

Supporting Diversity: Employees with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Canadian Academic Libraries.

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With many provinces adopting accessible legislation and a proposed National Accessible Canada Act, academic libraries will have a legal responsibility to engage employees of diverse ability levels, including a growing segment of the working population with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). All employers will need to review their practices in terms of supporting employees with neurodevelopmental disorders but institutions of post-secondary education and the academic libraries housed within them should be especially concerned with adhering to these new laws, as Canadian universities will have to show they have removed any accessibility barriers in order to secure some of their largest sources of funding.

ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that encompasses a wider range of conditions including autistic disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger syndrome. Often people with ASD have physical and mental co-morbidities such as epilepsy, sleep disorders, anxiety, and depression. While it is difficult to determine how many adults live with autism in Canada, current statistics show that one out of 66 children are on the autism spectrum (PHAC, 2018). As these children grow up and enter the workforce they face significant challenges as a result of their condition.

Academic libraries are not well poised to support this segment of the workforce nor to adapt to new legislation on accessibility, as one recent study finds that two of the top five skills leaders in academic libraries tend to be deficient in are compliance issues and legal issues. This paper will delve into the practical steps academic libraries can take towards adopting hiring, onboarding, and retention practices that are supportive of employees with ASD, and examine the attitudinal and organizational barriers that exist in the academy that hinder employees with ASD from securing and flourishing in academic libraries.