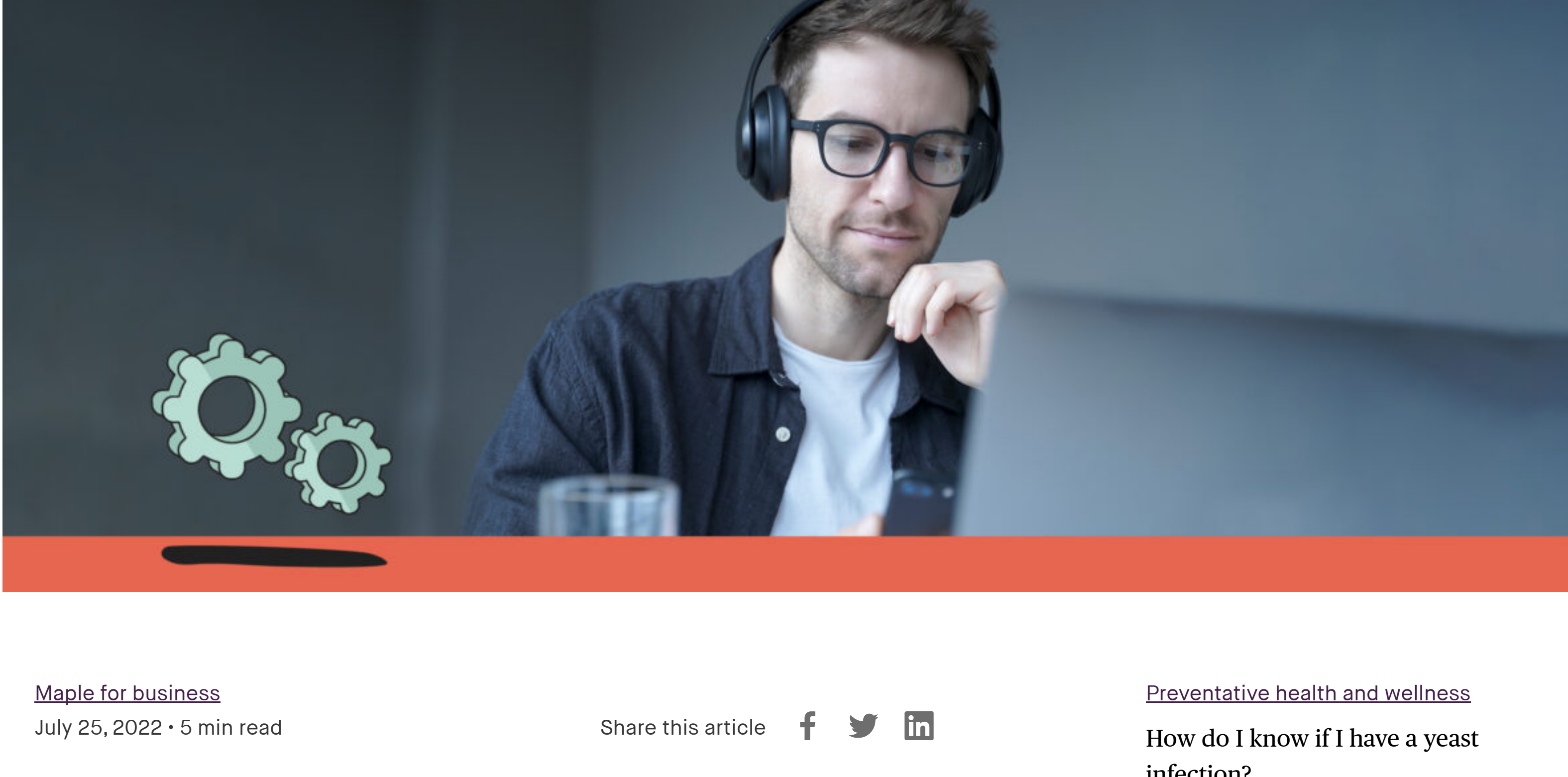


See all > [Maple for business](#)



[Maple for business](#)

July 25, 2022 · 5 min read

Share this article



Neurodiversity and inclusion in the workplace

In July 2021, Sir Richard Branson, CEO of the Virgin Group, went on record to commend LinkedIn for its [inclusion of "dyslexic thinking"](#) as an official skill, stating that people with dyslexia think "creatively and more expansively." Branson described the new initiative as a "breakthrough" in acknowledging the potential benefits of dyslexia in the workplace.

The billionaire boss identifies as dyslexic and added that he hoped companies will be actively seeking out dyslexic thinkers in the coming years. Was this a biased statement or is there underrecognized value to hiring talent with perceived learning disabilities to develop an inclusive work environment?

What is neurodivergence?

Dyslexia is a learning disability characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition, and poor spelling and decoding abilities. It can take away an individual's ability to read quickly, automatically, and retrieve spoken words easily, but, as Branson implied, [it doesn't dampen their creativity and ingenuity](#).

Learning disabilities such as dyslexia fall under the larger umbrella of "neurodivergent" thinking. [Harvard Health](#) defines neurodivergence, or neurodiversity, as "the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one 'right' way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and [differences are not viewed as deficits](#)."

The term "neurodiversity" was coined in the 90s and refers to [the range of differences in individual brain function and behavioral traits](#), regarded as part of normal variation in the human population. It's often used in the context of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as well as other neurological or developmental conditions such as Tourette's syndrome, OCD, dyspraxia, and learning disabilities.

It's also important to note that about [15-20% of the global population](#) identify as neurodiverse – and that's not accounting for the undiagnosed struggling to understand why they can't just "fit in."

Like many neurodevelopmental conditions, they often are comorbid with mental health conditions that can put one at a disadvantage in the hiring process. Social Anxiety Disorder symptoms flare up during high-stress situations like job interviews, leading to perceived character or culture deficits through indicators like a lack of strong eye contact.

Depression can lead to a lack of confidence, enthusiasm, and/or know-how to showcase one's talents. And there are many other reasons that can make the job search more difficult — partly due to [recruiter bias and systemic ableism](#).

"I had to be taught how to socialize in the corporate world while in the internship program," said Danny Lakes, Manager of Global Business Services at P&G, who has ASD and was a guest on [HBR's The Anxious Achiever](#) podcast, a series devoted to creating cultures of inclusion, and embracing neurodiversity in the workplace. "If you don't have those basic social skills down, then people pick up on that and it really lowers your chances of being hired, from my experiences anyway."

According to a [2015 StatsCan report](#), 12% of Canadians with a disability reported having been refused a job in the previous five years as a result of their condition. Among 25-to 34-year-olds with a severe or very severe disability, the percentage was 33%.

Moreover, a 2017 [Public Health Canada survey of disability](#) reported by Deloitte's ["Embracing neurodiversity at work"](#) guide found that neurodiverse individuals remain underrepresented in the workforce, with a similar percentage of one in three Canadian adults with autism between the ages of 20 and 64 reporting being employed.

Why it matters

"Every member of society has an opportunity to participate in our nation's social and economic prosperity", states the Deloitte report. "All Canadians should be able to engage in work that's personally suitable and meaningful, capitalizing on their unique talents and strengths."

Too often, learning disabilities and neurodivergent traits are seen as a hindrance by organizations, requiring extra support. But many neurodiverse individuals don't view their condition as a disability. Rather, they frame it as being differently-abled.

A disproportionately high percentage of neurodivergent workers have been found to excel in areas like data analytics and mathematics. Neurodivergence can also bring a capacity for sustained attention with the capacity to focus – or hyperfocus – on complex, repetitive tasks, sustained over a long period of time.

[Researchers found](#) that autistic employees also have an information processing advantage and are better able to detect critical information, which may account for their higher-than-average prevalence in IT positions.

People with autism excel at pattern recognition and spotting irregularities, such as cyber intrusions. This is one of the reasons the Australian Government Department of Defence has found success with its [cybersecurity neurodiversity program](#).

That being said, it's important to note that neurodivergence is not a "superpower". While it can come with specialized skillsets that can bring a competitive advantage to your organization, it's also not something to be fetishized. Popular media has a way of doing so with savant-like characters such as Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of Ray in Rain Man or Jim Parsons portrayal of Dr. Sheldon Cooper, the ambiguously autistic physician from TV's The Big Bang Theory.

If you're looking to boost the diversity, equity, and inclusiveness of your workforce with regards to neurodivergence, certain accommodations, initiatives, and programs will need to be put in place.

Trailblazing companies

When it comes to fostering a culture of neurodiversity, some companies are trailblazing the path. Microsoft, for example, has created the [Microsoft Neurodiversity Hiring Program](#). The software giant believes that "neurodivergent individuals strengthen a workforce with innovative thinking and creative solutions...while enriching their performance, products, communities, and the lives of their employees."

EY has also made strides in diversifying its hiring strategy. The multinational organization launched the [Neurodiversity Centre of Excellence in Toronto](#) in November 2020, intending to recruit employees with autism, ADHD, or other sensory and cognitive differences.

"We're dying for talent as an organization," Anthony Rjeily, EY's neurodiversity program national leader, told [the CBC in April 2022](#). "So we wanted to see if there was any talent pool out there that we could potentially tap into."

Since the launch of the program, the company has recruited 45 neurodiverse employees to their Toronto, Vancouver, Halifax, and Montreal offices — and plans to expand recruitment in other cities in Canada.

There's more proof to the pudding. The four largest US neurodivergent hiring programs (SAP, JPMorgan Chase, Microsoft, and EY) all have [retention rates above 90%](#), which is higher than the average retention rates for their industries.

Furthermore, JPMorgan Chase reports that professionals in its [Autism at Work](#) initiative make fewer errors and are 90 to 140% more productive than neurotypical employees.

How to create a more inclusive workplace

The [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) falls under the Ontario Human Rights Code and is intended to recognize the history of discrimination against persons with disabilities in Ontario. Part of its goal is to reduce and remove barriers for people with disabilities while fostering a psychologically safe work environment. Some of the recommendations in the act include:

- The right to accommodation plans like flex hours for staff to adjust to their optimal work hours.
- The right to accommodation also advises creating an environment that ensures optimal work output. This can include allowing people to wear noise-canceling headphones while at the office to help reduce distractions or building distraction-free workspaces.
- Designing customized career development and advancement plans that take into account the accessibility needs of employees with disabilities.
- Setting clear expectations between managers and employees to ensure that work objectives and deliverables are met in a fair and timely manner.

Adding a telehealth service like Maple to your benefits package can support your recruitment efforts and improve employee wellness by providing accommodations for staff who may feel more at ease seeing a doctor from the comfort of their home.

But providing accommodations is not always a cut-and-dry situation, and it can require thoughtful consideration to navigate.

For example, according to the [Right to Accommodation](#) guidelines, a person may approach their employer to ask for accommodations because they're losing their hearing. At Maple, staff that have trouble prioritizing tasks and workloads have been able to make accommodations.

"I have a very difficult time with context switching and I rely on uninterrupted blocks of focused time to be productive," said Leah M. who identifies as neurodivergent. "After hearing this feedback, my team has ensured we condense meetings and back-and-forth correspondence to the morning chunk of the day so that my afternoons are nearly always uninterrupted which allows me the heads-down time I need."

Alternatively, the person may feel reluctant to approach the employer because they fear stigma if they disclose that they're gaining a disability.

However, the employer may notice that the worker seems distracted or less productive than usual. The employer should take time to discuss whether this behaviour could be due to challenges the worker is experiencing and whether workplace accommodations could help reduce these challenges.

In either case, the worker and employer can then begin discussing what the worker's disability-related needs are and how the employer can provide accommodations that will allow the worker to be productive again.

Diversity at work

Having a disability or neurodivergent traits does not equal savant-like capabilities, nor does it necessarily give one the power to become a billionaire CEO, like Sir Richard Branson or Elon Musk, for that matter.

But organizations can do more to allow for better outcomes and opportunities for differently-abled candidates by challenging recruitment biases, focusing on inclusion "culture fit" in the workplace and looking at skillsets of neurodiverse talent that go beyond "culture fit".

If you'd like to speak with a member of our team on how to bring your employee benefits to the next level, please reach out. We'd be happy to share our insights with you as Canada's leading virtual care platform.

Discover Maple for employees

[Learn more](#)

Services	Resources	Company	Specialties	Business	Care delivery
How it works	Blog	About us	Dermatology	Business solutions	Care delivery solutions
Meet our doctors	FAQ	Security	Online therapy	Employers	Hospitals
Treatable conditions	Testimonials	Newsroom	Endocrinology	Insurers	Clinics
Pricing	Help desk	Careers	Naturopathy	Brokers	Long-term care
Online prescriptions	Contact us	Become a provider	All specialties	Strategic partners	Care systems

Conditions	Medications	Locations	Regions	Compare Maple to	COVID-19
Acne treatment	Viagra	Toronto	Ontario	Telehealth Ontario	Book a PCR test
Depression treatment	Cialis	Vancouver	Quebec	Felix	Rapid antigen test kits
UTI treatment	Finasteride	Calgary	British Columbia	TELUS Health MyCare	COVID-19 resources
ED treatment	Amoxicillin	Winnipeg	Alberta	Access Virtual	Vaccine information
Anxiety treatment	Valacyclovir	Ottawa	Manitoba	Tia Health	Rumours & facts
All conditions	All medications	All locations	All regions	WebMD	Symptoms