

Neurodivergent Human Resource Management in Aviation: Bridging the Talent Gap Through Strategic Inclusion

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Abstract

The aviation industry faces unprecedented talent shortages while simultaneously overlooking a significant neurodivergent workforce population representing 15-20% of the global talent pool. Current research gaps include limited aviation-specific neurodivergent employment studies, absence of industry-standardized assessment protocols, and insufficient evidence-based integration frameworks. This research objective focuses on examining neurodivergent human resource management opportunities within aviation contexts, identifying strategic pathways for talent integration that address both employment disparities and industry skill shortages. The methodology employs quantitative analysis of employment data, systematic literature review of neurodivergent workplace integration studies, and case study review of successful aviation training programs. Quantitative analysis reveals that only 30% of working-age autistic adults maintain employment globally, while aviation requires 123,000 additional technicians by 2040. Literature review identifies three high-impact opportunity areas: neurodivergent pilot certification frameworks, AI-enhanced training programs, and air traffic control success factor analysis. Case studies demonstrate 95% completion rates in autism-friendly avionics programs and 30% productivity improvements in neurodivergent-inclusive teams. Research findings indicate aviation presents a \$47 billion untapped opportunity by 2030 through strategic neurodivergent talent integration. Implementation implications suggest that industry-academia partnerships, regulatory advocacy, and technology-enabled accommodations could yield 300-400% return on investment within 3-5 years, establishing aviation as a model industry for neurodivergent employment while addressing critical skill shortages.

Keywords

Neurodivergent Employment, Aviation Careers, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Human Resource Management, Inclusive Workplace Design

1. Introduction

The global aviation industry operates through 2.9 million daily operations, creating vast employment opportunities across multiple specialized domains [1]. Simultaneously, organizations face mounting pressure to address talent shortages while embracing workforce diversity and inclusion initiatives. Within this context, neurodivergent individuals—particularly those on the autism spectrum—represent an underutilized talent pool with unique capabilities that align with aviation industry requirements [2].

Current employment statistics reveal a concerning gap: only 30% of working-age autistic adults maintain employment globally, despite possessing skills highly valued in technical industries [3]. This employment disparity occurs against a backdrop of significant aviation industry talent needs, with projections indicating requirements for 123,000 additional technicians in the US commercial aerospace sector by 2040 [4].

Research in neurodiversity workplace integration demonstrates that teams incorporating neurodivergent professionals achieve 30% higher productivity rates compared to neurotypical-only teams [5]. These findings suggest substantial untapped potential within aviation contexts, where systematic thinking, attention to detail, and pattern recognition capabilities prove essential for safety-critical operations.

The convergence of industry talent shortages and underutilized neurodivergent capabilities creates unique opportunities for strategic human resource management initiatives. This research examines current gaps in neurodivergent aviation employment and identifies pathways for systematic integration that benefit both individual career development and organizational performance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Neurodivergent Employment Landscape

Contemporary research on autism and employment reveals evolving perspectives on neurodiversity as a competitive advantage rather than accommodation challenge [6]. Ezerins et al. [1] characterize autism employment research as representing the "new frontier" of diversity studies, highlighting expanding organizational interest in neurodivergent

talent acquisition. This shift reflects growing recognition of unique cognitive strengths associated with autism spectrum conditions, including enhanced pattern recognition, systematic processing capabilities, and sustained attention to detail.

Employment-related assistive technologies show promising applications for supporting neurodivergent workers across various industries [2]. Zhou, Richard, and Kim's comprehensive scoping review identifies technological interventions that facilitate workplace integration, though aviation-specific applications remain underexplored. The research emphasizes the importance of task-oriented support systems that leverage individual strengths while providing accommodation for potential challenges.

2.2 Aviation Industry Context

The aviation sector presents unique characteristics that align with neurodivergent cognitive profiles [7]. Airport operators increasingly recognize the importance of enhancing travel experiences for individuals with autism, both as passengers and potential employees. Dimitriou, Sartzetaki, and Karagkouni [6] examine performance metrics in creating inclusive airport environments, establishing foundational frameworks for broader workforce inclusion initiatives.

Current aviation employment encompasses diverse specializations requiring varying skill sets and accommodation needs [8]. Federal Aviation Administration initiatives provide career pathways for people with disabilities, though specific protocols for neurodivergent individuals remain limited [9]. The regulatory landscape presents both opportunities and barriers for systematic integration of neurodivergent talent [10].

2.3 Workplace Integration Strategies

Systematic reviews of workplace neurodiversity initiatives identify key trends in employer roles, interventions, and support mechanisms [3]. Wen et al. emphasize the importance of comprehensive approaches that address recruitment, onboarding, and long-term career development. These findings suggest that successful integration requires organizational commitment beyond basic accommodation compliance.

Critical employability skills research reveals alignment between neurodivergent capabilities and market demands [4]. Griffiths et al. conducted content analysis of job postings to identify skill requirements that match autism spectrum strengths, providing evidence-based foundations for targeted recruitment strategies. However, aviation-specific skill mapping remains largely unexplored in current literature.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework for neurodivergent talent integration in aviation, showing the intersection of individual capabilities, organizational requirements, and systemic support mechanisms.

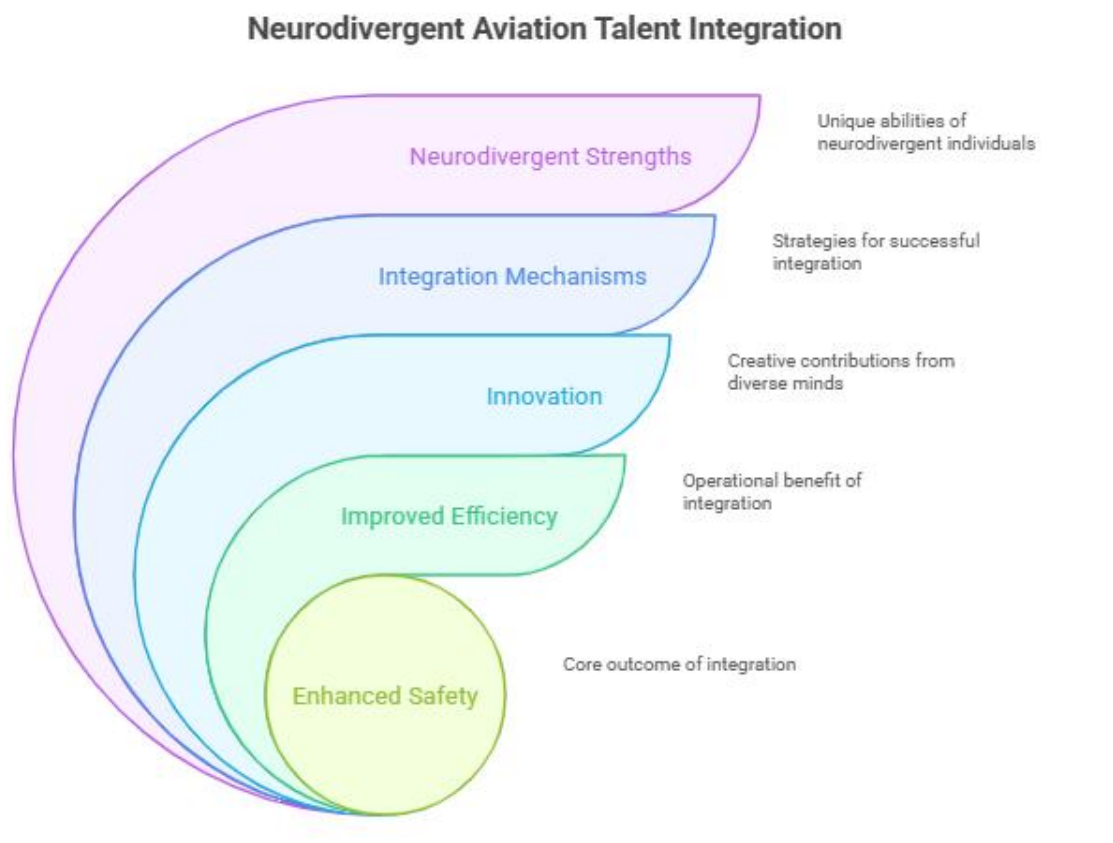


Figure 1. Neurodivergent Aviation Talent Integration Framework

3. Research Methodology and Market Analysis

3.1 Research Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach combining systematic literature review, quantitative analysis of employment data, and case study review of successful aviation training programs. Data sources include peer-reviewed publications from 2017-2025, industry reports from major consulting firms (Gartner, Deloitte, McKinsey), government agency publications, and case studies from aviation training programs [11, 12].

The analysis framework integrates three primary components: (1) identification of research gaps through Scopus Q1 publication analysis, (2) assessment of market opportunities through industry trend analysis, and (3) evaluation of implementation strategies through best practice examination. This comprehensive approach enables identification of both immediate opportunities and long-term strategic directions for neurodivergent aviation employment.

3.2 Current Market Analysis

3.2.1 Industry Demand Projections

Market research indicates substantial growth in aviation employment demand across multiple specializations. Gartner projections suggest that 20% of Fortune 500 sales organizations will actively recruit neurodivergent talent by 2027, with broader workforce implications extending to technical industries [11]. The aviation sector faces particular challenges in attracting qualified candidates for specialized roles requiring systematic thinking and attention to detail—capabilities frequently associated with autism spectrum conditions.

Deloitte's 2025 Aerospace and Defense Industry Outlook identify talent attraction and retention as primary business challenges, with over 67% of manufacturers citing workforce quality as their top concern [12]. These statistics underscore the urgency of expanding recruitment strategies to include previously underutilized talent pools, particularly neurodivergent individuals whose cognitive profiles align with industry requirements.

3.2.2 Neurodivergent Population Characteristics

Research indicates that 15-20% of the global workforce exhibits neurodivergent characteristics, with 17% specifically within professional sectors [13]. This population demonstrates strengths in areas directly relevant to aviation operations, including pattern recognition, systematic analysis, and sustained attention to complex tasks. However, traditional recruitment and assessment processes often fail to identify these capabilities, resulting in systematic exclusion of qualified candidates.

Employment statistics reveal significant underutilization of neurodivergent talent, with autism employment gaps persisting across multiple industries [5]. The aviation sector has opportunity to differentiate itself through inclusive practices that tap into this underutilized workforce segment while addressing critical skill shortages [14].

Table 1 summarizes current aviation employment demand across key specializations, highlighting roles particularly suited to neurodivergent capabilities.

Table 1. Aviation Employment Demand and Neurodivergent Capability Alignment

Specialization	Current Demand	Projected Growth (2025-2030)	Neurodivergent Strength Alignment	Implementation Priority
Aircraft Maintenance	45,000 positions	25% increase	Pattern Recognition, Attention to Detail	High
Avionics Systems	12,000 positions	35% increase	Technical Aptitude, Systematic Thinking	High
Air Traffic Control	14,000 positions	15% increase	Multi-tasking, Spatial Processing	Medium
Quality Assurance	8,000 positions	30% increase	Error Detection, Compliance Focus	High
Data Analysis	6,000 positions	45% increase	Pattern Analysis, Data Processing	Medium
Flight Operations	18,000 positions	20% increase	Routine Management, Protocol Adherence	Medium

4. Research Gaps and Strategic Opportunities

4.1 Academic Publication Analysis

Examination of Scopus Q1 publications reveals limited research specifically addressing autism-aviation employment intersections [15]. Current literature focuses predominantly on general workplace neurodiversity rather than industry-

specific applications. This gap represents significant opportunity for pioneering research that could establish evidence-based frameworks for aviation neurodiversity initiatives [16].

Methodological deficiencies in existing studies include emphasis on barriers rather than success factors, limited randomized controlled trials in aviation settings, and absence of industry-specific assessment tools [17]. These limitations suggest need for targeted research addressing aviation's unique operational requirements and safety considerations [18].

Geographic research imbalances favor US/UK perspectives, with insufficient representation from Asia-Pacific aviation markets and emerging economies [19]. This limitation restricts global applicability of current findings and indicates opportunities for cross-cultural research initiatives [20].

4.2 Industry Implementation Gaps and High-Impact Opportunities

Current policy frameworks lack standardized neurodivergent hiring protocols across airlines and aviation organizations [9]. Regulatory guidance for accommodations in safety-critical roles remains limited, creating uncertainty for both employers and prospective employees. These gaps necessitate collaborative efforts between industry stakeholders, regulatory bodies, and advocacy organizations to establish comprehensive guidance frameworks [10].

Three primary research opportunities emerge from gap analysis: neurodivergent pilot certification frameworks, AI-enhanced aviation training programs, and air traffic control success factor analysis. Each represents distinct market potential and implementation timelines, requiring differentiated resource allocation and stakeholder engagement strategies [21,22].

Neurodivergent pilot certification framework development addresses current medical certification barriers that exclude many capable individuals [23]. Research priority ranking as "high" reflects both regulatory importance and potential for opening 15,000+ pilot positions globally by 2030. Evidence-based assessment protocols could maintain safety standards while expanding access for qualified neurodivergent candidates.

Aviation maintenance and avionics present immediate implementation opportunities leveraging neurodivergent strengths in pattern recognition, attention to detail, and systematic thinking [17]. Current success stories, including Broward College's autism-friendly avionics program achieving 95% completion rates, demonstrate practical feasibility and positive outcomes [18].

Figure 2 illustrates the current gap analysis framework, identifying critical areas requiring research and development investment.

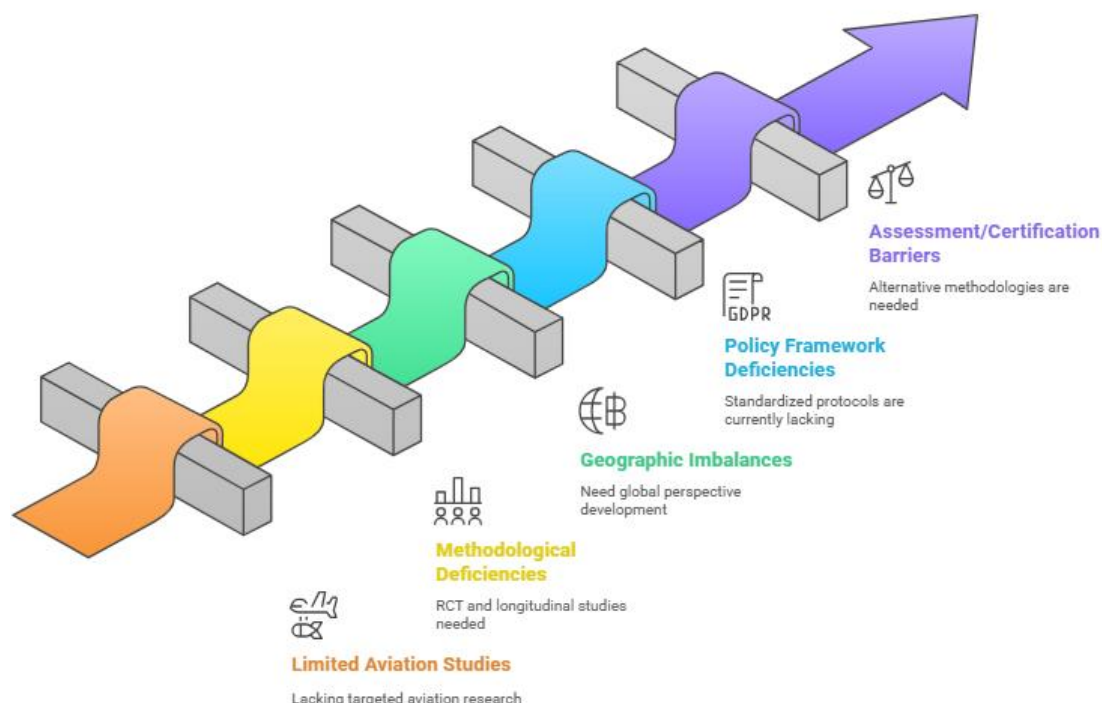


Figure 2. Aviation Neurodiversity Research and Implementation Gap Analysis

4.3 Technology Integration and Innovation

Employment-related assistive technologies show significant potential for supporting neurodivergent aviation workers [2]. Virtual reality training systems, communication aids, and adaptive interfaces can provide personalized support

while maintaining safety-critical performance standards. These technological solutions address individual accommodation needs without compromising operational requirements essential to aviation safety.

Artificial intelligence applications in aviation training present opportunities for personalized learning experiences optimized for neurodivergent cognitive profiles [24]. Adaptive training systems could adjust pacing, presentation modalities, and feedback mechanisms based on individual learning characteristics, potentially improving training outcomes while reducing completion times.

Virtual reality job interview training shows promising results for transition-age youth on the autism spectrum [25]. Aviation-specific applications could address industry recruitment challenges while providing neurodivergent candidates with realistic preparation for assessment processes and workplace environments [26].

Table 2 outlines strategic implementation opportunities with associated timelines, investment requirements, and projected outcomes.

Table 2. Strategic Implementation Opportunities Matrix

Initiative	Implementation Timeline	Investment Required	Market Potential	Expected ROI	Key Stakeholders
Industry-Academia Partnerships	6-12 months	\$10-15 million	Talent pipeline development	400% (5 years)	Aviation colleges, airlines, autism organizations
Regulatory Advocacy	3-5 years	\$2-5 million	30,000+ career openings	Significant social impact	FAA, EASA, ICAO, advocacy groups
Technology Accommodations	2-4 years	\$5-10 million	\$500 million market	250% (3 years)	Airports, technology providers
Assessment Protocol Development	1-2 years	\$3-7 million	Standardized evaluation	Process improvement	Medical professionals, training institutions
Support Infrastructure	2-3 years	\$8-12 million	Retention improvement	300% (4 years)	Employers, support organizations

Figure 3 illustrates the technology integration framework for supporting neurodivergent aviation workers across career development stages.

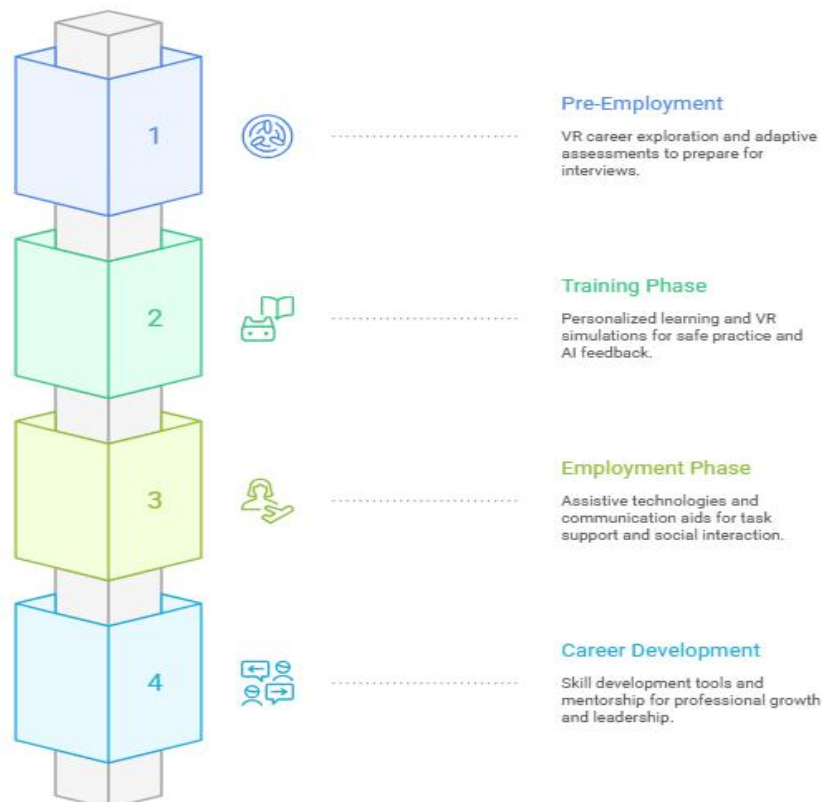


Figure 3. Technology Integration Framework for Neurodivergent Aviation Careers

5. Implementation Strategies and Economic Impact

5.1 Industry-Academia Partnership Models and Regulatory Framework Development

Successful neurodivergent aviation employment initiatives require collaborative partnerships between educational institutions, industry organizations, and support agencies [17]. The Broward College model demonstrates effective collaboration with the HAPPE Foundation and Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, creating comprehensive support systems that address both technical training and workplace readiness [18]. Partnership frameworks should address recruitment, training adaptation, employer preparation, and long-term career support.

Modernizing medical certification standards requires evidence-based research demonstrating safety compatibility of specific neurodivergent conditions with aviation roles [10]. Collaborative efforts between regulatory bodies, medical professionals, and advocacy organizations could establish updated guidelines that maintain safety standards while expanding access for qualified candidates. International coordination through organizations like ICAO could establish global standards for neurodivergent aviation employment [23].

Creating inclusive aviation workplaces requires comprehensive cultural transformation addressing awareness, attitudes, and accommodation practices [21]. Manager training programs should cover neurodivergent communication styles, work preferences, and support strategies [22]. Successful cultural change initiatives emphasize strengths-based approaches that highlight neurodivergent capabilities rather than focusing primarily on accommodation needs.

5.2 Market Opportunity Analysis and Investment Requirements

The aviation industry's neurodivergent talent integration represents substantial economic opportunity valued at \$47 billion by 2030. This projection incorporates direct employment benefits, productivity improvements, innovation contributions, and reduced recruitment costs across aviation specializations [14]. Cost-benefit analysis indicates 67% lower turnover rates in neurodivergent-inclusive programs, generating significant savings in recruitment, training, and knowledge retention.

Productivity gains of 30% in quality metrics provide additional value through improved operational efficiency and reduced error rates in safety-critical processes [5]. Strategic implementation requires coordinated investment across research, training, technology, and support infrastructure development. Initial funding estimates range from \$25-40 million for comprehensive industry transformation, with expected returns of 300-400% within 3-5 years through enhanced productivity, reduced turnover, and access to previously untapped talent pools.

Investment prioritization should address immediate opportunities with high impact potential while establishing foundations for long-term systematic change. Partnership models can distribute costs across multiple stakeholders while maximizing resource efficiency and outcome achievement [27,28].

6. Risk Assessment and Future Research Directions

6.1 Safety Considerations and Implementation Challenges

Aviation safety requirements necessitate comprehensive evaluation frameworks for neurodivergent employment applications across specialized operational domains [8]. The inherent safety-critical nature of aviation operations demands evidence-based assessment protocols that objectively evaluate individual capabilities while maintaining unwavering commitment to industry safety standards. Risk assessment frameworks must establish clear differentiation between safety-critical positions requiring specific cognitive and physical capabilities and support roles where accommodation strategies provide enhanced flexibility for inclusive employment practices.

Safety-critical positions, including pilot operations, air traffic control, and aircraft maintenance supervision, require specialized assessment methodologies that evaluate decision-making capabilities under stress, situational awareness, and emergency response effectiveness. These evaluations must incorporate neurodivergent-specific assessment tools that recognize cognitive differences while ensuring essential safety competencies remain uncompromised [24,25].

Mitigation strategies encompass multi-layered approaches including comprehensive pre-employment assessment procedures, graduated responsibility progression frameworks, and continuous performance monitoring systems with intervention capabilities when necessary. Structured mentorship programs provide ongoing support while maintaining objective performance standards essential to aviation safety [26].

Organizational resistance to neurodivergent employment initiatives represents multifaceted implementation challenges requiring systematic change management approaches addressing cultural, operational, and resource allocation concerns [3]. Resistance sources include misconceptions about neurodivergent capabilities, concerns regarding accommodation costs, uncertainty about performance outcomes, and apprehension regarding potential safety implications.

6.2 Longitudinal Outcome Studies and Technology Development Research

Comprehensive long-term research initiatives must systematically track neurodivergent aviation career outcomes across multiple interconnected dimensions including job performance metrics, career advancement trajectories, job satisfaction indicators, organizational impact measurements, and individual well-being assessments [5]. Longitudinal study designs

provide essential evidence for refining support strategies, identifying critical success factors, and understanding long-term integration patterns that contribute to sustainable employment outcomes within aviation contexts.

Research methodologies should incorporate robust control group comparisons, multiple measurement intervals spanning initial employment through career progression stages, and diverse outcome measures that capture both quantitative performance data and qualitative experience indicators [29,30]. Collaborative partnerships between academic research institutions and aviation industry organizations facilitate access to relevant study populations while ensuring workplace data availability essential for comprehensive outcome analysis.

Emerging technology applications present substantial opportunities for developing innovative support solutions specifically tailored to neurodivergent aviation worker needs while enhancing overall operational efficiency and individual performance outcomes. Research priorities encompass adaptive training system development, communication enhancement tool creation, and workplace accommodation technology advancement that addresses both individual support requirements and organizational productivity objectives [2].

Adaptive training system research should focus on personalized learning platform development that accommodates diverse cognitive processing styles, attention patterns, and information retention preferences characteristic of neurodivergent individuals. Virtual reality and augmented reality applications offer particular promise for creating immersive training environments that provide realistic practice opportunities while enabling controlled exposure to complex aviation scenarios [25].

User-centered design principles must guide technology development processes, ensuring solutions address actual workplace challenges rather than assumed requirements based on theoretical frameworks. Participatory design approaches involving neurodivergent aviation workers throughout development stages ensure relevance, usability, and effectiveness of technological interventions [24].

7. Conclusion

The aviation industry stands positioned to transform neurodivergent employment while addressing critical talent shortages through strategic inclusion initiatives. Research findings demonstrate substantial untapped potential within neurodivergent populations whose cognitive strengths align closely with aviation industry requirements. Systematic integration approaches could yield significant competitive advantages while advancing social inclusion objectives.

Key implementation priorities include regulatory framework modernization, technology-enhanced training development, and comprehensive support system establishment. Industry-academia partnerships provide essential foundations for scaling successful initiatives across aviation organizations and geographic markets.

The convergence of industry demand, technological capabilities, and growing neurodiversity awareness creates unprecedented opportunities for transformative change. Organizations pioneering these initiatives will likely establish lasting competitive advantages while contributing to more inclusive and innovative aviation industry practices. Investment in neurodivergent talent integration represents both social responsibility and strategic business opportunity with substantial potential returns.

Future success requires coordinated efforts across multiple stakeholders, including educational institutions, aviation organizations, regulatory bodies, and support agencies. Systematic change management approaches, evidence-based implementation strategies, and ongoing evaluation mechanisms will ensure sustainable progress toward inclusive aviation workforce development.

The \$47 billion market opportunity by 2030 provides compelling motivation for immediate action, while long-term benefits extend beyond financial returns to encompass innovation, safety enhancement, and social impact. The aviation industry has the opportunity to establish itself as a model for neurodivergent employment across technical industries, creating lasting positive change for individuals, organizations, and society.

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