

# Future Skills Centre Podcast

## Season 3: Episode 4 Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a range of different ways of thinking, interacting, and processing information, and is especially important to the future of work. In this episode, experts in neurodiversity in the workplace join us to discuss the immense potential of neurodiverse individuals in professional settings. Our guests share practical strategies and valuable insights for employers looking to create supportive environments for neurodiverse employees—from implementing accommodations for all to fostering inclusive company cultures.

### Guests

Neil Barnett, Director - Inclusive Hiring and Accessibility, Microsoft  
Radha MacCulloch, VP and Head of Canada, Specialisterne North America

### Host

Julie Cafley, Executive Director, Catalyst Canada

### Links

Future Skills Centre and Conference Board of Canada links, such as recommended articles and webpages, social media handles, etc.

**Future Skills Centre Homepage:**

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**Brick by Brick: Building Neuroinclusive Workplaces, Conference Board of Canada:**

<https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/building-neuroinclusive-workplaces/>

**Breaking Down Barriers: Improving the Workplace Experience for Neurodivergent Canadians, Conference Board of Canada**

<https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/breaking-down-barriers/>

**Building Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Workers Thrive, Conference Board of Canada**

<https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/building-workplaces-where-neurodivergent-workers-thrive-2/>

**Neurodiversity Hiring Program, Microsoft**

<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/cross-disability/neurodiversityhiring>

**Specialisterne Canada:**

<https://ca.specialisterne.com/>

**Workers with disabilities will soon become the new norm, Future Skills Centre:**

<https://fsc-ccf.ca/blog-disabilities/>

## Transcript

### Julie Cafley:

Welcome everyone. You're listening to the Future Skills Podcast which brings together experts from coast to coast to discuss the most important challenges facing the future of work. My name is Julie Cafley. I am the Executive director of Catalyst Canada. I'm delighted to be your host for this podcast.

Today we'll focus on another important issue affecting the future of work which is neurodiversity. It's become such an important topic in the workplace, but the term is really still new to many. Neurodiversity is a range of naturally different ways of thinking, interacting, and processing information. It's often referred to as an invisible disability and covers a range of conditions. For example, autism spectrum, ADHD, dyslexia, anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, so it's really quite broad.

There's so much in our workplace that doesn't understand the complexities of neurodiversity. Interviewing and onboarding processes are not designed for neurodiverse employees to succeed, and there can be many barriers in terms of accessing employment. The barriers stem from undervaluing neurodivergent workers' strengths in the workplace, as well as biases against the way that neurodivergent individuals present themselves and communicate with others during the interview process or, more broadly, within the work environment.

More than two-thirds of HR and business executives admit their organization is, at best, only somewhat successful in its attempts to create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace. This comes at a time when employers are searching for skilled workers due to labor shortages, and expanding the talent pipeline and bringing in neurodiverse employees is critical to maximize workforce participation and the future of work.

I'm so looking forward personally to this discussion today. I'm going to have with me two incredible experts in the field of neurodiversity in the workplace to discuss these questions. Neil Barnett is the director of Inclusive Hiring and Accessibility at Microsoft. I've followed their initiative for a long time and really been fascinated by it. Radha MacCulloch is the VP and head of Canada at Specialisterne North America. Another incredible expert in this area. Thank you to both for joining us today to discuss these issues.

To start off, we're going to talk about neurodiverse workers more broadly. I think we need to take for granted that, for much of the audience, this will be new for a lot of people. I guess my first question is, how can employers create productive spaces for neurodivergent workers to thrive and to feel safe in divulging their needs and to bringing their full self to work? I'm going to start with you, Neil.

### Neil Barnett:

First of all, thanks for having me, today. It's a great topic. I think employers, when you think about work, it's about creating a culture of inclusion and whether it's neurodiversity or any other dimension. I think what are the simple steps that employers can take for neurodiversity and in general about creating trust in the workforce? For a lot of employees that are neurodivergent, they may not self-disclose or self-identify to their manager or to their leadership.

What are those things that any employer can do that's good for everybody? That's one of the things that we try to talk about at Microsoft and in general with other employers are, what are those things that you can do for everybody? There's simple things. It could be asking employers about their communication styles and preferences. It can be about recapping meetings with actually written notes so people can go back later and digest and think about the topic.

It could be simple things around just asking folks about preferences, about attending meetings in-person or remotely. Things that are good for everybody. I think that's a big piece of it is just, what are the things that employers can do today to make it more inclusive for everybody?

**Julie:**

That's amazing, Neil. Thank you. Radha, do you have anything to add to that?

**Radha MacCulloch:**

Yes. Great to be here. Thanks, Julie. Great to be here with you too, Neil. I would echo much of what Neil has shared. At Specialisterne, we really encourage employers and managers to have those regular and proactive conversations with their employees about what they need to be their best at work. Asking questions, like Neil said, how do you prefer to communicate, how do you like to receive feedback, in what kind of environment do you find you work best.

Even if an employee has disclosed, perhaps they've shared that they are autistic, asking those questions really allows managers to move beyond a label and actually get to know their employee. Just as Neil had shared, asking questions to get at can a schedule be adjusted to allow for some deep focused work, can the employee have access to a quiet working space.

At the end of the day, we really encourage employers to be flexible, to be adaptable, and to be creative, and to be open to making some of those really simple informal adjustments where possible. What I would add is that we also encourage employers to consider almost building out a bit of a library of workplace adjustments or accommodations that not only include equipment or technology or those modifications to the physical environment, but some of those adjustments to ways of working or communicating or collaborating.

We find that for many neurodivergent employees, they may not feel that they can ask for a particular adjustment or a modification to address some of those more hidden or entrenched barriers in the workplace. Those are things like organizational processes or practices or ways of communicating on the job.

**Neil:**

I think that last part is really important, those soft accommodations. It could be having breaks. Sometimes teams will schedule long meetings for multiple hours. There needs to be multiple breaks so people can get up, get away from the screen. It could be sending agendas in advance so people have time to digest and study the information and not walk in not knowing what's going on. There's a lot of accommodations that are what I call soft accommodations that don't cost anything. It's just rethinking your process to be more inclusive. Spot on.

**Julie:**

That's great. Maybe before I even get into the next question, if we go back a step and really looking at the whole concept even of disclosure. Of course, before an employee feels that level of ease to disclose something like this in the workplace, there are some things that can be done to help optimize and help encourage that disclosure. Could you talk a bit about that, Neil?

**Neil:**

I think it, again, that culture of trust. We always talk about culture of trust is so important, and it takes time for companies to build it, to accrue it sometimes, for employees to feel safe that they want to self-disclose to their employer. One of the things that we've seen at Microsoft is, as you evolve that culture of trust, when other coworkers are able to tell their story and share. For larger companies, you might have an employee resource group.

In our case at Microsoft we have one for neurodiversity, but it could be a coworker, a team member, an executive telling their story about, in this case, being neurodivergent and what it's to work at the company. I think there are things that employers can do and signpost and build that credibility with everyone at the company that will make employees over time feel comfortable to self-disclose. The manager is really the key because the manager is the one that's working with the employee every day.

**Julie:**

Radha, can you talk a bit about some of the barriers that neurodivergent individuals face in the workplace and how can we remove these barriers?

**Radha:**

At Specialisterne we work with businesses to build their organizational capacity to create more neuro-inclusive approaches to hiring and management. We know that many of those standard or, perhaps, typical approaches to how we hire, so I'm thinking resumes and interviews and how we manage people in the workplace, can often present as barriers for neurodivergent talent or neurodivergent employees.

In a tight labor market, attracting talent is really critical and the neurodivergent community represents a really vast untapped talent pool. In Canada we've got, if we look at some of the recent stats, about 33% of autistic working age adults are employed and that's compared to 79% of working age adults without a disability. In order to tap into the talent pool, it becomes really critical to remove some of those barriers.

In terms of candidate recruitment and assessment, in our experience, we know that standard resume and interview approach might actually obscure or get in the way of a neurodivergent candidate's potential for the job. An interview may be a great tool for evaluating how well a person does at selling themselves, but it might be a less useful tool at allowing a candidate to actually showcase or demonstrate their skills and competencies.

What we do at Specialisterne is, wherever possible, we like to work with our employer partners to really identify ways to adapt those approaches to be more of a show instead of a tell approach. We might rely more on work samples, for example. If you are going to hold an interview, you might consider providing those questions in advance or allowing more time for candidates to process information during the interview, for example.

**Julie:**

That's great. Neil, can I get you to describe in a bit of a concrete fashion the initiative that you've advanced at Microsoft and how it works?

**Neil:**

At a high level at every company, whether you're neurodivergent or a person with a disability, you can apply to any company for any role through a traditional career site. As we talked about a little earlier, it's about making those processes more inclusive for everybody. The agenda in advance, the more times, these are things any employer that's listening can do today.

Then there's employers that have created what I call an alternative front door which is back to the point about looking at your interview process and how can you make it even more inclusive. Microsoft has been on a journey since 2015 when we started our autism hiring program which is now called Neurodiversity, we've created a multi-day three or four-day event where we bring candidates in, we let candidates get to know each other, get to know the teams.

We do those experience exercises that we just talked about where candidates can showcase their skills and have more time and ask questions. We'll do mock interviews and practice interviews before the actual real final interview. That, again is more spaced out, potentially could have a job coach there. We've trained the managers and interviewers ahead of time to focus on the skills and the experiences and not on, potentially, social cues.

We really try to set the candidate up for success during our three or four-day process. Again, some candidates come through that traditional front door which works great for many, many people. Then at Microsoft, along with a lot of other companies, they've created this different shaped front door to come through. Again, everything's the same. The same pay, the same benefits, the same job expectations, all the same, it's just a more accommodated interview process initially.

**Julie:**

I love that. The alternate front door is a brilliant term, and I love the fact that you're rooting for the incumbents from the very beginning, and you want them to be at their best. I think about old-fashioned interview techniques where it's like, "We'll try to catch them on this question." How many of us are not great in an interview process which is awkward whether it's on Zoom or in person or multiple people around the table?

Really flipping that on its head to say, "How can we get people to be at their best?" It's so simple and yet kind of the opposite of the many ways that interviews are held even today. I'm going to flip over a bit to looking at the impacts from the employers and other stakeholders in terms of hiring the neurodivergent employees and just the amazing positive effects of this for organizations.

Radha, maybe if you could talk a bit about what we're seeing employers doing in this space. What are they learning? What are some of the opportunities from the employer perspective?

**Radha:**

Absolutely. I started working in this space back in 2014 and, certainly, things have shifted quite a bit since then as employers are really recognizing that the value and the benefits of building neurodiverse teams and organizations. Maybe I'll drill down on one specific aspect of where we see change in the workplace and that really is around onboarding. Creating a really strong onboarding experience for neurodivergent hires.

When we think about creating or building a neuro-inclusive workplace, we do need to think about that full employment trajectory all the way from sourcing to assessment to onboarding and career advancement. To drill down on the onboarding experience, we know that that is not only important for employees, but it's also really important for businesses. A good onboarding experience. It makes employees feel comfortable and supported and confident.

If we even think about our own experiences, what is the most difficult part about starting a job? It's often about learning all the information that's not included in your standard onboarding presentations and materials. We're seeing employers really take this on and work to adapt those typical onboarding practices to improve the experience for neurodivergent candidates.

We typically see that in onboarding practices they're really focused on that process and paperwork and there might be unclear instructions or expectations. Unclear or ambiguous instructions and training. Of course, not necessarily intentional. There might be a lack of feedback or those unwritten rules of the workplace. What we're seeing employers do, and certainly a big part of what we do with employers, is to support an improve the onboarding process.

What that really is, it comes down to clarity, and so it's about, really, the act of making some of those processes and policies or those hidden social norms and behaviors more explicit. It's that inclusive onboarding that's really trying to take the guesswork out of starting a new job. That's particularly important for neurodivergent folks who they learn and communicate and process information differently.

Again, as Neil has highlighted previously, this is helpful and beneficial for neurodivergent employees, but it's beneficial for all employees. It's a good example of where we're seeing some real change happen with our employer partners.

**Neil:**

I think that's spot on. I work a lot with other employers, and I think the two trends that I'm seeing are, one- Again, this is targeted more, I would say, at more enterprise organizations, larger organizations. -but really thinking about diversifying role types. Traditionally there's a lot in news about STEM which is great. As a technology company, we hire a lot of STEM candidates, but also thinking about what about those corporate function roles, HR, marketing, finance. A lot of great talent out there. It's not all technical and so having employers really think about, as they create programs.

Back to that alternate front door, what are the roles that are there? Are they more than technical roles? We see more and more employers coming to market with, what I would say, non-STEM roles which I think is great. I think the other trend which I'm really excited about is, for all these companies that have programs- There's a site. We lead a neurodiversity at work employer roundtable and there's over 50 employers in there. One being Good Feet delivery in Canada- Shout out to Good Feet. -but one of the things that we're seeing is the vast majority of folks really aren't hired through these programs.

Few 100 at EY, few 100 at Microsoft, few 100 at SAP, but there are hundreds if not thousands already in their organizations. We're seeing more and more companies take these learnings from these what I call lighthouse programs and pull that red thread back across the entire enterprise. That's how you impact a tremendous amount of people to be productive and successful. They're already working at your company, you just haven't been thinking about it.

It's great for companies to have these programs, these alternate hiring programs to get people in the door, but taking the learnings and the resources that you're building for this cohort of individuals and pulling it back across your entire enterprise, that's how you scale and that's how you have true impact. I'm seeing more and more companies realize that and spend more time shifting that way.

**Julie:**

That's great advice. I love what you're saying around clarity being kindness. Like a lot of this is basic human kindness, compassion, clarity that makes such a huge difference for all employees as you were saying, Neil. Maybe just a look at stakeholders in the broader skills ecosystems, so skills practitioners, training centers, higher ed. How can we be doing more and better to support neurodivergent workers in their job search or whatever else it might be? Radha?

**Radha:**

Oh, good. That's a great question. I think that, perhaps I'll use an example. I'm just drilling down working directly with new managers that might have a new neurodivergent employee. I can't stress enough the importance of communication. I think we talk about that a lot when we're talking to stakeholders. Whether that be post-secondary institutions or whether it be a specific hiring team within an organization.

I think it comes down to talking about the importance of communication, accessible communication. Sometimes it takes a little training, it takes adjustments on behalf of our own selves to change how we communicate with others. As I said earlier, autistic or neurodivergent folks, they may learn, they may communicate, they may process information differently, they really benefit from that accessible and inclusive communication and that communication is universally beneficial.



We talk a lot about that within stakeholder groups. Creating opportunities for information exchange to ensure that mutual understanding. We often find people tend to rely on mind reading rather than mutual understanding. We assume that our employee or our student knows and understands what we know and understand, and that's where a lot of miscommunication comes from. We also really advocate for the use of plain language in written communication.

Simple clear language, being direct, clear, literal, avoiding some of the softer nuanced language that can happen when communicating with whether it be with a student or with an employee. It sounds really foundational and, perhaps, obvious, but I think it's so critical to creating neuro-inclusive spaces. Whether that be at work or beyond.

**Julie:**

That's great. Neil, did you want to add anything there in terms of the broader ecosystem?

**Neil:**

I would say the broader ecosystem is, really, it's been amazing to see it develop over the last five to seven years. There's a ton of great service providers out there and so you don't have to be an expert in this space and know everything. There are tons of partners out there that are willing and able to help today get you started on the journey, because it is a journey, and we're still on the journey at Microsoft. The ecosystem, whether it's training, whether it's skilling whether it's talent pipeline, whether it's everything from that whole life cycle perspective, there are tons of great folks out there that can help if folks are interested.

**Julie:**

That's great advice. It is a journey, and it's a journey that never ends. It's constantly improving and bettering and ensuring that the full teams skills up in terms of understanding how to best create these inclusive spaces. It's something that is definitely a journey. I guess one of my final questions is focusing around how we're better able to support managers. How are we able to roll this out?

We have experts like you who do amazing work, but how are we able to ensure-- I know at Microsoft they've done some really innovative work around having teams almost together where that manager has a full understanding of the ins and outs. Maybe even talk a bit about the advantages and disadvantages of specific teams as opposed to managing across the organization. Neil, I'll start with you.

**Neil:**

At Microsoft, we are constantly working with the manager community to upscale them in this space of neurodiversity, disability readiness, accessibility. As you said, 70%, 80% of all disabilities are invisible or non-apparent and so many folks have people on their team that are neurodivergent and they don't know because they haven't, back to the beginning, self-disclosed.

We're constantly working on the fundamentals of things you can do as a manager to be, as we talked about in the beginning, more inclusive that are good for everybody. It's amazing how many managers that will lean into these topics, like recapping meeting notes or providing more feedback or being more concise, and it is good for everybody. I'll have people come up and say, "Hey, Neil, what's changed?" You're a better manager," or like, "This is 101 management stuff," but your entire team will notice if you actually do some of these things.

You'll be hitting the broad spectrum of diversity by doing that. I think we spend a lot of time with managers in this space, and there's a lot to do, but I think it's super important, if one in seven folks are neurodivergent and you think about your workforce size, there's folks on your team that can use some support this way.

**Julie:**

You mentioned those that don't disclose. Obviously, there's, I don't know what percentage, but there's many who are probably undiagnosed as well, right, and not even aware of this. That's a whole other reality and talking about the effects for everyone that are positive. Radha, did you have anything you wanted to add to that?

**Radha:**

I would absolutely echo Neil's comments there. We do a lot of work hand in hand with managers to build their education and their awareness and understanding about neurodiversity and different diagnoses or labels or identities, but I think, as I shared earlier, really drilling down on looking at how we all communicate with one another. One of the great things that we do with many of the managers that we work with is we do a, what we call, a productivity profile.

It is designed to complete with your employees, but we invite managers to complete it as well. It's that process of reflecting on, how do you work best and how do you receive feedback and what environment do you work best in. Often that reflective exercise of understanding, well, I might not identify as being autistic or having ADHD, but I do have ways that I prefer to communicate and work.

That can really create an open environment where, to Neil's point, managers become more open to adapting and adjusting how teams collaborate and work together. To be more universally inclusive for neuro-divergent employees but also the larger employee basis as well. I think, at the end of the day, a lot of what we do with employers is really encouraging, managers specifically, is encouraging them to get to know the person.

We can talk about, neurodiversity, we can talk about labels like autism and ADHD or intellectual disability, but at the end of the day, it really is about getting to know your employees, asking those questions, getting the information that goes beyond that label. That's where we're really going to move the needle in terms of being a flexible creative workplace that allows for some of those natural adjustments.

**Julie:**

As you could probably tell, I could go on for a long time. We've definitely gone past our time. As a mom of a neurodivergent son, I have to say it gives me a lot of comfort to know that people like you are out there in the world doing the good work that each of you are doing because it's pretty inspiring. Of course, we didn't speak about it today directly, but of course, the amazing skills and talents of these individuals in terms of perspective and creativity and expertise that, frankly, others don't have.

They're exceptional in so many ways. When workplaces are ever able to uncover all of that there's so much amazing benefit to everyone. Thank you both for joining us today and for this exchange. It really helps us to discover the specifics of neurodiversity in the workplace. It's still relatively a new idea, as much as-- I believe Neil said he's been working on this since 2015, so not so new at Microsoft, but new to many, many employers.

It really helps us to understand how essential neurodiverse employees are to the workplace into the future of work, and also see how embracing our diversity in the workplace creates and promotes more diverse perspectives, boosts company culture, collaboration, and productivity. Since some employees don't have the capacity or resources, this integration and implementation of neurodiverse inclusion initiatives is really essential to have supports and training for all employees running the strengths and values of neurodiverse individuals in the workplace.



So many great messages today, but a lot of it is really going back to basics. Talking about that alternative front door, the importance of clarity as kindness, and how this really benefits all employees within the organizations and not simply neurodiverse employees. Really, really grateful for the time of Neil Barnett who's the director of inclusive hiring and accessibility at Microsoft, Radha MacCulloch who's the VP and head of Canada at Specialisterne North America.

We're delighted to have benefited from your experience, from your compassion, your insights, and I know that many employers who are listening today will be greatly beneficial of that. Thanks to the listeners for tuning in. Please continue to follow us and share these episodes. I'm your host Julie Cafley, and have a fabulous day. Thank you so much.

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