

Cross-Neurotype Communication Is Not a One-Sided Deficit

Common assumption: Autistic people struggle to communicate because they lack social skills — so the fix is teaching them to communicate the “right” way.

What the research shows: The breakdown runs in both directions. Non-autistic people misread autistic colleagues just as often — and in workplace-specific testing, more often — and the mismatch eases when both sides adapt, not just one (Milton, 2012; Crompton et al., 2020; Szechy et al., 2024).

Executive Summary

For decades, autism research treated social difficulty as a one-sided deficit — autistic people struggling to read the room. In 2012, autistic researcher Dr. Damian Milton proposed a different explanation: the double empathy problem, which frames cross-neurotype communication breakdown as a two-way mismatch rather than a one-way failure. This brief traces that idea from theory through the current evidence base — a 2020 controlled experiment showing autistic-to-autistic communication is just as effective as neurotypical-to-neurotypical communication, with breakdown concentrated specifically in mixed-neurotype interaction; workplace-specific research showing non-autistic observers misread autistic colleagues' behavior more often than autistic observers do; and industry data showing the resulting gap in disclosure, accommodation, and psychological safety is widening rather than closing. The brief also engages directly with a 2025 theoretical critique of the framework and states plainly where its own evidence base is thin.

KEY FINDINGS

- Cross-neurotype communication breakdown is measurably bidirectional, not a one-sided autistic deficit (Milton, 2012; Crompton et al., 2020).
- In direct workplace testing, non-autistic observers misread autistic employees' behavior roughly twice as often as autistic observers do — 31.2% accuracy versus 50.7% (Szechy, Turk, & O'Donnell, 2024).
- The cost of that mismatch is currently absorbed almost entirely by neurodivergent employees, through masking and non-disclosure (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Gallup, 2025).
- Employer confidence in neuroinclusion is rising while employee-reported experience is not improving at the same rate — the gap is widening, not closing (City & Guilds Foundation, 2026).
- The theoretical framework has a live, credible academic critique (Livingston, Hargitai, & Shah, 2025), which this brief addresses directly rather than omits.



Communication breakdown between autistic and non-autistic people is bidirectional — not a one-sided deficit.

Milton, 2012; Crompton et al., 2020

The gap runs both ways: communication breakdown between autistic and non-autistic people is bidirectional.

How This Brief Was Built

Sources were identified through targeted search of peer-reviewed journals — *Autism, Autism in Adulthood, Disability & Society, Psychological Review, Journal of Management Studies, PLOS ONE, Scientific Reports* — and primary industry research (Gallup, CIPD, City & Guilds Foundation), prioritizing original publications over secondhand summaries. Every citation was checked against its original source rather than an aggregator or a prior draft, a standard adopted after an earlier citation error in this project was caught and corrected. The search prioritized, in order: the foundational theoretical paper; direct experimental tests of the theory; workplace-specific applications; large-sample industry data on disclosure and accommodation; and any published critique of the framework itself. Sources span 2012–2026, weighted toward 2020 and later, when direct empirical testing of the theory began.

This brief was researched and drafted with AI assistance, used to search academic and industry sources, compile candidates, and draft narrative sections. Every citation was independently verified against its original publication. Source selection, editorial judgment, and conclusions are NeuroMeet's own.

Evidence base at a glance

Source type	Count	Examples
Foundational theory	1	Milton (2012)
Controlled experiments	2	Crompton et al. (2020); Jones et al. (2024)
Workplace-specific studies	2	Szechy et al. (2024); Vogus (2025)
First-impression / bias research	1	Sasson et al. (2017)
Mixed-methods / survey research	1	Pryke-Hobbes et al. (2023)
Industry & workforce data	4	Gallup (2025); CIPD (2024); City & Guilds (2025, 2026)
Applied practice framework	1	Finke & Dunn (2025)
Theoretical critique	1	Livingston, Hargitai, & Shah (2025)

Total: 13 sources

Background

For decades, the working assumption in autism research was simple, and simply wrong: autistic people struggle socially because they lack the skills to read other people. The deficit sat in one place. The fix, therefore, had to sit there too — social skills training, masking coached as competence, a lifetime of being told to try harder at being someone else.

In 2012, autistic researcher Dr. Damian Milton published a short paper that broke that frame. He called it the double empathy problem, and the idea is exactly as direct as it sounds: when an autistic person and a non-autistic person struggle to understand each other, the breakdown doesn't belong to one side. It belongs to the mismatch between them (Milton, 2012).

That reframe is the intellectual spine of NeuroMeet. Here's the research behind it — what it actually says, what's been tested since, and where the open questions still are.

What Milton Actually Argued

Milton's claim wasn't that autistic people have no social difficulties. It was that the standard explanation — a one-directional deficit in “theory of mind,” the ability to model what someone else is thinking — didn't hold up. Milton pointed out that so-called neurotypical empathy also fails, routinely, when it's aimed at autistic people. The assumption that there's one correct set of social rules, and that autistic people are simply bad at following them, treats a *difference* in communication style as a *deficit* in one party (Milton, 2012). Communication, in other words, is relational. It takes two people to build shared understanding, and it takes two people to lose it.

For years this was a theoretical argument — compelling, but untested. That changed in 2020.

The Evidence: Autistic People Communicate Fine — With Each Other

In 2020, Dr. Catherine Crompton and colleagues at the University of Edinburgh ran the first direct experimental test of the double empathy problem. Seventy-two adults were split into three types of eight-person “diffusion chains” — all-autistic, all-non-autistic, and mixed — and passed a story down the chain, the way you'd play telephone. The researchers then measured how much of the original story survived by the end of the chain, and how much rapport participants felt with the person next to them (Crompton et al., 2020).

The results were the opposite of what the deficit model would predict. Autistic-to-autistic chains retained information just as well as non-autistic-to-non-autistic chains — there was no meaningful difference between the two. The breakdown appeared specifically in the *mixed* chains, where information degraded significantly faster and self-reported rapport dropped as well. Chain type and position together explained 85% of the variance in how much information survived (Crompton et al., 2020).

Put plainly:

“Autistic people are not bad at communicating. They're good at communicating with people who communicate the way they do — exactly like everyone else.”

The friction shows up specifically at the cross-neurotype boundary, on both sides of it.

This finding has since been echoed by other researchers. A 2024 study out of the University of Texas at Dallas had 102 non-autistic observers watch and rate video recordings of “get to know you” conversations between autistic and non-autistic adults. The observers — who had no idea what the double empathy problem even was — independently rated the mixed conversations as the least successful of any pairing, underestimated autistic participants' intelligence and trustworthiness, and expressed less interest in getting to know them. Tellingly, the autistic participants' actual conversation partners rated them more favorably than the outside observers did, suggesting direct contact softens the very misjudgment the theory predicts (Jones, Botha, Ackerman, King, & Sasson, 2024).

What This Looks Like in a Workplace, Specifically

Milton's paper and Crompton's experiment were about general social interaction. More recent research has asked the sharper question NeuroMeet cares about: how does this play out at work?

A 2024 study published in *Autism in Adulthood* tested exactly this. Researchers asked autistic and non-autistic participants to interpret the workplace behavior of an autistic employee — things like why they might avoid eye contact in a meeting or respond to feedback in an unexpected way. Autistic participants correctly interpreted the employee's behavior 50.7% of the time. Non-autistic participants got it right 31.2% of the time — a statistically significant gap ($\chi^2 = 8.65$, $p = 0.003$) (Szechy, Turk, & O'Donnell, 2024). The people best equipped to understand an autistic colleague, in other words, were other autistic people — not managers, not HR, not well-meaning coworkers running on good intentions and no context.

The bias shows up fast, too. Earlier work from Noah Sasson and colleagues found that:

“Non-autistic observers form negative first impressions of autistic adults within seconds of a brief video clip — and those snap judgments predicted a measurably lower willingness to interact with them at all, independent of anything the autistic person actually said” (Sasson et al., 2017).

That's the mechanism showing up at the exact moment it matters most for employment: the interview.

This matters because it relocates the problem. Autistic adults face persistently high rates of unemployment and underemployment, and that gap has traditionally been explained as a “them” problem — insufficient social skills, insufficient self-advocacy. The double empathy research says otherwise: a meaningful share of workplace misunderstanding is a *comprehension* gap on the non-autistic side, not a *competence* gap on the autistic side.

Management scholarship is starting to catch up. In a 2025 essay in the *Journal of Management Studies*, organizational behavior researcher Timothy Vogus argued that the double empathy problem doesn't just describe individual workplace friction — it describes a structural blind spot in how organizations (and

the academic field that studies them) are built, largely without neurodivergent people in the room where norms get set (Vogus, 2025).

Masking: The Tax Nobody Sees on the Invoice

If communication breakdown is bidirectional, why does it so often feel like the burden of fixing it falls entirely on the neurodivergent person? Because it does. That burden has a name: masking — consciously suppressing or performing traits to pass as neurotypical.

A 2023 study in *PLOS ONE* compared the workplace masking experience of 285 autistic adults, 88 non-autistic neurodivergent adults, and 99 neurotypical adults in the UK. All three groups masked at work to some degree — that part isn't unique to neurodivergence. But autistic and non-autistic neurodivergent participants described a distinct *kind* of pressure to mask, driven specifically by how little their workplaces understood neurodivergence in the first place (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). Masking wasn't optional self-improvement. It was a defensive strategy against a workplace that hadn't done its half of the double empathy work.

“That's the throughline: when only one side of a two-way gap is asked to change, the cost of closing it lands entirely on the side already carrying the disadvantage.”

The Current Workplace Data

Academic research explains the *mechanism*. Industry data shows the *scale*.

- **Disclosure is still a live risk calculation, not a formality.** In Gallup's 2025 *Neurodiversity in the Workplace* report, 37% of employed neurodivergent individuals said they choose not to disclose their neurodivergence to coworkers, and 46% said they don't request accommodations during the hiring process — in both cases because they anticipate being labeled “difficult” or stigmatized rather than supported (Gallup, 2025).
- **Strengths look more similar than different.** That same Gallup research, drawn from CliftonStrengths data, found neurodivergent and neurotypical employees' strengths profiles largely overlap. Neurodivergent employees scored higher on Ideation, Strategic thinking, and Command; neurotypical employees scored higher on Achiever, Discipline, Responsibility, Harmony, and Consistency (Gallup, 2025). Different emphasis, not different capability.
- **Support remains inconsistent even where policy exists.** The CIPD's 2024 *Neuroinclusion at Work* report, based on surveys of over 1,000 employers and 1,000 employees, found that a third of organizations say neuroinclusion isn't currently a focus at all, 20% of neurodivergent employees reported experiencing discrimination or harassment tied to their neurodivergence, and a third of neurodivergent employees said their experience at work had negatively affected their mental wellbeing (CIPD, 2024).
- **The gap is widening between what employers believe and what employees experience.** City & Guilds Foundation's Neurodiversity Index has tracked this annually in the UK since 2023. By the 2025 edition, an estimated 15% of the UK population — roughly 10 million people — identified as neurodivergent, 41% of neurodivergent employees reported workplace challenges on a daily basis, and 51% had taken time off work specifically because of their neurodivergence (City & Guilds

Foundation, 2025). The 2026 edition found that gap *widening* rather than closing: employer confidence in supporting neurodivergent staff is rising, but employees report uneven support, slower access to adjustments, lower psychological safety, and more frequent microaggressions than the previous year (City & Guilds Foundation, 2026).

None of this reads as a niche concern. It reads as a mainstream, underbuilt part of how workplaces function.

What this looks like at your scale. Population-level percentages can feel abstract. Simple arithmetic on the numbers already cited above makes the scale concrete: in an organization of 200 people, City & Guilds' 15% figure suggests roughly 30 neurodivergent employees. Applying Gallup's disclosure findings to that group suggests roughly 11 of them aren't disclosing to any coworker, and roughly 14 skipped requesting accommodations during hiring. *This is illustrative math applied to the cited population figures, not a new measured finding — but it's a useful gut check for what these percentages mean inside an actual team.*

Limitations

This evidence base has boundaries worth stating plainly:

- **Geographic concentration.** The industry data leans heavily UK-specific (CIPD, City & Guilds Foundation), while Gallup's workforce data is largely US-weighted. Findings may not generalize evenly across labor markets, disclosure norms, or legal protections outside those regions.
- **Workplace-specific double empathy research is young.** Only one study in this brief (Szechy et al., 2024) tests the theory directly inside a workplace scenario. Most of the theoretical foundation comes from general social-interaction research whose workplace implications are inferred, not tested there directly.
- **Core experimental sample sizes are modest by psychology standards.** Crompton et al. (2020) tested 72 adults; Jones et al. (2024) tested 102 observers. Both are peer-reviewed and statistically significant, but neither is a large-population study, and replication at scale is still limited.
- **Self-report data carries known bias.** The masking and disclosure findings (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Gallup, 2025) rely on participants accurately reporting their own behavior and motivations, which is subject to recall bias and social desirability effects — people may underreport masking or overreport willingness to disclose.
- **The 2026 City & Guilds figures are qualitative, not exact.** The Foundation's site renders its precise percentage figures dynamically, which didn't come through on a standard fetch, so the 2026 edition is represented here in descriptive terms rather than specific numbers. See the note in the References section.

Where the Research Is Still Being Argued

A limitations section covers the boundaries of the evidence. This section covers something different: a live disagreement about the theory itself.

In 2025, psychologists Lucy Livingston, Luca Hargitai, and Punit Shah published a formal critique of the double empathy problem in *Psychological Review*, one of psychology's most rigorous theoretical journals. Their argument isn't that cross-neurotype communication difficulty is fictional — the Crompton data is hard to argue with. Their argument is narrower and more technical: that “double empathy problem” as a term has been stretched to cover too many different constructs at once (empathy,

rapport, information transfer, mentalizing), making it difficult to know exactly what's being tested or confirmed from one study to the next (Livingston, Hargitai, & Shah, 2025).

That's a fair critique of the *science*. It's also not a critique that undoes the core, testable claim NeuroMeet is built on — that mixed-neurotype interactions break down at a different rate than same-neurotype interactions, and that autistic people are not inherently worse at communication in general. That specific claim has now been replicated across multiple independent studies using different methods (Crompton et al., 2020; Szechy et al., 2024). What's genuinely unsettled is the theoretical machinery underneath — the *why* — not the basic *what*. Good research culture means holding both of those at once.

What This Means in Practice

Put the pieces together and a clear, non-abstract picture emerges:

1. Cross-neurotype communication difficulty is real, measurable, and bidirectional — not a one-sided deficit (Milton, 2012; Crompton et al., 2020).
2. In workplace-specific contexts, non-autistic people misread autistic behavior more often than autistic people do (Szechy et al., 2024) — which means training aimed exclusively at neurodivergent employees is training aimed at the wrong half of the problem.
3. The cost of that mismatch is currently absorbed almost entirely by neurodivergent employees, through masking, non-disclosure, and forgone accommodations (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023; Gallup, 2025).
4. Employer confidence and employee experience are diverging, not converging, even as awareness rises (City & Guilds Foundation, 2026).

That structural shift already has an applied proposal behind it, not just a diagnosis. Finke and Dunn (2025) reviewed the double empathy evidence base specifically through the lens of autistic belonging and proposed a practical framework for reducing empathy disconnects in cross-neurotype interactions: both parties, not just the autistic partner, actively reflecting on how the other person is perceiving and processing the exchange. That's the same mechanism NeuroMeet is built around — mutual reflection, not one-sided accommodation.

That's the gap NeuroMeet exists to close — not by asking one side to keep adapting alone, but by building the shared context that's been missing from both directions.

Where to Start

Diagnosis is only useful if it points somewhere. Five actions, each tied to a specific finding above:

1. **Stop aiming disclosure and communication training exclusively at neurodivergent employees.** Szechy et al. (2024) found the comprehension gap sits more heavily on the non-autistic side — 31.2% accuracy versus 50.7%. Training built for one side is training built for the smaller half of the problem. Format matters too: mandatory HR sensitivity training rarely includes neuroinclusion specifics, and when it does, it's typically a one-time checkbox exercise — completed because it's required, not necessarily retained. NeuroMeet is built to be leveraged in real time, at the moment a situation actually arises, not just once a year.
2. **Build mutual reflection into regular check-ins, not just onboarding.** Finke and Dunn (2025) found that closing empathy disconnects works best when both parties actively reflect on how the other is perceiving the exchange — a habit that fits naturally into 1:1s and team retros, not just a one-time training module.

3. **Treat non-disclosure and skipped accommodation requests as a signal about the workplace, not the employee.** With 37% not disclosing and 46% skipping accommodation requests during hiring because they expect stigma rather than support (Gallup, 2025), the fix is changing what happens after disclosure — not pressuring people to disclose more.
4. **Measure psychological safety and adjustment speed, not just awareness.** City & Guilds Foundation's 2026 data shows employer confidence rising while lived experience gets harder. Track the metrics that reflect actual experience — time-to-adjustment, safety scores — not just training completion or policy existence.
5. **Don't treat masking as a skill to admire.** Pryke-Hobbes et al. (2023) frames workplace masking as a defensive response to inadequate understanding, not a coping strength. The goal is reducing the need to mask, not building better maskers.

References

- CIPD. (2024). Neuroinclusion at work report 2024. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, in partnership with Uptimize.
- City & Guilds Foundation. (2025). Neurodiversity Index Report 2025. In partnership with Do-IT Solutions.
- City & Guilds Foundation. (2026). Neurodiversity Index Report 2026. In partnership with Do-IT Solutions.
- Figures from the 2026 edition are cited qualitatively in this brief; see Limitations.*
- Crompton, C. J., Ropar, D., Evans-Williams, C. V. M., Flynn, E. G., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2020). Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective. *Autism*, 24(7), 1704–1712.
- Finke, E. H., & Dunn, D. H. (2025). Neurodiversity and double empathy: Can empathy disconnects be mitigated to support autistic belonging? *Disability & Society*, 40(3), 727–750.
- Gallup. (2025). Neurodiversity in the Workplace. Gallup, Inc.
- Jones, D. R., Botha, M., Ackerman, R. A., King, K., & Sasson, N. J. (2024). Non-autistic observers both detect and demonstrate the double empathy problem when evaluating interactions between autistic and non-autistic adults. *Autism*, 28(8), 2053–2065.
- Livingston, L. A., Hargitai, L. D., & Shah, P. (2025). The double empathy problem: A derivation chain analysis and cautionary note. *Psychological Review*, 132(3), 744–757.
- Milton, D. E. M. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: The “double empathy problem.” *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883–887.
- Pryke-Hobbes, A., Davies, J., Heasman, B., Livesey, A., Walker, A., Pellicano, E., & Remington, A. (2023). The workplace masking experiences of autistic, non-autistic neurodivergent and neurotypical adults in the UK. *PLOS ONE*, 18(9), e0290001.
- Sasson, N. J., Faso, D. J., Nugent, J., Lovell, S., Kennedy, D. P., & Grossman, R. B. (2017). Neurotypical peers are less willing to interact with those with autism based on thin slice judgments. *Scientific Reports*, 7, 40700.
- Szechy, K. A., Turk, P. D., & O'Donnell, L. A. (2024). Autism and employment challenges: The double empathy problem and perceptions of an autistic employee in the workplace. *Autism in Adulthood*, 6(2), 205–217.
- Vogus, T. J. (2025). Creating a neuroinclusive profession: Overcoming the double empathy problem. *Journal of Management Studies*.

NeuroMeet is built by a well-researched advocate, not a clinical practitioner. This brief is informed by published, peer-reviewed research current as of August 2026 and is not a substitute for individual clinical guidance. Full citations are listed above for anyone who wants to go deeper.