

BMO GATE MBA FELLOW 2024-2025

**INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES FOR
AUTISTIC WOMEN**

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Executive Summary

Autistic women face distinct barriers in the workplace shaped by a combination of neurodivergence and gender norms. While they often possess strong skills and qualifications, they encounter difficulties in hiring, retention, and advancement due to systemic issues in workplace design and culture. Many are underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed until adulthood, which delays access to support. Additionally, social expectations in professional environments including small talk, eye contact, and networking can be draining and disadvantageous.

Autistic women frequently mask or camouflage their traits to fit in, leading to exhaustion and long-term harm. As one participant shared: *"I can come across as odd, different or difficult, and I'd like interviewers to be able to see past that."* Their experiences show that instead of focusing on what's 'missing,' workplaces should aim to be more inclusive by supporting different ways of communicating and recognizing sensory needs.

Gendered Barriers

- **Underdiagnosis & Late Identification:** Autistic women are **often diagnosed later in life**, if at all, due to subtler manifestations of autistic traits and societal biases. [\[Source\]](#)
- **Systemic Challenges:** Autistic women are more **likely to leave employment due to systemic workplace barriers** rather than a lack of skills or desire to work. [\[Source\]](#)
- **Social Expectations & Mental Load:** Autistic women are often **expected to adhere to neurotypical social norms**, such as engaging in small talk and maintaining eye contact, which can be draining. [\[Source\]](#)
- **Underemployment & Skills Mismatch:** Despite high education levels, many autistic women are **underemployed or stuck in roles that do not align with their skills or training**. Research shows that 46% of autistic individuals report being overeducated for their current roles. [\[Source\]](#)
- **The "Double Disadvantage":** Women with learning disabilities are **20% less likely to be promoted than their male counterparts**, a trend that extends to autistic women. [\[Source\]](#)

Hiring and Advancement Barriers

Traditional Hiring Practices

Job interviews emphasize impression management and open-ended questions that can disadvantage autistic applicants. Vague job descriptions may lead to self-deselection, and sensory overload during interviews is rarely considered.

"Assumptions about what autism 'looks like' often lead to women being underestimated or misjudged."

Disclosure

Of 138 survey participants, 60% chose to disclose their autism at work, but only 37% of those who disclosed viewed their workplace as "very informed" about neurodiversity. This suggests that disclosure alone does not guarantee understanding or support. In fact, 89% of those who had not disclosed reported their workplace as poorly informed, highlighting a major gap in awareness.

"Disclosing at interview can often be too risky – if they don't understand, they'll just not hire you."

Workplace Culture

Autistic employees may feel pressure to self-advocate constantly or to mask their traits to avoid discrimination, pointing to employers' lack of nuanced understanding. This ongoing pressure can lead to mental fatigue and disengagement, especially when neurodiversity training is inconsistent or lacking depth.

"One size does not fit all in autism."

Underemployment & Poor Job Matching

Poor job matching can stem from a lack of understanding of autistic strengths, especially when employers overlook qualities like attention to detail, deep focus, and unique problem-solving abilities. Poor job matching also reflects broader systemic barriers, such as limited mentoring, misinterpretation of communication differences, and organizational cultures that prioritize conformity over fit.

"I think my CV looks patchy, like I haven't lived up to my potential."

Organizational Solutions

Rethinking Recruitment

Organizations should challenge traditional practices and design inclusive hiring:

- Use structured interviews or job simulations that focus on skills rather than social performance.
- Allow candidates to preview interview questions or submit written responses.
- Avoid personality tests and vague criteria that rely on neurotypical behavior.
- Ensure sensory-friendly environments.

Accommodations That Work

Accommodations should be flexible, individualized, and proactive. These may include:

- Offer hybrid work options, quiet spaces, and flexible scheduling to help manage sensory needs and energy levels and allow individuals to adjust the physical environment with tools like noise-cancelling headphones and dimmable lighting.
- Use clear and direct communication methods, such as written instructions and well-defined expectations.
- Establish support networks and mentoring programs to foster professional growth, provide guidance, and create a sense of belonging in the workplace.
- Ensure accommodations are personalized and easy to request, reinforcing that support is part of the culture.

Leadership and Policy Changes

As one participant noted, *“I wish it wasn't just the people with lived experience of autism or neurodiversity that attended the training courses and support.”* True inclusion requires buy-in from leadership and a shift in workplace norms. Organizations can:

- Train managers to take a strengths-based approach to assigning work and supporting growth.
- Provide neurodiversity training for all employees to build a culture of shared understanding.
- Challenge narrow assumptions about professionalism that prioritize charisma and conformity over authenticity and performance.

Final Thoughts

Autistic women bring valuable strengths to the workplace, yet they are too often held back by limited access to opportunities, inadequate support, and exclusionary systems. From hiring to advancement, outdated norms and unconscious bias continue to constrain their potential.

True inclusion requires more than individual adaptation, it demands structural change. Organizations have both the opportunity and the responsibility to reshape workplace culture. Creating a world where autistic women can thrive at work means creating one where all employees can bring their full selves to the table.