



# Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



## Embracing Different Minds: How Neurodiversity Strengthens Workplaces

Imagine starting a new job, being excited to contribute your unique skills and ideas, but quickly finding that the work environment isn't designed with your needs in mind. For someone who is neurodivergent – that is, who has variations in how they think, learn and interact - this creates feelings of being overwhelmed. For example, it might be incredibly challenging if they had to work in an open floor plan workspace. They might find rigid scheduling difficult, affecting their ability to perform at their best. During the interview, the hiring manager may recall some terrific discussions and decide that this candidate is a great fit for a role. However, most interviews happen in meeting rooms or specific spaces within human resources or outside the workspace that employees inhabit, which makes it difficult for someone with neurodivergent thinking to envision the physical arrangement and ask questions. Further, neurodivergence may not have come up in conversation or been disclosed during the interview. It's a topic where misinformation and disinformation are rampant, plus colleagues and managers who are neurotypical may need help understanding the types of challenges someone could experience despite their good intentions.

The reality is that workplace policies don't always align supportively with the strengths of someone who is neurodivergent despite the significant benefits for teams and organizations. When workplaces embrace neurodiversity, they create inclusive, adaptable environments where everyone can succeed. This article will look at how neurodiverse individuals, including those with ADHD, autism, and dyslexia, can enhance creativity, productivity, and innovation in any workplace. And from the employer's perspective, how offering flexible work arrangements to providing tailored accommodations, can help companies can create environments that allow neurodiverse employees to thrive. Actionable steps can make inclusivity part of any team's culture. We'll offer guidance on developing training programs focused on building empathy and awareness and share tips for managers on supporting individual growth. We'll also touch on some of the legal and ethical responsibilities companies face in Canada and the U.S., underscoring the importance of building workplaces where everyone's abilities are valued.

## Introduction to Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a term used to describe the natural variations in brain functioning that some people have from neurotypical individuals. Considering that “no two brains function the same way,” it’s estimated that neurodiversity “applies to an estimated 15 per cent to 20 per cent of the global population.”<sup>1</sup> It’s important to understand that the differences in the way neurodivergent people think are not deficits but rather unique ways of processing information because “there is no one ‘normal’ brain.”<sup>2</sup>

In the workplace, neurodiverse employees bring perspectives and skills that can introduce innovation, inspire critical thinking, and introduce fresh problem-solving approaches. Different thinking styles help organizations address the complex challenges they encounter today. Companies are beginning to understand how valuable neurodiverse employees are. As a result, they are embracing a movement to recognize diversity and demonstrate more inclusivity as part of the social structure at work.

We have included an overview of some neurodiverse conditions, focusing on the strengths these individuals can bring to organizations.

### • ADHD

People with ADHD often have high energy, are creative, and can bring hyper-focus to tasks they are interested in. Their intensity is beneficial in roles requiring innovative thinking. They may excel in multitasking, and their spontaneity and adaptability can be refreshing.<sup>3</sup> Chef Jamie Oliver and Actor Ryan Gosling both have found success while living with ADHD.<sup>4</sup>

### • Autism

People on the autism spectrum often bring strong attention to detail, pattern recognition, and specialized interests that can make them ideal candidates for roles that need precision, logic, and consistency.<sup>5</sup> Structured routines, clear communication and sensory accommodations can help these individuals thrive in contributing innovation and valued problem solving. Actor Dan Aykroyd is on the autism spectrum.<sup>6</sup>

### • Dyslexia

Individuals with dyslexia can be skilled at seeing big-picture points of view and creative problem-solving. They can also be skilled verbal communicators and demonstrate innovative thinking and entrepreneurship. Since they can solve problems creatively, they would be well suited to roles that require strategic thinking and visual strength.<sup>7</sup> Entrepreneur Richard Branson and Director Stephen Spielberg have thrived with dyslexia.<sup>8</sup>

### • Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia can affect someone’s motor skills, making activities that require coordination and balance challenging but also impacting cognition. In the workplace, this can translate to strong problem-solving skills, an appreciation for routines, and creative thinking as they approach tasks differently, showing innovation and adaptability.<sup>9</sup> Actor Daniel Radcliff is dyspraxic.<sup>10</sup>

### • Synesthesia

People with synesthesia often have heightened creativity due to their enhanced perception and sensory abilities, allowing them to see patterns

and associations innovatively. They can excel in design, the arts, and marketing roles.<sup>11</sup> Musician Billie Eilish has synesthesia.<sup>12</sup>

Even with the progress made towards neuro inclusion, many employees still “feel uncomfortable disclosing as neurodivergent, masking or pretend to be neurotypical, often at a great cost to their productivity and mental health.”<sup>13</sup> In Canada, there are still significant gaps between inclusion and support available to neurodiverse employees. Studies show that nearly half of Canadian autistic employees feel they must mask their traits to fit in at work, indicating that many workplaces are not yet fully inclusive.<sup>14</sup>

## The value that neurodiverse individuals bring to teams

Neurodiverse employees have the potential to bring resilience, creativity, empathy and problem-solving strengths that contribute to innovation and collaboration in business and enhance team productivity.

Some organizations have been long-time supporters and innovators when it comes to recognizing the value of and embracing neurodiversity in their workplaces. For example, DXC Technology’s Dandelion Program has been in place for over 10 years and connects “neurodiverse people with meaningful employment and helping workplaces fill IT skill gaps.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, SAP’s neurodiversity hiring initiatives have shown that the strengths that neurodivergent individuals bring to the workplace can lead to positive business outcomes, not only from a skills standpoint but also in enhancing culture and team dynamics with “broad increases in employee engagement.”<sup>16</sup>

## Supporting neurodiversity through inclusive work environments

Supporting neurodiversity boosts innovation and productivity plus strengthens team dynamics by introducing different approaches to problem-solving and creativity. This allows employers to enhance the outcomes of complex projects, for example. Companies that have found success have adapted their hiring practices to ensure that neurodiverse employees are successfully integrated into roles that match their strengths. They have also practiced policies introducing support into the work environment and specific accommodations. One Toronto-based employer observed that “whether it’s light or noise, or not having the right setup, that can really interrupt [a neurodiverse employee’s] ability to do their job and have the focus they need to complete a task.”<sup>17</sup> The adjustments companies can make are often low-cost and straightforward to implement, but they can profoundly shift morale and productivity for all employees because they demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity and a belief that all employees can contribute fully to the organization’s success.

Here are some examples that can be beneficial.

1. Flexible work arrangements such as modified working hours or remote work can accommodate different working styles.
2. Clear, simple and concise communications reduce misunderstanding and help everyone stay aligned with processes and goals.

3. Sensory-friendly spaces and tools like noise-cancelling headphones can help minimize workplace distractions, particularly for those with ADHD and Autism.
4. Task management tools that help with organization and time management, job coaching and mentoring, and adaptive technologies like speech-to-text software and spell-checking tools can all help employees—especially those with Dyslexia or Dyspraxia—perform at their best when completing written tasks.

### Training and awareness for team members

Education is crucial for developing more inclusivity and strengthening workplace culture so that neurodiversity is not stigmatized but understood and respected, supporting collaboration and organizational effectiveness. Training programs can help teams recognize and overcome unconscious biases – where people make decisions based on stereotypes or prejudices subconsciously.<sup>18</sup> During the recruiting process, it is essential to ensure that hiring managers “harness untapped talent in the recruitment pool.”<sup>19</sup> Being aware that situations that value quick decision-making or focus on abilities to work in teams or even one-on-one can be challenging situations for neurodiverse individuals. Resources like the Neurodiversity Hub <https://www.neurodiversityhub.org/resources-for-employers> and ADDitude Magazine <https://www.additudemag.com> offer tools and guidance for employees in transitioning to neurodiversity-friendly workplaces.

### Building support systems

Mentorship programs and employee resource groups can provide neurodivergent employees with a sense of community and access to additional resources. Managers can also play a critical role by offering regular check-ins, individualized feedback, and personalized development plans that emphasize the strengths of each team member. Open communication and establishing clear, attainable goals can go a long way toward making neurodivergent employees feel valued. Overall, these efforts improve morale and help reduce turnover, making them a worthwhile investment for companies.

### Legal and ethical considerations

U.S. and Canadian laws mandate supportive accommodations for neurodiverse individuals to ensure their rights are protected in the workplace.

- In the U.S., the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities, which includes neurodivergent conditions.
- In Canada, the Canadian Human Rights Act and various provincial regulations protect neurodiverse employees’ rights.

Beyond legal obligations, however, many companies view inclusion as part of their ethical practices and a core element of corporate social responsibility. Companies committed to improving Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) ensure that related positions and policies are reassessed regularly. This way, they comply with laws and invest in delivering a genuinely inclusive culture.

Embracing neurodiversity is a strategic advantage and an ethical choice for an organization. Neurodiverse employees bring fresh ideas, improved problem-solving, and strengthened team dynamics. For companies who are ready to take the next steps, here’s how to start:

1. Self-evaluate to assess current hiring practices and inclusivity measures. If they don’t account for neurodiversity, they need to shift.
2. Make inclusivity a core value and establish clear, measurable goals to increase the focus on neurodiversity within initiatives tuned to DEI.
3. Learn from organizations that have developed a deep understanding of the benefits of embracing neurodiversity to determine the most effective inclusion strategies.

Creating a supportive environment where all employees feel welcomed, confident, and able to perform at their best is not only beneficial for individuals but will also pay off in the long-term success and innovations that a company can be proud of.



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