

# Managerial Practices for Supporting Employees with Autism in Fast-Food Workplaces in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Glenn Ian M. Vetonio

Master in Business Administration & University of Perpetual Help System DALTA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines managerial practices to support employees with autism in fast-food workplaces in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It aims to find out the practices used by the managers, the problems they encounter and how the practices have contributed to inclusion in the workplaces. The research design applied in the study was qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews on five managers who had a real experience on how to be a manager of employees with autism. The analysis of data was done using the thematic analysis in order to reveal important patterns and insights. The results show that structured communication, simplifying tasks, and frequent supervision are common methods used by the managers in helping the employees with autism. Nonetheless, issues like communication barriers, high-paced working conditions, and deficiency in organizational training continue to exist. Empathy, encouragement, and patience were identified as supportive leadership behaviors that had a significant positive impact on employee performance and inclusion. The research enhances the knowledge on front line management practices within service-based sectors and the significance of adaptive leadership and organizational support towards encouraging inclusive workplaces.

**Keywords** -- autism, neurodiversity, workplace inclusion, managerial practices, fast-food industry, qualitative research

## INTRODUCTION

The employment of individuals with autism has remained a big challenge in the recent years despite the increasing awareness of inclusion in the workplace. In most countries, including Canada, autistic adults continue to encounter barriers to meaningful work because of the pressure of social communication, sensory sensitivity, workplace stigma, and a lack of neurodiversity literacy by management (Scott et al., 2021; Whelpley, 2020). Nevertheless, when given appropriate conditions and with the proper guidance, autistic workers have demonstrated value in terms of productivity, accuracy, innovation, and work culture in the organization (Austin and Pisano, 2017; Cope and Remington, 2021).

One of the most complicated tasks of managers is people management because an employee has individual features, requirements, and working styles. The contribution of managers has a significant impact on employee experience, performance, and inclusion at work. Managing a diverse workforce requires an understanding of individual differences and the ability to adapt leadership approaches accordingly. In the context of neurodiversity, managers must be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively support employees with autism, as their leadership practices directly impact employee engagement and productivity (Shore et al., 2018).

Autism inclusion is of particular interest in the fast-food industry. Its structured tasks and routine-based operations may align with the strengths of individuals with autism; however, the fast-paced environment, customer interaction, and teamwork requirements may also pose challenges without appropriate support (Lorenz et al., 2016; Richards and Sang, 2019). In such conditions, managers play a significant role in ensuring that employees with autism are properly guided, supported, and included in the workplace

While existing studies have examined autism inclusion at a broader organizational level, limited research has explored frontline managerial practices in fast-paced service environments such as the fast-food industry, particularly within the Canadian context. This gap outlines the necessity to get a clearer picture of how managers can directly engage and support workers with autism in their daily activities. Filling this gap offers practical information on how to enhance inclusive workplace practices at the working level.

This research therefore seeks to investigate managerial provisions in the management of employees with autism within fast-food workplaces in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Particularly, it aims to find common practices, analyze the problems faced by managers, and identify how such practices can bring inclusion in the workplace.

### **Factors Influencing Managers' Practices in Handling Employees with Autism**

Autism is a neurodevelopment disorder, which interferes with communicative, behavioral, and social interactions (Lord et al., 2018). A study suggests that autistic people can affect how people interact at the workplace and perform (Solomon-Harris et al., 2022; Lombardo et al., 2011). These neurobiological and behavioral disparities bring out the role of informed managerial practices in the management of autistic employees. Recognition of such differences allows managers to develop proper communication plans, offer fair assessment, and establish conducive working conditions.

### **The Growing Inclusion of Employees with Autism in the Workplace**

Employing people with autism has been of growing importance as organizations embrace the power of diversity. Whereas Austin and Pisano (2017) support the benefits of neurodiverse workers, such as attention to detail, reliability, and efficiency, Whelpley (2020) focuses on the still existing obstacles that restrict their access to jobs. Such implication creates an implication of difference between perceived potential of autistic people and the real conditions that they encounter at the workplaces.

Likewise, Richards and Sang (2019) suggest that workplace cultures that are inclusive are a key to this gap since they inspire acceptance, cooperation, and equal opportunities. However, even with the increased awareness, the rate of employment among individuals with autism is much lower than that of the general population, meaning that the inclusion has not been implemented properly.

These views imply that even though organizations have become interested in recruiting neurodiverse people, the effectiveness of these programs and approaches depends greatly on how inclusion can be applied at the managerial level. This underscores the need of effective management practice in the translation of organizational intentions into meaningful inclusion of the workplace and better employee performance.

### **Challenges Faced by Managers in Handling Employees with Autism**

Working with autistic employees is challenging, especially when communication and workplace adaptability are concerned. Research has found challenges in the areas of social interaction, comprehension of directions, and managing dynamic working conditions (Lorenz et al., 2016). Moreover, not all people with autism might be willing to share their condition as they fear discrimination, which restricts the assistance they can get (Whelpley, 2020). Such difficulties are only compounded by the industries that move at a high pace, where managers have to strike a balance between the requirements of productivity and the requirements of a personalized support.

### **Inclusive Workplace Culture and Climate**

Positive organizational culture will greatly contribute towards inclusion of employees with Autism. Neurodiversity leads to a sense of acceptance, belonging, and collaboration in organizations (Richards and Sang, 2019). Inclusive business practices can be beneficial to workers with autism as well as improve the overall work system and organizational structure in general. Employees who feel encouraged and appreciated will perform better and act positively to the organization when they feel supported and understood.

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## **Inclusive Management as a Key to Organizational Success**

Inclusive management practices are now gaining recognition as a strategic strength of organizations. It is posited that neurodiverse teams may help foster better innovative abilities, productivity, and problem-solving skills (Austin and Pisano, 2017; Vogus and Taylor, 2018). Managers who lead in an inclusive manner including giving structured directions, support, and focus on strengths of individuals with autism can more easily exploit their potential. This demonstrates that inclusion is not just a social obligation but also an aspect that leads to organizational success.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the managerial practices used in supervising employees with autism in fast-food workplaces. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth insights into the experiences, strategies, and challenges encountered by managers in supporting neurodiverse employees.

The participants of the study consisted of five (5) managers working in selected fast-food establishments in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Purposive sampling was utilized to ensure that all participants had direct experience supervising employees with autism, allowing for the collection of relevant and information-rich data.

Informed consent was obtained prior to the conduct of the study. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the participants at a convenient time for them. With permission, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The responses of interviews were transcribed, coded, and categorized to determine the patterns and themes of recurrence in terms of managerial practices, challenges, and strategies of managing employees with autism.

The study was conducted with ethical considerations. The participants were made aware of the objective of the research, and their consent was taken before the data collection. All the information collected was used on academic purposes only, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, with the use of codes instead of real names.

The study adhered to the qualitative research standards such as credibility, dependability, and confirmability to make the data reliable. The answers were transcribed and coded in the most standardized way to ensure consistency in the analysis. An objective interpretation of the participant responses and emphasis on recurring themes that emerged as a direct result of the data were used to reduce the bias of the researcher.

## **RESULTS**

The information collected through the interviews was processed through the thematic analysis. Four key themes were identified, namely: (1) managerial awareness of autism, (2) supervision problems, (3) supportive leadership, and (4) managerial strategies.

### **Theme 1: Managerial Awareness of Autism**

The results indicated that the awareness of managers is critical in the effective supervision of employees with autism. Managers with enhanced knowledge of communication style and patterns can adapt their leadership more effectively. Such awareness is beneficial in minimizing misunderstandings as well as enhancing interactions at the workplace.

The respondents observed that the knowledge about the needs of autistic employees helps to improve performance of the tasks and encounter fewer difficulties in the workplace setting.

### **Theme 2: Challenges in Supervising Employees with Autism**

Managers stated that they were facing various difficulties, especially communication and fitting into the fast-paced work setting. There are those employees who need to be given more detailed and structured instructions, and it may not be easy during the busy operations.

One responded that the tasks should be clarified step-by-step so that good comprehension should be achieved, particularly, during busy periods.

### Theme 3: Supportive Leadership and Workplace Environment

The findings indicated that in dealing with employees who have autism, the supportive leadership is necessary. Managers stressed on the need to be patient, understanding and supportive in enabling employees adapt and perform well. A positive working environment also gives the employees confidence and ease.

As one participant stated, “They will need to be patient and supported as they might take a longer time to adjust.”

### Theme 4: Managerial Strategies in Handling Employees with Autism

Some of the strategies that managers used included providing clear instructions, subdivision of tasks and offering regular monitoring and feedback. Such strategies enable employees to know their roles more and enhance their performance in the long run.

A participant explained, “The tasks can be divided into smaller steps so that they can follow the process easier.”

The results indicate that managerial flexibility is an important element of the gap between inclusion policies in organizations and the real practices at the workplace. Although the promotion of diversity and inclusion on a policy level may be encouraged by companies, the implementation of these policies by managers in everyday business is high dependent on the effectiveness of such initiatives. The findings suggest that the organized communication and the simplification of the tasks are not only viable strategies but they can also serve as the necessary tools in the improvement of the employee performance and inclusion. This brings to the fore the need to prepare the managers with the skills and knowledge they require in order to facilitate neurodiverse employees.

These themes can be interpreted through the lens of Situational Leadership Theory, which provides a framework for adapting managerial practices based on employee readiness. In this study, managers adjust their leadership approaches when handling employees with autism depending on each employee’s skills, communication abilities, and workplace behavior, emphasizing the importance of tailoring supervision and support to individual needs.

Managerial practices such as structured communication, task simplification, and supportive supervision influence the performance and workplace inclusion of employees with autism. These practices serve as the basis for developing an inclusion program that promotes effective management and a supportive work environment.



Figure 1. Adaptation of Situational Leadership Theory Model

Figure 1 illustrates how managerial practices and leadership styles should be adapted based on the performance, behaviors, and readiness of the employees with autism. In this model, managers assess each employee's skills, communication abilities, and workplace behavior to determine the most appropriate leadership approach. Practices such as structured communication, task simplification, and supportive supervision are applied according to the employee's level of readiness, promoting both effective management and a supportive, inclusive work environment.

## DISCUSSION

The study results emphasize that managerial knowledge, leadership style and support at the workplace are critical in managing employees with autism in fast-food restaurants. The managers who proved to be more understanding were also able to adapt their communication and supervision strategies and make employees perform better and feel included.

This complements the research of Lindsay et al. (2020), which highlighted that autism awareness increases inclusion at the workplace. On the same note, Shore et al. (2018) observed that inclusive leadership leads to positive employee engagement and relationships.

The study findings can be further interpreted through the lens of Situational Leadership Theory, which emphasizes adapting leadership styles based on employee readiness and competence. Managerial practices such as task simplification and close supervision reflect a "telling" approach, while the provision of encouragement and emotional support aligns with a "supporting" style. Instances where managers gradually increased employee independence demonstrate elements of "coaching" and "delegating." This suggests that effective management of autistic employees requires flexible and adaptive leadership strategies tailored to individual needs.

The challenges identified, especially communication gaps and rapid work environment are in line with the findings of Lorenz et al. (2016), who documented that demands of the workplace may pose a challenge in dealing with neurodiverse employees. Nevertheless, the findings of this research indicate that these difficulties can be resolved in the framework of organizational communication and the practice of adaptive leadership.

Moreover, the significance of supportive leadership is consistent with the findings made by Austin and Pisano (2017), who emphasized the idea of the benefits of the organization in case managers should identify and promote the strength of the neurodiverse workforce. The approaches recognized in the current research, including the division of tasks and regular supervision, are also indicative of the ideas about the Situational Leadership Theory, as it also focuses on the necessity to adjust leadership style to the needs of employees.

Generally, the results indicate that inclusive management is not only limited to organizational policies but is highly reliant on daily practices and flexibility of managers.

## LIMITATIONS

This study is limited by its reliance on manager self-reports, which may introduce social desirability bias. The absence of perspectives from autistic employees also presents a gap, as the findings reflect only managerial viewpoints. Future research should consider incorporating multiple stakeholders, including employees, job coaches, and human resource practitioners, to provide a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of workplace inclusion. Acknowledging these gaps underscores the importance of developing structured managerial strategies that can support neurodiverse employees in daily workplace settings.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen workplace inclusion for employees with autism, organizations should implement structured strategies that support both managers and employees. Managers can use step-by-step instructions, visual aids, and checklists to ensure tasks are clearly communicated. Complex tasks can be simplified and broken into smaller, manageable steps to gradually increase employee independence. Sensory-aware adjustments, such as low-noise areas, adjustable lighting, and scheduled breaks, can help employees maintain focus and reduce

overstimulation. Regular feedback, positive reinforcement, and supervision tailored to individual readiness further enhance employee performance and confidence.

Organizations may also strengthen inclusive practices by collaborating with community-based programs such as Autism Nova Scotia, which offers employer training and workplace inclusion support, and Ready, Willing & Able, which provides structured employment pathways job, job coaching, and accommodation guidance for individuals with autism. Integrating these external supports with internal managerial strategies can enhance both employee outcomes and organizational effectiveness.

Together, these strategies can improve employee retention, increase productivity, and foster a supportive and cohesive work environment, bridging the gap between organizational inclusion policies and everyday workplace practices.

## CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that managerial practices are important in ensuring that the workplace is inclusive of the autistic employees in a fast-food environment. The identified strategies, which were found to greatly enhance employee performance and integration, were systematic communication, leadership that was supportive and adaptive management strategies.

In spite of the given obstacles, including the communication barriers and high-pressure working conditions, such managers as those who express awareness, patience, and flexibility can be more helpful in supporting neurodiverse employees.

The paper highlights the importance of increasing managerial competency in the inclusive workplaces and in the provision of sustainable employment opportunities to individuals with autism.

The small sample size and the use of selected fast-food establishments in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada limits this study. The small sample size is consistent with qualitative research, which prioritizes depth of insight over generalizability and focuses on rich, context-specific understanding. The results might not be applicable to other sectors and geographies.

Additionally, the study relied on self-reported information from managers, which may be biased. The research could be enhanced by having several viewpoints in the future, including an example of employees having the autism condition, to get a better picture on the inclusion at the workplace.

The study findings suggest that organizations should introduce organized training programs to improve the knowledge of the neurodiversity and inclusive ways of leadership among managers. Employers should also develop policies that support autistic employees, including clear communication and task management policies. Future studies can expand the sample of work and sample size in various industries to enhance the external validity of the results and undertake more studies on effective managerial practices in inclusive workplaces.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing discourse on workplace inclusion by demonstrating how adaptive managerial practices can support autistic employees in fast-paced service environments.

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