

Individual Benefits



Improving employment outcomes for people with disability will provide significant benefits to workplaces, the economy, the community and individuals themselves.

Employment can provide people with disability with increased income, and with this, higher living standards and financial independence. Employment can contribute to a sense of identity and self-worth and have positive health impacts for some people with disability. Improved employment outcomes for people with disability can also reduce demand on welfare systems.

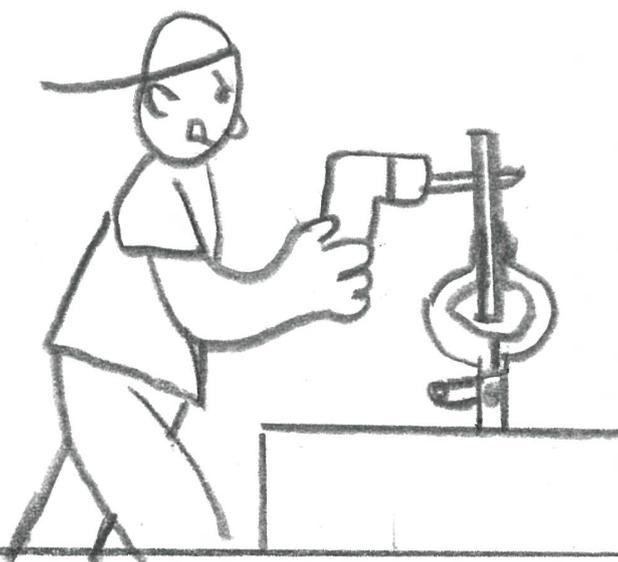
Businesses who employ people with disability benefit from the diverse range of skills, talents and qualifications that people with disability have to offer. Research has shown that workers with disability have higher rates of retention, better attendance, and fewer occupational health and safety incidents than those without a disability.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data have long demonstrated that people with disabilities are less likely to be employed, more likely to be dependent on income support, and more likely to live below the poverty line.

These stark statistics were heartbreakingly illustrated by a large number of submissions that detailed the grim reality of life on the Disability Support Pension. Resented by some in the community for their reliance on the pension, yet unable to access the support required to move off it, many people with disabilities find themselves trapped in a poverty cycle of high cost and low income.

More than 37 per cent of submissions highlighted the difficulties involved in juggling the high cost of living with disabilities and the low level of income support available.

Meaningful employment is essential not only to an individual's economic security, but also their physical and mental health, personal wellbeing, and sense of identity.





What most lack is not ability but opportunity!

Unfortunately, too few people with disabilities appear able to access meaningful employment. More than 33 per cent of submissions identified difficulties with employment, ranging from active and open employer discrimination, to misconceptions and misunderstandings about the needs of people with disabilities. What was clear from the submissions was that people with disabilities want to work. Submissions to the Department of Social Services detailed difficulties in seeking, obtaining, and retaining employment.

By far the biggest barrier identified was employer attitudes.

These ranged from entrenched discrimination to misconceptions about the adjustments required for some people with disabilities. Discrimination occurred in those cases where otherwise qualified candidates for jobs were screened out or overlooked, simply because of their disability.

Some employers and recruitment agencies are using medical tests to 'screen out' candidates with disabilities which are irrelevant to their ability to perform the job. This occurs particularly when the tests are used in a generic rather than job specific manner.

Others reported that discrimination and negative attitudes had a more subtle impact on their experience of employment.

There is a perception of employment being viewed as charity, which also has a negative impact on people with disabilities. The concept of 'giving someone a break' fails to recognise the important economic benefits of ensuring skilled individuals are able to participate fully in the economy. Greater independence also produces long-term benefits by enabling people to become less reliant on government income support.

There is considerable misunderstanding in the community about the cost of workplace adjustments.

The need for expensive adjustments is often cited by employers as a reason for not employing more people with disabilities. But the cost is often considerably overestimated. As the following case study illustrates, the benefits of employing a skilled individual far outweigh the often-small costs of modification.

An organisation was looking for an administrative officer. One of the requirements of the position was the transcription of lengthy taped material. For a long time, the organisation had been unable to find a cost-effective method of transcription; the employer commented that it had become a lost art.

Through an organisation specialising in assisting people with a disability to find employment, the employer located a young woman with vision impairment who had the right set of skills. The only workplace modification required was the installation of a computer program to verbalise word documents and a dual headset to enable her to listen to the tapes.

Productivity in the area increased considerably after the young woman joined the administrative team. The employer was delighted with the change and commented that 'by investing in the right person you will reap the benefits'.

As a number of submissions noted, workplace modifications are not always necessary. As the following case study suggests, what is sometimes required is additional support or a more flexible approach to working hours or leave. Such an approach benefits all employees in the organisation.

Injuries sustained in a serious car accident left one woman unable to continue in her current occupation. Searching for alternative employment, she applied for job after job, but was never offered an interview.

Determined to be fair and honest, she disclosed her medical history in her applications. She believes her decision to be frank was behind her constant rejections. She finally responded to a position within the Australian Public Service and was successful.

The flexible working arrangements offered to all employees allowed her to keep her medical appointments without requiring additional leave. After constant rejection, she was delighted to find a workplace committed to being more inclusive.

Lack of employment has resulted in high levels of unemployment and underemployment among people with disabilities compared to the rest of the Australian population—Australian Bureau of Statistics data demonstrate that labour force participation for people with disabilities is 53 per cent, compared to 81 per cent for people without disabilities.

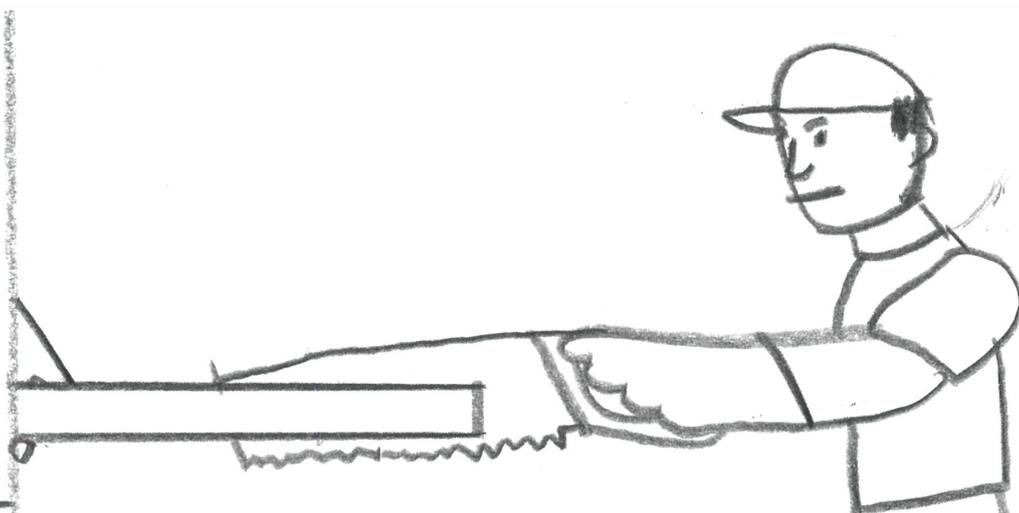
These figures do not, however, capture the extent and impact of underemployment. As one submission

noted, a recent study by Vision Australia found that 63 per cent of people who are blind or vision impaired are underemployed or unemployed.

Many people with disabilities and their families are therefore forced to rely on government assistance and find themselves trapped in a poverty cycle of low income and high costs. A number of submissions said that the inflexibility of the Disability Support Pension acts as a disincentive to employment and recommended a review. The loss of health care benefits was seen as a particular difficulty.

Gaps in the service system mean that many people with disabilities and their families, friends and carers, are forced to meet the cost of essential services and support themselves. As many noted, this leaves little discretionary income to meet basic living costs. As a result, families caring for a member with a disability also find themselves caught in the poverty trap. Many said they were forced to fund private services that were unavailable elsewhere, which put a significant dent in the family budget.

Generally, people with disability who were employed were more likely than people without disability to work part-time (**39.8%** and **29.6%** respectively). The number of hours usually worked by people with disability was associated with the severity and the type of their disability.



People with profound or severe disability who worked were more likely to work part-time hours than those with less severe disability. Nevertheless, almost half (**48.2%**) of those with profound or severe disability who were working, worked full-time.

Among the five disability groups, psychological and intellectual disability have greater association with fewer working hours. Almost one-third (32.9%) of people with psychological disability who worked, usually worked no more than 15 hours, followed by people with intellectual disability (30.7%). In contrast, about two-thirds of employed people with sensory or speech disability (65.3%) or physical disability (59.3%) worked full-time.

