

Accessible Job Interviews in the Library Workplace

A guide for library workplaces seeking to
hire autistic and neurodivergent employees

Building on BCLA's commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The existing EDI Strategies in Recruitment Toolkit presents practical strategies to help libraries recruit more Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour employees, recognizing that research has proved that “diverse teams are better at being innovative and creative” and that “teams benefit from broader perspectives with more information and experience brought to the table” (Whu Lee, 2022).

This guide draws on much of the same reasoning to advocate for more inclusive hiring practices for autistic library employees. By aiming to recruit more autistic librarians, BC's libraries will become more highly representative of all of the types of people who live, research, and read in British Columbia.

Why is this guide needed?

Autistic people experience immense rates of under- and unemployment, even in the library sector.

“The huge part of my task in a job interview is to shut down anything that might reveal that I am autistic”

—Autistic study participant (Finn et al., 2023)

An autistic candidate who is **more highly educated than an allistic competitor** will statistically not be offered the job.

(Bruyère, 2024)

Autistic people experience **greater rates of under- and unemployment** than people with **any other type of disability**.

(Taylor & Seltzer, 2011; Hendricks, 2010)

Equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives in library workplaces often **do not include neurodivergence**, even though autistic librarians report feeling **uncomfortable and unsafe** in their workplace.

(Giles-Smith & Popowich, 2023)

“The way they do interviews, I think sets me up for failure”

—Autistic study participant (Finn et al., 2023)

Job interviews present a number of challenges for autistic candidates, even when they are qualified for the job. This guide will explore those barriers and make practical recommendations for reducing their impact on an autistic job candidate’s performance.

**We'll explore these
five steps towards more
accessible interviews:**

- 1. Assess current practices**
- 2. Alter the interview format**
- 3. Alter interview questions**
- 4. Provide accommodations**
- 5. Evaluate success**

1: Assess the workplace's current interview practices

The first step to increasing accessibility is to assess the current status-quo in your organization (Hurley-Hanson, 2019). A team of people involved in the hiring process should meet to discuss the current assumptions, practices, and biases present in the hiring process or organization as a whole.

Some of these biases may include...

- The candidate's body language and tone of voice
- The candidate's ability to hold eye contact
- The candidate providing "blunt" or "overly-honest" answers

Work to acknowledge that there may be a variety of ways to demonstrate effective workplace performance. Your team should reexamine what it considers a valid predictor of workplace performance.

- Do you currently consider something to be a red flag in a candidate that is actually an autistic trait unrelated to job performance?
- How much do body language and social skills actually impact someone's ability to do the job?

In order for an accessibility initiative to be successful, everyone in the organization must demonstrate commitment to the initiative (Hurley-Hanson, 2019). Understand that inclusion and accessibility are worthwhile goals that require sustained effort, and that everyone needs to be on board.

Want to learn more about why workplace self-assessment matters? We recommend reading about **Double Empathy**, an idea that calls for both neurotypical and neurodivergent people to take mutual responsibility for successful communication with each other.

2. Alter the interview format

Your organization can alter the traditional interview format to make it more accessible to autistic candidates.

Provide alternative ways to demonstrate skills during the interview. A candidate who struggles to answer interview questions may excel at demonstrating the actual skills used in the job (Vogus, et al., 2022).

Consider the following alternative methods of demonstrating skills:

- Complete an activity or exercise during the interview
- Perform a live demonstration of a skill
- Pre-prepare a portfolio, presentation, or project
- Provide written answers to questions

Adjust the sensory environment of the interview venue to better suit autistic people's needs. Avoid conducting the interview in a crowded, noisy, or distracting location, and avoid harsh lighting if possible. (Bruyère, et al., 2021)

Aim to minimize the number of interviewers present. Avoid large panels and use only one or two interviewers. By reducing the number of people that the candidate needs to pay attention to and monitor for social cues, the candidate will be better able to focus their energy on listening and responding to questions. (Bruyère, et al., 2021)

Consider conducting the assessment over multiple sessions instead of a single, brief interview (Whelpley & May 2023). This format will prevent the interviewer from basing judgments off of a short period of interaction with the candidate, allowing more opportunity to develop a complete understanding of their communication style and skills.

Communicate clearly about the format before the interview (Booth, 2016). Tell the candidate the start and end time of the interview, what components it will include, and information about the venue, including the sensory environment and accessibility of the building.

A format consideration: Why provide questions in advance?

One of the most commonly recommended interview format alterations is to provide candidates with a list of the questions beforehand. This consideration allows candidates to think about and process the question before being put on the spot, and often leads to autistic candidates providing responses that more accurately represent them and their skillset (Finn et al., 2023; Bruyère, et al., 2021; Hurley-Hanson, 2020)

Your workplace may wonder if it is fair to provide questions in advance, as it is not a part of traditional interview practices. However, unless the role itself requires fast response to unforeseen questions, many employers report no issues identifying who is truly a good candidate (Weak, 2022).

“My experience so far is that good candidates continue to answer questions well, and less good candidates still don’t have solid answers.”

—Jaime Taylor, Management Systems Coordinator at W.E.B. Dubois Library

What are advantages to providing questions in advance for employers? (Rinderknecht, 2021)

Candidates better understand what you’re looking for and provide more thoughtful and relevant answers

Reduced candidate stress provides you with a more accurate picture of who they are

Candidates are more likely to view your organization as a positive place to work

You can more easily identify candidates who clearly did not prepare for the interview

Provide the questions in advance to all candidates, regardless of disclosure of disability or request for accommodation. This way, you can eliminate concerns around different candidates having access to different preparation strategies, as well as prevent autistic candidates from going without accommodation due to choosing not to disclose.

3. Alter interview questions

Follow these guidelines to alter your interview questions to make them more accessible to autistic candidates.

In general, avoid questions that are vague, hypothetical, or purposefully bizarre. (Vogus, 2022) (Hurley-Hanson, et al, 2020)

- Instead of asking “imagine if this happened,” ask “tell me about a time in your life when this happened.”
- Do not ask questions designed to assess personality or how a candidate responds to unexpected or bizarre questions. (For example, “How many elephants are in New York City?” or “If you were an animal, which would you be?”). Stick to questions that are clearly relevant to the skills the candidate will use on the job.

Ask questions in multiple parts using bullet points. Prompt the candidate to answer each individual component you would like them to tell you about, as opposed to relying on the candidate’s ability to intuit unsaid elements of the question.

Unadapted questions	Adapted questions
What are some of your strengths?	I’m going to ask about your strengths: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you consider to be your main strengths (things that you are good at?) • How have you used these strengths at work [in education]?
What experience do you have of managing high workloads?	Think of an example of when you’ve had lots of tasks to complete in a limited amount of time. Please tell me: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the situation? • What management strategies did you use? • Were these strategies effective?
Tell me about a time you’ve disagreed with a colleague — how did/would you handle it?	Think of a time you’ve disagreed with a colleague. Please tell me: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the disagreement about? • What did you do to resolve it?

Examples of adapted questions found to be effective in a study of autistic job candidates (Maras, et al., 2021)

4. Proactively offer accommodations

Your organization probably already has some type of accommodation process. However, you can likely improve it to increase job interview accessibility (Giles-Smith, 2023).

Remove medical documentation requirements. Not everyone who would benefit from accommodations has access to formal documentation of their disability. By offering accommodations to anyone who requests them, you can circumvent the financial and social barriers that prevent disabled people from accessing medical documentation.

Create a clear and documented process to request accommodation. Many organizations do not provide findable information about how to access accommodations, making it difficult for job candidates to discover the organization's policies and the steps they must take.

Consider creating an informational guide to host on your organization's website. The guide should include who to contact for accommodations, a list of possible accommodations, and other relevant information.

Train your HR department so that they are able to properly guide people through the process. People in charge of accommodations at your organization should be educated about the process and able to support employees throughout their job interview, onboarding, and long-term employment.

5. Assess the success of changes made

Your organization should assess whether the accessibility changes you made have had the intended impact on hiring decisions.

Questions to ask and consider as a hiring team:

- Have you hired any openly neurodivergent people?
- Have candidates disclosed neurodivergence to you and/or accessed accommodations?
- Did neurodivergent candidates display job skills effectively to you?
- Have you conducted surveys or collected data about candidates' experiences of the interview process?
- What areas of bias and room for growth have you observed in your organization throughout the process?
- What have you learned about how to best assess a candidate's skills during interviews?

Additional resources

Check out these sources for more information

[Autism and Intellectual Disability in the Library](#)

A course designed for library professionals to learn strategies and techniques for supporting the autism community. Offered through the University of Calgary and Autism Nova Scotia.

[Autism and Neurodiversity in the Workplace](#)

A free self-paced series of interactive modules designed for HR professionals, supervisors, and managers. The course provides practical strategies for supporting autistic and neurodiverse candidates in the workplace. Offered through the University of British Columbia Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Autism.

[Neurodiversity @ Work Employer Roundtable - Disability:IN](#)

An organized nonprofit group of employers committed to neurodiversity-focused hiring initiatives, covering many industries. Offers a library of resources, connection opportunities, and an annual conference.

[The JAN Workplace Accommodation Toolkit](#)

A resources for recruiters and hiring managers to create a more disability-inclusive workplace. Contains resources for updating accommodation policies and other processes. Note that the toolkit is based in the United States and refers to requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but the resources are accessible and useful to international audiences as well.

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