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A photograph of two men in an office setting. A man with a beard, wearing a striped long-sleeved shirt, is leaning over and pointing at a computer monitor. The other man, wearing a dark polo shirt, is sitting and looking at the screen with a smile. The background is a bright, modern office with a large window.

# Supporting Inclusive Work-Integrated Learning as an Employer

The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We partner with policymakers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. We are founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada, and are funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

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# Why this matters

- Neurodivergent post-secondary students bring valuable strengths to the workforce, including creativity, innovative problem-solving, and a keen attention to detail.
- Despite their potential, many face barriers to employment, often due to a limited understanding of their unique needs and strengths within traditional work environments.
- Work-integrated learning and placements are critical bridges to employment. Employers who offer inclusive placements can access a wider talent pool, improve retention and performance, and foster innovation through diverse perspectives.
- Inclusive onboarding, training, and communication practices not only support neurodivergent students but also improve systems that benefit all employees.





# Recommendations for working with neurodivergent students

## 1. Reduce stigma

Employers play a key role in creating equitable, supportive workplaces for neurodivergent employees. This starts with ongoing learning and organization-wide awareness and training about neurodiversity. Regular education for managers and employees builds understanding, reduces stigma, and fosters more productive, inclusive teams.

- Integrate continuous learning into organizational practices by incorporating recent research and neurodivergent perspectives into ongoing neurodiversity training and resources. Encourage managers and teams to reflect on assumptions, share insights, and model curiosity and openness.

## 2. Understand disclosure and safety in the workplace

Neurodivergent students may choose not to disclose their diagnosis or identity in educational or workplace settings. This decision is often shaped by concerns about discrimination, uncertainty around how disclosure will be received, or a lack of clarity about the process.

- Relying on disclosure to trigger support can unintentionally exclude those who need it most. Instead, offering flexible, inclusive supports by default ensures that all employees—regardless of diagnosis or disclosure—can access the tools and opportunities they need to thrive. This approach helps create environments that recognize and respond to diverse needs without placing the burden on individuals to self-identify.

### 3. Support executive-functioning differences

Differences in executive functioning—such as difficulties with time management, task initiation, and adapting to new systems—can influence how neurodivergent students engage with workplace tasks. These challenges are not a reflection of ability, but students may benefit from thoughtful adjustments in structure and communication.

- Providing clear, consistent instructions and regular check-ins can help students stay organized and focused. Offering flexibility in how tasks are completed supports diverse working styles and encourages skill development.

### 4. Clarify workplace culture and expectations

Workplace culture often includes informal norms and unwritten rules that can be difficult to interpret, especially for neurodivergent students. These implicit expectations may create barriers to participation and belonging.

- Clearly communicating both formal expectations and informal practices helps neurodivergent students understand how to engage meaningfully in the workplace.

### 5. Provide constructive and tailored feedback

Feedback is essential for growth, yet neurodivergent students may not receive it in ways that are accessible or affirming. A misalignment in communication styles or employers' assumptions about ability can lead to missed opportunities for growth.

- Feedback is most effective when it is specific, actionable, timely, and strengths-based. Supervisors can foster inclusion by delivering feedback in a way that respects individual learning preferences and supports ongoing progress.

### 6. Respond to career anxiety and build confidence

Neurodivergent students' concerns about performance, employability, and following workplace norms can contribute to heightened anxiety. This can affect their confidence and engagement during placements.

- Aligning tasks with students' strengths and allowing flexibility in how work is completed help to reduce stress and build confidence.



# Inclusive placement strategies: Prepare, support, sustain

## 1. Before the placement—Preparing students and workplaces

- Partner with post-secondary institutions to access neurodiversity training and resources.
  - Provide students with a step-by-step orientation covering systems, expectations, and workplace norms.
  - Provide each student with a designated point of contact, such as a supervisor, mentor, or HR representative, to ensure that they know who they can reach out to with questions or concerns about the placement.
  - Develop an onboarding guide outlining available accessibility tools, accommodations, and supports to normalize access, promote transparency, and help students feel confident as they begin their placement.
- Assign mentors or buddies to help students navigate workplace culture and informal processes.
  - Offer constructive, actionable feedback at multiple stages throughout the placement. Timely and specific feedback supports students' professional growth and helps prevent potential workplace or performance issues.

## 2. During the placement—Supporting students and employees

- Encourage students to share what helps them work best (e.g., “I prefer written instructions” or “I do best with clear deadlines”), regardless of whether they choose to disclose or not.
- Hold regular, structured check-ins to support task initiation and organization, and to clarify priorities.

## 3. After the placement—Sustaining long-term organizational inclusion

- Invest in continued neurodiversity awareness training for your team.
- Promote a culture where different communication and work styles are respected.
- Consider creating opportunities for neurodivergent students who are a strong organizational fit to continue in part-time, freelance, or full-time roles after their placements.



# Further reading

This resource is informed by our previous research that examined the experiences of neurodivergent Canadians in education and employment and explored the advancement of neuroinclusive policies for learning and work.

- *Building Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Workers Thrive.* The Conference Board of Canada, 2022.
- *Breaking Down Barriers: Improving the Workplace Experience for Neurodivergent Canadians.* The Conference Board of Canada, 2023.
- *Making the Invisible Visible: Neurodivergent Students' Experiences in Canadian Higher Education.* The Conference Board of Canada, 2024.
- *Creating Inclusive Campuses: Neuroinclusive Policies and Practices in Post-Secondary Education.* The Conference Board of Canada, 2025.

See also:

- *Thinking Differently at Work: Guide for Neurodivergent Employees.* Association of Canadian Financial Officers (ACFO-ACAF), 2025.





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Jennifer Fane

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Accessibility Officer, The Conference Board of Canada

Tel.: 613-526-3280 or 1-866-711-2262

Email: [accessibility@conferenceboard.ca](mailto:accessibility@conferenceboard.ca)

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meet impact