

## Navigating Career Development for Autistic Individuals with Lower to Moderate Support Needs: Integrating Evidence and Practice

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### Abstract

As awareness of neurodiversity grows, so does recognition of the unique considerations and strengths that autistic individuals with lower to moderate support needs bring to the workforce. Career counselling plays a crucial role in helping these individuals navigate the complex employment landscape and achieve their career goals. While many demonstrate strengths such as creativity, attention to detail, analytical thinking, and dedication, they also face challenges like social communication differences, sensory sensitivities, discrimination, and a lack of workplace accommodations. By adopting a client-centred, strengths-based approach tailored to each individual, career counsellors can assist autistic adults in identifying suitable career paths and requesting necessary supports. This paper explores key employment barriers for this group, highlights evidence-informed strategies, and offers practical recommendations for career counsellors and employers to foster inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming workplaces that enable autistic adults with lower to moderate support needs to thrive and contribute meaningfully to their careers.

*Keywords:* Autism, Career Development, Support Needs, Neurodiversity

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD or autism) is a neurodevelopmental condition marked by differences in social communication, sensory processing, and focused or “special” interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Pellicano & Stears, 2011). Autism covers a broad spectrum of experiences, influenced by intersecting factors such as gender, culture, and support needs. For example, autistic women and gender-diverse individuals are frequently underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed, which can delay access to support and career guidance (Hull et al., 2020; Pearson & Rose, 2021). Similarly, cultural norms and stigma impact how autism is identified and supported, affecting access to education and employment (Botha & Frost, 2020; Sonuga-Barke et al., 2024).

Although research has increasingly examined inclusion in education and community life, comparatively less attention has been given to the career development of autistic adults (Hedley et al., 2018). Notably, much of the existing employment literature does not reflect the full diversity of the autistic population. When support levels for diagnostic specifiers are included, participants usually fall into the DSM-5-TR support categories of requiring support (Level 1) and, less commonly, requiring substantial support (Level 2). These studies often focus on individuals without co-occurring intellectual disabilities who are verbally fluent and able to participate independently in interviews and standardized assessments (Frank et al., 2018). Individuals who require very substantial support (Level 3), including those who are minimally or non-verbal, require continuous assistance, or have significant cognitive impairments, are seldom represented in employment and career development research (Davies et al., 2024). As a result, while these studies frequently refer to “autistic adults,” they typically describe the experiences of only a subset of the population.

Employment disparities remain notable: fewer than half of autistic individuals hold paid jobs, often in part-time or entry-level positions, and many face frequent job changes and underemployment (Davies et al., 2024; Harvery et al., 2021). Compared to other disability groups, autistic adults tend to have some of the poorest employment outcomes and endure longer periods of unemployment (Dudley et al., 2015). Drexel University’s National Autism Indicators Report revealed that only 58% of autistic individuals worked during their 20s (Roux et al., 2013), while Frank et al. (2018), whose sample primarily included autistic adults with Level 1 support needs, noted that even highly educated autistic adults often find it difficult to secure stable, meaningful employment. These poor employment outcomes are closely linked to lower quality of life and increased mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Frank et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2022).

Career counsellors and other mental health practitioners play a vital role in supporting vocational development for autistic adults by recognizing strengths, addressing barriers, and promoting inclusion. However, traditional career counselling models may not fully reflect autistic experiences (Murray et al., 2016;

Sarrett, 2022). For example, trait and factor theory focus on matching traits with job requirements (Chartrand, 1991). Still, autistic individuals might struggle with self-assessment or expressing their preferences in typical ways (Murray et al., 2016). Similarly, strict adherence to standardized career paths can overlook the diversity of autistic interests, skills, and communication styles. Therefore, counsellors need a nuanced understanding of how autism intersects with career development, including sensory, social, and systemic influences that shape vocational identity (Roux et al., 2020).

This paper aims to enhance knowledge and practice in the field of career development for autistic adults by examining challenges and opportunities within the segment of the population most represented in existing literature—individuals with lower to moderate support needs (primarily Levels 1 and 2). Although some barriers, such as sensory sensitivities, may be common across support levels (Robertson & Simmons, 2015; Wigham et al., 2015), the research reviewed and the subsequent recommendations do not include the experiences of autistic individuals with higher or very high support needs (Level 3), who remain significantly underrepresented in empirical studies (Nicholas et al., 2019; Hedley et al., 2018). By focusing explicitly on this population, the paper ensures that its conclusions are appropriately scoped and do not overgeneralize, while also emphasizing the urgent need for research that considers the full spectrum of autistic experiences.

## **Barriers to Employment and Solutions**

Understanding the barriers to employment for autistic individuals is crucial for developing effective interventions and supports that promote inclusion and equity in the workforce. This section highlights four main barriers: social communication and interaction challenges, sensory sensitivities, stigma and discrimination, and the lack of accessible accommodations, along with evidence-based strategies and implications for career development professionals (Bury et al., 2024).

### ***Social Communication and Interaction Challenges***

Differences in social communication and interaction are among the most cited barriers to employment for autistic individuals. These differences arise from diverse ways of perceiving, interpreting, and responding to social cues (Kuzminskaite et al., 2020). Difficulties in reading subtle facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice can make workplace interactions and unspoken expectations, such as small talk, networking, or hierarchical communication, confusing and tiring (Cope & Remington, 2022; Pellicano & Stears, 2011). Consequently, autistic employees may experience social exclusion, misunderstanding, or conflict, which can hinder both job acquisition and retention (Wilczynski et al., 2013).

Recent theoretical advances, especially the double empathy problem (DEP), have shifted the perspective on these difficulties to be bidirectional rather than one-sided. Milton (2012) argued that communication breakdowns result from mutual misunderstandings between autistic and non-autistic people, rather than from inherent autistic deficits. Szechy et al. (2024) found that autistic participants were more accurate than neurotypical participants in interpreting the behaviours of an autistic employee, supporting the idea that social challenges are relational and contextual, not solely neurodevelopmental. Despite growing recognition of DEP, limited awareness among employers and colleagues continues to sustain bias about autistic experiences and misinterpretation (Bury et al., 2024).

Addressing these challenges requires shifting from “fixing” autistic ways of interacting to bridging communication styles through mutual understanding (Bolis & Schilbach, 2020). Supported employment programs that provide job coaches and structured feedback can assist autistic employees in navigating social expectations (Flower et al., 2019). Mentoring programs and peer support also promote a sense of belonging and skill development. Career counsellors can incorporate DEP into their practice by helping clients identify their communication preferences, develop advocacy strategies, and prepare for the social aspects of work environments. Integrating DEP-informed approaches into counselling and workplace training fosters more equitable and authentic interactions between autistic and non-autistic employees.

### ***Sensory Sensitivities and Overwhelm***

Sensory sensitivities, such as heightened reactions to noise, lighting, textures, or smells, create another significant barrier to employment (Harmuth et al., 2018; Lorenz et al., 2016). Environments with fluorescent lighting, constant noise, or strong scents can cause sensory overload, impair concentration, and increase anxiety or fatigue (Farkas et al., 2021; Hayward et al., 2019). For some autistic individuals, sensory overload may lead to shutdowns or meltdowns, resulting in absenteeism or job loss.

Implementing sensory-friendly accommodations can significantly enhance work performance and employee retention. Examples include providing noise-cancelling headphones, adjustable lighting, quiet work zones, or remote work options (Hendricks, 2010; Farkas et al., 2021). Career counsellors should incorporate sensory needs into career assessments, helping clients express their sensory preferences and request accommodations confidently. Employers who proactively adopt sensory-aware workplace adjustments create environments where autistic and other neurodiverse employees can thrive.

### ***Stigma and Discrimination***

Despite progress in neurodiversity awareness, stigma and discrimination continue to serve as widespread barriers to employment for autistic individuals (Raymaker et al., 2023). Misconceptions about autism, assumptions of incapacity, and implicit biases can result in exclusionary hiring practices, limited career advancement, and workplace harassment (Cooper & Mujtaba, 2022). Fear of discrimination often leads autistic individuals to mask their traits, which involves suppressing natural behaviours or mimicking neurotypical norms to gain acceptance (Miller et al., 2021). However, chronic masking is linked to anxiety, depression, and autistic burnout, characterized by extreme exhaustion and temporary loss of skills such as speaking and executive functions like organization and memory (Raymaker et al., 2020; van Wieren et al., 2008).

Organizations can lessen these harms through neurodiversity education and policy reform. Evidence-based diversity and inclusion training, clear anti-discrimination policies, and the implementation of neurodiversity hiring initiatives, such as Microsoft's Neurodiversity Program, have demonstrated effectiveness in promoting workplace inclusion (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018; Flower et al., 2019). Career counsellors play a vital advocacy role by assisting clients in making informed decisions about disclosure, enhancing self-advocacy skills, and identifying inclusive employers. Through this process, counsellors can empower clients to pursue employment environments that appreciate authenticity and neurodiversity.

### ***Lack of Accessible Support and Accommodations***

A lack of personalized support and accommodations continues to hinder employment outcomes for autistic individuals (Holwerda et al., 2012; Harvery et al., 2021). Many workplaces lack awareness, resources, or infrastructure to meet the diverse needs of autistic employees, especially those with higher support needs. Without appropriate accommodations, employees may experience stress, reduced productivity, and burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020; Harmuth et al., 2018).

Effective inclusion requires systemic and collaborative approaches. Employers should partner with disability advocacy groups, vocational rehabilitation services, and neurodiversity consultants to design tailored accommodations and foster inclusive workplace cultures (Raymaker et al., 2023). One promising and complementary strategy is Universal Design, which involves creating workplaces, policies, systems, and environments that are accessible and usable by the widest possible range of individuals, regardless of ability, neurotype, or background (Doussard et al., 2024). Instead of waiting to implement accommodations after challenges occur, Universal Design (UD) promotes flexibility, simplicity, and inclusion from the outset, fostering a sense of belonging for all staff. Examples of UD in practice include adjustable workstations, accessible office layouts, and quiet or sensory-friendly spaces that minimise sensory overload and support diverse needs (Ashburner et al., 2018; Raymaker et al., 2023). Career counsellors and other mental health practitioners can assist these efforts by helping clients request UD-informed accommodations, facilitating communication with employers, and advocating for inclusive policies. Additionally, peer support networks

and neurodiversity employee resource groups can offer spaces for connection, mentoring, and advocacy. By adopting collaborative, evidence-based strategies grounded in UD principles, counsellors and employers can move beyond ad hoc accommodations to create sustainable, inclusive workplaces that enable autistic individuals—and ultimately all employees—to thrive (Doussard et al., 2024).

## **Leveraging the Strengths of Autistic Individuals in the Workforce**

Historically, autism has been viewed mainly through its deficits (Pellicano & Stears, 2011). This perspective is problematic and overly simplistic because it overlooks the unique skills and qualities of this community (Dudley et al., 2015; Botha et al., 2020). Hiring autistic individuals benefits not only the individuals but also society (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Dudley et al., 2015). It is essential for employers to increasingly value diversity and inclusion in the workplace, recognizing the unique strengths and abilities that autistic individuals bring. This section discusses the benefits of hiring individuals with autism and harnessing their strengths to boost innovation, productivity, and success at work.

### ***Creativity and Innovation***

Autistic individuals often approach problems from distinctive angles, recognizing patterns and connections that others may miss (Happé & Vital, 2009; Johnson, 2022). This unconventional way of thinking can lead to innovative solutions and new viewpoints in the workplace. For example, in fields such as technology and design, autistic individuals may provide fresh insights that push the limits of what is achievable (Teti et al., 2016; Nowell et al., 2021). Their ability to think divergently and generate original ideas can drive creativity within teams, fostering an environment where innovation thrives (Botha et al., 2020). By recognizing and harnessing the creative potential of autistic employees, organizations can stay competitive and adapt more effectively to changing market demands (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

### ***Reliability and Dedication***

Autistic individuals are known for their strong sense of responsibility and dedication to their work. They often take pride in completing tasks accurately and on time, demonstrating high levels of dependability and commitment (Cheriyian et al., 2021; Nicholas et al., 2019). In roles that require consistency and attention to detail, such as data entry, quality control, and administrative support, autistic employees can be valuable assets (Cheriyian et al., 2021). Their meticulous approach to work ensures projects are finished with precision and efficiency, contributing to overall productivity and organizational success. Employers can rely on autistic employees to uphold high standards and deliver results consistently, which enhances trust and confidence in their abilities (Johnson, 2022).

### ***Specialized Knowledge and Expertise***

Many autistic individuals develop deep expertise in areas of focused interest through self-guided learning and sustained engagement (Jordan & Caldwell-Harris, 2012; Grove et al., 2018; Nowell et al., 2021). These areas can range from technology and mathematics to art or niche research fields, providing organizations with highly specialized skill sets. Harnessing this depth of knowledge allows employers to manage complex projects, innovate, and remain competitive in specialized sectors (Morris et al., 2025; Johnson, 2022).

### ***Attention to Detail and Accuracy***

Autistic individuals often excel in tasks that require precision, accuracy, and meticulous attention to detail (Bury et al., 2020; Crasta et al., 2024). Their ability to focus deeply on specific aspects of a project, recognize patterns, and maintain consistency ensures that work is completed to the highest standards. In industries such as finance, healthcare, and manufacturing, where accuracy is vital, autistic employees play a



crucial role in safeguarding data integrity, complying with regulations, and maintaining quality control (Farkas et al., 2021; Robertson & Simmons, 2015). Employers can rely on autistic individuals to scrutinize details, identify discrepancies, and deliver high-quality work, enhancing operational efficiency and reducing the risk of costly errors or rework.

### ***Analytical and Logical Thinking***

Autistic individuals are known for their strong analytical and logical thinking skills, which enable them to examine complex problems and develop systematic solutions (Bury et al., 2020). Their ability to analyze data, identify trends, and draw logical conclusions is valuable in research, software development, and strategic planning (Cope & Remington, 2022). Autistic employees often excel at breaking down large problems into manageable parts, creating transparent methodologies, and evaluating outcomes based on objective criteria (Cope & Remington, 2022). By leveraging the analytical and logical thinking skills of autistic employees, organizations can make informed decisions, enhance processes, and support ongoing development across all operational areas (Wong et al., 2015; Johnson, 2022).

### **Adapting Career Counselling Theories for Autistic Individuals: Challenges and Strategies**

Modern career counselling theories, especially those that integrate social justice, cultural context, and systemic perspectives, offer more inclusive frameworks than traditional trait-based models. However, even progressive models might not fully address the unique needs, communication styles, and identity experiences of autistic individuals (Nicholas et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2015). This section examines current approaches, highlights limitations for autistic clients, and proposes practical adjustments for neurodiverse career development.

### ***Cultural Infusion Model***

The cultural infusion model emphasizes the importance of integrating cultural awareness throughout career counselling, recognizing how ethnicity, language, and family systems influence career experiences (Arthur et al., 2009). However, neurodiversity—including autism—is often overlooked within multicultural frameworks. Autistic individuals typically have a distinct neurotype-based culture, shaped by sensory processing differences, unique communication styles, and identity development that diverges from neurotypical norms (Kapp et al., 2013; Botha et al., 2023). To adapt this model for autistic clients, counsellors can expand their understanding of culture to explicitly include neurodiverse ways of being. Practitioners can explore how behaviours such as stimming, direct communication, or intense focus on specific interests impact career strengths and challenges. Additionally, counsellors should reflect on their own biases and adjust communication strategies and decision-making processes to better align with the preferences and processing styles of autistic clients (Nicholas et al., 2019).

### ***Social Cognitive Career Theory***

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) highlights self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal-setting as key factors in career development (Lent et al., 2008). For autistic individuals, ongoing experiences of stigma, social exclusion, and negative feedback can reduce self-efficacy and limit perceived career options (Hedley et al., 2018; Nicholas et al., 2019). Additionally, SCCT's focus on social networking and mentorship might not always be accessible or comfortable for autistic clients who find conventional social scripts challenging. To adapt SCCT, counsellors can support clients in building self-efficacy by helping them recognize their specialized knowledge, problem-solving skills, and interests, rather than concentrating on traditional social skills. Including autistic role models and mentors who understand neurodiversity can provide relatable examples of career success. Broadening social learning to include online communities or alternative networks can foster connections and environments that may feel safer and more supportive (Botha et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2015).

These adaptations align with DSM-5-TR guidance that emphasizes individualized service needs, ensuring interventions are tailored to each client's abilities and needs.

### ***Social Justice Career Counselling***

Social justice approaches aim to address systemic inequalities such as racism, sexism, and poverty (Arthur et al., 2009). However, ableism and neurotypical privilege are often overlooked, despite being significant barriers for autistic individuals (Scott et al., 2015; Hedley et al., 2018). To adapt social justice strategies, counsellors should explicitly acknowledge ableism as a structural obstacle to career access. This includes supporting clients who may face job discrimination for behaviours like avoiding eye contact or using sensory regulation strategies such as stimming, which are often viewed as problematic. Career counsellors can actively advocate for inclusive practices, educate employers about neurodiversity, and help clients request accommodations under disability rights laws. By incorporating advocacy at both individual and systemic levels, practitioners can turn social justice principles into tangible outcomes that boost employment opportunities for autistic clients (Nicholas et al., 2019; Botha et al., 2023).

### ***Constructivist Career Counselling***

Constructivist approaches view career development as an ongoing process where individuals actively create meaning from their experiences (McMahon, 2011; Savickas, 1997). This aligns well with neurodiversity-affirming practice by emphasizing each person's unique perspective; however, autistic clients may face challenges due to differences in abstract thinking, alexithymia, or preferences for concrete communication (Bird & Cook, 2013; Hedley et al., 2018). To make constructivist approaches more accessible, practitioners can incorporate structured tools such as visual timelines, guided worksheets, or checklists. Using clients' special interests as entry points for reflection can boost engagement, while recognizing alternative forms of meaning-making, such as detailed factual narratives rather than emotion-driven storytelling, honours neurodiverse communication styles (Grove et al., 2018). Additionally, integrating neurodivergent role models and co-constructing interpretations enables autistic clients to develop career paths that genuinely reflect their strengths, interests, and identities, reducing reliance on neurotypical norms and fostering meaningful, individualized outcomes (Botha et al., 2022; Nicholas et al., 2019).

Adapting career counselling theories for autistic individuals involves recognizing neurodiversity as a cultural dimension, supporting self-efficacy through strengths and interests, addressing ableism, and providing structured, concrete strategies for reflection and goal setting. These modifications enable counsellors to offer personalized, practical, and inclusive support across the spectrum, empowering autistic clients to navigate careers successfully.

### **Effective Career Counselling for Autistic Individuals: A Multi-Dimensional Approach**

Effective career counselling for autistic individuals requires a client-centred approach that recognizes and accommodates their unique strengths, challenges, and preferences. Such an individualized approach aligns with the DSM-5-TR, which emphasizes that autism presents differently across individuals and developmental stages and notes that service needs can only be developed at the individual level through collaborative discussion of personal goals and priorities (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In practice, this means that career counselling must address multiple dimensions, including assessment, career exploration and planning, and skill development, while remaining flexible and responsive to neurodiverse experiences (Flower et al., 2019; Griffiths et al., 2016). By grounding counselling strategies in individualized goals and collaborative decision-making, practitioners can better support autistic clients with lower to moderate support needs in navigating vocational pathways that align with their strengths, interests, and contextual needs.

## ***Assessments***

Assessment plays a vital role in career counselling by providing insights into a person's strengths, interests, and areas for growth. However, traditional assessment tools may not fully capture the abilities of autistic individuals due to difficulties with communication, sensory processing, or social interaction (Wilczynski et al., 2013). To enhance accessibility and accuracy, counsellors can offer assessments in different formats, such as online, written, and verbal, allowing clients to participate in the way that works best for them. Clear instructions, additional time, and scheduled breaks can further reduce stress and improve performance (Tebele et al., 2015). Moreover, visual aids—including diagrams, charts, and instructional videos—can enhance understanding and make abstract concepts more tangible (Flower et al., 2019). By tailoring assessment methods to meet the needs of autistic clients, counsellors honour individual differences while gathering reliable information to inform career decisions.

## ***Career Exploration and Planning***

Career exploration and planning are essential for helping clients navigate complex decisions and establish achievable goals. Autistic individuals often benefit from structured, concrete strategies that include visual tools, real-world examples, and step-by-step activities (Griffiths et al., 2016). Visual career mapping, for instance, allows clients to identify potential career paths that match their interests and strengths, while scenario-based exercises and role-playing provide safe opportunities to practice decision-making and problem-solving. By making the exploration process clear and tangible, counsellors can increase clients' confidence in assessing options and taking informed steps towards meaningful employment (Flower et al., 2019).

## ***Skill Development***

Developing self-awareness and self-advocacy is a crucial part of career counselling, empowering autistic individuals to express their preferences, articulate career goals, and confidently request accommodations. Counsellors can improve skill development through reflective exercises that help clients identify their strengths, interests, and values, along with role-playing activities to practice workplace interactions, job interviews, or requesting accommodations (Flower et al., 2019). These strategies promote independence and confidence, enabling clients to navigate employment environments more effectively and advocate for their needs in different situations.

By incorporating these practical methods into career counselling, practitioners can strengthen existing theoretical frameworks, promoting flexible and inclusive practices that support neurodiverse clients. While theoretical adaptations provide a foundation, these applied strategies make counselling more actionable, client-centred, and responsive to the real-world experiences of autistic individuals.

## ***Creating Neurodiversity Affirming Workplaces***

Beyond career counselling, creating neurodiversity-affirming workplaces is essential for supporting autistic individuals in their careers. This involves implementing organizational policies, practices, and initiatives that promote inclusion, understanding, and support for employees across the neurodiversity spectrum (Solomon, 2020; Flower et al., 2019). Building on UD principles, organizations can systematically apply these frameworks to make workplace structures, communication processes, and expectations accessible and adaptable for a diverse range of employees (Doussard et al., 2024).

## ***Training and Education***

Providing training and education to all employees is a key strategy for increasing awareness and acceptance of neurodiversity in the workplace. Workshops, seminars, and online resources can cover topics such as autism awareness, effective communication strategies, and best practices for supporting neurodiverse

colleagues. By equipping employees and management with knowledge and practical tools, organizations can reduce misconceptions, foster empathy, and create a culture that values diverse cognitive styles (Ashburner et al., 2018; Solomon, 2020).

### ***Accommodations and Flexibility***

Implementing flexible work arrangements and tailored accommodations is another essential element of a neurodiversity-affirming workplace. Strategies may include sensory-friendly workspaces, alternative communication methods such as email or instant messaging, flexible scheduling, and telecommuting options to suit individual preferences and needs (Solomon, 2020). By proactively addressing environmental and procedural barriers, organizations improve accessibility and support autistic employees in performing at their best, promoting both retention and productivity.

### ***Inclusive Culture***

Fostering a workplace culture of respect, empathy, and open communication is crucial for creating a sense of belonging and acceptance. When differences are celebrated and valued, autistic employees are more likely to engage fully and contribute their unique strengths to the team (Ashburner et al., 2018). Inclusive cultures benefit not only autistic individuals but also enhance team performance, innovation, and overall organizational success.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has highlighted the complex barriers autistic individuals face in accessing meaningful employment, from social communication challenges and sensory sensitivities to stigma, discrimination, and lack of accessible support. At the same time, it has emphasized the valuable strengths autistic individuals bring to the workforce, such as creativity, analytical thinking, attention to detail, and dedication. Effective career counselling for this community requires flexible, individualized, and neurodiversity-affirming strategies. Workplaces must implement accommodations, promote inclusive policies, and foster supportive cultures.

Advancing inclusion and equity in employment for autistic individuals requires ongoing research, advocacy, and collaboration across sectors involving employers, career counsellors, educators, and policymakers. By focusing on practical strategies, strengths-based approaches, and inclusive mindsets, we can go beyond simple representation to empowerment, ensuring autistic individuals are not only included but also positioned to thrive and make meaningful contributions in their careers.

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