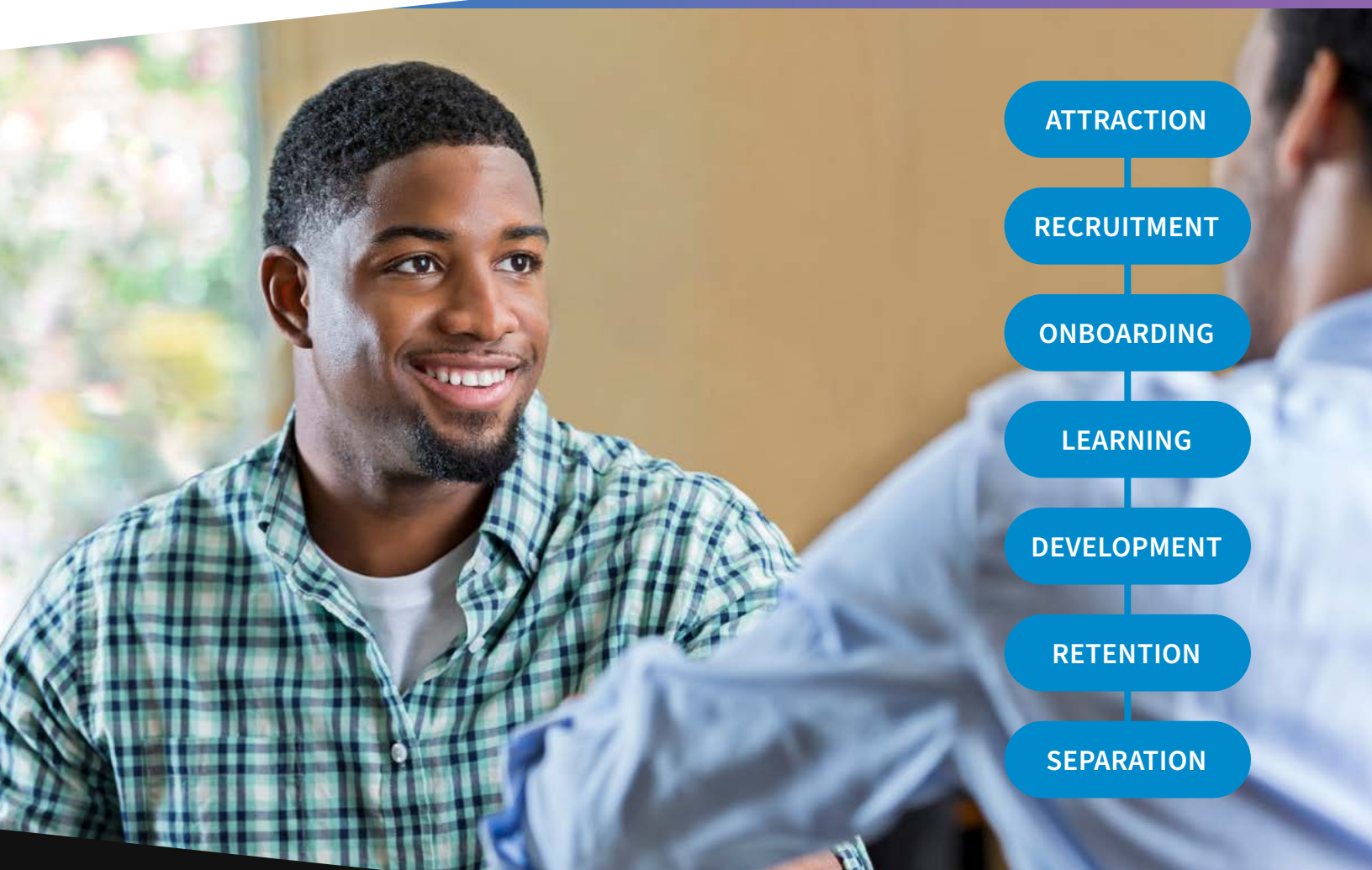# EMPLOYMENT WORKS

INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE PRACTICES
TO SUPPORT THE SUCCESS OF EMPLOYERS AND AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES
ACROSS THE EMPLOYMENT LIFECYCLE

QUICK GUIDE

- ATTRACTION
- RECRUITMENT
- ONBOARDING
- LEARNING
- DEVELOPMENT
- RETENTION
- SEPARATION

EMPLOYER RESOURCE

TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT FOR AUTISTIC ADULTS

→

This resource highlights key phases of the employment lifecycle
extracted from the *Success in the Workplace: Employer Toolkit.*

It shares strategies and adjustments that support both employee and employer success.
The Employer Toolkit was authored by an autistic self-advocate, and development of
the full resource involved extensive engagement with autistic employees and a range of
employers and human resources professionals across Canada.

The full version of the Employer Toolkit can be downloaded at worktopia.ca.

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Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Background

1 IN 10 PEOPLE ARE NEURODIVERGENT

Neurodiversity refers to the range of differences in people's brain function and behavioural traits. Autism is included under the broad umbrella of neurodiversity. Autism is commonly characterized by challenges in social interactions, verbal and non-verbal communication, sensory sensitivities and restricted or repetitive patterns.

Weaving inclusion into the employment lifecycle

ATTRACTION → RECRUITMENT → ONBOARDING → LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT → RETENTION → SEPARATION

The employment life cycle represents an individual's journey from initial interest in seeking employment with an organization through to leaving an organization.

To support employee success, organizations will often provide accommodations specific to each employee's needs. The term "accommodation" however, often implies special treatment for people with disabilities. One way to demonstrate inclusion for disabilities is to move away from the language of accommodation. Recognize and communicate that accommodations are simply "adjustments, strategies or supports" that employers make to ensure all employees can perform at their best.

Attraction

Inclusive practices that will attract a more diverse and talented workforce, as well as a broader customer or client base include:

▷ Communicating in easily accessible, plain language.

▷ Ensuring website and online materials are accessible and demonstrate inclusivity.

▷ Using photos and images that reflect the diversity in Canada.

▷ Supporting workplace learning about different elements of diversity so that people of different backgrounds, identities, experiences, strengths and abilities are welcomed and valued.

▷ Implementing universal design principles when developing policies and processes. Examples of universal design relevant to neurodiversity include clear signage, speech to text, closed captioning, and scent-free policies.

Recruitment

Several practices can make the recruitment phase more inclusive for all applicants.

Inclusive position description strategies:

▷ Including inclusive hiring statements in position descriptions.

▷ Using clear, succinct language that can be interpreted literally.

▷ Being clear about the skills and experience that are required for the position.

CREATE INCLUSIVE JOB POSTINGS AND APPLICATION FORMS

Inclusive interview strategies:

▷ Providing ALL shortlisted candidates a checklist of available interview adjustments that they may choose from if they need e.g. interview questions in advance, demonstration interview, closed captioning for virtual interview, physical site access needs like an elevator or ramp.

▷ Providing a sensory friendly environment or hosting a virtual interview.

▷ Limiting the number of interviewers.

▷ Setting the stage by informing candidates in advance about who will be in the room or on the call, what format the interview will take, and what the dress expectations are.

▷ Having a demonstration or competency-based interview instead of a traditional interview.

▷ Recognizing and accepting individual differences in interaction style. For example, many autistic people struggle with eye contact. Embrace each candidates' unique traits rather than judge them by it.

▷ Providing an estimated timeline for the length of the interview so the candidates can be prepared.

▷ Asking clear questions instead of soft questions. Try "Tell me one or two things that you are good at that will help you in this job." Instead of "What are your strengths?"

Onboarding

The onboarding stage of the employment life cycle provides an important opportunity to welcome new employees and set them up for long-term success. A great onboarding experience **improves new-hire retention by 82 percent and increases productivity by 70 percent**.

5 things that create autism inclusive work settings:

1 A welcoming and non-judgmental environment.

2 Familiarity with autism or willingness to learn.

3 Supportive management.

4 Mentorship.

5 Clear communication.

Many service organizations provide low or no-cost support to employers looking to be more inclusive. By developing a better understanding of autism and how you can support an autistic employee, managers and supervisors will better meet the needs of neurodiverse team members.

Commonly requested physical and sensory adjustments that benefit employees:

▷ Access to a quiet workspace that's free of visual and auditory distractions.

▷ Reasonable adjustments that support/enable management of sensory concerns like noise canceling headphones or sunglasses.

▷ Ability to control temperature, fans, and ventilation for their immediate workspace.

▷ Access to fidget devices.

▷ Ability to get up and move when needed.

▷ LED lighting or lighting that doesn't hum and flicker.

▷ Flexible working hours.

▷ Scent-free environment.

▷ Access to weighted blankets, vests or lap pads.

▷ Access to different chair and seating options.

Learning & Development

Organizations receive many benefits when they provide ongoing learning and development opportunities for their employees. These should include regular opportunities to learn about inclusive practices, adjustments, strategies and supports.

▷ **Ensure learning opportunities are inclusive.**
For example, if an employee has to attend training delivered by a third party, is the trainer or training agency open to the employee wearing sunglasses or getting up and moving during the session. If the answer is no, then consider exploring other opportunities and vendors that provide a more inclusive learning environment.

▷ **Empower employees to be open and honest about their needs, and work with them to determine what will help them maximize their success.**
In most cases, strategies that support inclusion are straightforward and free or inexpensive to implement.

▷ **Think outside the box when it comes to supporting an employee's personal and professional growth.** As an example, if an employee has difficulties managing their work schedule, find a scheduling app that meets both the employee and employer's needs. Allow the employee to use professional development time to set-up and learn the new app. This will address the schedule management issue and ultimately improve the employee's performance.

Retention

All employees benefit from having a supportive employer. Clearly developed and articulated processes to ask for adjustments helps employees feel comfortable advocating for what they need to be successful. It is great to offer employees support, but the value of support is diminished if no one knows how to access it. Regularly checking-in with employees will encourage them to communicate if they need something to be successful.

Promote employee success by embracing strategies that:

▷ Respect communication preferences.

▷ Reduce anxiety.

▷ Communicate and manage change.

▷ Support access to social situations.

Respecting communication preferences

Despite everyone's best efforts, misunderstandings and communication breakdowns sometimes occur. One way to reduce the occurrence of these stressful situations is for employers to learn and respect employee's communication preferences as much as possible.

Helpful communication strategies:

1. Using multiple sources to communicate (verbal, written, visual supports, social stories).

2. Keeping conversations short, specific, and concrete (less is more).

3. Communicating complex tasks by breaking them down into smaller tasks.

4. Practicing patience (allow adequate time to process and respond to questions).

5. Sharing feedback and expectations using clear and concise language (say what you mean and avoid using metaphors).

6. Avoid using sarcasm, figurative language, rhetorical questions, idioms or exaggeration (autistic individuals are literal thinkers and this can cause confusion).

7. Understanding that not everyone is comfortable with 'small talk'.

8. Having a "go to" person the employee can seek help from during a communication breakdown.

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Reducing anxiety

Many employees identify performance reviews as a significant source of anxiety for them.

Inclusive performance review strategies include:

▷ Providing feedback throughout employment; don't save it for performance reviews.

▷ Allowing employees to address concerns before a performance review.

▷ Being transparent about what's involved in the performance review.

▷ Providing employees with a draft of their performance review in advance of meeting with them.

▷ Reviewing supports and adjustments with employees and changing as needed.

Communicating and managing change

Many employees benefit from consistent work environments.

Scheduling strategies include:

▷ Keeping an employee's schedule as consistent as possible.

▷ Discussing schedule changes in advance.

▷ Providing as much advanced notice of schedule changes as possible.

▷ Allowing employees to request schedule changes when life events require it.

▷ Supporting employees to take unscheduled breaks as needed.

▷ Allowing employees freedom to move around and decompress as needed.

Communicating and managing change *continued*

There is a large body of evidence that humans are biased to maintain the status quo. Change can be uncomfortable and even scary.

Strategies that may help employees adjust to change include:

- Ensuring good communication.
- Providing advanced notice of change.
- Explaining reasons for all changes.
- Answering all questions about the change.
- Providing timelines for change.
- Allowing time to process and respond to the change.
- Negotiating a mutually acceptable timeframe to process change and regularly checking-in.
- Involving employees in change management process.
- Being patient, understanding, and flexible during any change.

Social situation strategies

Many autistic employees find navigating the social aspects of the workplace daunting. Informal social interactions during breaks or formal events like employee picnics and staff parties can be very stressful.

Strategies for reducing the stress of social situations include:

- Allowing employees to skip social events without judgement or repercussions.
- Allowing employees to attend only part of an event.
- Empowering and encouraging employees to participate in social committees, or plan their own social events, if they wish.
- Providing advanced notice of social events.
- Providing employees with a mentor to help them prepare for and navigate social events.
- Providing a quiet, low-sensory space.

Providing feedback that is honest, non-judgmental, and clear can help an autistic employee to navigate complex social interactions safely.

Separation

Sometimes an employer terminates an employee because the employee is deemed to be a "poor fit" for the company. An employee may leave voluntarily for the same reason. Poor fit can sometimes mean the work environment is not inclusive. **Best-suited roles** depend on the individual's interests and capabilities.
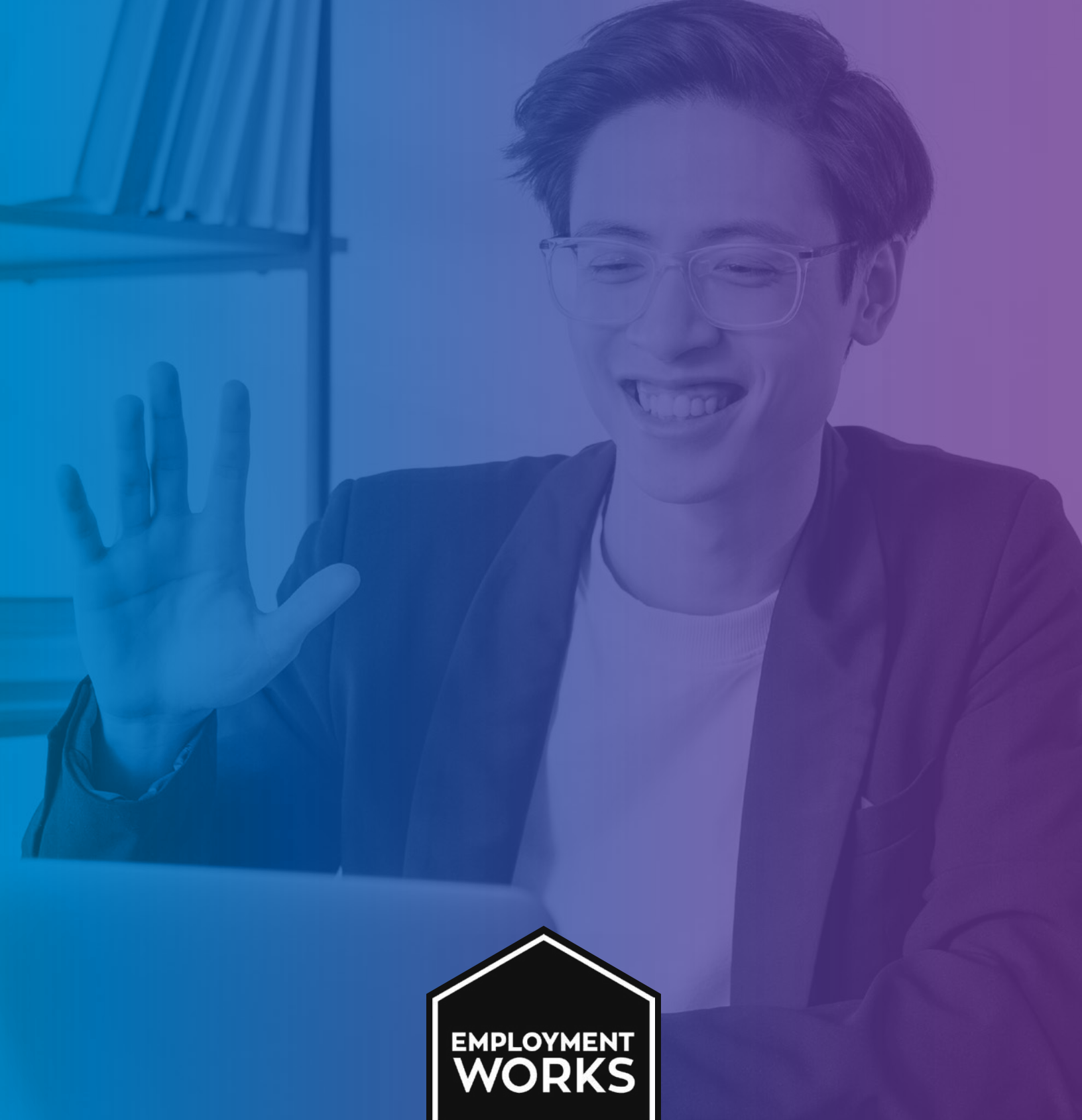
An autistic employee may act differently than other employees. **Be curious and ask yourself what drives their unique behaviour.** Don't simply draw conclusions that may in fact be wrong, and reflect unconscious bias.

Exit interview questions to consider asking when an employee is leaving (voluntarily or involuntarily):

1 What more could their supervisor(s) have done to support them?

2 What more could their co-workers have done to support them?

3 What is one piece of constructive advice you have to offer the organization?

4 What recommendations does the employee have for the employer regarding supporting autistic employees in the future?

Click here for more information on inclusive workplace practices, and to access additional tools and resources to support the success of employers and autistic employees across the employment life cycle.

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