

Neurodiversity and Gen Z: The Neurodiversity Conversation Has Arrived



A new wave of employees is reshaping the Canadian workplace. Generation Z, now entering the workforce in large numbers, brings with it not just new expectations about flexibility, technology, and values—but also a remarkable openness about neurodiversity. According to a recent ZenBusiness study, more than half of Gen Z identify as neurodiverse, whether that means ADHD, autism, dyslexia, anxiety, or other cognitive differences.

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation in how human brains function, process information, and experience the world. It recognizes conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, Tourette's syndrome, and others not as deficits to be "fixed," but as differences that can bring unique strengths as well as challenges. In the workplace, embracing neurodiversity means creating environments, policies, and practices that support and include people with a range of cognitive styles.

For HR managers, this isn't a niche issue. It's a fundamental shift. If more than 50% of your youngest employees identify this way, then neurodiversity isn't the exception—it's the norm. And yet, while the conversation is gaining momentum, most workplaces haven't caught up.

That raises some uncomfortable but essential questions:

- Do people in your workplace feel safe sharing the difficulties they experience because of their neurodivergence?
- When challenges arise, do employees trust HR as a source of support and guidance—or do they fear that speaking up might hurt their career prospects?
- Do you highlight the availability of resources and assistance with the same clarity and consistency as you do benefits enrollment reminders or everyday workplace notices?

Too often, the answer is no. And when that happens, employees are left to navigate the workplace without support, accommodations, or understanding. In a country where human rights law guarantees the duty to accommodate, that's more than just a cultural gap—it's a compliance risk.

Why Disclosure Is So Fraught

For many neurodivergent employees, disclosure feels risky. They worry that telling their manager or HR about their diagnosis will lead to stigma, missed promotions, or subtle bias. Research bears this out: a Deloitte survey found that while most neurodivergent workers want accommodations, fewer than 40% are comfortable disclosing their condition to their employer.

This fear is compounded by the unevenness of employer responses. Some organizations celebrate neurodiversity, while others treat it as a problem to manage. If an employee's first attempt at disclosure is met with skepticism, dismissiveness, or awkward silence, they may never ask again.

In Canada, employers have a **legal duty to accommodate disabilities to the point of undue hardship** under human rights legislation. That includes invisible and neurological conditions. But compliance alone is not enough. Employees won't disclose if they don't feel safe. And without disclosure, you can't fulfill your duty—or create a truly inclusive culture.

The Communication Gap

Think about the way you communicate about other HR issues. Every fall, employees are flooded with reminders about benefits enrollment. Posters go up in kitchens about keeping the fridge clean. Entire campaigns are built around safety or wellness weeks.

Now ask yourself: do you communicate with the same clarity and consistency about neurodiversity supports? Do your employees even know what resources are available? If not, the silence sends a message: *This isn't something we talk about here.*

Contrast that with organizations that treat neurodiversity as part of their core messaging. They highlight employee resource groups. They showcase leaders who share their own neurodivergent stories. They normalize accommodations the way they normalize parental leave or ergonomic adjustments.

The difference is night and day. Employees at the latter organizations are far more likely to ask for help, to use the supports available, and to stay engaged.

Universal Design: Moving Beyond Individual Fixes

One of the most powerful strategies HR can adopt is **universal design**. Rather than waiting for employees to disclose and then scrambling to create one-off accommodations, universal design embeds inclusivity into systems from the start.

Examples include:

- Offering flexible work hours by default, not just for those who ask.
- Recording meetings and providing transcripts so employees can process information in different ways.
- Using plain language in policies and communications.
- Allowing noise-cancelling headphones or quiet spaces in the office.

When these practices are normalized, employees don't have to single themselves out to access them. That reduces the fear of disclosure and creates a workplace where neurodiverse employees feel valued rather than burdensome.

The Role of Managers: Training for Empathy

Frontline managers are the first line of contact when an employee discloses a challenge. Yet most managers have never been trained in how to respond. They may react with discomfort, minimization, or confusion—not because they don’t care, but because they don’t know what to say.

HR can fill this gap with targeted training. Managers should learn to:

- Listen without judgment.
- Thank employees for their trust.
- Ask what support would help, rather than jumping to solutions.
- Involve HR early to explore formal accommodations.
- Maintain confidentiality while respecting the employee’s wishes.

When managers respond with empathy and competence, employees feel safer. When they don’t, HR inherits not just a disengaged worker but often a grievance or legal claim.

Accommodations: Common Gaps and Concerns

Despite the legal duty, many workplaces fall short in practice. Some common accommodation gaps include:

- **Rigid job design.** Roles are defined so narrowly that flexibility is impossible, even when minor adjustments would make them accessible.
- **Slow response times.** Employees wait months for accommodations like software or schedule adjustments, eroding trust.
- **Inconsistent practices.** One manager is supportive, another is dismissive, leading to inequity across the organization.
- **Failure to anticipate.** Accommodations are reactive rather than proactive, creating unnecessary stress for employees who must continually ask.

Canadian case law shows that tribunals take a dim view of such gaps. Employers have been found liable for failing to provide timely or meaningful accommodations, even when intent was good. The message is clear: **policies aren’t enough—delivery matters.**

Case Example: The Cost of Silence

Consider a hypothetical but realistic example. A young analyst at a Toronto financial services firm struggles with ADHD. She misses deadlines not because she lacks ability, but because her manager piles on tasks without clear prioritization. She worries about disclosing her diagnosis, fearing it will mark her as unreliable.

After a poor performance review, she finally approaches HR, only to be told that “everyone has to manage their time.” She leaves for another firm that embraces flexible project management tools and where disclosure is normalized. Her first employer loses not only her skills but also the \$50,000 they invested in recruitment and training.

Multiply this by dozens of employees across an organization, and the cultural and financial costs become enormous.

Building Trust: Practical Steps for HR

So, how do you create a workplace where neurodivergent employees feel safe to disclose, supported in practice, and included culturally?

First, make it visible. Don't bury neurodiversity in a policy manual. Communicate about it in newsletters, onboarding, and staff meetings. Treat it as part of your diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) narrative.

Second, make it normal. Embed universal design features and flexible practices so accommodations don't feel like special treatment.

Third, make it consistent. Train managers, standardize accommodation processes, and monitor delivery to avoid inequity.

Finally, make it safe. Reassure employees that disclosure will not harm their careers, and back that up with action. Highlight stories of employees who have disclosed and thrived.

Why This Matters Now

Gen Z is not shy about asking for what they need. If more than half of them identify as neurodiverse, then this isn't a side issue—it's central to your talent strategy. Employers who lag will struggle with recruitment and retention. Those who lead will become magnets for young talent.

The stakes are high. Neurodiversity is not a trend. It is a reality of today's workforce. The question is whether your organization will rise to meet it.

Stepping Into the Gap

When it comes to neurodivergence, many employees simply don't know how to navigate the workplace. They don't know if HR is a safe place, if managers will support them, or if accommodations will be delivered.

That's the gap. And as an HR leader, you have the chance to step into it. Not just to comply with the law, but to build a culture where employees feel comfortable disclosing challenges, confident they will be supported, and proud to contribute their unique strengths.

The research is clear: inclusion drives engagement, innovation, and retention. The moral case is even clearer: it's the right thing to do.

So ask yourself: **Do your employees feel safe to disclose? Do they know where to go for help? Are you communicating clearly? Are you closing the accommodation gaps?**

Because if you're not—your Gen Z employees will notice. And they'll go somewhere that does.