



# Navigating Self-Employment

A Guide for Neurodivergent Entrepreneurs

The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We partner with policymakers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. We are founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and Signal49 Research, and are funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

In partnership  
with:



Funded by the  
Government of Canada's  
Future Skills Program



# Contents

4

Why self-employment

5

Getting started and navigating challenges

8

Additional practical resources

This guide draws on insights from 75 neurodivergent entrepreneurs across Canada who told us what they wish they had known when starting out and the strategies that helped them handle obstacles along the way.



# Why self-employment

For some neurodivergent Canadians, self-employment and entrepreneurship can offer inclusive and empowering paths compared to traditional employment. (For an explanation of these two terms, see “Defining self-employment and entrepreneurship.”)

Exploring workforce participation outside of traditional workplaces can provide opportunities to:

- **Create purpose and impact:** Transform your lived experience into ventures that promote inclusion, innovation, accessibility, and social change.
- **Leverage your strengths:** Build your business around your unique skills, interests, and ways of thinking, rather than trying to fit into a conventional mold.
- **Exercise autonomy and flexibility:** Design your own schedule, pace, and work environment so you can work in ways that suit you best.

## Defining self-employment and entrepreneurship

**Self-employment** is working for oneself (includes operating a business, farm, or professional practice), alone or in a partnership that can be either incorporated or unincorporated.<sup>1</sup>

**Entrepreneurship** is a concept that generally implies innovation and the goal of creating and growing a business.<sup>2</sup>

Entrepreneurs are most often self-employed, but not all self-employed individuals are entrepreneurs.

1 Statistics Canada, “Classification of class of worker – variant on employees and self-employed,” Government of Canada, last modified June 18, 2021, <https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3VD.pl?Function=getVD&TVD=1305438&CVD=1305439&CLV=0&MLV=3&D=1>.

2 Statistics Canada.

# Getting started and navigating challenges

Self-employment can offer flexibility and agency—but getting started is easier when you build on what works for you, access the right supports, and use practical strategies to navigate common challenges.

## 1. Build from your strengths

Your unique skills and way of thinking aren't just personal assets; they can be the foundation of a meaningful and sustainable business. Examples of how common neurodivergent strengths can translate into entrepreneurial opportunities include:

- **Pattern recognition and deep focus:** Freelance work in data analysis, programming, research, or design.
- **Systems thinking and efficiency:** Businesses that help others plan, organize, or optimize workflows.
- **Problem-solving and persistence:** Ventures in innovation, product development, or consulting.
- **Creativity and visual thinking:** Opportunities in graphic design, marketing, multimedia production, or handmade products.

**Tip:** Notice the work you enjoy, the problems you naturally solve, the strengths others appreciate, and the settings where you thrive. These patterns can reveal marketable skills for self-employment.

### Ask yourself:

- What type of work do I enjoy or excel at?
- What skills or strengths of mine have been valued in home, school, work, or community settings?
- Which work environments and types of tasks help me perform at my best—structured routines, creative variety, focused deep work, collaboration, or independent projects?
- What unique perspective or lived experience do I bring to understanding problems and imagining solutions?
- What gaps or problems do I notice—things I wish existed or worked differently, or that others accept as unsolvable but I feel motivated to improve?



## 2. Tap into mentorship and peer support

Starting out in self-employment can feel overwhelming and isolating. Build skills and community through:

- **Neuroinclusive programs:** Engage in workshops, training, or business programs designed for neurodivergent entrepreneurs that provide practical support and accessible guidance.
- **Peer networks:** Connect with small business incubators or peer mentorship groups to share experiences, get real-world advice, and build a supportive community.
- **Co-working spaces:** Look at shared workspaces as these may offer opportunities to connect with other entrepreneurs, reduce isolation, and access informal learning and collaboration.

**Tip:** Look for training programs and peer groups led by neurodivergent professionals such as [ND Connect](#), [The Well Collaborative](#), and the [Neurodivergent Business Circle](#). Learning from people who share your experiences can provide practical guidance that considers your strengths, challenges, and ways of working.



## 3. Explore diverse business models

There's no single way to be self-employed. Choose a model that fits with your goals, working style, and comfort level:

- **Freelancing/contract work:** Take on short-term projects that match your skills, allow flexibility, and help you build your experience gradually.
  - **Examples:** Article writing, graphic design projects, web development, coding, tutoring, research analysis, or social media management.
- **Service-based:** Offer your services directly to clients through ongoing engagements or structured programs.
  - **Examples:** Coaching, consulting, virtual assistance, marketing services, trades like carpentry or electrical work, or event planning.
- **Product-based:** Create tangible or digital products that reflect your skills and creativity, which can scale over time or generate passive income.
  - **Examples:** Handmade crafts, clothing, jewelery, apps, digital tools and resources, assistive devices, or online courses.
- **Hybrid models:** Combine services and products to diversify income and balance active and passive work.
  - **Examples:** A graphic designer who sells templates online while offering design consulting, or a coach who provides workshops alongside downloadable guides or apps.

**Tip:** Consider starting with a model that fits your current capacity and lifestyle. Many neurodivergent entrepreneurs shared that they began with part-time or freelance work alongside other commitments, gradually scaling up, or combined multiple income streams to reduce risk and increase flexibility.

## 4. Learn the basics

In addition to your unique, marketable skills, developing core business skills is essential for building a sustainable self-employment venture. Consider the following strategies to help you get started and manage the practical side of running a business:

- **Business concept and planning:** Develop your idea, write a business plan, and seek feedback from other neurodivergent entrepreneurs or professionals in your field. Many entrepreneurs benefit from using online templates and planning tools to structure their ideas such as [BDC's Entrepreneur's toolkit](#).
- **Budgeting and pricing:** Calculate the costs of running your business—including materials, tools, and overhead—and set pricing that covers these expenses. Get advice from mentors, accountants, or peer networks to ensure your pricing is realistic and sustainable.
- **Marketing and networking:** Discover where your potential customers or collaborators spend their time. Explore online groups, social media communities, industry forums, digital marketplaces, and co-working spaces to connect, share your work, and build relationships.
- **Legal and financial setup:** Learn the essentials of registering a business, invoicing, collecting payments, and filing taxes. Familiarize yourself with financial software like Xero, QuickBooks, or FreshBooks, and consider outsourcing tasks you find challenging.

**Tip:** Focus on learning the essentials first, and seek out workshops, community programs, or mentors who can guide you step-by-step as your business grows.

## 5. Build capital through accessible funding

Income instability, challenges with financial management, and potential impacts on government benefits can make it risky to seek traditional financing. Consider the following strategies to reduce your risk:

- **Explore targeted funding options:** Seek out microgrants, low-interest loans, or funding programs specifically designed for neurodivergent entrepreneurs or that are disability-inclusive.
- **Seek guidance:** Consult a financial advisor, mentor, or peer network to identify funding options that reduce personal financial risk and support sustainable business growth.
- **Plan around benefits:** Understand how disability benefits or social assistance clawbacks may affect your earnings as your business grows.

**Tip:** Use accessible funding strategically. Combine grants, loans, and other supports with careful planning and expert guidance so you can invest in your business confidently, minimize your financial risk, and build a stable foundation for long-term growth.



## 6. Optimize daily work through personalized tools and systems

Self-employment relies heavily on executive function skills –planning, prioritizing, and staying focused– something many neurodivergent individuals struggle with. The right tools and systems can help you manage these challenges while building your business:

- **Organize your ideas and priorities:** Use whiteboards, digital notes, voice memos, or executive function apps like [Zeda](#), [Virtual Assistants](#), [Motion App](#), or [BrainVault](#) to reduce mental clutter.
- **Break tasks into steps:** Make projects more manageable with visual planners, checklists, the pomodoro technique, scheduling apps, digital project boards, or workflow automation tools such as [Trello](#), [Asana](#), [Notion](#), [Todoist](#), [TimeHero](#), or AI assistants.
- **Simplify communication:** Create templates for emails, messages, or calls to make client interactions predictable and less stressful.
- **Work around your energy levels:** Schedule tasks when you are at peak energy and design a workspace that addresses your sensory needs.
- **Clearly communicate your accessibility needs:** Let clients know your preferred ways of communicating and any accommodations that help you work most effectively from the outset.

**Tip:** Combine practical strategies with accessible tools to structure your work, conserve energy, and maintain focus. Regularly review and adjust your strategies to match your evolving priorities and work demands.

# Additional practical resources

Explore supports and resources for neurodivergent entrepreneurs across Canada and internationally using our [interactive resource map](#).

Learn more about our research on self-employment for neurodivergent Canadians:

- [\*Creating Their Own Path: Unlocking Self-Employment for Neurodivergent Canadians.\*](#)
- [\*Advancing Pathways to Neurodivergent Self-Employment: A Resource for Supported Employment Providers.\*](#)

This issue briefing was prepared with financial support provided through the Government of Canada's [Future Skills Program](#). We are proud to serve as a research partner in the Future Skills Centre consortium.

**Navigating Self-Employment: A Guide for Neurodivergent Entrepreneurs**

Jennifer Fane

To cite this research: Fane, Jennifer. *Navigating Self-Employment: A Guide for Neurodivergent Entrepreneurs*. Ottawa: Signal49 Research, 2026.

Forecasts and research often involve numerous assumptions and data sources, and are subject to inherent risks and uncertainties. This information is not intended as specific investment, accounting, legal, or tax advice. The responsibility for the findings and conclusions of this research rests entirely with Signal49 Research.

An accessible version of this document for the visually impaired is available upon request.

Accessibility Officer, Signal49 Research

Tel.: 613-526-3280 or 1-866-711-2262 | Email: [accessibility@signal49.ca](mailto:accessibility@signal49.ca)

Published in Canada | All rights reserved | Agreement No. 40063028

AERIC Inc. is an independent Canadian registered charity operating as Signal49 Research.



Where knowledge  
inspires action

Formerly operating as The Conference Board of Canada  
Effective January 26, 2026, Signal49 Research discontinued use of 'The Conference Board of Canada' name and trademark, which had been used by Signal49 Research under license from The Conference Board, Inc. The Conference Board, Inc. and/or its licensees have the exclusive right to use 'THE CONFERENCE BOARD' marks in Canada.

**Signal49**  
RESEARCH

[signal49.ca](https://signal49.ca)