

# Leading From The Front?

*Research on Disability Employment  
in the Victorian Disability Sector*

## **SUMMARY**

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**ADDE**



**Australians for  
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**Prepared by Equity Research Centre  
On behalf of Australians for Disability  
and Diversity Employment (ADDE)  
and Action for Community Living (ACL)**

## Introduction

In July 2007, a group concerned with the issue of disability and employment, Australians for Disability and Diversity in Employment (ADDE), commissioned the Equity Research Centre to undertake research on disability employment within the Victorian disability services sector. The research was funded by the Reichstein Foundation, ANZ Trustees and the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust and aimed to investigate the disability employment policies and practices of Victorian disability organisations, not only to fill a gap in research in disability employment within the sector, but also to indicate future areas for action, advocacy, research and documentation.

Forty-five organisations responded to an on-line survey sent to 165 employers in the disability sector in September and October 2007. HR staff were targeted in the mail-out. Surveys focused on quantitative information about policies and staff numbers and also asked respondents to describe initiatives undertaken to increase the number of staff with disabilities, and the benefits and challenges they associated with such initiatives.

In February and March 2008 the Equity Research Centre conducted interviews with five organisations to document in more detail disability employment practices and experiences. Interviews focused on the way organisations implement cultural change, policy settings and current disability employment practices, and how they perceive the benefits, challenges, and future directions of the employment of people with disabilities within their organisations.

This paper summarises the context for this research, describes the key findings, and discusses the implications of these findings for the employment of people with disabilities in the disability sector. It also sets out key future directions that the Victorian disability sector could take to lead from the front in disability employment.

## Lessons from the literature

### Australia's poor performance

It is well recognised that Australia has a poor record in disability employment. In 2003, 1.3 million Australians were restricted in their schooling or employment because of a disability or impairment, and 0.7 million of those were under the age of 65 (AIHS, 2007). The OECD reported that Australia ranked 13 out of 19 OECD countries on the overall employment rate for people with a disability. Australian people with disability had a 53% workforce participation rate overall compared to 81% of those without a disability (ABS 2003), and those with profound disability had a much lower participation rate of 15%.

### Government not leading

Despite a good national legislative and policy environment, the participation of people with disabilities in the labour force has improved little in the past two decades. Indeed, the number of people with disability employed by the Australian Public Service has actually decreased by 20% since 1997. Government leadership is required, both by example of its own practice and by the provision of funds to assist organisations and individuals to overcome the considerable costs of employment.

### Education is not enough

Barriers to employment are partly due to educational inequities faced by people with disabilities. They are more likely overall to access lower level qualifications and are less likely to complete their training than students without a disability. However, whilst evidence suggests that training and, in particular, tertiary education leads to improved access to employment for graduates with disabilities, tertiary graduates with disabilities still experience lower levels of employment than their peers without disabilities.

Major employment barriers include lack of relevant work skills and experience, as well as negative employer attitudes and behaviour, caused by lack of information, skills or willingness to assist employees with disabilities to develop proficiency and confidence. Mentoring, work placement, networking, research and resource initiatives and cross-sectoral collaboration initiatives have been put forward in several major reports and by some organisations as strategies for improving employment outcomes for graduates with disabilities.

### Barriers to disability employment

Barriers outlined by the People with Disabilities Council of Australia (PDCA) include employers' low awareness of the benefits of employing people with disabilities, and that employers do not know the needs of people with disabilities or provide flexible work practices and work hours. There are currently no requirements for employers outside the government sector to develop and enact disability employment policies or to keep data on levels of employment of people with disclosed disabilities.

In 2005 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissions' (HREOC) enquiry into disability and employment in Australia identified six major barriers to both employers and people with disabilities in addressing poor performance in the employment of people with disabilities. These were a lack of accessible information, high costs, high personal risk of failure, lack of appropriate education and experience required for job readiness, vulnerability to discriminatory processes in the application phase when going through disability employment agencies, and fear of low retention. There is currently no analysis of the extent to which these barriers apply to the employment of people with disabilities in the disability services sector.

### **Recruitment processes**

Many skilled people with disabilities in Victoria do not access either Disability Employment Services or Job Networks. There are therefore a large number of people with disabilities not represented in the labour market figures or job seeker statistics. This creates a recruitment challenge for Australian employers and a strategic challenge for the Australian Government.

### **A national employment strategy**

The Federal Government's *National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy: Discussion Paper* was released just as this project was coming to a close in April 2008. The Government acknowledges that Australia is performing poorly on the international front in disability employment practices, identifying employer attitudes and practices as a key barrier. The paper states that the issue of disability employment needs to be dealt with as a critical economic and social issue, requiring a national, cross sectoral strategy.

### **The Victorian disability sector - leading from the front?**

Within the disability sector, there are currently no legislated standards similar to the *Disability Standards for Education 2006*, obliging employers to meet measurable disability employment targets. Many organisations within the Victorian disability sector actively work on advocacy and community education programmes to raise the profile of people with disabilities as good employees. Many work closely with employers, advising them on how to work with employees with disabilities.

One would therefore expect to find that such organisations perceive an advantage to their own organisations in ensuring that people with disabilities fill highly visible positions and that they are actively recruited to work across a range of levels and roles in the organisation. One would also expect to find innovative recruitment, employment and staff development practices within the disability sector and for these practices to be well documented. Whether these expectations are the reality was the focus of this research.

## **Key Findings**

The findings from this research indicate that while the Victorian disability sector states a commitment to disability employment, this commitment is not always consistently apparent in the sector's own performance. The findings suggest that whilst some individual organisations have established good disability employment practices and policies, the disability sector as a whole is not leading from the front. Eight main issues emerged as the key reasons for this:

### **Poor data collection**

*Thirteen organisations could not estimate the proportion of their staff with disabilities, including a number of large, well resourced organisations.*

This research found that employer data about employment levels of people with disabilities was lacking or non-existent. This makes benchmarking practice, measuring improvement, and evaluating the effectiveness of disability employment strategies and policies difficult.

### **Lack of a sector wide strategy**

*There was no evidence of a sector-wide strategy focused on increasing employment levels of people with disabilities in the Victorian disability sector.*

This research found that good initiatives amongst employers were not shared within the sector and that there is a lack of sector wide strategies, support networks and resources for addressing disability employment.

### **Low level of work readiness**

*For organisations in the sector, support and mentoring costs are significant for assisting new staff with disabilities to perform at their best.*

Employers in this research reported that low levels of work readiness among their recruits with disabilities made it necessary to invest heavily in work readiness, which acted as a disincentive.

### **Lack of policy or strategy**

*Less than half the respondents had a disability employment strategy, and five had no plans, policies or strategies in place to recruit staff with disabilities.*

Employer responses indicated that specific policies and organisational strategies on disability employment are not common practices in the Victorian disability sector. Without this level of corporate focus it is difficult for the sector to develop and record good practice and monitor improvement.

### **Lack of funding**

*Twenty-seven respondents mentioned that the provision of support to employees is the main challenge faced when employing people with disability. Six of these specifically mentioned the cost of support and logistics, eight mentioned the time and resources involved in mentoring and training, two mentioned administrative time, and four mentioned supporting the development of capacity and confidence.*

Employers in the sector reported that lack of funding for support restricts their ability to increase levels of disability employment.

### **Lack of high level representation**

*Organisations with a representation of people with disabilities on their board or management team had a better articulation of disability employment policy and measurement tools in place to ensure that policy was being observed. Twenty-nine survey respondents reported that an overall average of eight percent of the workforce had disabilities. Only five were employed in management roles, and none of these were employed by large organisations.*

There is very low representation of people with disabilities at the level of boards or management teams in the sector. This flows through into poor visibility on the issue of disability employment in organisational policy and practice.

### **Lack of proactive marketing and recruitment practices**

*Organisations with experience in dedicating resources to employment of people with disabilities identified the time and cost involved in targeted recruitment as an issue.*

Employers in the sector do not utilise proactive marketing and recruitment practices in order to identify potential applicants with disabilities. Given the low involvement of people with disabilities in the labour market there is a strong need for innovation in this area.

### **Poor understanding of “value”**

*Only one third of survey respondents saw the value of employing staff with disabilities as a critical asset to their organisation.*

The literature suggests that increasing disability employment levels requires that organisations are aware of the value people with disabilities have as employees. Most employers surveyed in this research failed to identify the benefit to their organisation of employing people with a disability, indicating a poor understanding of the value to their organisation of employing people with disabilities.

## **Discussion of the findings**

### **Leading from the front?**

Whilst disability organisations have a strongly stated commitment to disability employment, this commitment is not apparent in the available data on practice within the sector. The appearance of poor practice on disability employment is exacerbated by the lack of data collection, which can be explained, in part, by a lack of corporate focus on the issue.

Disability organisations are faced with a number of competing corporate priorities, particularly through the pressure of national mergers and a stronger focus on branding, funding and external relationship building. As a result, internal disability employment policy and practice are often de-prioritised. While many disability organisations are strong advocates for the employment of people with disabilities generally, their lack of internal policies and strategies, and lack of performance on this issue, indicates that the sector is, as a whole, unable to lead by example.

Victorian disability organisations can benefit greatly from employing people with disabilities to strengthen their service delivery. However, it is clear from the survey results that people with disabilities still represent only 8% of all employees across the disability sector. This ratio is no higher than the national average, which has been found to be unacceptably low by international standards, and declared so by national advocacy groups and now the Federal Government.

### **Sector wide strategy**

The HREOC report noted that disability employment is a multifaceted issue, requiring a range of interconnected strategies. These strategies cut across all aspects in the work of an organisation, from policy development to awareness training for staff and development of proactive recruitment strategies. What is currently missing for disability organisations is a sector-wide approach to this issue, such as that developed within the private sector through the Australian Employers Network on Disability (AEND). AEND resources and supports the efforts of individual employers addressing disability employment within their organisations.

A key future direction for the Victorian disability sector is the development of such a network. At the moment, initiatives such as those captured in the case studies in this report are not being promoted to other disability organisations. A sector wide forum could assist organisations to develop and share a range of solutions, initiatives and tools.

### **Lack of work-readiness**

Work-readiness of people with disabilities was a significant barrier reported by employers to increasing employment levels of staff with disabilities. This requires a complex response, including an examination of the pathways that lead to paid employment. While volunteering may provide a pathway for some, there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that volunteering does not lead to paid employment for many people with disabilities. The role of volunteer work as an effective pathway to paid employment for people with disabilities requires rethinking and further research.

### **Funding shortage**

The costs associated with supporting staff with disabilities were also identified as a barrier for employers wanting to increase employment levels of staff with disabilities. This indicates that disability organisations require access to funding for strategies that lead to disability employment. If the State and Federal Governments are committed to addressing this issue they must be prepared to take into account costs employers incur supporting people with disabilities in the workplace.

### **The future**

Are organisations in the Victorian disability sector leading by example? The evidence gathered by this research suggests that the answer is no. There is, however, enormous potential for this to be turned around. The expertise, knowledge and passion of organisations on the issue of disability employment places the sector in a strong position to lead from the front.

By taking steps now, the Victorian disability sector has an opportunity to role model innovative disability employment practices to the wider community and by doing so make an impact on a crucial social and economic issue.

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## Key Future Directions

A number of future directions arise out of the eight key findings from this research:

**A disability employment network:** In order to develop a sector wide response, a forum for strategy development, sharing, learning and resourcing on disability employment is urgently required.

**A toolkit for the sector:** The sector needs practical assistance in the development of policy, implementation guidelines, recruitment options, reporting, measurement and data collection tools.

**Funding:** Additional funding to support people with disabilities in the workplace is critical to increase employment of people with disabilities in the sector.

**Awareness Raising:** An awareness raising campaign that targets leadership in disability employment practice and the value of the business case for employing people with disabilities is required.

**Innovative practice on work readiness:** Innovative practice which stimulates and furthers work readiness, such as graduate programs, traineeships and mentoring support, need to be encouraged and supported across the sector.