DISABILITY IN THE WORKPLACE

WHAT IS DISABILITY?

A disability is a limitation, impairment or restriction that may limit full and effective participation in society—it may be physical, mental, intellectual or sensory.

SUPPORTING WORKERS WITH DISABILITY

Approximately 15 per cent of the working age population has a reported disability.¹ The prevalence of disability is expected to increase in the coming decades due to an anticipated rise in chronic disease and an ageing population.

Disability is significantly under-represented in the Australian Public Service (APS). According to the State of the Service Report 2011-12, only 2.9 per cent of people in the APS have a reported disability². Some of this discrepancy can be accounted for by differences in how disability is defined. Under-reporting of disability is also a factor; some workers fear to disclose disability as this may lead to discrimination.

Organisations have a number of key challenges in tackling this inconsistency. These include:

> actively promoting the employment of people with a disability to reflect the diversity of the broader Australian community
> supporting existing workers with a disability so they do not leave the workplace for the wrong reasons.

BENEFITS OF EMPOWERING PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY TO CONTRIBUTE

There is a strong business case for including people with a disability in the workplace. Employers report significant benefits to the organisation as a result of employing people with a disability³.

> Workers with a disability have, on average, higher job retention and better attendance rates than those without one.⁴
> There is little difference between people with a disability and others when comparing levels of productivity.⁵
> Workers with a disability have fewer work health and safety (WHS) incidents. Furthermore, workers’ compensation costs and WHS costs for workers with a disability are much lower compared to the average worker.

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⁴ Ibid., p.29.
⁵ Ibid., p.30.
> People with a disability currently self-select themselves into ‘safe’ jobs, that is, jobs with little or no risk of traumatic injury.\(^6\)

> An analysis of available employment skills against foreseeable market demand indicates people with a disability have skills that correspond to the skill needs of the workforce.\(^7\)

> Most people with a disability need no workplace modifications, and if they are needed, they are usually simple and inexpensive.\(^8\)

**WHAT IS PREVENTING EMPLOYMENT OF PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY?**

> ‘After physical barriers have been removed, the most significant barrier for people with disabilities appears to be the stereotypical assumptions and attitudes of employers about what people with a disability can and cannot do.’

Australian Network on Disability

Employers can actively challenge attitudes and stereotypes to enable people with a disability to participate without prejudice, and overcome the following issues:

> Different impairments elicit different degrees of prejudice, with the strongest prejudice exhibited towards people with mental health conditions.\(^9\)

> People with mental illness and intellectual impairments have the lowest employment rates.\(^10\)

**CREATING DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES**

The Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) has developed an APS Disability Employment Strategy that focuses on what workplaces can do to build a diverse and inclusive workplace. Initiatives include:

> **Fostering inclusive cultures.** Finding opportunities to incorporate diversity messages into daily activities. Celebrating events such as Carers Week, Mental Health Week and International Day of People with Disability to promote understanding of people with a disability and encourage support for their dignity, rights and wellbeing.

> **Increasing demand for candidates with disability.** Promoting the benefits of the integration of people with a disability in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life.

> **Improving recruitment processes.** Enable more candidates with a disability to enter the APS. It is important for employers to be clear about the inherent requirements of the job so people with disability can self-select.

> **Improving leadership.** Educating and empowering leaders to be open to flexible working arrangements and to implement reasonable workplace modifications and adjustments.

> **Offering reasonable adjustments.** Examples of adjustments include a short time off work, workload management, flexible working arrangements, a change of workspace and technological assistance.

The result of these initiatives is a disability confident organisation—a healthy environment that is supportive and flexible, where every individual is treated as an individual.


\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Australian Public Service Commission, Ability at work: Tapping the talent of people with disability, p.28.


\(^10\) Ibid., p.237.
EMPLOYER DUTIES TO WORKERS WITH A DISABILITY

The Work Health and Safety Act 2011 aims to ensure the health and safety of all workers. People who have a duty to ensure health and safety must eliminate risks to health and safety, so far as is reasonably practicable. If it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate risks, then they must minimise them so far as is reasonably practicable. It is important to remember the definition of health includes both physical and psychological health.

MORE INFORMATION

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<td>Australian Network on Disability</td>
<td><a href="http://www.and.org.au/pages/about.html">www.and.org.au/pages/about.html</a></td>
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<td>Australian Safety and Compensation Council, December 2006</td>
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