



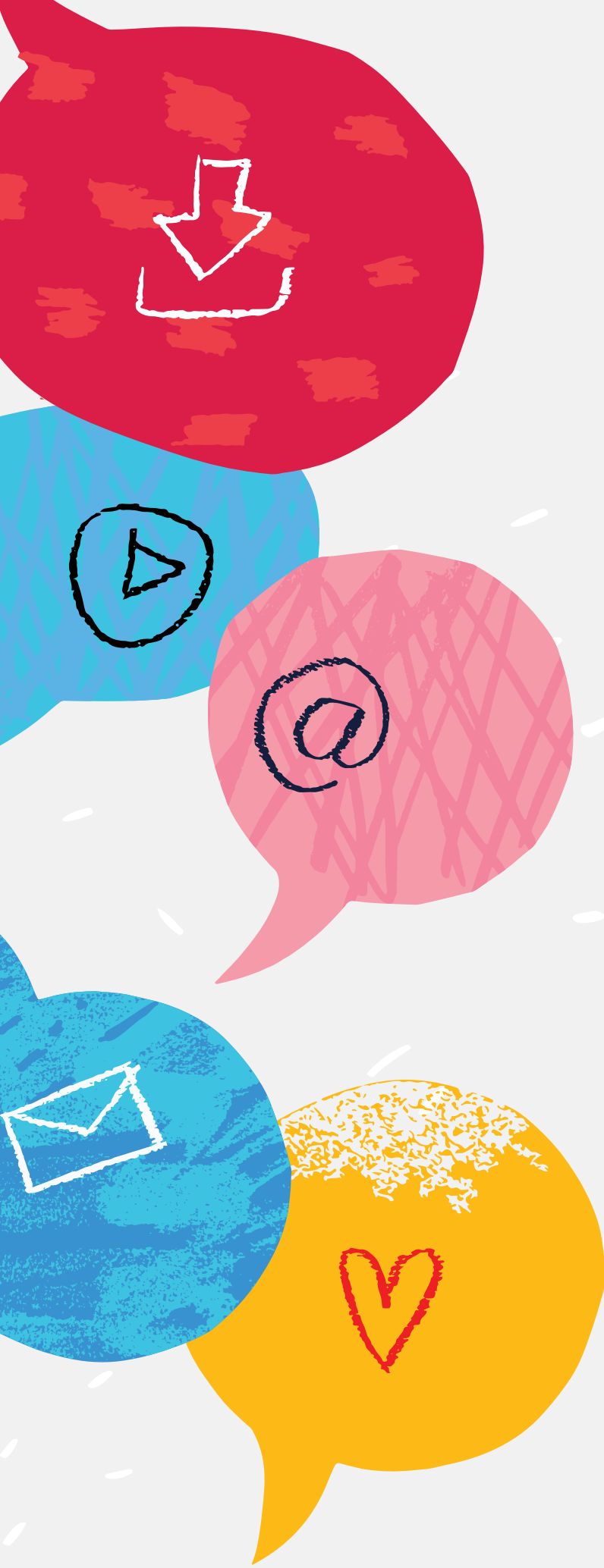
# Successfully Managing the Neurodiversity Gap in Work and Benefits

by | **Melanie Crutchley**

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Employers that move beyond compliance to invest in inclusion, particularly through neurodiversity-friendly workplaces and benefits, gain a competitive edge by unlocking diverse cognitive strengths, boosting innovation, productivity and employee satisfaction. The author examines initiatives and problem-solving approaches that organizations can adopt to create a neuro-friendly workplace.



**Y**our latest batch of new hires has just arrived. They are qualified and engaged, but these people may come with exceptional neurological needs that you—and perhaps even they—are not aware of.

People with unique brains, who might be referred to as neurodiverse, bring strengths that have the potential to greatly benefit their new workplace. At the same time, they may also present particular challenges or risks to their employer and its benefits program. A neurodiverse-friendly workplace not only supports employee well-being but also fosters an environment that drives innovation and empowers the individual to work productively within it.

### Neurodiversity: Optimizing Strengths

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) describes *neurodivergent individuals* as “those whose neurological development and functioning differ from what is considered typical or ‘neurotypical.’” While neurodiversity is a term often used to refer to people with conditions such as autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, or other cognitive and developmental conditions, there are many neurodivergent people without a specific diagnosis.

The MHCC notes that “the concept of neurodivergence challenges the idea that there is a single, ‘normal’ way for the brain to function and emphasizes that neurological diversity is natural and should be respected.” Rather than viewing these differences as deficits, neurodiversity promotes the idea that different brain types bring unique strengths and perspectives.

Although many employers and plan sponsors remain focused on compliance, those that take it a step further and invest in inclusion initiatives are positioning themselves to gain a genuine competitive advantage. Some strengths and talents of neurodivergent individuals may include:

- Innovation and creativity
- Productivity
- New ways to solve problems
- High levels of concentration
- Keen accuracy and ability to detect errors
- Strong recall of information and detailed factual knowledge
- Reliability and persistence
- Ability to excel at work that is routine or repetitive in nature.<sup>1</sup>

## The Risks With Unsupported Neurodiversity

On the other hand, employers that don't adequately include and support their neurodiverse team members can face unnecessary risk and financial impact.

Research indicates that adults with diagnoses falling within the neurodiversity umbrella are also more likely to have a comorbid medical diagnosis, such as anxiety, depression and substance use disorder.<sup>2-4</sup> Neurodiverse individuals may also be more vulnerable to stress, potentially leading to *loss spirals*, where those lacking in resources are more vulnerable to future losses.<sup>5</sup>

If a neurodiverse employee is struggling, this could mean that the employee is less productive and more susceptible to going on short-term disability, and later, long-term disability. Indeed, mental health disability claims are increasing and make up a disproportionate amount of disability costs.<sup>6</sup> Long wait times for assessment and diagnosis exacerbate this problem. This can cost the company or plan thousands of dollars, or in some cases, hundreds of thousands of dollars, when including necessary disability reserve funding.

An estimated 15-20% of the world's population is neurodiverse, making it essential for employers to understand how to support these individuals in the workplace.<sup>7</sup> But without the clear definitions of a diagnosis—since employees may not have a diagnosis (yet) or be unwilling to share one—it can be a

challenge for employers and plan sponsors to adequately meet the needs of all neurodiverse team members. By incorporating neurodiversity into workplace practices and benefit plans, organizations can unlock untapped talent, driving innovation and building more inclusive, high-performing teams.

## Building a Neurodiverse-Friendly Culture

As employers become more aware of the unique needs and strengths of a neurodiverse workforce, they may wonder how to adapt the workplace to support neurodiverse individuals better. While targeted accommodations can be helpful, adopting a universal design approach is a powerful way to unlock the potential of neurodiverse talent while also fostering an inclusive environment where all employees can thrive.

## Applying Universal Design to the Workplace and Benefit Plan

Universal design (UD) is a framework that originated in architecture and material design. The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD) defines it as the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. An environment (or any building, product or service in that environment) should be designed to meet the needs of all people who wish to use it. The CEUD notes, "This is not a special requirement, for the benefit of only a minority of the population. It is a fundamental condition of good design."

Over the past decade, numerous innovative ideas in human resources, pensions, benefits and wellness have been developed to better support diverse needs. For employers and plan sponsors, the next step is to implement the right tools and structures. Practical options include:

- Health care spending accounts, which allow members to choose where their benefits money gets allocated
- Flexible benefit plans, which allow members to adjust coverage up or down according to their needs
- Benefit hub websites, which make benefit program information easily accessible for members and dependents via well-organized, searchable, device-responsive, web-based content
- Increased mental health coverage, which supports all members with managing their mental health, regardless of whether they would meet diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder

### Takeaways

- A neurodiverse-friendly workplace not only supports employee well-being but also fosters an environment that drives innovation and empowers the individual to work productively within it. The Mental Health Commission of Canada reports that "the concept of neurodivergence challenges the idea that there is a single, 'normal' way for the brain to function and emphasizes that neurological diversity is natural and should be respected." Rather than viewing these differences as deficits, neurodiversity promotes the idea that different brain types bring unique strengths and perspectives.
- By including neurodiversity within workplace practices and benefits plans, organizations can unlock untapped talent, driving innovation and building more inclusive, high-performing teams.
- Environments, buildings, products, and services should be designed to be usable by everyone. According to the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, this is not a special accommodation for a minority but a fundamental principle of good design.

- Enhanced employee assistance programs (EAPs), which often cover manager training and can include targeted counselling, strategies and resources that may be helpful for neurodiverse employees as well as their neurotypical peers
- Virtual care platforms, which can improve access and lower the costs associated with assessment and treatment of neurodiverse conditions, as well as most other physical and mental health issues
- Flexible or hybrid work arrangements, which allow employees to choose their preferred work environment some or all of the time
- Structured work/project management tools, such as Asana, Trello or Microsoft Planner, which keep all employees organized and accountable
- Manager training to support effective leadership, structured bi-directional communication, and frequent feedback between managers and workers
- Peer mentoring networks or employee resource groups, which create opportunities for any employee to access support and guidance from experienced peers, while also building relationships and morale across the organization
- AI networks and agents, which employees or members can use to access personalized work-related or benefits-related information and guidance, as well as facilitate adherence to treatment plans.

### Occupational Accommodations

Even with a universal design approach to the workplace and benefits, some individuals may still need additional support. In these cases, granting individual accommodations or exceptions can make a meaningful impact on a neurodiverse individual's productivity, attendance, retention and overall performance at work.

Many neurodiverse individuals entering the workforce today are already familiar with accommodations from their educational experiences, so employers and plan sponsors may see an increase in requests for accommodations in the coming years.

These accommodation requests should be taken seriously, as some conditions that fall within the neurodiverse umbrella are legally classified as disabilities in Canada. Although employers have a duty to accommodate, a medical diagnosis does not necessarily equate to a disability, and employers

### How can employers make their workplace more neurodiversity-friendly?

- Offer minor adjustments to an employee's workspace to accommodate any sensory needs, such as
  - Sound sensitivity: Offer a quiet break space, communicate expected loud noises (like fire drills), and offer noise-cancelling headphones.
  - Tactile: Allow modifications to the usual work uniform.
  - Movements: Allow the use of fidget toys, allow extra movement breaks and offer flexible seating.
- Use a clear communication style:
  - Avoid sarcasm, euphemisms and implied messages.
  - Provide concise verbal and written instructions for tasks, and break tasks down into small steps.
- Inform people about workplace/social etiquette, and don't assume someone is deliberately breaking the rules or being rude.
- Try to give advance notice if plans are changing, and provide a reason for the change.
- Don't make assumptions—Ask a person's individual preferences, needs and goals.
- Be kind, be patient.<sup>8</sup>

often have options for accommodating the employee's barriers to work.<sup>9</sup>

There are many types of individual occupational accommodations, including:

- Work environment flexibility, such as use of private meeting rooms, noise-cancelling headphones and re-design of shared working space
- Schedule flexibility, such as flexible hours and remote work
- Supervisor, co-worker or external resource support, such as additional feedback time with supervisor, differences in instructions provided and allowing access to support activities throughout the working day
- Executive function coaching, in areas such as planning, prioritization and organizational skills
- Training adjustments, including sending materials in advance or providing additional induction training
- Workstation adjustments, such as the use of dual screens, whiteboards, standing desks and wobble boards



- Assistive technology and tools, including speech-to-text or text-to-speech software, mind-mapping software, specialist spell checkers designed for dyslexia, and planning and memory software
- Literacy coaching, which consists of targeted coaching based on the literacy requirements of the role rather than teaching basic skills.<sup>10</sup>

There is a significant amount of bias in the cost perceptions of disability accommodations. Leaders often presume that accommodations will cost much more than their final budget impact. In contrast, employers often consider the financial implications of disability-related modifications and changes to have a financial benefit that exceeds the net cost.<sup>11</sup>

### Neurodiversity-Specific and Personalized Benefits

Beyond the work environment, individual exceptions and/or arrangements specifically tailored for neurodiverse individuals can also make sense in the context of benefits plans.

For instance, Sun Life notes that comorbidities are increasingly complicating treatment—leading to poorer health outcomes—and underscores the value of personalized disease management support and coaching.<sup>12</sup>

Some insurers, such as Manulife, offer or cover pharmacogenetic testing, which can more accurately guide medication decisions following a diagnosis of ADHD or other mental health conditions.<sup>13</sup> Plan sponsors can also review their insurer's prescription drug formulary to ensure that their plan includes medications commonly used by neurodiverse employees.

### Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Looking Ahead

While employers and plan sponsors may face challenges such as resource constraints or uncertainty about how to implement appropriate adjustments, these hurdles are generally far outweighed by the benefits of creating a neurodiversity-friendly workplace and benefits plan. Embracing neurodiversity enables organizations to tap into a broader range of cognitive strengths, perspectives and problem-solving approaches, often leading to increased innovation, productivity and employee satisfaction. By prioritizing inclusivity,

## BIO

**Melanie Crutchley** is lead consultant at Futurpruf Benefits and HR Communications (a division of Futurpruf Marketing Inc.). Crutchley is a passionate speaker and author on topics related to engaging audiences with empathy, clarity and the latest technology. She is informed and inspired by her masters in neuroscience; a career in education, marketing and communications; and her own neurodiversity.



employers not only fulfill their ethical and legal responsibilities but also strengthen their teams and achieve better business outcomes. ☞

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