney Lieu, Sara Lacarte, Stephen Gentles, and the Summer 2022 Policy Development Working Group¹

¹Allison Annesley, Anick Bergeron, Cyndi Gerlach, Elsbeth Dodman, Jennifer Sinclair, Megan Pilatzke, Natalie Samantha Beanland, Patricia George-Wicker, Saira Zuberi, Sarah Southey, Valérie Martin

Please email us at info@autismalliance.ca with questions, comments

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