

# What would it take? Employer perspectives on employing people with a disability



GROUP TRAINING ASSOCIATION  
OF VICTORIA

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NCVER

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team  
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Additional information relating to this research is available in *What would it take? Employer perspectives on employing people with a disability—Literature review*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2219.html>>.

To find other material of interest, search VOCED (the UNESCO/NCVER international database <<http://www.voced.edu.au>>) using the following keywords: employer attitude; employability; employment opportunity; disabled person; labour force participation.

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# About the research



## *What would it take? Employer perspectives on employing people with a disability*

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One focus of the Australian Government's social inclusion agenda is to help people with a disability into work. The government's new National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy acknowledges that a considerable barrier to employment for people with a disability is the lack of information for employers.

It is therefore timely to examine employer views on employing people with a disability. Based on a series of focus groups with employers from small-to-medium-sized enterprises, this report describes the attitudes of employers towards hiring a person with a disability. It also sets out some strategies that would assist businesses to take on employees with a disability.

### Key messages

- The research confirmed that, even when employers are open to the idea of employing a person with a disability, they are often not confident that they have the knowledge, understanding and capability to do so.
- Disclosure (or more often lack of disclosure) of a disability is a key concern for employers, especially in relation to mental illness. However, employers readily conceded that this issue is mitigated if there is trust between the employer and employee.
- The role of trusted brokers and mediators emerged as a key issue. Small-to-medium-sized enterprises expressed frustration at their difficulties in accessing information relevant to their businesses.
- Employers are not looking for formal training in 'disability employment'. They are looking for assistance in building their capacity to support the productive employment of people with a disability.

The vocational education and training (VET) system already helps employers to employ people with disabilities (by providing group training organisation field officers, for example), but this report suggests a broader role could be developed. Inevitably, this would require financial support from governments.

Tom Karmel  
Managing Director, NCVER



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# Executive summary

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## Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to answer the question ‘what would it take to enable employers to employ people with a disability?’ The study was premised upon two core ideas. The first is that there are people with disabilities who are ready, willing and able to work, yet who find it difficult or impossible to obtain suitable employment. The second is that the voices of employers have been lacking. This study sought to address this gap by engaging employers in conversations about employing people with disabilities. The study explores the factors which influence them to include (or exclude) people from equity groups, particularly people with disabilities, in their workforce mix.

## The research method

Forty employers, of whom 33 were from small-to-medium-sized enterprises and seven from large organisations, participated in focus groups convened in Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Sydney. The Group Training Association of Victoria recruited these employers through its networks. Most had some experience of employing people with disabilities.

## Findings

A review of the literature confirmed that the employer’s perspective was largely absent from the research literature and policy discourse on employment of people with disabilities. For the most part, disability employment issues have been framed from a ‘supply side’ point of view. That is to say, most studies have focused upon what people with disabilities need, or need to do, to gain employment. There has been relatively little attention given to the ‘demand side’ of the employment equation—the employer’s perspective. What employers might have to say, or what employers might need, has not been widely investigated or canvassed.

One significant exception to this finding is a recent study by the Office of Disability and Employment Policy in the United States (Domzal, Houtenville & Sharma 2008). This study, based on telephone interviews with a stratified random sample of employers across 12 different sectors of the United States economy, found that larger corporate and public enterprises are the leading employers of people with disabilities. Domzal, Houtenville and Sharma (2008) also reported significant employer anxiety about employing people with disabilities. They highlighted the need for information and support for employers, particularly smaller employers, regarding disability and employment issues.

Three key themes emerged from the analysis of the literature. First was the importance of leadership from the top of organisations. Bosses must demonstrate that they have a serious commitment to employing people with disabilities. Secondly, employers need credible and reliable sources of information in order to appreciate and understand disability and disability employment issues. These information sources are often lacking, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises. Thirdly, employers need to be connected to appropriate networks to successfully identify, access and recruit people with disabilities and then ensure that they achieve employment success.



Our interviews with employers also highlighted a further set of issues. These are:

- ✧ mental health/illness and the impact of mental health issues in the workplace
- ✧ disclosure (or non-disclosure) of disability and challenges posed by ‘invisible’ disabilities
- ✧ employers lacking understanding of disabilities and related employment issues and experiencing difficulties in accessing useful information
- ✧ the challenges of conducting the cost–benefit analysis on disability employment
- ✧ the intricacies, accessibility and adequacy of government assistance.

The employers participating in this study reported that employment of people with disabilities would be easier (and more likely) if they, that is, *the employers themselves*, had a better understanding of various disabilities and disability employment issues. Most indicated they would like to do more on this front and they tended to define the problem, not so much in terms of the perceived disabilities of individuals seeking employment, but rather in terms of their own insecurities in relation to disability and disability employment.

The Australian Employers Network on Disability (2008) highlights the importance of employers having ‘disability confidence’. Although interested, many of the employers contributing to this study lacked this confidence.

## What would it take?

As we explored employers’ perceptions of ‘what it would take’ to employ a person with disability, several key strategies emerged. As noted in the literature, the type and quality of organisational leadership emerged as a key factor. Leadership is enhanced when senior managers are informed, knowledgeable and confident about their stance on disability employment issues. Hence it is important to have reliable sources of information which appreciate and speak effectively to their interests and concerns as employers and small business people.

In this regard ‘trusted knowledge brokers’ and intermediaries were identified as important. In many cases the field staff from group training organisations fulfilled this important role; sometimes disability employment network providers addressed these needs; for some employers, the Australian Employers Network on Disability filled this gap. The key point here is the strategic importance of a trusted third party to provide the employer with information and assistance in relation to disability and disability employment issues.

Work experience for people with disabilities also emerged as a key strategy. Employers appreciated applicants who presented with a history of some work experience—and perceived the work experience provider/employer as a potentially reliable source of information regarding the applicant. Access to work experience was cited as particularly useful and important for people with a disability seeking employment.

The capacity to design and redesign jobs in order to productively employ people with disabilities emerged as a need. The potential to redesign *other people’s* jobs to maximise the productivity of a work group that might include a person with disability was also highlighted. Employers expressed a need for support with these processes. They stressed that successful employment must provide win-win-win outcomes for everyone involved: the person with a disability, the others in the work group or team, and the enterprise itself.

Finally, most of the successful strategies identified included learning for managers, supervisors and staff. As noted previously, employers adopted the view that it is not just the person with the disability who needs to learn. However, employers did not express a desire for formal or accredited training on these issues. Rather, they expressed a desire for informal but trusted sources of

information which could be accessed as required. The adage, I need to know ‘just-enough, just-in-time, just-for-me’ is pertinent here.

## Implications of the study

The first key implication of the study is that government policy aimed at employment of people with disabilities is unlikely to be realised without strategic action on the demand side of the employment equation. Employment problems cannot be solved from the supply side alone. The perceptions and needs of employers must be appreciated and addressed. Hence efforts should be targeted to:

- ✧ raising employer awareness and sharing information on disability employment issues
- ✧ communicating with and providing strategic and practical support for employers, particularly small-to-medium-sized enterprises
- ✧ facilitating change and the spread of learning and best practice, particularly from larger corporate and public enterprises to small-to-medium-sized enterprises.

VET practitioners can and do make a genuine contribution towards the employment of people with disabilities. They do so through skill formation and knowledge building, particularly through work experience and employability skills development. Beyond such programs, however, there remain significant challenges, particularly on the demand side. Challenges involve working collaboratively with employers to inform and build leadership and organisational capacity but do not necessarily involve accredited training.

For employers, particularly small-to-medium-sized enterprises, this study suggests the importance and the rewards of developing disability confidence:

Disability confidence is about knowing how to make adjustments to the workplace to retain employees who acquire a disability, and how to make changes to recruitment processes to allow skilled and talented job seekers with disabilities to compete on a level playing field. Disability confidence is also about delivering accessible customer service that provides a great experience to customers who may have a disability (Australian Employers Network on Disability 2008).

Effective networks, contacts and community connections help to build this confidence and capability. There are specialist support agencies and programs available to support employers, but employers need help to locate and engage with these providers. Small-to-medium-sized enterprises in particular are less likely to be effectively networked or connected to such support services.

The research also has implications for traditional advocacy groups working with people with disabilities on the supply side of the employment equation. It suggests that, if they are not already doing so, there may be value for them in expanding their focus of attention to address the employers’ demand side issues. For some this may involve reframing their constituencies in ways to include employers. Such advocacy groups have ready access to the knowledge and experience which employers need. However, effective information exchange in this context is dependent upon establishing trust. Advocates need to be mindful that employers have genuine concerns and that it is education and information that is required to build disability confidence and increase disability employment.

# Introduction

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## Equity groups, employment and missing voices

A large percentage of people not currently participating in the labour market are identified as disadvantaged and categorised in one or more equity groups. While there may be legitimate explanations for their low rates of participation in the labour market, they are also an immediate target for intervention strategies to lift their participation rates. Many of the people in these groups are willing and able to work, but a range of factors militates against their involvement. One such group consists of people with disabilities.

Increasing employment rates for people with disabilities would provide benefits for a range of stakeholders. There are benefits for the individuals involved who want to work, generate independent income and be involved productively in their communities. There are benefits for businesses that need skilled, committed and productive people—particularly in areas where there are currently skills shortages. There are also benefits for governments committed to the goals of promoting equity, social justice and full employment.

The evidence from contemporary research demonstrates that much time has been devoted to the supply side of this issue—such research has identified the systemic barriers and constraints faced by the disadvantaged and disenfranchised. However, little coordinated effort has been applied to the demand side of the employment equation, namely employers. Despite stated policy intentions for vocational education and training (VET) systems to be ‘demand driven’ and ‘industry led’, the voices of a wide range of employers are largely missing from the existing research on equity groups and their participation in the workforce.

The purpose of this research was to investigate employer perspectives on what would facilitate employment pathways or opportunities for people with disabilities and to determine the training and other complementary policy measures likely to support employers in their efforts to engage people with disabilities as sustainable workforce participants. In brief, we wanted to know ‘what it would take’ to persuade and enable employers to employ individuals with disabilities.

## Insights from the literature

A review of the literature confirmed our initial impressions and anecdotal evidence that the voices of employers are largely missing from the research literature and from the policy discourse on employment of people with disabilities.

Most evidence and arguments for employing people with disabilities derive from studies of various groups which are disenfranchised or disadvantaged, and which have become ‘target groups’ for equity policy. This literature almost invariably adopts an advocacy stance on behalf of the disadvantaged cohorts—including people with disabilities. The arguments are driven from the supply side of the employment equation.

A different, although related, line of argument is found in the policy discourse coming from governments advocating diversity employment. Here the arguments are generally framed in terms of twin objectives. On the one hand, there are policy objectives for social justice and equal

opportunity; on the other hand there are economic objectives relating to labour supply and maintaining a productive and competitive economy. These twin policy themes are evident in both the local and international literature.

A significant and recent exception to the above observation on the missing voices of employers is a study by the United States Office of Disability and Employment Policy (Domzal, Houtenville & Sharma 2008). Reported as the first substantial investigation of employer perceptions and attitudes on these issues, it involved telephone interviews with a stratified random sample of employers across a dozen industry sectors taken to be broadly representative of the United States economy. Perhaps not surprisingly, the study found that larger corporate and public employers are leading the way on the employment of people with disabilities. Nevertheless, the proportion of businesses overall employing people with disabilities remains relatively low at a little less than 20%. Amongst larger businesses just over half reported employing people with disabilities, while for small businesses the figure was close to 11%.

The Office of Disability and Employment Policy study (Domzal, Houtenville & Sharma 2008) also reported significant employer anxiety about employing people with disabilities. The research highlighted the need for information and support for employers, particularly smaller employers, on a whole range of issues concerning disability and employment. Lack of information and misinformation constitute a significant barrier to employers adopting a more proactive stance towards employing people with disabilities.

Even where information and support services are available to employers, the Office of Disability and Employment Policy study found that the majority of employers are unaware of their existence. Only 7% of small businesses, for instance, are aware of 'one stop' career centres designed to provide support to employers and employees on employment issues—including employment of people with disabilities. Awareness amongst employers of the specialist United States Job Accommodation Network, which has a particular mission to facilitate the employment and retention of workers with disabilities is similarly low. Only 7.4% of companies are aware of this and only 6% of small employers know about it.

It is also worth noting that the United States study excluded businesses employing fewer than five people—small businesses were defined as those employing 5–14 people. It is reasonable to assume that the above figures would be even lower had truly small and micro-businesses been included. More encouragingly though, at the other end of the range the study reported that 38.1% of public sector employers are aware of the 'one stop' career shops—and of those, 41.5% reported using them.

Despite the information gaps highlighted above, there are some positive developments to report. There are three key recurring themes in the good news stories about employment of people from equity cohorts, including those with disabilities. First, there is the importance of effective leadership; secondly, the power of knowledge replacing a lack of information; and thirdly, connectivity replacing isolation.

The importance of leadership from the top is reflected throughout the literature (Australian Industry Group 2005; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2001). There must be commitment to diversity employment, and values reflecting equity and non-discrimination must be articulated and demonstrated. Rhetoric or policy alone will not suffice.

Secondly, employer anxiety and disengagement grows from the doubts of not knowing. Whether the issue is how to manage various types of disabilities and their workplace consequences; employment and industrial relations law in relation to disability and discrimination; reasonable adjustment; or equal opportunity, not knowing leads to stepping back and adopting a defensive stance.

The good news is that as trusted information replaces ignorance and uncertainty, employers are able to engage and move forward into more proactive approaches on these issues. The study by Lewis and Priday (2008), for example, exposes some of the myths holding people back. It found

that apprentices with a disability are, on the whole, perceived to be safer on the job than apprentices with no disability, and that most apprentices with a disability are rated as equivalent or superior to their non-disabled colleagues for their work attitude and attendance. Research shows that employers who have previously employed a worker with a disability are much more likely to employ a person with a disability in the future (Smith et al. 2003; Morgan & Alexander 2005; Keating, Beaton & Foster 2007).

Thirdly, there is the issue summed up as ‘connectivity’. Positive developments on this front are often characterised by effective partnerships, networks or relationships of one sort or another. The work of the Australian Employers Network on Disability in proactively informing and supporting its employer members is one example. The role of group training organisations as trusted brokers and employment partners is another. Recent research has also shown inclusive TAFE institutes to be those which are characterised by robust networks and high levels of connectivity (Volkoff, Clarke & Walstab 2008).

A series of national skill ecosystem projects (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2002–08; Windsor & Alcorso 2008) provide further illustration of how employment relationships do not sit within a vacuum, but rather within a sometimes complex system. These projects show that both supply side and demand side issues need to be considered. Skills formation and skills utilisation are both important, as is the environment within the organisation, and the local, industry and regional contexts need to be taken into account. On the basis of these insights from the literature, it is reasonable to suggest that employers experiencing success in the employment of people with disabilities may be similarly networked and connected.

A full literature review is available as a support document to this report on the NCVET website.

# Research method

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While larger enterprises may be leading the way in equal employment and diversity policies and practices, it is, ironically, small-to-medium-sized enterprises that actually employ the majority of Australians. It is essential to gain their understanding of the issues around disability employment for meaningful progress to be made in employment outcomes. Hence semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted with employers to explore their experiences of employing people with disabilities and the factors that influence their employment decisions.

Forty employers, of whom 33 were from small-to-medium-sized enterprises and seven from large organisations, and almost all of whom had employed people with disabilities, participated in interviews and focus groups. They were targeted from across metropolitan and regional centres in four states (Queensland, South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria) and a breadth of enterprises, both government and private, and ranging from small to large, but with a prevalence of small-to-medium-sized. Included were group training companies, not-for-profit aged care providers, retailers, local government organisations, a cleaning contractor (community development), a furniture manufacturer, a building company, a telco, education and training organisations, water/utilities suppliers, an apprenticeships centre, recruitment agencies, information technology consultants, hospitality venues, government organisations, advertising and research agencies, an hotel, an Indigenous employment coordinator (university), sales/marketing companies, a landscape contractor, a not-for-profit registered training organisation, disability employment organisations and disability peak bodies.

We selected a sample such as this because we believed their experiences and interests as employers, including employing people with disabilities, provided them with an informed view, which we expected would be of value to others.

Our approach aimed to be sensitive, flexible and responsive and to draw employers into a conversation which allowed exploration, not only of policies and employment practices, but also of perceptions, values and possibly prejudices that may not be immediately volunteered. The intention was not to conduct a structured questionnaire, precisely reiterated on each occasion, but to build on what we gleaned from each focus group and to deepen our understanding by generating information-rich conversations with individuals and/or small groups of employers. Accordingly, we used a set of generative questions to stimulate dialogue and, as the conversation unfolded, some questions were omitted, others added or substantially re-shaped, depending upon circumstances and the particular conversation.

Employers were also asked to indicate what they would consider useful in response to the needs and concerns they identified. These data were synthesised to develop a model for consideration (see following section).

Towards the end of the data-gathering and analysis process a focus group of employer members of the Australian Employers Network on Disability was formed to discuss the emergent findings of the study. This discussion clarified and ratified the team's analysis of the findings and informed the drafting of this final report.

Analysis of the interviews with employers led to the identification of several themes which could be grouped together either as issues or as strategies, which their experience indicated were, or could be, useful in employing people with disabilities.

The major themes and strategies that emerged from the data are discussed in the following sections.

## Defining disability

Disability has been defined in various ways. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (ABS 2003) in its definition of disability refers to ‘a limitation, restriction or impairment, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months’. The 2006 census data takes a slightly different stance, highlighting ‘Core activity need for assistance’. It records the number of people with a disability who require assistance in one or more core activities. What is interpreted as ‘core activity’ is left for the respondent to determine.

In the VET sector, data on the Australian VET Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS) do not record information on a learner’s need for assistance. These data rely on self-reporting of a number of disability types, and the disclosure of a learner’s disability is not mandatory. In addition, it is not possible to determine whether the level of disability is such that an individual requires extra assistance. Some learners who indicate a disability may have a level of disability low enough not to interfere with their capacity to engage in formal learning or employment. The figures available may contain instances of both over-reporting and under-reporting.

For the purposes of the fieldwork in this project, the Australian Bureau of Statistics’s approach was adopted as a ‘working definition’. Discussions with employers were framed by the notion of a disability being a ‘limitation, restriction or impairment, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months’. This was a broad and inclusive definition of ‘disability’; it could include for instance, chronic illness and mental illness, both considerations which we anticipated might be of concern to employers.

# Employer experience of disability employment

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## Changing economic context

The research proposal for this study was drafted in April 2008 at a time of virtually full employment, and with some industry sectors experiencing significant skills shortages. The proposal referred to the potential for 'growing labour supply' from equity groups.

Since the conception and funding of this study, the world has been experiencing what has been referred to as the 'global financial crisis'. During the conduct of this research employers have commented on the significance of the deteriorating financial climate. The financial crisis, these employers have argued, has already changed the landscape. Hence, within the 12-month life of this project, the context has altered significantly. Employers in this study have suggested that this in turn will affect the prospects of people with disabilities seeking work.

Despite such concerns, others have suggested that employers, particularly larger corporate and public employers, have both a responsibility and a commercial desire to have their workforce reflect the wider diversity of their customer and consumer bases. Hence it is suggested that a purely economic and short-term labour market analysis of the employment issues is an inadequate way to address the issues. Longer-term strategic and developmental approaches are required to build and sustain employment opportunities and outcomes. These approaches, it is argued, have implications for both the supply and demand sides of the employment equation.

## Type of disability

### Mental illness

Mental illness is a significant concern in relation to employment, and this is verified in recent research and policy initiatives such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission inquiry into disability employment, *WORKability 2: Solutions* (2005) and the *National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy Discussion Paper* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2008).

Throughout these focus group discussions, mental illness was the most frequently mentioned type of disability and the type that was perceived to have the greatest impact on an enterprise. The most prevalent forms of mental illness discussed were depression and bipolar disorders. Employers also discussed a wide range of other forms of non-physical or 'invisible' disability, which, they implied, either belonged under the mental illness umbrella, or were closely associated with it in relation to their implications for the workplace. These included eating disorders, autism and Asperger's Syndrome, learning disorders, cognitive impairment (often through substance abuse), acquired brain injury and dyslexia.

In the research literature, mental illness is frequently associated with behavioural problems. In Australia 11% of the population has a long-term mental health problem, 18% has had a mental disorder at some time during the 12 months prior to the Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (ABS 2006), and 2.1 million people have a mental or behavioural problem as a long-term condition (Beyondblue 2008). On the balance of probability, this prevalence of mental illness, especially



depression, among the Australian population, would indicate that many people with a variety of conditions are productively employed. We cannot really know its full extent or impact, as privacy laws preclude employers from eliciting the information even for record keeping or organisational improvement purposes. However, the right to know, or not to know, is not the only issue here. Employers spoke passionately about the problem of unexpected, inappropriate behaviour in the workplace and its multiple impacts on a working day.

One employer cited examples of individuals with mental illness ‘not understanding and/or overstepping personal and professional boundaries’, ‘speaking inappropriately in meetings in the workplace’ and ‘using abusive or aggressive language and behaviour’.

Behaviours which may be indicative of mental illness can manifest among employees at any level of seniority in an organisation and in any kind of job. Often they can be confused with attitudinal issues but in the experience of these employers, such behaviours frequently have their origins in a previously existing or newly manifesting mental illness. On the other hand, they can also be closely related to the work environment itself. As one employer from a large institution that is undergoing significant change said, the source of some depressive and stress-related illnesses may be the workplace itself:

[Some] people can't cope with the changes. They're institutionalised. [Mental illness] is the most difficult, it's hard to see it coming, you can't always anticipate it and depression is a silent disability, people don't talk about it.

Management attempts to address such issues are often met with employee denial of the problem, together with refusal to explore strategies to resolve issues resulting from mental illness. This may be the case, even when such strategies are designed to benefit the particular employee as well as their colleagues:

People don't put up their hand for help, they put up barriers. They become expert at deflecting attention from the issues and sometimes they're in denial. If there is no disclosure, problems can be exacerbated. It becomes a bigger problem if or when things happen because you can [unknowingly] aggravate an existing condition. If you can't see it you don't know where the boundaries are.

One employer noted that in a large organisation human resource and organisational development teams are usually available to assist with integrating employees with a disability. In smaller organisations, however, the situation is different:

The thing that struck me the most is the amount of depressive illness amongst our own staff. It's staggering and it's hidden. In the bigger organisations they have filters, but in the small organisations these mental health issues are mostly under-diagnosed and poorly treated.

Disruptive or insidious as these behaviours may be, they have different implications when they are manifested among senior management staff or work group leaders with responsibilities for other employees.

In a large organisation we'll have all sorts, including those who may be suicidal and self harming ... in our place they're all well educated, well qualified, but it doesn't mean they don't have these sorts of issues.

## Physical disability

Compared with mental illness, employers in these focus groups did not posit physical disability as a major employment issue. When they raised the subject they seemed much more confident about dealing with conditions which were ‘visible’ or at least more tangible and seemingly more familiar. Many were quite confident about making adjustments or matching people and jobs:

This is relatively easy for us as a large institutional provider, we're also an equal opportunity employer and for some things we can get resources ... we can put in a lift for someone if

that's what's required ... I've seen it happen so they can get to the second floor ... or we rip up a path and lay a new one that is wheelchair accessible. Small business can't really do that.

While some small enterprises were concerned about expense, they argued that this is the easier end of disability.

All I need to do is build a ramp, or change some doors. It's just changing the building that's easy, it doesn't resist. Although it might cost some money, it doesn't resist change. The people do, people resist change.

On the whole, employers argued that coping with employees with physical disabilities is relatively easy.

## The dilemma of disclosure

Closely related to the dilemmas and issues associated with mental illness and other 'invisible' disabilities experienced by employers was the dilemma of disclosure—the foremost issue for employers in all focus groups. Employers wrestled with supporting the principle of privacy on the one hand, and the impact of non-disclosure on the employer, the employee with a disability and the enterprise and its staff as a whole, on the other hand. They were also concerned about their legal responsibilities, both in respect of discrimination laws and in terms of occupational health and safety.

Most employers were frustrated by the 'secrecy' that surrounds disability and felt that it would be better for all if, without being insensitive or discriminatory, they could find ways of addressing the problem more explicitly:

Why can't we get the problem out into the open?

With barriers and prohibitions to the open discussion of disability, many employers who would like to take a positive approach to employing people with disabilities in fact experience underlying fears. In anthropological terms, it may be fear of 'the other' stemming from lack of contact or ongoing relationship with someone with a disability in either their personal or professional lives.

I understand why they [disabilities] are not disclosed because it may cost your job, but because they've not disclosed that's a problem too.

Many employers were honest enough to admit that, even when people do disclose, they might hesitate to employ them as they wonder about the capacity of their enterprise to support them and the gaps in their knowledge and understanding.

Despite their fears, most focus group participants want to take seriously their ethical and social responsibilities as employers.

If you've got 250 employees ... then it's like you've got a thousand, because you're carrying the family, the boyfriend and girlfriend, you're part of the community, you're connected. It's not just the money side of it; it's the mental side of it, it's about community.

They value the notion of workplaces as microcosms of community diversity and are strongly attached to the ethic of a 'fair go'. Some choose to direct their efforts to Indigenous people, refugees or former prisoners and may never choose to employ people with disabilities. But others are actively searching for ways to do just that because they have seen that:

People with disabilities can be advantageous to a workplace ... an individual with a disability can unite the team.

Such experience, or a desire to be socially responsible, had led many of the employers participating in this research to actively seek to employ people with disabilities:

We would try [to employ someone with a disability] if given the opportunity. We do care, that's why we're here [at this meeting] but if we don't know, in a way we're not even really given the choice.

While these words were those of a small-to-medium-sized enterprise employer, large enterprises mandated by headquarters to employ people with disabilities often experience considerable difficulty in finding them. Is this because people with disabilities are choosing not to disclose their disability? Given the proportion of people with disabilities who have been unable to find employment, it would seem unlikely that their invisibility is because the pool is too small.

While privacy, equal opportunity and discrimination laws designed to protect human rights preclude employers asking questions about disability in an employment context, we could locate no research that examined the dilemma of disclosure and the impact of non-disclosure in the workplace.

Employers are especially concerned when they feel that they have been deceived.

If someone didn't disclose to me I would feel ambushed as an employer. There's got to be trust to be fair to both of us. I understand why they wouldn't want to disclose but there's a million hazards out there and I have a duty of care.

Some employers regard non-disclosure of mental illness as a form of dishonesty, but others are practical, pragmatic and philosophical. While recognising that they can only ask questions directly related to the inherent requirements of the job, they take the view that:

You haven't been lied to if you didn't ask the question. It's my fault. I should have picked it up. I should have been more tuned in. When the revelation occurs it is time to take stock, and then provide what support you can along the way. You do what you can. You do what is necessary to get the job done.

## Perceived risk and duty of care

Focus group participants were concerned first and foremost about the effects of non-disclosure on their duty of care and risk management, both for the employee with disabilities and all other members of staff. Not knowing means that they're not aware of what they are dealing with, which in turn can create or exacerbate problems for themselves as employers as well as for their staff as a whole or individual work groups:

Disclosure is a key issue for us as well. We have a duty of care. We need to be careful and we have a duty of care to staff as well as to our clients.

Safety is an issue, as both managers and work groups can be unsure how to respond to unexpected behaviour and what responses to make to ensure workplace safety and the wellbeing of all. The depressive illnesses and mental health concerns about employees are particularly difficult for employers to manage. One small employer says:

they have their ups and downs with medications and things going on ... it's a constant concern ... it keeps you on edge and it's not just the cost in dollars it's the cost in concern and worry ... [another employer adds] It's a cost in grey hair and worry.

These employer concerns reflect some of the findings discussed in the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry's 'Plan for the employment of people with a disability' (2008), which cites risk as a major fear for employers and points out that risk is mainly centred on safety issues, a finding that is echoed in an American journal article, 'The employer's perception: Employment of individuals with developmental disabilities' (Morgan & Alexander 2005). This is despite evidence that the safety records of employees with disabilities are better than those of other employees (Morgan & Alexander 2005).

## Discrimination

Employers expressed fears about laws relating to disability and employment:

You need to know about the legal issues and the sort of time it can take to settle e.g. through VCAT [Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal] or WorkCover.

Such fears often arise from misconceptions or imperfect understandings of anti-discrimination laws and are stimulated or exacerbated by high-profile anti-discrimination decisions against employers settled in court. Anecdotes circulated among peers and myths arising from stories that circulate among associates add grist to the rumour mill. Employers are afraid that they will inadvertently contravene occupational health and safety regulations or anti-discrimination laws, that they will be subject to onerous workers' compensation claims or that they will find themselves enmeshed in tribunal hearings which, even if they are exonerated, will cost them dearly in resources, time and anxiety:

It's difficult to be able to ask the question and to be clear about what employers can and can't ask ... You can ask, 'is there anything that could affect the job?' but that's a pretty wimpish question. How do you get information? What are employers entitled to ask? Employers don't know—we feel scared to ask.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2008) also found that the biggest concerns for employers related to occupational health and safety, workers' compensation, disability discrimination and equal employment opportunity.

## Impact on enterprises and managers

Employers are concerned that non-disclosure might have repercussions, not just for the individual employee, but for the workplace as a whole:

Non-disclosure can lead to accidents that create problems—for employees as well as the employer.

This can be a greater problem in a small-to-medium-sized enterprise than in a larger enterprise, where as one employer pointed out:

When you've got 400 staff versus 20 staff and management/staff ratios, you can manage a problem more easily. You can pick up the slack, although colleagues are sometimes resentful if they think someone's not pulling their weight.

Employers expressed concern that non-disclosure prevents managers or supervisory staff from providing support which could have been made available.

About 90% don't disclose. It comes out *after* they've got the job, with the apprentices for instance, it comes out when they're starting to fail, when they're having difficulties at TAFE or problems on the job.

Being proactive in the prevention of such difficulties is a preferable strategy to being reactive after problems have become apparent. As another employer noted:

But if we knew this up front then we can quietly, discreetly, offer that extra support whatever your requirements may be.

Managers become uncertain and their self-confidence is undermined when they don't know that the problem in work performance they observe is actually a manifestation of a disability, especially a mental illness:

I think it's a problem for all managers, not just younger or older managers. It's a problem because you can't identify that it's a problem, but it's right across the board. All managers need support on mental health issues. Moreover, non-disclosure can jeopardise staff cohesion.

If it's unknown I'm not equipped to deal with this person's issues or needs and the damage that this person can cause/is causing, particularly in a small workgroup it can be very destructive.

Employers talked about the value of experience for being able to ‘pick up the signs’, a capacity essential for managers with people with undisclosed disabilities in their work teams. This sensitivity enables them to be better prepared for dealing with behavioural problems by careful management or appropriate referral to available expertise. They emphasised the importance of having the appropriate systems for recruitment, interviewing, selection and appointment processes that are cognisant of various forms of disability. Here again they commented on the difference between larger and smaller enterprises:

This is very difficult for small and medium-sized enterprises—[there’s] no chance to monitor, to pick up signs, and to know what to do anyway.

Others noted:

There are problems with performance managing a person with a disability—Are they hiding behind the disability?—‘I can’t do that because of my disability.’ Managers are scared to say things when a disability is used as an excuse for poor performance.

Employers welcomed the opportunity provided by this research to discuss these issues openly. Some employers are concerned that legislative and regulatory requirements that skirt the direct experience of employers erect barriers to discussing the issues. Such barriers, although unintended, hinder development of employers’ understanding of the sort of workplace culture which is desired. There was a clear consensus that employers would prefer workplaces that enable disclosure of disability to the extent that the employee with a disability is fully accepted in the workplace and the existence of a disability becomes a non-issue.

## Costs to the business

Most of the existing literature on disability employment focuses on the experience of employees. There is no research literature that addresses the impact of disability employment on enterprises and managers except for a few examples that emphasise cost-related issues such as workplace modification, the additional need for supervision or the retention of an underperforming employee.

Employers are worried about costs in terms of money, time and productivity, not only of the employee with a disability but of the work teams which bear some of the responsibility for each other’s performance. In small-to-medium-sized enterprises, where time is money, one key concern raised on several occasions was the cost of additional supervision and training to support a person with disability:

It takes more attention from me, more supervision, more time, it just takes longer.

I would say that 90 per cent of the time everything is okay and he [a worker with a disability] manages fine. However there are some situations where his disability means that there is less flexibility in his work and [therefore] in our employment arrangements.

Another employer, running a medium-sized furniture manufacturing enterprise, talked about employing people with intellectual disabilities. He said he has ‘engaged quite a few over the years’ because he has a social conscience. He talked about the social benefit for the individual and the benefit for society and the community, but states there is ‘definitely not an economic benefit for the employer it simply doesn’t add up’.

In the same focus group a small employer, running a cleaning business, talked about employing people with intellectual disabilities. ‘It takes a lot more time than with the average Joe’, he argues. Even after 12 months, and with training that has been customised for the individual, he is still not absolutely confident about some of his employees working on their own: ‘it’s the more intense supervision that’s the cost’. He also talked about the challenge of communication skills, referring to the need to work and communicate with clients and customers who need to be kept happy. He has concerns about his business being represented by some of his employees because of their difficulties with communication and relationship skills.

One employer summed it up:

Can we afford it? It's still a business decision that you have to make ... some of the needs are financial. It's a business case that you have to make and you have to manage those risks.

The research literature indicates that there appear to be three main cost-related factors that limit employment opportunities for people with disabilities: the cost of hiring, the cost of additional supervision and the contingent loss of productivity (Peck & Kirkbride 2001). Cost is also cited as an issue in the recent US survey (Domzal, Houtenville & Sharma 2008).

## Employer knowledge and information

The focus groups identified the need for different sorts of assistance for employers. Some of this support is relatively simple. There is a need, for instance, for straightforward provision of information. However, the range of topics needed to address knowledge gaps is significant, and there are challenges in providing the information in ways which make it accessible to diverse employers.

Most employers in small-to-medium-sized enterprises have very limited knowledge about what information is available to them. As one employer said:

The perception of employers is that they don't want to employ people with disabilities, but the bottom line is employers don't know. We don't know about the resources, the support, the funding available. As small organisations we simply don't have the resources [to know]. It's pure lack of knowledge.

Employers are aware in a general way that there are legitimate ways to identify conditions such as dyslexia that might limit literacy and numeracy capability, or autism and Asperger's Syndrome, which define the ways people relate to others. They are not however confident about their abilities to use such tools or strategies. They are even less confident about their understanding of the various forms of mental illness and about strategies that are permissible for identifying disabilities and supporting everyone in their workplaces.

Even when they do know what information and assistance are available and how they can be accessed, it is not available in forms they find practical. They have limited time to trawl the internet or look for examples of strategies that might be useful. In particular they are anxious about missing information regarding government policies and programs, especially when changes occur. Several employers noted the importance of group training organisations in this regard:

The GTO [group training organisation] information and support especially on current policies and procedures (eligibility, entitlements etc), is important ... the information and support from the GTO is really essential for us.

The level of knowledge about information and assistance available is high among public agencies and large enterprises with human resource departments, and low in most small-to-medium-sized enterprises. The focus group discussions pointed clearly to a vicious circle for small-to-medium-sized enterprises: inadequate knowledge tends to engender fear among employers, fear engenders avoidance of the issue, avoidance undermines the prospect of considering employment, which precludes experience and knowledge and reinforces fear. What small-to-medium-sized enterprises want is up-front assistance.

Employers' need for information and assistance is cited in 'ACCI's plan for the employment of people with a disability' (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2008) and in *Leading from the front?* (Kimberley & Keating 2008). The recent US survey found that the sorts of information employers believe would encourage them to employ people with disabilities include how it would benefit the company's bottom line and how it could increase a company's productivity (Domzal, Houtenville & Sharma 2008).

Another important issue that emerged from this research pertains to the quality of (and sometimes the lack of) communication between employers and advocates and professionals working within various programs and services to support people with disabilities. The latter might collectively be referred to as the disability support system. The language of policy and professional disability support services places considerable emphasis on sensitivity to disability matters. Employers such as public institutions, government-funded services and large companies with dedicated human resources staff are well practised in using this language. However, to many employers, particularly those in small-to-medium-sized enterprises, this professional and politically correct language is indirect, opaque and confusing.

Employers' difficulty with the language impacts on their understanding of regulation and knowledge of assistance available to support them to employ people with disabilities. They often rely on others as 'translators' between the disability system and themselves. This means that people working at the interface between employers and the disability support system, for example, group training organisation field officers, VET liaison staff and disability employment network field workers, are called upon to play this role. It is these professional 'boundary-crossing' workers who need to speak the language of/for employers if there are to be successful employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

## Government assistance

Some employers are wary of government programs and raised concerns about the effect of using government support on organisational independence and the impact of 'red tape' on the human and financial resources of the enterprise. Others are ambivalent, on the one hand complaining that traineeship funding is inadequate, but on the other hand boasting that they have maintained control over their businesses by not having other funding or agencies involved.

Some employers in regional Australia are critical of the limited availability of support outside metropolitan areas; others stressed the need for support post-recruitment and for support to carers or parents, who are often active partners in successful employment:

I have a strong moral radar but sometimes it would be really good, I mean if government is really serious, it would be good to have funds available to support these things; at the end of the day it's much easier to have 'Billy' rather than 'Bobby' because 'Billy' can hit the ground running ... there needs to be a bucket of money that smaller private employers can tap into.

Employers who have used support programs such as Disabled Australian Apprentice Wage Support have specific criticisms of some services: workplace assessment criteria are seen to be inappropriate, too restrictive in some cases, or requiring excessive levels of administration and reporting. Others criticise the high level of disability required to attract support, which automatically disqualifies many people with low-level disabilities who need assistance to hold positions which otherwise would be available to them. Still others highlight the inadequacies of psychological and physical rehabilitation services.

Commenting on the implementation of the Disabled Australian Apprentice Wage Support program, one employer referred to what he perceived as a shift in the eligibility criteria relating to disability, a consequence of which is that some individuals are now not likely to attract support from this program. He reported a sense of a general tightening of these eligibility criteria, claiming 'unless you've got the world's worst case of dyslexia, for example, you're not going to get any support'.

We could locate no literature about employers' attitudes toward or use of government assistance in Australia. However the US survey demonstrated that the level of knowledge or use of such assistance was extremely low, especially among small-to-medium-sized enterprises and quite low among large enterprises as well (Domzal, Houtenville & Sharma 2008).

# Strategies that work

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When focus group attention turned to what employers needed to enable them to employ people with disabilities, five types of strategies dominated discussion:

- ✧ the type and quality of organisational leadership
- ✧ the provision of information and assistance from a trusted third party
- ✧ work experience for people with disabilities
- ✧ job design
- ✧ training for managers, supervisors and staff.

## Organisational leadership

Employers both large and small generally agreed that the organisational culture is critical to successful employment of people with disabilities. There was also agreement that an organisational culture conducive to such employment is defined by a proactive stance at the top of the organisation. This organisational leadership places both ethical and practical value on creating a workforce that is inclusive of employees with disabilities. For large organisations a staff profile that mirrors the diversity of the Australian community is a hallmark of good corporate citizenship. Moreover, such an organisation actively values the positive effects of people with disabilities on other employees. To a lesser extent, and in slightly different ways, even small employers reflected this sense of being, and wanting to be, part of the community.

The type of organisation offering such leadership represents a confluence of interconnecting values in relation to diversity in the workplace: the contribution that diversity makes to building good individual attitudes and interpersonal relationships; how personal experience of co-workers with disabilities dissipates stigma and stereotype; and the fundamental importance of trust between and among management and staff at all levels. In some large companies, diversity in employment is serious business, mandated from the top and not only included in performance indicators for individuals and groups, but promulgated among enterprises that constitute the supply chain.

Despite the efforts of leaders to promote company policy on diversity employment, there is still the need to continually refresh and monitor achievement. Individual supervisors are still tempted to select employees for more easily guaranteed productivity over maintenance of workplace diversity. This may be so, even where their perceptions of what would please management are mistaken.

Large organisations that employ human resources expertise have been better situated to positively promote employment of people with disabilities. Indeed, the inclusion of employment of people with disabilities as a strategic objective for many enterprises led to the formation of the Australian Employers Network on Disability, a peer group through which resources, strategies and experiences are shared. In addition, the Australian Government provides resources to Disability WORKS Australia to provide recruitment support to enterprises of 100 or more employees.

This project has identified the needs of small-to-medium-sized enterprises in relation to these issues, and there are challenges in how the experience, lessons and accumulated wisdom of the larger corporate and public employers might be transferred to smaller enterprises.



The knowledge and skills required to successfully employ people with disabilities are similar, whether the organisation is large or small. But small organisations, however committed they may be to principles of equitable employment, and however conducive the attitudes in their workplace culture may be, inevitably have fewer resources. They also often lack the critical mass to justify the time required for building capability in this area. They talked of needing to take a more flexible approach and being prepared for it not to work out exactly as they had planned:

... in some cases we take a risk, sometimes it works out sometimes not. You've got to look at the fit with the organization, look at personnel and relationships, the fit with certain people in the organization ... It's very difficult to employ some [individuals].

They talked of providing a safe workplace, having appropriate policies and procedures, and having an understanding of working with people with disabilities:

We've had all sorts, mental health ... spina bifida, physical disabilities ... As an employer we look for the best fit.

Just as large organisations promoted their principles and practice through the enterprises that form their supply chains, some small-to-medium-sized enterprises were concerned with the importance of honest and ethical behaviour among their business partners and associates. They noted that:

There are always some organisations out there that want to take advantage [of people with disability and/or those who want to support them]. Some employers are just like that, they use people and then throw them away! There are ethical issues. We don't want their business. I say to my staff, 'Would you place your child there? If you wouldn't, we'll walk away'. We won't do it—we don't want their business.

## The value of third party assistance

Small-to-medium-sized enterprise employers participating in this research described how the most persuasive measure for employing people with disabilities is the availability of external persons who introduced them to the notion and built the business case for employing people with disabilities. They showed them how to do it, supported them through the processes of job design and recruitment, provided initial on-the-job support for the employees and continued mentoring employers as they and their staff gained knowledge and experience. For most of the employers participating in this research, this support has been provided by field officers from group training organisations and, for a smaller number, by personnel from Disability Employment Network services.

A rural employer talked about people with learning difficulties and the consequences of poor literacy. He talked about how much he appreciated the group training organisation being transparent on these issues:

It's really important that they tell me about them. We have one [an employee] with quite profound learning disabilities.

Employers feel they need more than support workers from funding agencies who stay for perhaps two days to provide support to the individual, but then move, on although the employee still needs a high level of direct supervision because they forget what they have been told or trained to do.

Because of the intellectual disability the training doesn't 'stick.'

When you need to go through the basic instruction again and again, it's difficult. It does cause difficulties. At school they might have one-to-one support but we need like an employment aide. Where can an employer go to get someone like that?

Another employer commented on the importance of the third party arrangement he has with a group training organisation. He said that he would not have taken on the employee on his own. The wages for this individual have until recently been subsidised through the Transport Accident Commission and with assistance from the group training organisation:

We're currently investigating whether we can obtain further support for him because we think he has the potential to go further with his career but it will be difficult without additional support.

Many employers in these focus groups would like to take more responsibility for recognising conditions that impact on work performance, but as one employer said:

[For employers] it's all about education and awareness and communication issues; and also the role of DEN [Disability Employment Network] providers, but many employers are not aware of this ... There are agencies of all sorts but it's not clear what their roles and services are.

## The value of work experience

Employers placed high value on employees with previous work experience, not only in the specific tasks to be performed but also in workplace behaviour, for example, understanding supervision and relating to other employees.

One employer, the principal of a primary school, talked about the range of people with disabilities employed at his school, which has a well-established culture of diversity and inclusivity. He stressed his role in this context as an employer. The school employs approx 100 staff—58 teaching staff, as well as paraprofessionals and ancillary staff and support staff. There are 25 teacher aides encompassing a wide variety of skills. The school has staff with disabilities and chronic diseases, which include vision impairment, diabetes and epilepsy.

The school is also the biggest employer of trainees in its state, employing trainees in a variety of areas including education, IT, multimedia and horticulture. These traineeships are often seen as an employment pathway for young people, including those with disabilities. The school has a very high (95%) completion rate for all these school-based traineeships—including those with special needs.

A complex range of factors contributes to this achievement. Relationships are seen to be the fundamental determinants of success, but also essential are staff training, work structure, job design and clarity about parameters to work within.

If a supervisor has effective skills and is compassionate it can work very well ... The relationship between the supervisor and the trainee is absolutely critical and it's important to remember that supervisors change too, and then they need training as well.

This principal also stressed the quality of the vocational training provider as central to the trainee's achievement. 'We're selective in our choice of RTO [registered training organisation]' he noted, highlighting the effective partnership between employer and training provider.

Equally important is treating the young people coming into the school on traineeships as employees rather than as students. It is possible that people with disabilities who experienced similar programs would more readily be employed by the employers participating in this study.

## Job design

Several employers commented on the importance of work design and redesign processes and advised that an effective strategy was to:

Move people around to find the right job that matches attitudes—then train them. A good attitude can get someone on the bus, then we need to find which seat is right for them.

Others have found that:

It's helpful to be talking to job seekers about their interests and aspirations and then seeing where or how they might fit into the organisation rather than approaching it from the point of view that you've got a vacancy or a space that you're trying to fill.

This approach might be described as a more person-centred approach to selection and recruitment. This is not however about employing people purely for the social good or social capital this might generate, and it is not about charity either. Employers stressed that successful employment must provide win-win-win outcomes for everyone involved: the person with a disability, the others in the work group or team, and the enterprise itself.

These issues affect how the workplace is perceived, holistically, systemically, with its web of relationships and interdependencies. The potential to redesign other people's jobs in order to maximise the productivity of a work group that might include a person with a disability was also highlighted. This is not so much about whether an employer is large or small, public or private, but rather how creatively jobs, work processes and workplaces are conceived and designed. Employers stressed the need for support with these processes.

One employer spoke proudly of what her firm had achieved with, and for, an employee with an intellectual disability:

She's a 40-year-old with intellectual disability. Housekeeping—doing fixed tasks. Very reliable but also very easily distracted. She's been there six years and gone from 40% to 60% capability.

There are also needs and responsibilities beyond the immediate requirements of the on-the-job task. For instance, alternative transport arrangements and adapted tools may be required. As one employer said:

There are practical controls and arrangements for support for this person with a disability. There are physical constraints. A pragmatic and practical approach is required.

## Learning, not training

In relation to employment of people with disabilities, employers rarely mentioned training as a means of overcoming issues that arose in the workplace. Where it was mentioned, the word was used in a generic sense and not to indicate formal accredited training. One employer described a problem her enterprise encountered with epilepsy in a laundry saying:

We needed to train the whole team (the employee hadn't disclosed and there was an accident).

She was talking about on-the-job rather than course-related training. Another employer said:

We train our staff on specifics for working with [a particular person] with a disability.

Other employers talked about education and preparation:

[Our company] has a strategic plan that will take some time to implement. We need to educate management and staff—prepare them to be ready.

Preparation of supervisors is very important before they're in a position to take on people with disability.

Another employer took a different tack:

Actually *initial* employment is not always such an issue. It's the lack of *long-term* and employee and employer support that is a real concern. We've had two previous failures, not getting them in, but once they were there ... We need to be able to tap into mentor programs and support for employers and the work team ... if you've got some other risks they may need

one-to-one support longer term. It's not just about induction or entry level. It's about ongoing support. The assumption seems to be that once they're in they'll be OK, and the employer's left to carry the whole lot.

The sort of learning that employers most appreciate and find most useful is not formal training, but the sort of informal learning that occurs through supportive relationships built among peers or with a knowledgeable third party such as a group training organisation or Disability Employment Network field worker. Also of value is access to experts to obtain knowledge and advice related specifically to improving their understanding of what to expect and how to manage a particular sort of disability held by a current or prospective employee. They want learning opportunities that are timely and which focus on real workplace events.

# What does it take?

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The original expression of our research question, ‘What would it take?’ presumed a certain level of resistance on the part of employers. Prima facie this is reasonable enough. The anecdotal evidence and insights from some research conducted by advocacy groups have suggested that employers are part of the problem (Kimberley & Keating 2008).

Nevertheless, generalisations are always somewhat dangerous. It is useful to bear in mind that responses and positions on these issues vary considerably, even amongst employers. One way to think about the change management processes involved in the push for disability employment is to think in terms of trying to move individuals along on a continuum. At one end of the spectrum are people who are highly resistant to the idea and negative in their stance. At the other end are those who are supportive. They are the champions and positive advocates. The challenge becomes how to move those who are hostile and resistant towards a more neutral stance, one where, even if they are not supportive, they will at least not stand in the way. With those who are already in a more neutral position, the aim is to move them towards a positive, supportive position. For those already positive, the aim is to generate advocates and champions.

Our analysis of the data from the focus groups led us to conclude that the employers contributing to our study are not, on the whole, against the principle of employing people with disabilities. They are, for the most part, neutral or relatively positive *in principle*. They express sympathy for those disadvantaged by disabilities (or other circumstances). They also express an interest in the welfare of such individuals and an interest in employing them where possible. At the risk of oversimplifying their position, it could be suggested they do not see the applicants with disabilities as the real problem. Rather they tend to see their own lack of knowledge, understanding and capability as the problem.

On the whole, they lack ‘disability confidence’ (Australian Employers Network on Disability 2008). The Australian Employers Network on Disability stresses the importance of ‘disability confidence’. Suzanne Colbert, chief executive officer of the network explains:

Disability confidence is about knowing how to make adjustments to the workplace to retain employees who acquire a disability, and how to make changes to recruitment processes to allow skilled and talented job seekers with disability to compete on a level playing field.

Disability confidence is also about delivering accessible customer service that provides a great experience to customers who may have a disability.

(Australian Employers Network on Disability 2008)

Despite their lack of confidence, the employers engaged in this study were interested and philosophically committed. Perhaps this is not so surprising. They had, after all, volunteered their time to come along to discuss these issues with researchers.

However, as the previous thematic overview of the data has shown, the focus groups did highlight the genuine concerns of these employers and the difficulties they perceived. These difficulties create barriers to engaging with equity groups in general, including people with disabilities. As a consequence, a common strategy is to back away and rationalise the inaction or disengagement as ‘leaving well alone’. Advocates for those with disabilities then face the challenge of how to get employers to change their minds.

Gardner (2006) has made a particular study of the process of changing minds. He outlines what he terms 'seven levers of mind change'. These are (in his words):

Reason—argument, a rational approach which involves 'identifying of relevant factors, weighing each in turn and making an overall assessment'.

Research—'complementing the use of argument is the collection of relevant data'

Resonance—'Reason and research appeal to the cognitive aspects of the human mind; resonance denotes the affective component. A view, idea or perspective resonates to the extent that it feels right to an individual'.

Representational Redescriptions—'Redescriptions for short' ... 'A change of mind becomes convincing to the extent that it lends itself to representation in a number of different forms, with these forms reinforcing one another.'

Resources and Rewards—'sometimes ... mind change is more likely to occur when considerable resources can be drawn upon'.

Real World Events—'Sometimes an event occurs in the broader society that affects many individuals, not just those who are contemplating a mind change'.

Resistances—'Any effort to understand the changing of minds must take into account the power of various resistances'.

(Gardner 2006, pp.15, 16, 17, 18)

In summary, Gardner suggests that 'a mind change is most likely to come about when the first six factors operate in concert and the resistances are relatively weak' (Gardner 2006, p.18).

In various ways virtually all of Gardner's 'seven Rs' were reflected in this project. Certainly the resistances were evident. At each point along the way these employers articulated their concerns—including their own perceived inadequacies.

## Resistances

We found it helpful to summarise these employer concerns and barriers in relation to the common phases of the recruitment, selection and employment process: namely, pre-employment, recruitment, placement and post-placement.

The summary of employers' concerns is presented in the following chart. In Gardner's terms this summary represents the employers' resistances. This summary/outline was presented to employers and ratified in the latter focus groups, including the session with the Australian Employers Network on Disability.

**Figure 1 Summary of employers' concerns**

*"What would it take?" ... So far, employers are saying ...*

We have an ('in-principle') <b>interest &amp; commitment</b> (to employ people with disabilities) <b>but,</b> ... <b>it's difficult because ...</b>			
Pre-employment >>>>	Recruitment >>>>	Placement >>>>	Post-Placement >>
<p><b>We don't know:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who or where they are</li> <li>If our businesses is 'ready' for disabled employees</li> <li>How to manage people with disabilities</li> </ul> <p><b>We aren't:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Big businesses</li> <li>Well equipped, prepared or trained to deal with disability issues</li> <li>Trained to understand the law on discrimination or equal opportunity</li> </ul>	<p><b>We don't know:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What they're capable of doing</li> <li>How, or if, they'd fit in</li> <li>What disability service providers do</li> <li>If government support is available</li> </ul> <p><b>We're afraid that:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We might say, or do, the wrong thing</li> <li>We might place ourselves, our business or employees at risk</li> <li>We might be stuck with someone unsuitable</li> <li>They might not tell us the truth about their disability</li> </ul>	<p><b>We don't know:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What support they would require or how much that would cost</li> <li>If supervisors will be able to cope</li> <li>If other employees will be able to cope</li> </ul> <p><b>We're afraid that:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People with disabilities could be dangerous at work</li> <li>People with Mental Health problems could cause problems at work.</li> </ul> <p><b>We don't have:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mentors, or other business colleagues to talk to on disability issues</li> <li>Adaptive technologies, aids or support structures for people with disabilities</li> </ul>	<p><b>We don't know:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whether they would have a career path or longer term future with us</li> <li>How to assess fairly or conduct performance appraisals for people with disabilities.</li> </ul> <p><b>We're afraid that:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We might not get a positive return on investment from a disabled employee</li> </ul>

*Do these concerns 'ring true' for you too? ...*

Framing the employer concerns (or resistances) in this way led to discussions of what would be required to address them. It may be noted that, while some of the concerns are best addressed from the supply side of the employment equation, much of the learning, development and change needs to occur on the demand side; that is, among employers themselves and within their organisations.

So what if these concerns could be addressed? Our analysis of the data from the literature review, the early focus groups, the project reference group and our own professional experiences within the field suggested possible responses to these employer concerns. These possible responses were summarised into a second chart.

In our later focus groups, and with the Australian Employers Network on Disability, this 'So what if ...' chart was presented and interrogated with employers as a follow-up to the identification of concerns and barriers. In these discussions there was strong support for this emerging 'model'. There was clear consensus that this outline provides a reasonable summary of 'what it would take' to optimise the likelihood of employers employing people with disabilities.

**Figure 2 Possible responses to employers' concerns**

*So what if ...*

Pre-employment	Recruitment	Placement	Post-Placement
<p><b>What if local providers could provide information &amp; training for SME business owners &amp; managers on:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understanding &amp; managing people with disabilities</li> <li>Knowing your rights &amp; responsibilities under employment law</li> <li>Mental Health &amp; its impact at work</li> <li>Helping you assess your workplace needs, culture &amp; 'readiness' to employ</li> </ul>	<p><b>What if 'value-adding' strategies were adopted to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explain the nature of disability &amp; what candidates are capable of doing on the job</li> <li>Maximise the possibility of open disclosure</li> <li>Explain how 'reasonable adjustments' can be made &amp; costs covered</li> <li>Minimise risk &amp; optimise positive returns for your business</li> </ul>	<p><b>What if you could have contact with other business owners &amp; managers who could:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Show 'reasonable adjustments' &amp; adaptive technologies at work</li> <li>Act as management mentors &amp; sounding boards</li> <li>Provide success stories about employing people with disabilities</li> </ul>	<p><b>What if local providers could provide information &amp; training for SME business owners &amp; managers on:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Reasonable adjustments' in performance appraisal &amp; on-the-job assessments</li> <li>Workforce development strategies &amp; succession planning</li> <li>'Strengths-based' practice</li> </ul>
<p><b>What if you had a 'trusted broker' who understands SME needs and could:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide 'work-ready' candidates with high level employability skills suitable for your business</li> <li>Explain the availability of government subsidies &amp; support</li> </ul>	<p><b>What if you had a 'trusted broker' who could:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share the work-load &amp; responsibility for the recruitment &amp; selection process with you</li> <li>Process the paperwork to access government subsidies &amp; support</li> <li>Link you with specialist service providers, agencies, information &amp; support</li> </ul>	<p><b>What if local providers could provide information &amp; training for your workforce on:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disability awareness &amp; strengths-based approaches</li> <li>Mental Health 'First Aid' &amp; awareness</li> </ul>	<p><b>What if your 'trusted broker' could provide:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supportive case management &amp; follow-up for/with employees with disabilities</li> <li>Coaching &amp; support for supervisory staff</li> </ul>

*Would that be enough? ...*  
*What else can you suggest? ...*

This then, in brief, is the answer to our research question: 'What would it take to enable employers to employ people with disabilities?' It would take a significant shift (or expansion) in focus to address seriously concerns on the employer side of the equation.

The tasks summarised above, in relation to the recruitment and employment process, need to be tackled. The good news is that in many cases there are already precedents and useful examples of good practice that point the way forward.

The following section discusses some of these key challenges, possibilities, and strategies in relation to Gardner's 'levers of mind change'. The final section of the report moves onto considering the implications of the study for key stakeholders.

## Importance of having a reason

Employers need a sound reason to employ anyone—even the most capable and able-bodied person will not be employed without good reason. As the employers in this study pointed out, the decision to employ is essentially a business decision. In the end, the employer must be confident that the individual will generate more for the business than it costs to employ him or her. This is the fundamental equation.

Those disadvantaged by community (including employers') attitudes and misconceptions, however, would wish that it were always this simple. They know that perceptions do make a difference (even when they are based on misinformation or ignorance). The strategies summarised above present employers with several lines of argument or reasons, for employing people with disabilities and therefore shift or reframe unhelpful perceptions. They argue experience shows that:

- ✧ It pays for organisations to reflect the diversity of their customer and consumer base—it makes good business sense and brings rewards.



- ✧ Leading businesses are already moving down this path because it reaps rewards.
- ✧ For larger corporate and public enterprises, disability confidence is about image and good corporate citizenship.
- ✧ For small and medium-sized enterprises, disability confidence is about supporting and being part of one's community.
- ✧ Provided the worker can address the inherent requirements of the work, employment of people with disabilities is no more or less risky than employing anyone else.
- ✧ There are reasonable adjustments that can be made in the workplace.
- ✧ There may be support available if you look and ask for it.

## Value of research

The US Office of Disability and Employment Policy study cited earlier (Domzal, Houtenville & Sharma 2008) highlighted the significance of research in persuading employers. The study found that larger corporate and public employers in particular are more likely to be influenced by the findings of research than smaller employers. Larger corporations are more likely to have formal, more sophisticated human resource and personnel management systems. They are more likely to monitor, measure and evaluate human resource (or human capital) indicators, such as worker morale, productivity, attendance, turnover and sick leave. They use business metrics on such issues and they value and are familiar with the language and methods of research and statistics.

Small and medium-sized enterprises, according to Domzal, Houtenville and Sharma (2008), are more likely to be persuaded by information on job performance and how hiring a person with disabilities can increase their productivity. They are more likely to be influenced by a good story than impressive statistics. However, the story must come from a reliable source, such as another respected employer. This goes to the issue of resonance, which is discussed below.

## Importance of resonance

Gardner explains that, while research and reason appeal to the cool, analytical thinking (left hemisphere) parts of the brain (2006, pp.15–16), resonance appeals to the more emotional, affective (right hemisphere) sensibilities. It is difficult to persuade or bring about change unless, or until, what one says resonates effectively with the listener. When there is strong resonance the listener 'gets the vibe'.

As Gardner puts it:

Resonance often comes about because one feels a 'relation' to a mind-changer, finds that person 'reliable', or 'respects' that person. (Gardner 2006, p.16)

The effect of the Australian Employers Network on Disability as a business-to-business network and the role of group training organisations and disability employment networks as mediators, information givers and trusted brokers can be explained in terms of their messages, which have strong or effective resonance with constituent employers.

By the same means, the apparent failure of some other messages might also be explained. The policy and program messages of government, for instance, fail to resonate effectively with many employers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises. It is not that the policy setting is wrong or that employers disagree with government intentions: it is simply that the messages are not on the right 'wave-length' for employers to pick up—the resonance is not there to give the message penetration. As we noted earlier, the language of the employers we engaged with on these issues was not the language of policy or disability services professionals.

## Representational redescriptions

Gardner (2006, p.16) further argues that it helps if a mind-changing message can be presented in different but complementary forms. Disability confidence needs to be built simultaneously on several fronts, using multiple forms of representation. There are economic arguments, which will resonate for some, in which the numbers need to glow. There are moral and social justice arguments and stories to be told. Employers need to see the faces of disability and disadvantage—real people, with real skills and abilities to offer. ‘What it will take’ is multiple forms of storytelling, image-building and argument-making, to address different audiences, perceptions and needs.

## Resources and rewards

The importance of resources and rewards is also highlighted in Gardner’s overview of levers of mind change. Resources and rewards are significant in terms of government policy. Government incentives, allowances, and support payments were raised in most of our discussions with employers. Virtually everyone said such payments were useful, but they were not the deciding factor. As Gardner notes:

Individuals are being rewarded for one course of behaviour and thought rather than the other. Ultimately however, unless the new course of thought is concordant with the other criteria—reason, resonance, research, for example—it is unlikely to last beyond the provision of resources. (Gardner 2006, p.17).

In similar fashion, various disability employment awards schemes were cited as valuable for recognition and reward, but not decisive.

In this context a further critical factor to highlight is the role of the chief executive officer, senior manager or executive. At the organisational or enterprise level it is the leader who has the power to release or access resources and to bestow rewards. We asked employers who were already employing people with disabilities if there was one single factor that would prevent them from continuing to do so. They said, ‘if the chief executive officer stopped supporting the idea, that’d be it’. Removal of support by the chief executive officer would be crippling. We have already referred to the importance of strategic leadership but it cannot be overstated.

Conversely, for those attempting to introduce diversity employment and build disability confidence, winning support from the chief executive officer is seen to be essential.

## Impact of ‘real world’ events

Finally, Gardner notes that events in the ‘real world’ can be influential. In the context of arguments for greater diversity in employment and improved disability confidence there are two opposing ‘real world’ forces apparent.

On the one hand, the changing demographics of many economies, including Australia, see the onset of an increasingly ageing workforce. This, along with some other factors such as low fertility rates raises issues about skills shortages and the difficulty of recruiting and retaining appropriately skilled labour. Hence the window of opportunity identified at the outset of this project—to leverage improvement in employment circumstances for many who have been marginalised or disadvantaged, including people with disabilities.

On the other hand, there is the ‘real world’ impact of the recent financial crisis that has affected the global economy. The macro impact of this series of financial events ripples through into much more local and microeconomic decision-making as individual businesses and employers are influenced by the news of what has happened, what is happening, and what is expected to happen.

Confidence is shaken and employers' decisions to employ anyone, let alone people with disabilities, are based on confidence in the future. This vision suggests the window is being closed again.

Perhaps this is too simplistic a story. Several employers in this study highlighted the importance of taking a longer-term strategic view of these issues. Important social change rarely happens overnight, even when policies to support it are widely understood and accepted. These employers pointed out that, when the backwash of the global financial crisis recedes, the population will still be ageing and the skills shortages will still be there. They argued there will still be the need to find skilled labour and the potential to employ from groups traditionally disenfranchised.

There is also another dimension to the influence of the 'real world' on employers and their perceptions of disability. Several of the employers contributing to this study reported that their first engagements with disability were not when they were wearing their 'employer' hats. Their understanding of disability issues was influenced by personal and/or family experiences quite outside their work domain. It is useful to remember that employers are influenced by those around them in a wide range of settings.

# Implications

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This final section outlines the issues and in particular the implications of the study for significant groups of stakeholders with interests in disability and employment.

## Policy implications

The literature review (see Support Document) notes the twin policy imperatives of the Australian Government and governments overseas in relation to the employment of people from various equity target groups, including people with disabilities. The twin goals are seen to be for equity and social justice on the one hand, and a labour force fully engaged within a productive and competitive economy on the other.

The key implication of this study is that these policy objectives are unlikely to be realised without deliberate and strategic attention to the demand side of the employment equation. Employment problems cannot be solved from the supply side alone; the understandings and needs of employers must be appreciated and addressed.

Of particular significance are the understandings and needs of small and medium-sized enterprises, which collectively employ a high proportion of the workforce. The integration of people with disabilities into the mainstream recruiting processes of employers involves social change at a community level and organisational change at a business level. While corporate and public sector employers are leading the way, smaller employers often lack the knowledge, time, contacts, confidence and resources to be proactive in sourcing, recruiting and employing from equity groups, including people with disabilities.

However, these employers are not necessarily hostile to, and indeed are often enthusiastic about, the idea of employing from non-traditional cohorts. There is potential for employment solutions that provide ‘win-win’ outcomes. Government policy should be targeted to:

- ✧ raising awareness and sharing information
- ✧ strengthening strategic, practical and individual support for employers, particularly small-to-medium-sized enterprises, employing people with disability
- ✧ facilitating change and the spread of learning and best practice, particularly from larger corporate enterprises to small and medium-sized enterprises.

There are particular challenges for government and the other stakeholders involved in developing strategies to communicate government policies, programs and available support in ways that reach and resonate effectively with employers, including smaller employers who may not be connected to peak bodies. It appears that, at present, government messages to employers about these policies and objectives are confusing, not well understood, not well conveyed and in many cases not known at all.

## Implications for VET practice

This study has found that, on the whole, the employers canvassed did not identify lack of skills in employees or job applicants as the main problem.

Employers did place a strong emphasis upon the need for pre-employment pathways that include structured work experience for people with disabilities. To this extent, the problem can be seen as a supply side issue which needs to be addressed through improved education and training experiences, commencing in the school sector and continuing through into post-school education and employment situations.

The study highlighted the need for more demand side strategies to support employers and managers in their ongoing learning and development. Employers are not looking for formal training in disability employment. They are looking for assistance to build workforce capacity across their businesses to support the productive employment of people with disability. This holds true for all types and sizes of businesses in this study.

So what are the implications for vocational education and training? The answers depend on how we see the VET system and what it can do. If vocational education and training is seen simply as TAFE institutes delivering mainstream accredited training leading to formal qualifications, then it is unlikely it will play a key role in addressing the employer needs identified in this study.

On the other hand, the VET system can be seen more broadly. Vocational education and training already takes place in schools, in adult community education providers, in private providers and in industry and enterprise-based organisations. The VET system is more than the delivery of accredited training. Taken in its broader sense, the VET system already includes:

- ✧ provision of information, advisory and consultancy services
- ✧ brokerage and linkage services, networking and the building of social capital
- ✧ facilitation of informal and non-accredited learning and development
- ✧ building of cross-sectoral partnerships and communities of practice
- ✧ facilitation of industry and organisational development processes.

Some group training field staff and Disability Employment Network personnel are already perceived as ‘trusted brokers’, providing key sources of learning and critical support for some employers. As one of our contributing smaller employers employing people with disability noted:

I wouldn't do it if it weren't for the support from the GTO [group training organisation].

Some VET programs, projects and providers are funded for such activity. Others are already engaged despite their funding constraints, but it appears much of this social capital and partnership-building activity remains relatively marginalised, under-resourced and undeveloped.

Agencies such as Beyondblue visit workplaces to talk about depression, and psychiatric rehabilitation services offer ‘mental health first aid’ to workplaces. These providers are developing and offering new VET services—even though such work-related learning might not be conventionally considered vocational education and training.

This study suggests there are considerable benefits to be gained by expanding such work both within and beyond the boundaries of conventional VET practice and that there is value in looking beyond a narrow TAFE institute-centric view of VET. We have already noted that not all problems have a training solution, but they all have learning implications.

This begs a series of important questions about how we see the role(s) of the VET system and how the necessary practices may be funded. As noted in the literature review, even where there is good will and consensus on objectives, effective networks and partnerships can be difficult to develop and sustain. They involve time-consuming commitments, perseverance and hard work from personnel in VET providers. Resources are required to support and sustain such new VET practices.

## Implications for employers

The lesson for employers from this study is that there is value for themselves and their businesses in developing ‘disability confidence’ (Australian Employers Network on Disability 2008). There are also some support systems and resources available to help them develop this confidence. However, they need to be ‘connected’ and networking effectively to be aware of, and take advantage of, these resources. Unfortunately many, particularly smaller employers, are not so connected and are unaware of support they may be able to access.

Membership of the Australian Employers Network on Disability is open to all interested employers, although the annual membership cost may be perceived as unrealistic for many small businesses. The network provides information and resources targeted specifically to employers. It is a particularly valuable resource because it is an *employer* network providing, in effect, business-to-business information and advice. It is also noteworthy that employers, the larger corporate employers in particular, are in some respects ahead of governments and VET providers on this agenda. They are where many of the examples of best practice can be found. The Australian Employers Network on Disability provides literature and examples and their website provides a valuable and free first point of access for employers. However, we suspect that the reach of this network into small and medium-sized enterprises is limited.

Group training organisations, who are employers in their own right, provide valuable support services to their host employers, including small and medium-sized enterprises. As mentioned above, several of the employers in the study cited the critical importance of the group training organisations and disability employment networks in providing information and support, particularly in relation to available government programs and subsidies. Keeping up to date with shifting government priorities, policies, programs and eligibility criteria is a constant challenge and employers appreciated the role of the third party support agency, which viewed this specialist information role as their core business.

Summing up, it is apparent that there are pockets of excellent practice amongst some employers, particularly larger employers. There are still substantial challenges in how best practice knowledge and experience in ‘big business’ can be made accessible and feasible for small and medium-sized enterprises. Disability WORKS Australia, which is funded by the federal government, helps to address these issues for businesses with 100 or more employees, but once again small and medium-sized enterprises seem to miss out.

## Implications for equity groups and their advocates

There are also challenges arising from this study for various equity and advocacy groups, including those who work with people with disabilities. The study suggests that the cause of their primary clients, people with disabilities, for instance, could be advanced by some shifting of attention to the demand side of the employment equation.

The challenge is in whether, and to what extent, various advocacy groups or associations may come to see employers themselves, particularly smaller employers, as a constituency to be informed and supported. The evidence suggests that employers *need* to know, and to a considerable extent also *want* to know, more about disability and disability employment: the myths, issues, possibilities and constraints.

Peak bodies and advocacy groups with considerable depth of experience and specialist knowledge are in a strong position to address many of the employers’ concerns. They are in a position to move the conversation from one based on uncertainty and anxiety about disability and disadvantages, to one based on confidence about capability and advantages in diversity. There is potential for win-win scenarios as relationships and trust develop.

The development of such relationships may require some re-thinking, and perhaps a shift in emphasis on the part of some advocacy groups. These issues have not been tested with such advocacy groups in this study. Our brief was to engage with employers and to bring their voices into the discourse on these issues. From the employer perspective:

You can be too zealous [as an advocate] ... You need people who understand how a business functions and who are practical and realistic. You can't promote the interest of the person with a disability as a 'special person for a special job'. If you do that you're going to reduce the chances of getting many—or even any—positions.

This particular employer was speaking from experience in engaging with advocacy groups. He (and others) stressed, from the employer perspective, that it is not so much advocacy that they want to hear, as down-to-earth and factual information framed in response to their genuine concerns, noted earlier, for example:

- ✧ What about the issues of disclosure and non-disclosure?
- ✧ What about occupational health and safety?
- ✧ Do you understand my duty of care, as an employer, to you and to others?
- ✧ Can you reassure me I'm not going to get caught up in legal red tape in a tribunal somewhere if I take on an employee with disability?

And perhaps most important of all ...

- ✧ What about my (our) business—can you, given your ability and your disability, how can you really add value for us?

If employers' concerns are real and genuinely held, as was demonstrated in this research, they must be treated with respect—and they must be addressed if progress is to be made on these issues.

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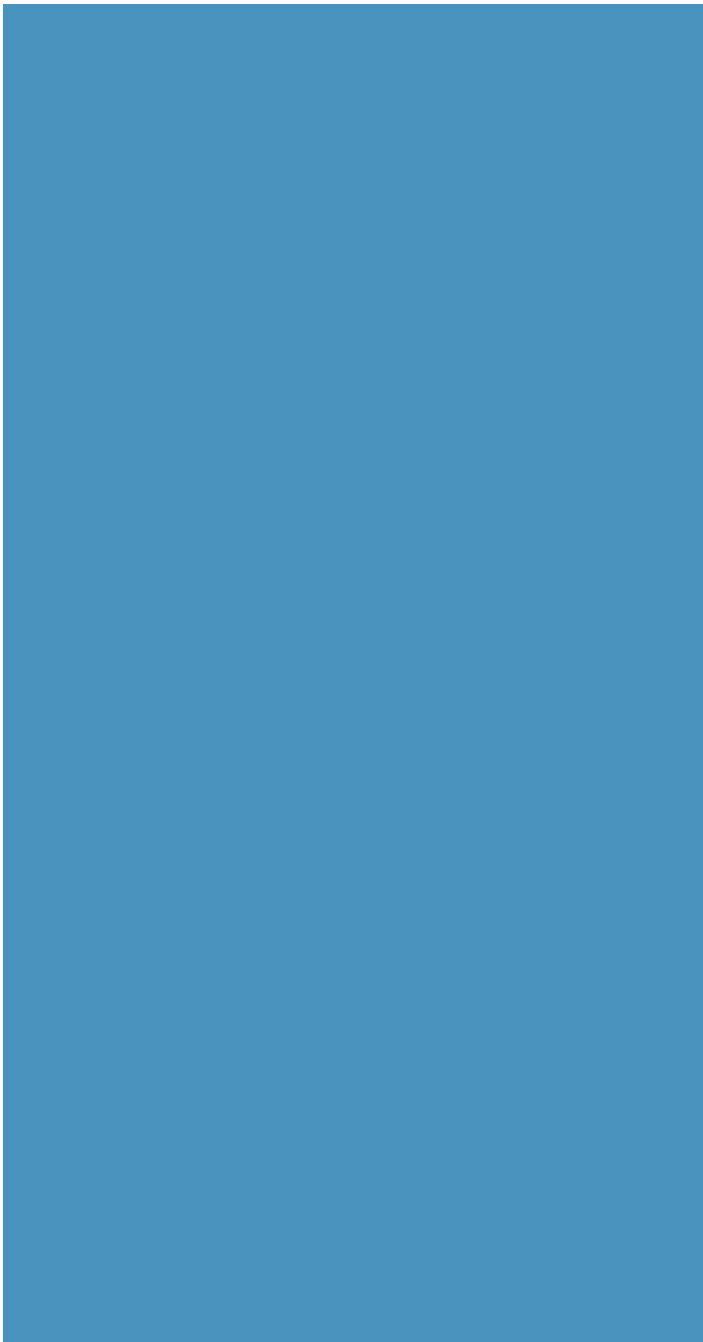


# Support document details

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Additional information relating to this research is available in *What would it take? Employer perspectives on employing people with a disability—Literature review*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2219.html>>.

✧ Literature review.



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