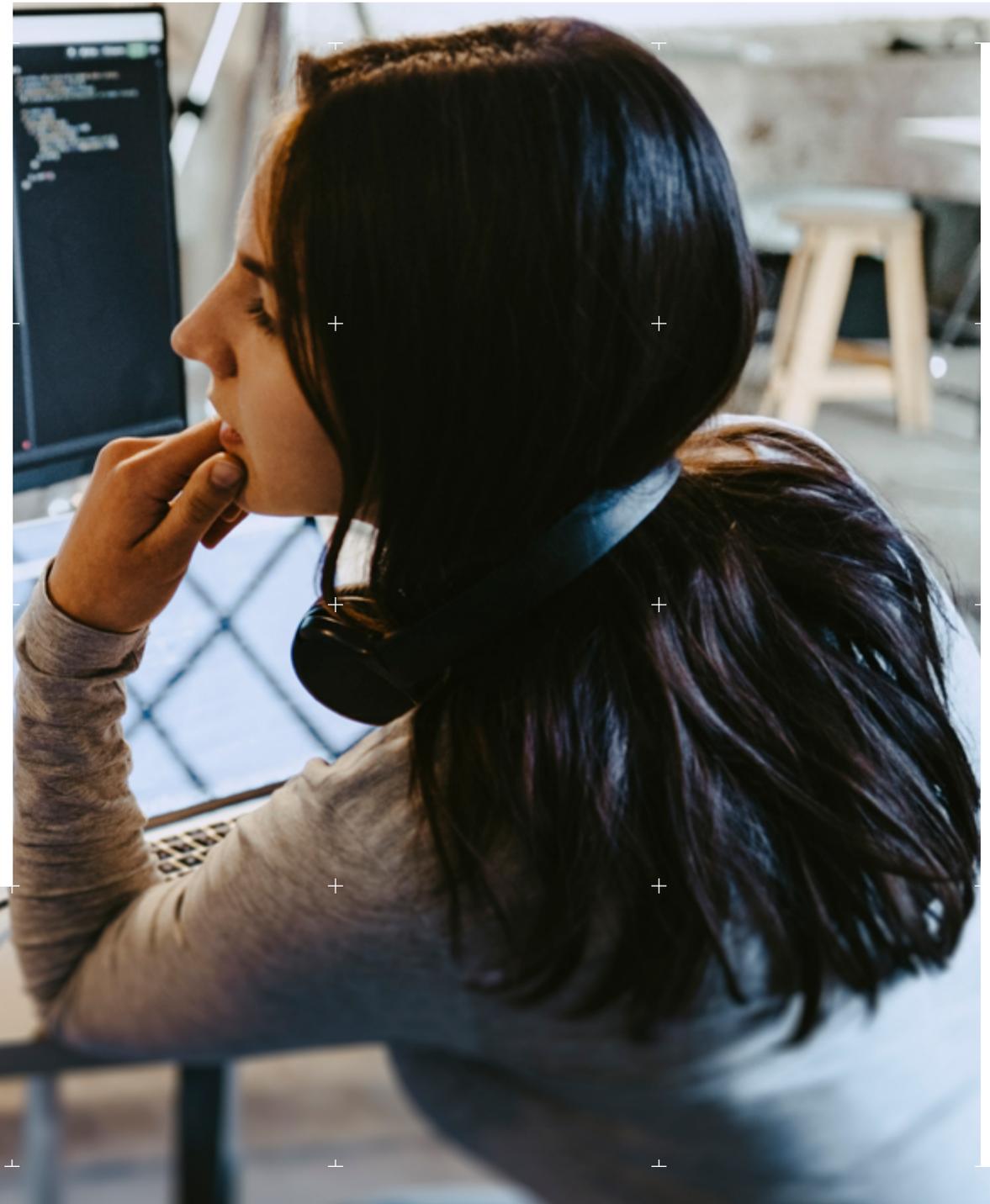


*Embracing neurodiversity at work  
How Canadians with autism can  
help employers close the talent gap*





**M**y journey of discovery with neurodiversity began when my eldest son, Kyle, was diagnosed with autism when he was two-and-a-half years old. In order to have adequate time to focus on helping him, our family made a series of significant life changes, including moving provinces and changing careers. We also sought out communities and organizations that we could turn to for support and guidance.

As our children were graduating, a core group of parents who were united in our journey noticed that the market had an employment gap for neurodiverse talent, so we started what is now called auticon Canada. That was more than 10 years ago, and in that time, we've seen so many uniquely skilled and highly productive neurodiverse people succeed and bloom on the job front.

Today, it's an honour for me to be at Deloitte, an organization that is deeply committed to community, as well as to diversity, equity, and inclusion. I'm equally honoured to engage in this critical dialogue on neurodiversity. While my connection with autism has been deeply personal, I believe the insight gained is relevant to the larger community: It's clear that the capabilities of neurodiverse employees can help drive improved productivity, increase workplace diversity and inclusion, and enhance cultures. This pool of candidates represent an untapped opportunity for corporate Canada.

I hope you find the results of our research to be engaging and that we can unite together in a national dialogue to help improve employment outcomes for neurodiverse talent.

*-Roland Labuhn,  
Partner – Digital, Analytics  
and Transformation leader*



**A**t Deloitte, we know firsthand the business benefits that come from having employees and teams with diverse experiences, backgrounds, knowledge, and ways of thinking and working—including the unique contributions of neurodiverse individuals. But those benefits are only fully realized when organizations are able to unlock the passion and potential of each person by creating the conditions for true inclusion. As this report shows, there is still much work to be done to tap into neurodiverse talent, create the conditions for neurodiverse individuals to thrive, and provide them with opportunities to meaningfully contribute.

We hope that the recommendations presented in this report will encourage organizations to review their current practices and identify opportunities for positive change. By committing to recruiting, employing and developing neurodiverse talent, you will also be creating a more inclusive culture for everyone.

*-Peter Graham,  
Partner and Executive Sponsor  
for Deloitte Accessibility*



**Emcie Turineck** is a Montreal-based digital artist and illustrator. Her education includes a BFA and art-education degree from Concordia University, where she focused on drawing and sculpture. A persistent sense of spilling into the world around her inspired her life's endeavour, *Spill Girl*. A neurodivergent artist on the autism spectrum, Emcie is profoundly fascinated with her surroundings and often feels deep empathy with her immediate environment. **This connection with her milieu reveals itself through her use of lines and colour, as even everyday objects in her work brim with joy and personality.**



# INTRODUCTION



→ **Canadians with autism are an integral part of the nation's communities**—yet the same cannot be said of our workplaces. Many autistic adults face barriers to finding and retaining meaningful, lasting employment—even though they offer skills and qualities that employers crave in these days of talent shortages.

As Deloitte highlighted in our report *Catalyst: A vision for a thriving Canada in 2030*, it's imperative that every member of our society has the opportunity to participate in our nation's social and economic prosperity. All Canadians should be able to engage in work that's personally suitable and meaningful, capitalizing on their unique talents and strengths. Canadian businesses have made significant strides toward improving diversity, equity, and inclusion on many fronts, but there's still much work to do. This includes opening doors and workplaces to neurodiverse Canadians.

To better understand the state of employment among Canada's autistic community and identify how companies can do more to recruit and retain this subset of talented people, Deloitte teamed with auticon Canada, a global technology consulting firm that employs autistic technology consultants and has offices in Toronto, Calgary, and Montreal. Our research, which includes academic insights, a survey of and discussions with Canadian adults with autism, and conversations with employers, informs the report you're about to read.

Our goal is to foster a greater understanding of what autism in the workplace really looks like—and the many benefits that employees with autism can bring. We also hope to inspire businesses and other organizations to develop their own programs to recruit and retain autistic talent. **To this end, we highlight the barriers to employment faced by the autistic community, as well as the opportunities for employers to successfully hire, onboard, and support staff with autism.**



# What is autism?

The clinical model defines autism, or autism spectrum disorder, as a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects the way a person processes information, communicates, and relates to others and the world around them. Diagnosis includes variations in social interactions and communication (including difficulty understanding non-verbal cues), as well as restricted or repetitive interests, activities, and patterns of behaviour. Many autistic people also experience sensory sensitivities.

While the Public Health Agency of Canada references the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) in classifying autism as a disorder, many autistic people prefer to describe autism as a neurological difference or condition. In fact, the framing of autism and other

neurodevelopmental differences as disorders is increasingly being replaced by the notion of “neurodiversity.” Judy Singer, an autistic sociologist, began using the term in the 1990s to conceptualize autism and other neurodevelopmental differences as ordinary variations of the human brain. Autistic people who embrace the concept of neurodiversity may identify as neurodiverse or neurodivergent. The term “neurotypical” is often used in autistic communities to refer to anyone who is not neurodiverse.

Autism is a spectrum condition, which means no two people are affected in the exact same way: according to one popular maxim, “If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.”<sup>1</sup> While all autistic people will experience some of the differences previously noted, the degree and ensuing support required—

sometimes influenced by the presence of co-occurring conditions—will vary. These can also vary according to the accessibility of the environment and society autistic people inhabit.

Autism exists in all cultures, ethnicities, races, and gender identities. According to the World Health Organization, approximately one in 160 children worldwide has an autism spectrum condition, but reported prevalence varies substantially across studies.<sup>2</sup> Autism diagnoses have increased dramatically over time, but it’s unclear to what extent this represents a true increase in prevalence. The increase is at least partly attributable to increased awareness about autism and changes to diagnostic criteria and practices.<sup>5</sup>

In Canada, a 2019 survey found that approximately 2% of youth aged one to 17 years had been diagnosed with autism, a prevalence of about one in 50.<sup>4</sup> Of this group, boys outnumbered girls by as much as four to one. The reasons for this disparity remain unclear. Researchers agree that at least some of the difference in prevalence between girls and boys is due to biases in perception, assessment, and diagnosis of autism in girls.<sup>5,6</sup> However, biological differences are also thought to play a considerable role: recent studies examining brain imaging and genetic data have found robust gender differences in the functional brain organization of people with autism that contribute to their clinical symptoms in distinct ways.<sup>7,8</sup>

## ***Our wording choices for this report***

Deloitte recognizes that some people prefer person-first language (i.e., “people with autism”), while others prefer identity-first language (i.e., “autistic people”). This report uses both options interchangeably and without judgment to respect the diverse preferences of the autistic community.

# About our research approach

We used several research methods to prepare this report. This helped us to better understand the current state of employment for autistic Canadians, the benefits of employing autistic workers, and best practices for hiring and retaining people with autism.

## Methods included:

- ♦ **Literature review.** This involved a review of academic, media, think-tank, and other secondary articles and data, with comparisons between employment of autistic people in Canada and in countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia.
- ♦ **Survey.** Our survey of 454 autistic adults across the country was distributed primarily by organizations that help autistic people find and succeed in work. Because of this, employed subjects are overrepresented in our survey sample.
- ♦ **Interviews with employers.** We interviewed seven Canadian companies, each with at least one autistic employee.
- ♦ **Interviews with people with autism.** Our research also included interviews with six Canadians with autism.

*Under-represented and underemployed:*

## **Canadians with autism in the workplace**

*People with autism have much to offer potential employers. Unfortunately, their skills and talents are often overlooked. As a result, the autistic community—in Canada and around the world—is under-represented in the workforce in three distinct ways:* →



For this illustration, I wanted to represent what it's like to feel like an outsider at work. So, I portrayed the subject with a concerned expression, looking at nearby groups of people who are socializing. I also added headphones, a popular accommodation for many people with autism—including myself—to help them manage their sensory input.

This image represents how some autistic people may feel when their companies don't offer support services or when other employees are not educated on autism and diversity.

—Emcie Turineck, artist

1.

## Adults with autism are less likely to be employed

Autistic adults experience a much lower employment rate compared with adults without a disability. In 2017, one in three Canadian adults with autism between the ages of 20 and 64 reported being employed.<sup>9</sup> That's a significant increase from 2012, when the rate was just 14.3%,<sup>10</sup> but still well below the employment rate for adults without a disability in 2017, which was 79%.

People with autism also face relatively low employment rates around the world. In January 2021, for example, the UK Office for National Statistics reported that only 22% of autistic adults held any form of employment.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, US statistics suggest that only one-third of adults with autism work in paid jobs for more than 15 hours per week.<sup>12</sup>

### Canadian adults with autism that are employed (self-reported)

2012

**14.3%**



2017

**33%**



### UK adults with autism that are employed (self-reported)

2021

**22%**





### 3.

## → Autistic adults face higher job turnover and shorter average job tenure

In 2021, full- and part-time workers in Canada had been in their current jobs for an average of 8.6 years, although full-time workers aged 25 to 44 changed jobs a little more often, averaging 5.9 years in any one position.<sup>17</sup>

**For Canadian workers with autism, it's a very different picture.** Among our employed survey respondents, just 2% had been in their current position for more than five years. Most (47%) responded with one or two years, and 29% had been in their current roles for three to five years.

Higher rates of job-switching among autistic adults are also observed in other countries. For example, in the United States, autistic adults tend to stay in a role for two years, less than half the average job tenure for US workers overall (4.2 years).<sup>18</sup> In Australia, researchers have noted that autistic workers have shorter job tenures—and therefore, more fragmented work histories—compared with the general working-age population.<sup>19</sup>

**The current under-representation of autistic people in the Canadian workforce does not reflect their talent, skills, and employability. In fact, the vast majority are willing and able to work and they are as capable of succeeding in meaningful employment as any other group.**

*Barriers to employment:*

## **What adults with autism face in finding meaningful work**

*Canadian adults with autism are eager to work and achieve personal and professional success. Yet in finding meaningful work—and thriving in their roles—autistic adults often face significant barriers.* →



This image is inspired by my own experiences with masking, a coping tool that is mentioned in this report. Here you see a person in distress having to listen to their co-worker and take notes, all while dealing with noise from cars outside and trying to divert their attention from the sometimes overwhelming sensation of their own clothes.

This is a common experience for me when I am not supporting myself properly. For the neurodiverse, masking can mean they are ignoring their social and sensory needs, instead feeling they have to perform and present themselves in ways that are expected of them.

—Emcie Turineck, artist



## → The job interview is one of the greatest obstacles

*Few people enjoy job interviews. But for candidates with autism, navigating the traditional hiring process can be uniquely challenging.*

Interviews are ultimately a test of both work and social skills. They're designed to evaluate a candidate's ability to synthesize information and present their past experiences in a way that demonstrates their knowledge and intellect. But they're also designed to help recruiters evaluate a candidate's social competency, or "fit"—the combination of social, emotional, and

cognitive skills that shape how a person interacts with others. Ultimately, interviews tend to evaluate a candidate's interview skills—their ability to make a good impression and sell themselves—rather than their job-related skills or competencies.

For autistic people, who tend to think in literal terms and who may not read social cues

or express themselves in neurotypical ways, this stage of the hiring process can be a significant barrier. Of our survey respondents, 40% said the interview process was a "great challenge." From an employer perspective, there is a real risk that current job-interview processes are working to eliminate highly qualified candidates, including those with autism.



## Point of view from... **an autistic interviewee**

“ In many cases, the interviewers are not actually interested in understanding your skills and capabilities. It always felt like they were trying to trick you. ... I honestly hate the interview process—it gives me anxiety. I always send an email [beforehand] about what is going to be asked for in the interview so hopefully I can be prepared and hope they will ask relevant questions.”

“ Some of the behavioural questions are cookie-cutter. [Interviewers] expect you to critically think through [the questions], but [an interview] just teaches you how to mimic the answers in a way they want to hear them.”

“ [I have a] debilitating fear of the interview experience. It's still there for me. It took someone who knew my abilities (from working with me at another company) to help me transition. ... She did a lot of the path clearing for me to get in. She helped [the interviewers] understand I had a mortal fear of interviews, but that she felt I was otherwise top talent and a leader in my field. She also helped me personally by encouraging me through the hiring/interviewing process.”

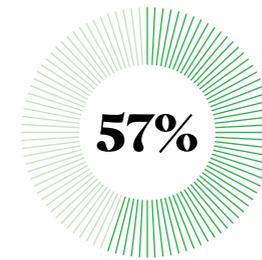


## → Without appropriate supports in place, social and cognitive differences can make it hard to succeed at work

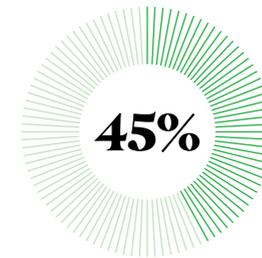
*Research has found that adults with autism can struggle to acclimate and adapt to new work environments and expectations. They can sometimes find it challenging to recall and follow verbal instructions; they can also struggle to communicate and work effectively with their teammates, particularly in unstructured environments. These social and cognitive differences, the research asserts, may help explain why autistic adults have shorter average job tenures than the general population.<sup>20</sup>*

Navigating daily work often takes a significant toll on autistic people as they strive to integrate into a largely neurotypical workplace. More than half (57%) of our survey respondents said they feel exhausted at the end of their workday. And at least one of the employers we interviewed noted that autistic employees tend to tire more quickly and that adjusting their hours has proven to be a vital accommodation.

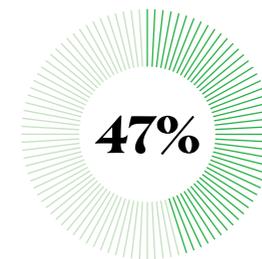
One of the contributing factors to this post-work exhaustion is the effort made by autistic workers to minimize or hide their differences. Among our survey respondents, 45% said they feel they have to mask their autism to get through work, and **47% said they aren't comfortable disclosing their autism to employers.** The urge to mask their differences and fit in seems to be greater for those working in larger organizations.



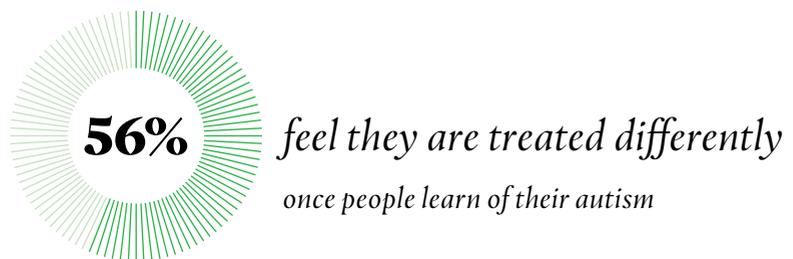
*feel exhausted  
at the end of their workday*



*feel they have to mask  
their autism to get through work*



*aren't comfortable disclosing  
their autism to employers*



Reluctance to disclose one's autism could stem from several reasons. More than half (55%) of our survey respondents indicated they feel there's still a stigma attached to autism, despite efforts to build awareness and understanding. Moreover, 56% said they're treated differently once people learn of their autism. And, even more unfortunate, 42% said they've been the target of discrimination at work.

## Point of view from... an autistic interviewee

“ In prior companies, I did not disclose because most companies do not understand autism or disabilities in general; it’s best not to disclose and [instead] try to blend [in] so that they think you are competent and will not become a liability. It also can make you a target for workplace bullying in the wrong company.”

“ Initially, I didn’t want to disclose. Aside from sensory challenges, I believe I am completely ‘camouflaged,’ similar to many women on the spectrum. Thus, I grew concerned that some of my accommodations sounded like I was just a whiner! Eventually, I decided to be more transparent—both for that reason, but also because I began to want to be helpful to other (new) employees who were starting out their careers and who were also on the spectrum. I hope to do more for them somehow.”

“ I chose to disclose [my autism] since [my company] has an autism support program and sees the value in it.”

→ It’s important to note that the previously discussed barriers that autistic people face in finding work are ultimately **barriers to an inclusive workplace for all employees**. In other words, removing these obstacles will improve the situation not just for neurodiverse Canadians, but for all Canadians.

# The case for hiring autistic talent

*Many of the employers we interviewed for this report cited a twofold rationale for hiring more autistic candidates. On the one hand, they recognized the moral imperative to deconstruct systems and processes that have prevented autistic people from gaining meaningful employment: in short, it's the **right thing to do**. But they were also persuaded by the business case for hiring autistic talent: the tangible and intangible benefits companies have realized thanks to their employment of neurodiverse people.*



I wanted to represent autistic talent and creativity in the workplace. When fully supported, the uniqueness that autistic people exhibit will leap from their work, depicted here using hot air-balloons: You can see some balloons on the desk, with others emerging from the computer screen and into the workspace.

I wanted to suggest diverse skills and interests, and how autistic passions can lead to great ideas and innovation. Moreover, this is a happy, uplifting, and inspirational image meant to showcase the uniqueness of each person with autism.

—Emcie Turineck, artist



## **Inclusive talent policies benefit all employees, especially others who are under-represented**

The changes employers can make to attract and retain autistic candidates can have a positive impact on all employees. For example, adopting inclusive hiring practices and flexible workplace policies can also help employers attract and retain talented job candidates from other groups that are currently under-represented in Canada's labour force. These groups include people with disabilities and chronic health conditions, racialized and Indigenous peoples, those with caregiving responsibilities, newcomers to Canada, youth, and those who have experienced long-term periods of unemployment.

Intentional efforts to foster diversity and inclusion in the workplace—including embracing neurodiversity—can also help shape a culture of belonging and a shared sense of purpose among employees. As teams become more diverse, staffers of all stripes can benefit from increased buy-in to their organization's purpose.

Finally, many of the employers we interviewed said having one or more autistic people on their teams has improved specific features of their workplace operations, such as team communication norms. For instance, managers have seen the rewards of using straightforward language, avoiding jargon, and being cautious about information overload, and entire teams have benefitted from clearer communications.

“If you’re just a little bit accommodating, there is an amazing pile of people out there ready to work who will be foundational members of your team. And if you’re flexible with your employees, they will reward you in kind.”

*-Tom Peterson, Vice President,  
Product & Technology, FieldCap Inc.*



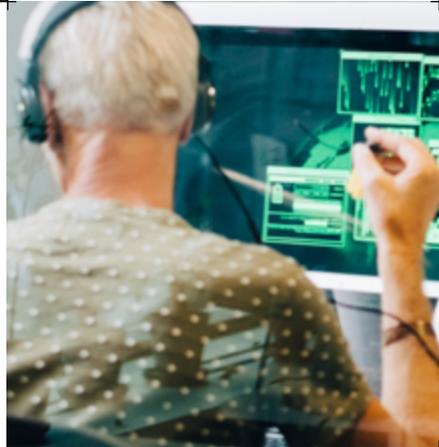


## The benefits of hiring autistic employees far outweigh the costs

Businesses are often unwilling to hire workers with autism because they worry these employees won't be as productive as other, more neurotypical staff, or that they'll require more job support and supervision. These concerns are rooted in misperceptions about autism, which exist because of limited societal knowledge about autism and insufficient available transition and support services for autistic workers and their employers. Indeed, research has shown that the financial and social gains of hiring autistic workers offset any costs involved.<sup>21</sup>

Employers that overlook autistic job candidates—or fail to give them serious consideration when making hiring decisions—are missing out on a sizable pool of talent. In an environment that sets them up for success, autistic employees can be valued team members. Many of the employers we interviewed said that, when engaged in work they found meaningful and aligned with their strengths, autistic employees represented a net positive return on investment.

Beyond enhanced productivity, autistic team members can also offer an ability to think about problems in unique ways, delivering perspectives that can drive new ideas and approaches. Gaining a talented resource with valuable domain knowledge can outweigh the comparatively insignificant costs involved in recruiting workers with autism and accommodating their needs.



“

Costs pile up if you have poor testing, and it's more expensive to fix things once they're in production. The [salary] of [our tester, who is autistic] is quite high, but it's worth every penny and it frees up the rest of the team to do the work they do. It costs what it costs to develop solid software, so pay what it costs to do it right. It's cheaper in the long run, and you can't buy your credibility back from disappointed customers.”

*- Tom Peterson, Vice President,  
Product & Technology, FieldCap Inc.*



## Autistic workers can help Canadian employers close the skills gap

Employers across Canada and around the world are finding it increasingly challenging to recruit the talent they need—especially as the job market recovers from the effects of the pandemic and the resulting war for talent rages. In 2020, 48% of Canadian companies reported that they were experiencing workforce shortages—double the rate disclosed 10 years earlier.<sup>22</sup> In September 2021, Statistics Canada reported more than one million job vacancies across the country,<sup>23</sup> which translates to 0.8 vacancies per job seeker: that’s the highest vacancy rate since 2015.

Many of the unfilled jobs in Canada and elsewhere require in-demand technology skills. Cybersecurity Ventures, for example, observed that the number of unfilled cybersecurity roles worldwide increased 350% between 2013 and 2021, from one million to 3.5 million.<sup>24</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the demand for skilled technology talent, as companies have embraced remote work, digital innovations, e-commerce, and more.<sup>25, 26, 27</sup>

While 79% of Canadian employers say they’ve changed the way they work during the pandemic—and need more employees with IT skills—68% report that they’re struggling to recruit the skilled talent they need to grow.<sup>28</sup>

While it's important not to imply a one-to-one solution, it's worth recognizing that autistic Canadians represent an underemployed, skilled group that can help companies meet their talent needs, especially with respect to technology skills. That's not to say there aren't meaningful non-technology work opportunities for autistic Canadians—however, research has shown that autistic students gravitate to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields at a disproportionate rate.<sup>29</sup>

Our own survey results reflect this trend. Nearly nine out of 10 respondents pursued a STEM field in post-secondary education, and 48% of all survey respondents said the idea of working in a technology-related field was appealing. Clearly, Canadian employers that overlook autistic candidates are missing out on a sizable pool of enthusiastic talent—many of whom have in-demand technology skills.

“My whole idea [as an autism education advocate] is to get more actual autistic people [into the workplace] because they have special skills, and they can be great assets for companies. I want to lead by inspiration and example.”

*-Paul Walderman, Digital Content Specialist, Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment (MLSE)*

“Over the years, as we got to know colleagues who joined through the program and others on the spectrum, we saw it was a very diverse population with a broad skillset. Not everyone is technical. We're a tech organization, so we'll always be hiring for tech roles—but we have lots of different kinds of roles, and we've expanded our understanding of the potential of candidates on the autism spectrum. We have folks working in over 25 different types of jobs: tech, but also human resources, sales, finance, and more. It runs the gamut.”

*-Sarah Loucks, Autism at Work Global Lead, SAP*

# How employers can successfully recruit—and retain—autistic talent

*Our research for this paper connected us with many autistic people, as well as with employers that have successfully recruited autistic talent and discovered how to help them succeed. We have distilled our conversations into a series of opportunity areas that we hope will help employers connect with more autistic job candidates, recruit them into meaningful roles, and help them build thriving careers.*

*It's worth emphasizing that many of these suggestions can also be useful for recruiting and retaining other pools of under-represented candidates. Small changes to accommodate autistic workers can have a compounding effect on attracting more diverse, talented, and overall more successful employees.* →





## *Recruiting* **Finding the right champion before you start**

New business initiatives are more likely to succeed when they have a strong sponsor or champion and launching programs to recruit more autistic talent is no different. These programs are more likely to succeed when championed by someone who has personal experience with the autism community—whether at a personal or family level, through volunteering, or via prior experiences in the workplace. The right champion could also be someone who is passionate about inclusion and diversity in all its forms and who has a strong interest in being a leader in this space. This person should be adequately compensated for their efforts and be senior enough to make an impact on an organization—this can be achieved by including this recruiting process in the staffer’s official job function, as opposed to asking the champion to pursue this added goal on a volunteer basis.

## Laying the groundwork, including with education and bias training

The employers we interviewed stressed the value of doing preparatory work before launching any initiative to hire people with autism. Educating recruiters, leaders, and staff beforehand can help dismantle preconceived ideas about autism and tackle conscious and unconscious biases. A campaign to build awareness and understanding about the condition can set an organization—and autistic employees—up for success.

This step might include helping recruiters and hiring managers understand that autistic candidates might avoid eye contact during interviews or be exceptionally direct in their responses, but that these behaviours don't mean these candidates are untrustworthy, evasive, rude, or poor fits for the organization. Interviewers should also be asked to be specific in discussing positions to be filled, as well as duties and expectations, and should avoid asking open-ended questions. Coaching employers can also help them to consider interview-independent hiring processes (such as tests, written assessments, and trial employment periods) to help reduce the degree of any bias that can enter the interview process.

“SAP's Talent Attraction team launched an 'inclusive interview framework' last year that touches on a number of diversity elements. We partnered with Talent Attraction and colleagues on the spectrum to create a segment on autism inclusion. It's a quick reference to help hiring managers be more inclusive and enhance the hiring experience for candidates on the spectrum. We encourage hiring managers to focus on the candidate's job-related skills, not interviewing skills or social skills that don't impact how well someone does their job. We also encourage hiring teams to provide candidates on the autism spectrum with interview themes, topics, and even questions ahead of time, so that the candidate can concentrate on conveying their skills and experience—not worrying what they'll be asked.”

—Sarah Loucks, *Autism at Work*  
Global Lead, SAP

Managers can take this prep work a step further by providing education and anti-bias training to entire teams, not just those involved in the recruitment process. By helping other employees understand what it means to have an autistic colleague, managers can help create a welcoming and supportive work environment—one where autistic employees, new hires and long-serving employees alike, feel comfortable asking for the supports they need.

However, employers don't need to tackle these preliminaries alone. Several of those we interviewed partnered with organizations that have expertise in inclusive-employment practices with respect to autistic new hires, and they relayed the value of this type of collaboration in making their recruiting processes and workplaces more inclusive.



“

Find a partner. Understand the realities of autism. Challenge what you think you know, because it might not be true. Learn the facts you didn't know. Unless you're educated about autism, you'll go out into the talent market unprepared. You won't be helping yourself—or [the candidates]. You could do more harm than good.”

*-David Workman, Senior Director of Technology & Digital, MLSE*

“

Interviews have a lot more riding on them in terms of pressures than other day-to-day pressures the candidate would face on the job. So, making them perform on-the-spot tasks during interviews could likely disqualify very ideal candidates. Candidates who are on the spectrum are processing a lot, trying to seem neurotypical, fit in, etc.—it's just a lot of overhead/pressure. Consider going over their portfolio work instead, talk through scenarios, how/why they picked certain approaches, etc.”

*-Autistic interviewee*



## *Onboarding* **Using the buddy system to help new hires with autism settle in**

Starting a new job is a stressful experience for anyone. Many employers we spoke with have found that matching a new autistic hire with an informal mentor, or buddy, can greatly ease the new employee's transition into the job, help them integrate into the team, and facilitate their social interactions with others. Mentors may themselves have autism, may have worked with autistic colleagues previously and therefore better understand the challenges they face and how to overcome them, or may have minimal or no experience with autism but are nevertheless eager to learn and passionate about inclusion.

“

The buddy is a testimony that the autistic colleague isn't difficult to work with, or 'strange.' They work together, get along, have fun, and other people get curious and want to connect. Having a buddy helps everyone feel more comfortable—much more so than if we left an employee with autism to navigate the workplace and integrate on their own.”

*-Suzanne Thibodeau, Senior Director of Governance, Government Relations and Security Frameworks, Desjardins*

**Several of the employers we interviewed worked with auticon Canada, which provides a coach to work with both their own autistic employees and the managers and team members on the employer side. This resource can be invaluable for a better understanding of autism in the workplace, as well as for helping to provide strategies on creating a more inclusive workplace. Coaches can also advocate for autistic employees, especially in cases when communications with their employers may be more challenging or intimidating.**

## Maintaining regular, open, and clear communication

The majority of employers we interviewed recommended that managers make sure to schedule regular check-ins with autistic employees. These touchpoints provide opportunities for employees to ask questions and seek clarifications, and for managers to provide direction, adjust work, discuss flexibility needs, and more. By communicating regularly, employers and employees alike can remain clear on what needs to happen—and how things are going overall.

“The biggest thing, for us, is to make sure team members [with autism] know what’s coming, what we’re doing, and what people expect. And make sure they know who to reach out to if they have questions, or if they’re feeling overwhelmed or stressed. Take the time to make sure people aren’t feeling too much pressure. Check in regularly. Help them prioritize when you need to—and explain why something is a priority.”

—*Marc Wachmann,*  
*Head of Software Development,*  
*Decisive Farming by Telus Agriculture*



*Achieving lasting success*  
**Recognizing that  
flexibility is vital**

Employees with autism have unique social and cognitive differences, which employers should strive to understand and accommodate in order to help these team members succeed.

Some of the employers we interviewed noted that they needed to make small adjustments to their management approaches to better suit the requirements and preferences of their autistic staff. One respondent said he usually had a hands-off style, allowing employees the freedom to “figure things out” and establish their own “guardrails.” However, this wasn’t ideal for an autistic team member; in response, the interviewee adjusted their methods, providing clear guidelines and deadlines, which proved to be much more effective for the employee in question. The rest of the team soon adjusted their approaches, too, learning to avoid being too ambiguous in their communications and interactions.

Those with autism often have sensory sensitivities, which can be exacerbated in a busy office environment. Such employees may benefit from—and appreciate—workplace accommodations that reduce bright lighting, noise, and other stimuli. For some (but, crucially, not all), working remotely can be an ideal solution; most of the employers we interviewed felt that allowing their autistic employees to skip the daily commute and have the flexibility of choosing where to work had a positive impact overall.

Additionally, employees with autism may have patterns of concentration that differ from those of their neurotypical colleagues. For example, some report being able to focus on specific tasks, such as quality assurance and problem solving, for long periods of time. This can result in periods of significant productivity which may not be in keeping with a traditional workday.

**As noted earlier in this report, autistic people may also tire more quickly than their peers, owing either to sensory overstimulation or the energy they may spend in masking their autism. Offering flexible working conditions—something that most employers are already adopting or considering in order to meet labour-market demands—can help these team members maintain the energy levels required throughout the day and avoid exhaustion or burnout.**

“ The challenge isn't the employee's personality, it's finding their sweet spot. [Our autistic team member] had a background as a junior developer, but he was open to trying QA. However, he struggled to perform on work that didn't drive him; QA wasn't his sweet spot, and he'd lose focus. He knew it, too. After a while, we had a conversation about it, and we've moved him to a role that's mostly, if not entirely, dev ops.”

*-Charles Martin, Vice President,  
Technology, Carebook Technologies Inc.*

“ [Flexible scheduling is] something that I need and use. I don't work at a slow burn, I work in hyper-efficient bursts that can happen at any time and [are] uncontrolled when they happen. So without [flexibility,] I just don't get much of anything done in a day [due to] being too burnt-out from trying to force work.”

*-Autistic interviewee*

“ Organizations have to provide accommodations for autistic people. They have to let them work at their own pace, on their own terms. They have to give them proper sensory environments, where they can feel comfortable and like they belong.”

*-Paul Walderman,  
Digital Content Specialist, MLSE*

## Providing opportunities to grow and learn

Employees with autism are generally eager to learn new things and take on new projects and assignments: more than half (54%) of our survey respondents said they would welcome opportunities to improve their technical skills. Employers who operate on the assumption that their autistic staffers are somehow less capable—and who reduce these employees' workloads as a result—risk demoralizing them and missing out on the value and results they can deliver.

“ [To help me advance in my career,] I would ask to help develop my technical skills. The company does provide that, and I want to take full advantage of it.”

*-Autistic interviewee*

### **Why are Canadians with autism having more success finding jobs in technology versus other sectors?**

Autistic Canadian adults in the technology field are more likely to be employed—and working full-time—than autistic adults in other sectors. Our survey and interviews suggest that in the current labour market, technology-focused jobs may be a strong fit for many autistic adults. Two-thirds (67%) of employed survey respondents said they were working in the technology sector. This is a far greater proportion than that seen with Canadian workers in general—for example, in 2016, the national rate was just 5.1%.

Although our methodology was more likely to uncover autistic survey respondents working in the technology field, it also revealed that these employees were more likely to succeed—and to be working full-time—than were respondents in other sectors. Among employed survey respondents, more than half (55.8%) of those in technology jobs were employed on a permanent, full-time basis, compared with 41% of those in other sectors.

## The technology sector's efforts to attract and support neurodiverse talent are paying off

Results from our survey suggest that autistic workers may find it easier to integrate into the technology sector. We asked those who were actively seeking employment to rank a selection of potential job-hunting obstacles, choosing from among “No challenge at all,” “Somewhat of a challenge,” and “A great challenge.” Job-seeking respondents in the technology sector ranked challenges as “great” significantly less often than did their peers in other sectors. For example, while 60% of job seekers in non-technology sectors said finding suitable opportunities was a great challenge, only 29% of those in the technology sector felt the same way.

Respondents looking for technology opportunities also reported that employers in this sector seemed more willing than others to consider them as serious candidates, with just 27% saying they’d received no response after applying for a role. By comparison, more than half (55%) of job seekers in other sectors had received no response to an application.

It’s important to note that the idea of autistic people being suited only for technical jobs is a stereotype. Autistic adults are employed across a wide range of sectors and have found success in industries including science, law, arts, and finance. Tech companies are leading the way in tapping into this talent pool, but even within these companies, **autistic workers are succeeding in all types of roles.**

Indeed, this stereotype may exist simply because organizations in the technology sector **are more willing to take risks on, and support,** neurodiverse people. Companies in other sectors have an opportunity to tap into this potential by incorporating neurodiversity into their own recruitment and employee-support initiatives.

## Deloitte and autism

### Legal rights and disclosures in Canada

Deciding to disclose a disability or condition is deeply personal. Job candidates and employees are not required to do so. However, Canadians have a legal right to reasonable accommodations in the workplace; so if a person requires accommodations in the hiring process or to do their job, they will have to explain the impact of their disability or condition and note the supports they need.

The decision to disclose, as well as how much to disclose and when, depends on both the candidate/employee and their employment situation. Some people who may legally fit into the category of *person with a disability* may choose not to self-identify as such.

## Deloitte's efforts to support neurodiversity

Deloitte is constantly working toward supporting neurodiversity. In addition to our initiatives with auticon (see next page)—a global IT consulting firm employing highly skilled adults on the autism spectrum that has Canadian operations in Toronto, Calgary, and Montreal—we have created awareness campaigns, training opportunities, and employment supports. We've also made efforts to advance the recognition of neurodiversity through the promotion of individual stories, panel discussions, and awareness days. In addition, we offer targeted training for leaders and teams, as well as other tailored accommodations to support those with self-identified needs.

Deloitte refers to emerging standards and best practices, informed by a range of employment alliances with organizations such as Ready, Willing & Able and auticon Canada that help employ those with neurodevelopmental differences such as autism, as well as people with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, these companies provide job support as well as education and awareness training with Deloitte hiring managers and leaders.

**How Deloitte measures up in these opportunity areas**

<p>+</p>	<p>In 2019, Deloitte launched an alliance with auticon Canada. Auticon consultants work with Deloitte by providing technical skills on client projects including software development; quality assurance and testing; extract, transform, and load (ETL) services; and data science.</p>	<p>employment. Auticon helps companies engage with this highly skilled talent pool. Through education, training, and supports, auticon enables companies to build workplaces that are not only truly inclusive, but also deliver measurable and impactful business results. By placing the right resources, in the right role, with the right companies, auticon delivers on its mission to help companies experience the autism advantage for business and create long-term sustainable technology careers for individuals with autism.</p>		<p>+</p>	<p>+</p>		<p>+</p>		<p>+</p>
<p>+</p>	<p>Auticon recognizes that many autistic adults have pursued higher education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and have talents for careers in information technology. Despite this, many find it difficult to secure or maintain</p>	<p>employment. Auticon helps companies engage with this highly skilled talent pool. Through education, training, and supports, auticon enables companies to build workplaces that are not only truly inclusive, but also deliver measurable and impactful business results. By placing the right resources, in the right role, with the right companies, auticon delivers on its mission to help companies experience the autism advantage for business and create long-term sustainable technology careers for individuals with autism.</p>		<p>+</p>	<p>+</p>		<p>+</p>		<p>+</p>

# Let's get more Canadians with autism working

*Autistic adults have much to offer employers—yet their potential remains astonishingly untapped. Autistic Canadians are far less likely than the general population to be employed full-time; even those who are working often find themselves underemployed, in precarious work, or changing roles frequently.*



For this illustration, I wanted to highlight the ways companies and workplaces can accommodate their staff with autism. Here, there is a neurodiverse person at the office, comfortable and engaged in their space and work. I depicted the idea of togetherness by having everyone share one desk, with just clear dividers separating them. An accommodation like this can help autistic employees reach their full potential, to the benefit of everyone involved.

—Emcie Turineck, artist



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