**INFINITY - THE NETWORK FOR NEURODIVERGENT PUBLIC SERVANTS**

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK**

# **Purpose**

Neurodivergent people bring extraordinary talents to work but face unique and significant barriers to entering, staying, and growing in the workforce that neurotypical people do not face. This document provides a strategic overview of issues at the intersection of neurodiversity and professional development, and offers best practices to enhance the recruitment, retention, and advancement of current and aspiring neurodivergent public servants. These practices are a starting point. Ultimately it is best to be guided by the individual needs of the neurodivergent employee – there is no “one-size-fits-all” model and flexibility is key.

# **Context**

Research shows clear benefits from diverse teams – enhanced creativity and innovation, stronger employee engagement and better-informed decision-making. However, realizing those opportunities requires leadership to create an environment in which individuals can be authentic and thrive in their differences.

Neurodivergent people face barriers to accessing and maintaining employment which neurotypical people do not face. Some of the most common challenges experienced by neurodivergent individuals in the workplace context are:

* navigating hiring processes, particularly job interviews;
* handling social interactions and understanding social cues and non-verbal communication;
* focusing on a task for an extended period of time;
* being placed into overstimulating work environments, including open offices and hot‑desking; and
* adhering to a 9-to-5 work schedule.

In addition, neurodiversity is commonly intersectional in nature. Individuals who are neurodivergent and belong to one or more other vulnerable and/or marginalized groups (for example, women, racialized persons, Indigenous peoples, 2SLGBTQI+) may face particular or compounded intersectional barriers in the workplace. Also, neurodivergent individuals often have co-occurring health conditions such as Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, hypermobility, mental health issues or autoimmune diseases. This means that neurodivergent individuals sometimes seek workplace accommodations for more than one condition at the same time, a reality that may not always be well understood by those in charge of the accommodations process.

Within the federal government, the numbers on “cognitive disability” from the 2022 PSES offer an imperfect, yet insightful illustration of the challenges faced by neurodivergent employees.[[1]](#footnote-1) According to the 2022 PSES, respondents with a “cognitive disability” are:

* less likely (65%) to feel valued at work compared to non-disabled respondents (75%);
* significantly more likely to report higher levels of stress (32% vs. 17%);
* significantly more likely to feel emotionally drained at work (46% vs. 26%); and
* significantly more likely to experience harassment (21% vs. 9%) and discrimination (19% vs. 6%) at work.
  1. **Professional Development and Workplace Accommodations**

The literature suggests that the specific organizational orientation toward workplace accommodations plays an important role in the experience of employees that require accommodations. As noted in the [*2019 Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat Benchmarking Study of Workplace Accommodations in the Federal Public Service*](https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/diversity-inclusion-public-service/accessibility-public-service/benchmarking-study-workplace-accommodations/2019-tbs-benchmarking-study-workplace-accommodations-federal-public-service-validation-key-findings.html)(the “*Benchmarking Study*”), the current federal workplace accommodations process can involve lengthy delays and varied levels of managerial experience, training and support.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In addition, the *Benchmarking Study* noted key differences between the experience and outcomes for employees with visible disabilities and those for employees with invisible disabilities.[[3]](#footnote-3) Notably, it found that employees with invisible disabilities are:

* more likely to be required to provide medical certification or undergo formal assessments;
* more likely to have to wait longer for a formal assessment, including those with a cognitive invisible disability who are much more likely to have to wait more than six months for a formal assessment (26%);
* more likely to have senior management, doctors or specialists, labour relations advisors, a union representative or a personal advocate involved;
* less likely to see their request approved; and
* more likely to say that the reason for the denial was a concern that the accommodation would be seen as favouritism or that it was not taken seriously.

In terms of professional development, the *Benchmarking Study* noted that accessibility or accommodation issues and delays in implementation may adversely affect the career of persons with disabilities in a number of ways, including:

* physical, emotional and financial difficulties for the employee;
* negative impacts on relationships with supervisors and peers;
* increased likelihood of experiencing discrimination and harassment in the workplace; and
* lower levels of workplace engagement.

The conclusions of the *Benchmarking Study* are reflected in the 2022 PSES, which found that, compared to non-disabled respondents, respondents with a “cognitive disability” are:

* significantly more likely to report that accessibility or accommodation issues cause stress at work (19% vs. 3%); and
* significantly more likely to report that accessibility or accommodation issues have adversely affected their federal public service career progress (18% vs. 3%).

# **Best Practices**

In this part, we outline best practices that can be used to foster a neuroinclusive workplace.

* 1. **Attitudes**

**Context:** Managers and co-workers may not be familiar with the concept of neurodiversity, or may think of neurodivergent colleagues as “slow”, strange or antisocial.

**Best practices:**

* **Provide new mandatory training programs on neurodiversity** to managers, employees, HR professionals and selection board members to create a general understanding and knowledge of what neurodiversity is and the various opportunities leaders have to lead from a dignified, inclusive and strengths-based foundation.[[4]](#footnote-4) The training should also include an intersectional lens to cover the experiences of neurodivergent individuals who have multiple medical conditions and/or other protected characteristics (e.g. gender; sexual orientation; Indigenous, Black or racialized identity etc.).
* **Update existing training** **programs** (e.g. on mental health, accessibility, change management) to include consideration of neurodiversity.
* Be mindful of how **unconscious biases** may impact one’s view of neurodivergent people.
* Rethink the “good employee”. Challenge the emphasis toward extraversion and sociability and seek “culture-add” rather than “culture-fit”.

1. **Processes**

**Context:** Existing workplace processes can create unnecessary barriers for neurodivergent employees and job candidates, and, in some cases, can contribute to or exacerbate mental health concerns or illness.

**Best practices:**

* **Restructure recruitment processes** to reduce barriers for neurodivergent candidates.
* Consider creating hiring programs specifically for neurodivergent persons, as has been done in the [Australian public service](https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/aurora-neurodiversity-program?context=1).
* Make job descriptions more appealing to neurodivergent candidates by:
* reducing jargon;
* adding information about diversity and inclusion hiring policies and expressly mentioning neurodiversity;
* sharing details about reasonable supports;
* describing the physical workspace (e.g. personal office/cubicle, open office etc.); and
* clarifying whether flexible work arrangements such as remote work are available.
* Take a skills-focused approach to recruitment rather than an approach that tests social aptitude.
* Consider asking candidates to demonstrate their skills by doing a work‑related task instead of a face-to-face interview. Work trials are a more accurate predictor of performance than interviews or CVs and allow all candidates to be judged fairly on merit and skill alone.
* If an interview is deemed necessary, offer accommodations to make the interview process easier, such as providing the interview questions ahead of time to reduce anxiety, doing online interviews instead of in-person ones, reducing the number of interviewers and providing breaks.
* **Restructure accommodations processes** to reduce barriers for neurodivergent employees. Foster an environment conductive to the success of neurodivergent employees – be ready and willing to accommodate.
* In line with the *Benchmarking Study*, consider moving from the “medical model” of disability to a “yes-by-default” perspective. A common theme among many employees and supervisors in the *Benchmarking Study* is that accommodation requests should be approved by default unless there is an objectively justifiable reason to question the validity of the request. It is worth noting that many accommodations requested by neurodivergent employees are low-cost (e.g. lighting adjustments) or can even result in large net cost savings for the employer (e.g. remote work).
* **Make performance management processes more equitable** by recognizing that unmet accommodation needs or constantly needing to advocate for one’s needs can be exhausting, lead to burnout and potentially impact performance.
* If an employee requests an adjustment during a performance meeting, ensure that the adjustment is implemented consistently prior to further performance evaluation.

1. **Communication**

**Context:** Communication issues can arise between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. According to an emerging theory known as the “double empathy problem”, these communication breakdowns are a two-way issue, caused by both parties’ difficulties in understanding. Neurodivergent individuals often experience pressure to be the ones to adapt to neurotypical communication styles, a practice known as “masking” or “camouflaging”. While camouflaging may prevent ostracization, it may also lead to neurodivergent burnout due to the high expenditure of energy required to maintain workplace camouflaging over time.

**Best practices:**

* Be cognizant of the double empathy problem and make conscious efforts to adopt **neuroinclusive communication practices**.
* Ask questions to get to know an employee and their preferred communication style.
* Communicate clearly: Be upfront, direct and honest. Avoid using non-verbal language.
* Don’t be offended if a neurodivergent employee does not establish eye contact or engage in small talk. Refrain from making assumptions about a person based on their body language.
* It is important to ensure that correct language is used when speaking with a neurodivergent person. Consider asking if they prefer person-first language or identity-first language.[[5]](#footnote-5)
* Some neurodivergent individuals find it harder to concentrate and process language when they are in the same physical space as others. Offering the option of virtual meetings can result in more effective communication.
* Give notice for meetings and changes to allow for preparation.

1. **Environment**

**Context:** Neurodivergent individuals can be more impacted by their physical environment and by changes to their environment and working conditions.

**Best practices:**

* **Flexibility** for neurodivergent employees includes how, where and when they perform their job role. When forced to conform to rigid neurotypical-driven structures, our capacity for creativity and innovation can be reduced because it takes a lot of mental effort to process and function under those conditions.
* Offer location-flexible work for remote-capable jobs, as is being done in the [British Columbia public service](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-govt-remote-work-public-service-1.6736555) and the [Australian public service](https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/uncapped-remote-working-on-the-cards-for-australian-public-servants/). Remote work options can help with sensory overload and neurodivergent burnout, and neurodivergent public servants have demonstrated that working from home is an available and often more productive option for remote-capable positions.[[6]](#footnote-6)
* Provide the option of quiet workspaces and dedicated workstations to reduce the risk of overstimulation. Open office spaces and hot-desking can pose a real challenge for those with processing needs.
* Provide the option of flexible work hours. Some neurodivergent employees may be more productive at hours other than 9 to 5.
* Consult neurodivergent employees and networks early on in the change management process.

1. **Support**

**Context:** Neurodivergent employees may not receive meaningful support from colleagues to help them succeed in the workplace.

**Best practices:**

* **Mentors** can help neurodivergent employees navigate workplace situations and workplace culture. Neurodivergent individuals may require different career guidance, so the mentors themselves should be diverse in skills.
* **Peer support** can also help neurodivergent employees. For example, people with ADHD can benefit from an “accountability buddy” who offers connection, validation, and advice, while those with ADHD are even more likely to flourish when they receive positive feedback.
* Offer **professional development workshops** and activities tailored toward neurodivergent people and their unique needs.
* **Networking events** can often be overstimulating for neurodivergent people. Consider offering diverse options for participation, such as virtual options and one-on-one/smaller networking sessions that are less formal than a mentorship program.

1. **Leadership**

**Context:** Lack of uptake from middle and senior management on efforts to support neurodivergent employees can set them up for failure.

**Best practices:**

* **Invite middle and senior managers to support neuroinclusion efforts** in all stages of employee careers and at all levels of the public service.
* Encourage managers to attend neurodiversity-related **training and events**.
* Ensure that **tools to assess leadership potential are neuroinclusive** and have been validated for use on neurodivergent groups.
* Offer **training tailored to neurodivergent managers** to support their career journey.

**Conclusion**

Neurodivergent individuals are an asset to the federal public service. By embracing the neuroinclusive workplace practices outlined in this Framework, the federal public service can further diversify its workforce and enable neurodivergent employees to unlock their full potential in the service of Canadians.

1. While the expression “cognitive disability” can cover conditions like Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), there are concerns that it does not accurately count the total number of neurodivergent public servants. This can result from reluctance to self-identify as “disabled” and the semantic overlap of “cognitive disability” with similar-sounding categories such as “intellectual disability” or “other disability” which to a neurodivergent individual may more accurately capture the nature of their lived experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A new requirement for ADM-level approval of telework accommodations from December 2022 onwards represents an additional barrier for employees with disabilities, including neurodivergent employees. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the purpose of the *Benchmarking Study*, visible disabilities or conditions were deemed to include those involving mobility, hearing, seeing, flexibility and dexterity; and invisible disabilities or conditions were deemed to include chronic health conditions and issues involving mental health, environmental sensitivities and cognition. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See for example the free training entitled “Autism and Neurodiversity in the Workplace” (University of British Columbia): https://circa.educ.ubc.ca/autism-in-the-workplace/. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Expressions such as “disabled person”, “autistic person”, “blind person” and “deaf person” are examples of identity-first language. Expressions such as “person with a disability”, “person with autism”, “person who is blind” and “person who is deaf” are examples of person-first language. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “A Letter from a Coalition of Public Service Networks on the Return to the Office” <https://gccollab.ca/file/download/15963115> at p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)