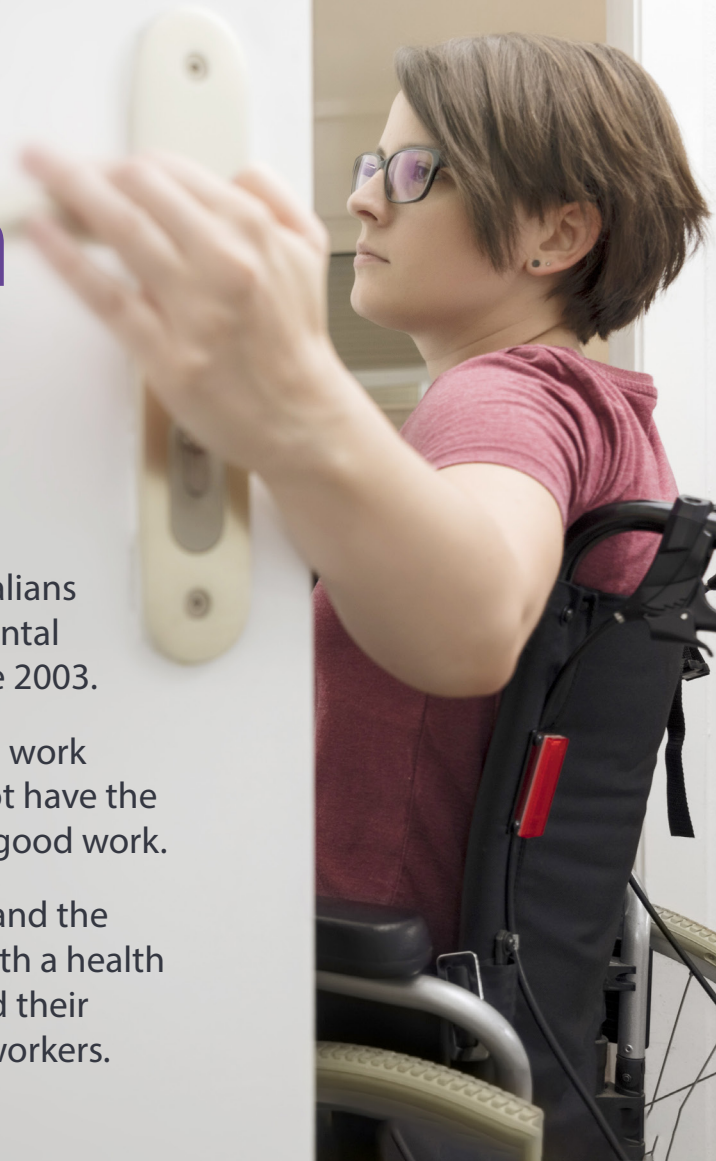# Employer Mobilisation Research

Workforce participation for working age Australians with a temporary or permanent physical or mental health conditions has remained the same since 2003.

Employers play an important role in improving work participation rates for these people yet may not have the resources, capability or willingness to provide good work.

This project was undertaken to better understand the barriers for employers in supporting people with a health condition or disability and to find ways to build their capability to recruit and accommodate these workers.
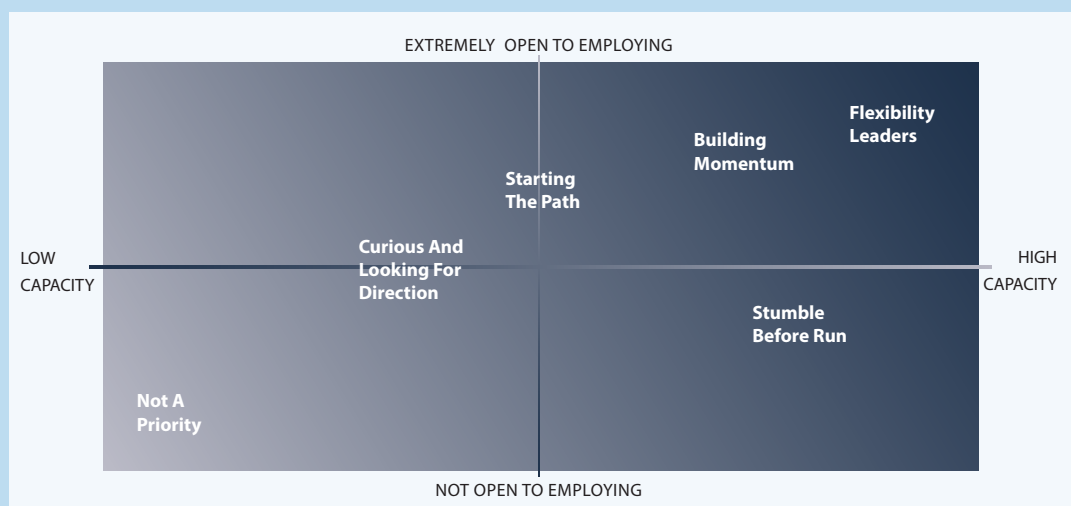
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Stage One — Segments At-A-Glance

A large quantitative study of 2,457 managers responsible for recruitment, retention and/or return to work in Australian private businesses and public sector organisations was undertaken to determine **employer behaviours, attitudes and intentions towards recruiting, supporting and accommodating people experiencing temporary or permanent physical or psychological health conditions or disabilities.**

Of the managers, 1,441 were from private sector businesses; 1,016 participants were from Australian public sector and non-government organisations). This was followed up with 35 one-on-one depth interviews to gain deeper insight into the experiences of six key employer segments that emerged from the study.
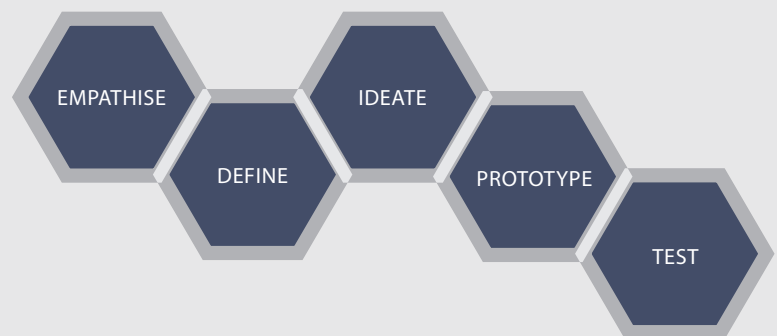
41% **Not A Priority** – struggle to see how supporting people should be their focus

17% **Curious And Looking For Direction** – little insight into or interest in pursuing organisational supports available

12% **Starting The Path** – individual interest in supporting people but are stymied by resourcing/process issues and lack of leadership buy in

8% **Building Momentum** – open to supporting people – but rigid (expect employees to fit into the company)

18% **Stumble Before Run** – passive when it comes to recruiting and supporting people with disability and health conditions

4% **Flexibility Leaders** – strategic flexibility in structuring the workplace and roles – for all workers

Quadrant of employer segments

Identify and test live 'interventions' with two volunteer partner organisations

Human Centred Design approach

Spring-boarding from the Stage One research, a deep exploration of each trial partner's experience was conducted to empathise with each organisation's challenges and ambitions.

Co-design workshops were conducted to define common employer issues, friction points and aspirations to provide a basis for ideation and ultimately inform the intervention prototypes crafted and tested in the live trials.

EMPATHISE

DEFINE

IDEATE

PROTOTYPE

TEST

Common challenges raised by employers

- **Lack of understanding or education** – understanding of disability and work accommodation is poor.

- **Constraints of job design** – most have not considered job design beyond basic modification.

- **Organisation size** – smaller businesses express stronger concerns around lack of support and resources.

- **Social context and deficit mindset** – prevalence of unconscious bias and a focus on limitations and constraints.

- **Hidden disability and confidentiality** – social stigma, fear of job security or stymied careers means businesses (especially large) believe the scope of disability in their business is unknown.

- **Morale boost but performance uncertainty** – while the positive impact on workplace morale is easily understood, businesses are less likely to assume that there can be a productivity benefit.

- **Separation of recruitment, retention and return to work** – policies and practices across hiring, retention and RTW are often separated and is a barrier to holistic staff wellbeing.

What employers want support with

- Retention through peer sharing
- Hiring policies and procedures
- Team culture
- Job design
- Identifying relevant roles
- Workplace policy
- Mental health education and management
- Education and training

What employers are saying

WORKPLACE POLICY

As a contributor towards supporting someone with a disability or psychological issue, I want a policy which clearly shows support, expectations, commitment so that we have a consistent approach and can better retain people with disabilities.

IDENTIFY RELEVANT ROLES

As a manager, I want to identify job share roles and/or specific roles that cater to different disabilities so I can create meaningful work for people with varying abilities.

JOB DESIGN

As an employer, I want to recruit and retain people in all stages of their lives, so that people feel valued and have equal career opportunities. As an employee, I would like to know that my job can be redesigned in a flexible way, so that it can accommodate a need that I have.

WORKPLACE CULTURE

As an employer, I want to model an inclusive safe culture in my workplace to model zero tolerance for incivility and bullying behaviour so that all employees can enjoy a safe and caring and inclusive work environment.

RETENTION THROUGH PEER SHARING

As a manager, I want peer to peer management support (via managers who have successfully and unsuccessfully managed a person with a disability who supported each other and learn from each other's experiences) so we can continue to improve how we work with people with disabilities.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

As a manager, I want one source of truth so I can gain access to education tools to assist with any situation including tried and tested industry standard policies to help my organization and its reputation.

Stage Two - Intervention Trial Results

TRIAL ORGANISATION ONE

The goal was to assist four team members on a path to medical retirement find alternative and meaningful work.

Outcomes:

• Progressed further as Flexibility Leaders.

• Seven in ten (72%) surveyed are open to employing someone with a temporary psychological health condition or disability (previously 56%).

• Significant increases in the perceived availability of roles for people with Asperger's Syndrome (up from 85% to 100%), and people with chronic or recurring discomfort (up from 78% to 96%).

Organisational view of trial success:

• The management team has a learning mindset and recognise multiple learnings from the trial design and live pilot process.

• The pilot has helped four people re-evaluate their employment future with one-on-one coaching and upskilling.

• The organisation identified a new means to support injured staff and find meaningful work earlier than present, thus facilitating candidates into meaningful work sooner and thereby reducing risk.

• The pilot was a joint trial between HR and Injury Management, the two main areas in People and Culture, and so learnings were shared across these often-independent areas.

TRIAL ORGANISATION TWO

The goal was to develop a diverse support group that provides a buddy/accessibility coach to support new hires and existing staff with a temporary or permanent disability. This includes being a go-to resource for managers and teams.
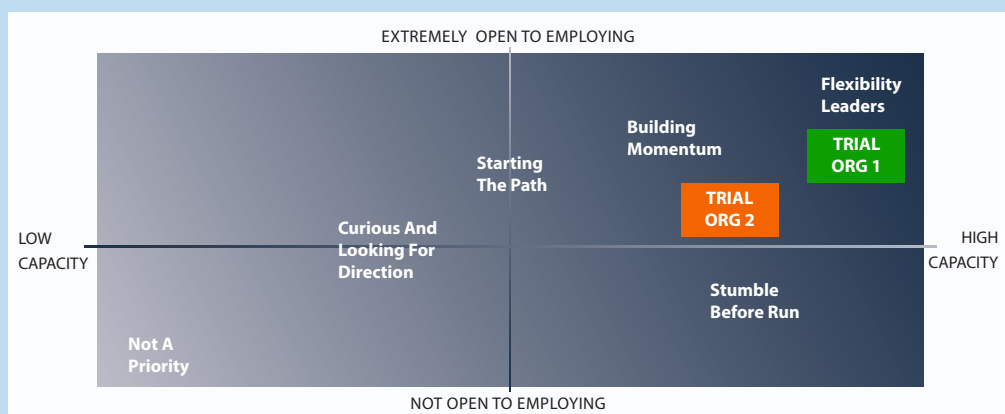
Outcomes:

• All but three of the 16 managers were open to the possibility of employing someone with a temporary psychological health conditions (compared to five of ten at the pre-measure.

• All but five of the 16 managers were open to the possibility of employing someone with a permanent psychological health conditions (compared to five of 10 at the pre-measure).

Organisational view of trial success:

• The trial generated good support for the tested buddy concept and the underlying premise of inclusive care for employees with all abilities. People (outside of the buddy unit) have seen the benefit and management has made a commitment to continue the buddy program beyond this project trial.

• Qualitatively, the trial team report increases in empathy and inclusion and the recognition of individual's different needs. This has created an increased aim for equitable access to products, services and information for staff of all abilities.

• The trial challenged the assumption that staff will ask for help or resources when they need it, revealing that this is not always the case. Checking in (from the buddy) helps to talk about what could help someone work more effectively.

Quadrant of employer segments showing trial organisation positions

Based on the specific outcomes of the employer trials and the learnings gathered over the project, the summary of recommendations for employers and the Collaborative Partnership are summarised as follows.

Adopt a test and learn mindset:
This mindset is a key step in transitioning from ambition to action, combining curiosity (what if we…?) with adaptability (willingness to challenging BAU) " It is critical that failures are recognised as inevitable and essential learning opportunities".

Communicating experience fuels momentum:
Creating awareness in the organisation of work being done can build momentum, foster wider confidence and sense of permission to do more.

Managers are linchpins:
They have the power to enable or block meaningful change depending on their mindset, experience and/or skillset.

Establish shared language and vision:
Strong cultures are typically built on shared values or subscription to an investment mindset versus a compliance mindset.

"The business has the right culture and temperament to support a disability strategy and/or initiative. It is understood that disability / health conditions touch a lot of people – either directly or through friends and family."

"We do it because it works."

Education and reframing a strengths-based culture:
Key to this is reframing the deficit mindset (which sees disability and health conditions as a burden or limitation) as a critical first step.

"I am a small business owner. I employ someone with a disability. It was tough work when I first hired him. I had to put in a lot of effort to work because I had to really support this person initially and also educate other staff members about his needs. He now flourishes and is a valued member."

Top down leadership combined with permission to act:
Success requires the overt endorsement of senior management. Creating a sense of ownership and responsibility beyond management can take engagement to another level.

"When the team are involved it is not just a management thing."

Create a multi-pronged social campaign to create widespread recognition of the importance of meaningful work for all to:

- start conversations – in businesses, between businesses, across society
- communicate evidence of multiple levels of value (to the individual, the business and society) to disrupt BAU thinking
- appeal to the range of employer motivations (i.e. compliance or investment, the right thing to do or desire to be best practice) to engage and signal relevance to the broad employer market
- alert employers to the experience they may already have - accommodating staff with conditions or disabilities - without having formally recognised this will have the dual benefit of signalling the community wide relevance and may start to build a sense of capability to do so again
- encourage all employers to make small changes to gain/build on experience – as evidence in stage one identified direct experience is the path to further experience.

Build a community of interest to establish a sense of solidarity and greater accountability.

Create a resource hub or portal to enable sharing of experiences, tools and processes of leaders. This can include a array of (accessible) materials, in different formats (printed, video, interactive) as well as a simple directory to connect visitor to services, subsidies, tools, mentors and more.

The Employer Mobilisation Research Stage Two: Intervention Trial Report was commissioned on behalf of the Collaborative Partnership.

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