

Leading from the front?

Research on Disability Employment
in the Victorian Disability Sector

April 2008

ADDE



Australians for
Disability and
Diversity Employment

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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia is a poor performer in the area of disability employment, and this has been well documented (OECD 2003) and recognised by the Federal Government (Australian Government, 2008). The 2005 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's (HREOC) enquiry into disability and employment in Australia found that Australian employers are reluctant to employ people with disabilities for a range of reasons, including fear of cost, risk of failure and lack of information.

Given the high profile role that many disability organisations play in employment support and advocacy on behalf of their service users, one would expect the disability sector to be leading in the practice of employing people with disabilities across a range of levels. One would also expect to find innovative employment practices within the sector and a sophisticated discourse on the topic.

In July 2007 a group concerned with the issue of disability and employment, Australians for Disability and Diversity in Employment (ADDE), commissioned the Equity Research Centre to undertake research on disability employment within the Victorian disability sector with funding from the Reichstein Foundation, the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust and ANZ Trustees. The aims of this project were to investigate the disability employment policies and practices of Victorian disability organisations, and to indicate future areas for action, advocacy, research and documentation.

The research involved an on-line survey of Victorian disability organisations to capture a snapshot of the sector. This was followed with in-depth interviews with five organisations in order to develop case studies that gave more detailed examples of the issues in disability employment from the perspective of employers. Both the surveys and the case studies focused on five main areas in relation to the employment of people with disabilities in the sector: levels of employment, initiatives, policies and strategies, beliefs and attitudes, and challenges and barriers.

This executive summary describes the key findings from the research and sets out the future directions that the Victorian disability sector could take to lead from the front in disability employment.

Key Findings

The findings from this research indicate that while the sector states a commitment to disability employment, this commitment is not always apparent in the sector's own performance. The findings suggest that apart from the good practice of some individual organisations the disability sector as a whole is currently not leading in the practice of employing people with disabilities. Eight main issues emerged as the key reasons for this:

Lack of a sector wide strategy: Good initiatives amongst employers are not shared within the sector. There are no sector wide strategies, support networks or resources for addressing disability employment.

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

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

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

Low levels of work readiness: The literature clearly identifies low work readiness as a barrier to disability employment and that low levels of work readiness required employers to invest heavily in staff with disabilities.

Poor data collection: There is no obligation for employers to keep records in relation to staff with disabilities. This research found that employer data about employment levels of people with disabilities is poor. This makes it difficult to benchmark practice or measure improvement.

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

Poor understanding of "value": The literature suggests that to increase disability employment, organisations need to see the value that people with disabilities can bring as employees. Most employers surveyed in this research failed to identify the benefits to their organisations of employing people with a disability.

Future Directions

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

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

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

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

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

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

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, Australians for Disability and Diversity Employment (ADDE) received funding from the Reichstein Foundation, the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust and ANZ Trustees to conduct research into the employment of people with disabilities within the Victorian disability services sector. The research aimed to investigate disability employment practices, performance and strategies across the disability sector in Victoria. The Equity Research Centre was contracted by the research project management group to conduct the research.

Project Objectives

The overall project objectives were to:

- Identify current levels of employment of people with disabilities in the not-for-profit disability sector in Victoria
- Consult with disability organisations and consumers about barriers to, and examples of, best practice in the employment of people with disabilities in the not-for-profit disability sector
- Develop strategies for increasing opportunities for the employment of people with disabilities in sector organisations
- Raise awareness in the sector and in the Victorian and Federal Governments of the role of Government-funded disability agencies in providing employment opportunities for people with disabilities

It was anticipated that the project would have the following outcomes:

- A comprehensive analysis of the level of employment of people with disabilities in the not-for-profit disability sector in Victoria
- A better understanding of the barriers towards, and best practices in, the promotion of employment of people with disabilities in this sector
- A report detailing the outcomes of the research, and a series of recommendations towards increasing employment opportunities of people with disabilities in the disability sector
- An outline for an action research project for implementation of the recommendations

Research Activities

To meet these objectives, the Equity Research Centre was required to undertake a number of activities including to:

- Design and conduct an initial survey of the disability service and advocacy organisations in Victoria
- Collate the results of the survey
- Complete a literature review on Disability and Employment
- Conduct a number of case studies of Victorian organisations in the disability sector emerging as leaders in the practice of employing people with disabilities

This report contains three sections.

Discussion of the Literature

This section provides a context for the research. It outlines the current issues emerging in recent literature on policy, practice in disability employment, focussing primarily on the Australian context.

A Snapshot of Policy and Practice in the Disability Sector

In this section, information is presented from results of an on-line survey of Victorian disability organisations as well as material gathered from interviews with staff in disability organisations.

The data is organised according to reported levels of employment, employment initiatives, policies and strategies, beliefs and attitudes, and challenges and benefits cited by respondent organisations. This section also discusses some of the ways forward in disability employment as perceived by respondents.

Findings and Future Directions

This section summarises the main findings from the research and identifies several future directions for stimulating leadership and improved practice on disability employment within the Victorian disability sector.

DISCUSSION OF THE LITERATURE

The Policy Environment

The Federal Government's recently released *National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy: Discussion Paper* refers to the most recent literature available in relation to Australia's performance in disability employment, including the 2007 OECD report *Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers, Vol 2: Australia, Luxembourg, Spain and the United Kingdom*, the findings of the 2005 HREOC Inquiry into Employment and Disability, the 2004 ABS data on Disability, Ageing and Carers, as well as the 2003 OECD report *Transforming Disability into Ability: Policies to promote work and income security for disabled persons*. These four documents combined produce a disturbing picture of Australia's performance on the international front, underscoring how poorly the issue of disability employment is currently dealt with as a critical economic and social issue within Australia.

The Federal Government's commitment to developing a national strategy on disability and mental health in employment is framed in relation to both social inclusion and economic productivity. Through a national strategy, the Government seeks, amongst other things, to *influence employers to employ a person with disability and/or mental illness* and such a strategy will *suggest clear and practical actions for governments to promote improved employment opportunities for people with disability and/or mental illness* (Australian Government, 2008:7).

In March 2007 Australia was one of the first of 80 nations to sign the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Australian Government, disability advocates and HREOC were involved in drafting the convention, which promotes the right of people with disabilities to participate fully in society. Disability has an extremely negative impact on both employment and household income. This, in turn, has a negative impact on social participation (Saunders 2005:9).

The Australian government has invested heavily in both the provision of disability services and disability employment support. The next Commonwealth National Disability Agreement with disability employment services is estimated to cost the Australian government around \$2.5 billion (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007). Disability support and advocacy organisations (other than disability employment services) in Victoria alone received over \$1 billion in 2005-6 from state, territory and federal governments. Yet, it has been observed that in order to be successful, reforms will need to be accompanied by *measures designed to assist the disabled to overcome the very serious barriers...that currently prevent them from joining the labour force* (Saunders 2005:11).

Two key factors are expected to impact on the profile of disability employment by employers in Australia in the immediate future. The first is the ageing population, which is likely to bring an increased visibility of disability in the workplace and the second is the shortage of potential workers in the labour market as older people retire, making it necessary to recruit workers from as broad a field as possible. The Rudd government has confirmed that it is imperative from an economic policy position, as well as a social justice point of view, to bring more people with disabilities into the labour force through a national strategy.

Low Participation and High Unemployment

According to the AIHS website, in 2003, 3.9 million people were affected by a disability, impairment or limitation in Australia. One million three hundred thousand people were restricted in their schooling or employment and 0.7 million of those were under the age of 65, with one in every 100 Australians using a disability service organisation.

The OECD reported in 2003 that Australia has the lowest percentage of people on a disability pension who are employed out of 16 OECD countries. Also Australia is ranked 13 out of 19 OECD countries on the overall employment rate for people with a disability. In 2003, people with disability had a 53% workforce participation rate overall compared to 81% of those without a disability (ABS 2003). Those with profound disability had a much lower participation rate of 15%. According to the *Labour Force Characteristics of People with a Disability, 2006*, most (58%) working-age people with a disability who were not in the labour force reported being permanently unable to work. People with mental illness are recognised as being at higher risk, with 48% of people with a psychological disability reporting they are permanently unable to work, compared with only 28% of those with a sensory disability.

When they are employed, people with disabilities earn lower wages, on average, than workers without disabilities and this situation has worsened. In 1998, the average gross weekly wages of women with a disability was \$110 (24%) lower than the wages of their peers without a disability and for men it was \$105 (17%) lower. In 2003, the median gross personal income per week of people of working age with a disability was \$255, compared to \$501 for those without a disability. However, the income of people with sensory and mobility disabilities is higher than that of people with psychiatric disabilities.

Alarmingly, since 1993 the labour force participation rate of people with disabilities has fallen, while the rate for people without disabilities has risen. Women with disabilities are less likely to be in the workforce than men with disabilities and whilst employment rates for women overall have increased over the past decade they have decreased for women with disabilities.

Information has been generated on specific subgroups of people with disabilities in relation to their employment. A study conducted by Vision Australia research in 2007 with 1,864 people who were blind or with low vision found that the rate of unemployment Australia wide based on numbers of Australians who wanted work but had none (including those who had given up looking) is 13.9%, whereas for those with low vision or blindness it is 69% (Vision Australia, 2007: 16).

Government not Leading

The participation of people with disabilities in the labour force has moved little in the past two decades, and the Government has been far from leading in the area of disability employment. According to the People with Disabilities Council of Australia (French, 2006), the number of people with disability employed by the Australian Public Service has decreased by 20% since 1997, even though the government sector is required to develop and enact disability employment policies and to keep data on levels of employment of people with disclosed disabilities.

Employment Services Inadequate

The Welfare to Work policy introduced by the Australian Government in July 2006 included additional resources for disability employment services. Disability employment services either assist people with a disability to work in the open labour market or provide direct support or employment for people with a disability. In June 2005, 8,908 workers and independent workers were on the books of disability employment services in Victoria. Of these, 38.5% worked more than 30 hours a week.

In 2005-6, however, figures showed that people with disabilities who are registered with Job Networks have lower successful outcomes than those without disabilities. Diversity @Work notes that great numbers of skilled people with disabilities in Victoria do not access disability employment services or Job Networks. There are a large number of people with disabilities not represented in the labour market figures or job seeker statistics.

This means that employers looking to recruit staff through these agencies are unlikely to find a broad range of qualified applicants. These services alone do not provide the recruitment support required by employers.

Education is not Enough

The data from several enquiries into disability and employment in Australia: HREOC, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the Census on Australian Government disability services, the HILDA survey, and the OECD, indicates that even where people with disabilities have graduate and post graduate qualifications, they are far less likely to be in employment or to be earning the equivalent of those without a disability.

Boardman (2003) describes the barriers graduates with disabilities face in accessing employment, including lack of relevant work skills and experience, employer attitudes and behaviour and lack of information, skills or willingness to assist students with a disability within the educational institution. Mentoring, work placement, networking, research and resource initiatives, and cross-sectoral collaboration initiatives have been recommended as strategies for improving outcomes for graduates.

While evidence suggests that tertiary education and training leads to improved access to employment for graduates with disabilities, tertiary graduates with disabilities continue to experience lower levels of employment than their peers without disabilities. More research is needed with students who have different kinds of disabilities in order to understand ways in which particular disabilities are implicated in lower performance or completion. Some research of this sort has been done by disability organisations. According to Vision Australia, for example, although a smaller proportion of the total blind and low vision population in Australia has Year 12 qualifications compared to the general population (about half), a higher proportion has graduate and post graduate qualifications. Among the most educated respondents, however, a staggering 34% are still not employed.

Multiple Barriers

The *Review of the Disability Discrimination Act in 2004* found that people with disability face substantial discrimination in the workforce; and women with a disability are especially disadvantaged, facing discrimination on the twin grounds of gender and disability (Productivity Commission 2004: A.28). The literature repeatedly identifies employer attitudes as the single most important barrier facing people with disabilities, and this is explained and analysed in different ways; although one would expect that many of the fears, gaps in information and inexperience with disability described in relation to Australian employers would be absent within the disability sector itself.

Peck and Kirkbride (2001) contend that “fear” underlies the many reasons given by employers for not employing people with a disability. They identify ‘costs associated with hiring’, ‘additional supervision and loss of productivity’, ‘being stuck forever’ and ‘damaged goods’ as the four main fears. Similarly, the People with Disabilities Council of Australia (PDCA) found that employers lack awareness of the benefits of employing people with disabilities, do not know what the real needs of people with disabilities are, and do not provide flexible work practices and work hours.

The HREOC inquiry into disability and employment describes six barriers to employment for people with disabilities. It posits the barriers from the perspectives of both the employer and the potential employee:

Information: the lack of accessible information for both people with a disability and employers.

Costs: there are costs to people with disability of workforce participation, and perceived costs to employers.

Risk: there is fear of financial and personal impact on both employee and employer, especially if a job does not work out.

Job readiness: there is a great need for appropriate education and vocational training at all levels as well as the all important social and life skills required to deal with the open workplace.

Discrimination: the process of submitting applications through disability employment agencies can work against the applicant in highlighting a person’s disability rather than their skills.

Retention: employees fear they will have difficulty retaining jobs or advancing within an organisation and employers fear the worker will be less likely to remain in a position for an extended period of time.

The HREOC recommendations emphasise the need to take a holistic approach to improving participation and employment rates for people with disability. Because the employment process involves a great number of interdependent parties and processes, improvements to any one aspect is unlikely to result in much success in isolation. HREOC Interim Recommendations outline the need for assessments and strategies to address information needs, costs, and support needs of both employers and people with disabilities, as well as public and private sector leadership in the employment of people with disability.

Surprisingly, cost and fear were also identified as the main barriers to employment of people with disabilities in the Victorian Public Sector (Graffam, 2005). Within the Victorian Public Sector as a whole, 5.0% (11,473) of the total weighted population of 229,647 staff were reported as having a disability that restricted them in performing everyday activities for a period lasting more than 6 months. No differences were found in the hours worked by employees with and without a disability. Other variables such as less work experience, more time out of paid employment and health issues, rather than the disability itself, were found to contribute to under-employment and fewer promotions and to result in less support for further education.

AFDO identifies specific barriers to the employment of people with disability, as well as the issues affecting their participation and opportunity. These barriers include inaccessible community infrastructure and resources, direct discrimination, lack of flexibility in employment policies to cater for the impact of a person's medical condition and the high costs associated with working and looking for work. The discriminatory attitude of employers was also found by AFDO to be the most significant barrier to people with disability finding and retaining employment and little has been done to address such attitudinal factors systemically.

Humpage (2005) identifies barriers that prevent people with disabilities from getting paid and unpaid work. These include lost work history or skill base for the person with the disability, as well as employer attitudes and understanding about administrative and other support requirements and flexibility requirements around work hours and roles. Humpage goes further in identifying a set of social and financial disincentives originating in the welfare system, particularly in regard to reporting to Centrelink, using specialist employment assistance processes, and the fear of losing the pension and/or concession cards, due to the considerable costs of having a disability.

Employer Information Needs

One of the most obvious gaps in the Australian literature on disability employment lies in the documentation of the employer experience and progressive employer strategies. Organisations such as Diversity @ Work and Australian Employers Network on Disability (AEND) have demonstrated that corporate employers can benefit enormously from putting a focus on recruiting people with disabilities into the workforce. Whilst organisations such as these are now publishing best practice stories and case studies of employers who have employed people with disabilities, there is little by way of large scale research documenting sectoral approaches to and benefits derived from the promotion of diverse workforce recruitment. This is a great need for this information to be shared amongst employers and for initiatives such as this to be encouraged.

UK research into employer perceptions about the costs and benefits of employing workers with disabilities may have significant relevance to the Australian situation, particularly in the development of new national strategies to change employer attitudes and practices. According to UK researcher Marilyn Howard (Needles and Schmidt, 2006:3), policies designed to encourage employment of people with disabilities fail unless employers perceive a benefit in recruiting them. She cites the corporate benefits reported by US employers who

made adjustments for workers with disabilities, who emphasised the high importance to the company of retaining valuable employees, productivity increases, improved interactions with other workers and heightened company morale.

Hasluck (2006) in the same publication notes that evidence of the specific 'value' of recruiting and retaining workers with disabilities is nearly impossible to find. Two thirds of UK employers in his study believe that a person with a disability would be unable to perform all aspects of available jobs. Meagre notes that employers who have not employed workers with disabilities may be more likely to perceive low productivity than those who have. He also suggests a lack of employer information is available on the capacity and requirements of workers with various disabilities.

The implementation of employer education requires targeted information on the specific impacts of particular disabilities on workers in different roles and successful employer strategies that have been put in place to meet specific logistical, mechanical, staff training and mentoring challenges.

According to Needles, the UK evidence suggests that new laws need to be attuned to the employer's goals and that programs should support existing employer-employee relationships. Employer uncertainty about applicants should be addressed with accessible information and finally, training and placement programs for employees with disabilities should be expanded.

What does exist in terms of documentation on Australian practice reflects findings in the UK. *Diversity Means Business* is a newsletter that showcases Australian employers who have employed workers with disabilities. The initiatives include positive employment policies and strategies, partnership training programs with the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service (CRS), which introduces jobseekers with disability to the company, and targeted recruitment and retention of people with disabilities. Ninety percent of surveyed employers who had employed workers with disabilities spoke favourably of the experience and would do it again.

AEND presents a strong business case as well as an ethical case in their *Fact Sheets* to support the employment of people with a disability. In relation to the cost benefit of workplace accommodations for employees with a disability, 65% of employers rated the financial effect to be cost neutral and 20% identified an overall financial benefit. AEND also states that employees with a disability averaged one-sixth the recorded occupational health and safety incidents of employees without disability, while 90% of employees with a disability record productivity rates equal to or greater than other workers and 98% have average or superior safety records while 86% have average or superior attendance records.

It is surprising how little literature is available on the use of measurement tools or indicators which can be used by organisations to document the role that diversity plays in organisational effectiveness, or the cost and benefits of employing people with different sorts of disabilities. This is a gap which urgently requires attention if Australian employers are to see and demonstrate the benefits of disability employment in ways that stand up to corporate scrutiny.

A sector wide approach

From Compliance to Culture Change (CDSLL, 2008) is a report from the Commission for Disabled Staff in Lifelong Learning, and it documents findings from its investigation into the under-representation of staff with disabilities in the lifelong learning sector of post-compulsory education in the UK. No sectoral research into the issue of disability employment has taken place in the Australian context. There are interesting parallels, however, between adult and further education and the disability sectors. In both sectors, people with disabilities are clients, and the provision of services to those clients brings in funding to organisations.

The report notes that tensions exist between the employment of staff with disabilities and the provision of services to clients with disabilities. Unlike service users, staff with disabilities do not bring in funding, and report being unable to access the same services and supports that are made available by the agency to clients with disabilities. In addition, managers interviewed in the UK survey identified fear of cost and also fears that 'fitness for work' issues that staff members with a disability might bring with them would impact negatively on their clients with disabilities who depend on their services.

Although the disability sector in Australia differs from the post compulsory learning sector in the UK, much could be learned by the Australian disability sector in taking a close look at the findings in the report, and the ways in which barriers and tensions regarding the employment of staff with disabilities are articulated and play out in the workplace.

Victorian Disability Sector- Leading from the Front?

Within the disability sector in Australia, one would expect to find organisations that consider it an advantage to have people with disabilities working within them across a range of levels and roles.

Given the high profile that many large disability organisations play in employment support and advocacy in the broader employer community on behalf of their service users, one would also expect to find innovative employment practices across the sector, particularly within those large organisations, as well as a significant body of work and sophisticated discourse within the sector that documents and reflects on how the disability sector can lead the way as employers of people with disabilities. However, documentation focusing on the leadership role that the disability sector itself can play is scarce, indicating that there has not yet been a process of self reflection on the key tensions and issues in this area.

This project investigates the policies and practices of a cross-section of Victorian disability organisations in recruiting and employing workers with disabilities, and documents the motivations, costs, challenges, and benefits they perceive in doing so. The report resulting from this project will begin to address this gap in the literature and indicate future areas for action, advocacy, research and documentation.

Disability organisations could be expected, as advocacy leaders on disability employment in the Australian community, to understand and implement processes for employing people from a diverse range of backgrounds in their workplaces. This research aims to investigate whether these expectations are the reality, and whether the Victorian disability services sector is truly leading the way when it comes to disability employment practices.

A SNAPSHOT OF POLICY AND PRACTICE IN THE DISABILITY SECTOR

Survey

In August 2007 the Equity Research Centre designed and trialled a set of survey questions for the disability sector in Victoria. The questions were designed to ascertain what disability employment policies were in place and what number and proportion of staff with disabilities were being employed in the sector. The survey was designed to take no more than 15 minutes to complete and was directed to senior HR staff. It asked a number of multiple choice and tick-the-box quantitative questions but also allowed the respondents to give qualitative information about the initiatives their organisations had taken to encourage employment opportunities for people with disabilities and the benefits and challenges that this had presented to their organisations.

In September and October 2007, forty-five organisations responded to the on-line survey about their disability employment motivations, policies and practices. The survey was sent to 165 organisations working in the disability sector, most of which were followed up with at least one telephone reminder. The organisations targeted included small advocacy organisations as well as peak body organisations, and extended to small, medium and large service providers, support organisations and organisations specialising in the direct employment and employment support of people with disabilities.

The forty-five organisations that responded to the survey included roughly equal numbers of small (1-25 employees), medium (26-65 employees) and large (65+ employees) organisations.

Disability employment policies and plans

Twenty-five respondents cited that their organisations had at least three of the following: a guarantee of support, affirmative action policy, disability action plan, recruitment strategy to attract people with disability, and a strategy for volunteers with disability.

Less than half the organisations responding to the survey had a disability employment strategy. Five of the organisations had no plans, policies or strategies in place to recruit staff with disabilities.

Employment levels

Eight percent of the known overall effective full time (EFT) positions in the respondent groups were filled by employees with a disability. Whilst large organisations employed higher numbers of people with disabilities, small and medium sized organisations were more likely to recruit people with disabilities into professional and management positions.

In total, thirteen respondents could not estimate any figures at all regarding numbers of employees with or without a disability, and of these many said the figures were not kept or known. Thirty-two respondents were able to provide accurate or estimated numbers of

employees with and without a disability. Three of these were 'supported employment enterprises' employing 192 full time employees with disabilities between them. These organisations were removed from the overall data in this section in order to create an accurate figure of employees with disability working in the sector.

The 29 respondents remaining after this adjustment employed a total of 1,518 effective full time workers between them and 120 of these positions were filled by people with a disability, representing an overall average of eight percent of the surveyed workforce. Eight of the 29 respondents cited that they employed no workers with disability.

Of the 120 people with disabilities reported to be employed within the respondent group, five were employed in management roles and 68 were in professional and technical roles. Of the remainder, 15 were employed in administrative roles and 32 in semi-skilled or generalist roles.

Even though large organisations employed a larger number of people with disabilities, none employed people with disabilities in management roles.

Benefits of employing people with disabilities

Respondents provided information about the perceived benefits of employing people with disabilities. Thirteen respondents made specific reference to the 'business case' for employing people with disability. Seven of these mentioned that employees with disabilities furthered the organisation's work with the client group and six mentioned the unique set of skills that workers with disability brought with them.

Six respondents made reference to the benefits that employment had for employees with disability. Two of these mentioned the importance of the skills their organisations were assisting the workers to develop, and four mentioned the confidence the workers with disabilities were developing as a result of their employment.

Seven respondents mentioned the broader social value of employing people with disability, and eight indicated that they did not perceive there to be benefits or disadvantages of employing people with disabilities.

Challenges of employing people with disabilities

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

Discussion of five key findings from the survey

The main challenge of interpreting the findings is that respondents often had limited or no employment data. It is difficult to be sure that this was always because the information was not available, or whether in some cases, respondents simply did not have easy access to the information. Similarly, qualitative answers about the benefits and challenges of employing people with disabilities can not necessarily be taken as indicators of the organisational approach as they may reflect only the understandings of the employee who responded to the survey on behalf of their organisation.

Five issues emerged as key findings in the disability sector in relation to disability employment:

Data collection is poor

Many disability organisations do not have voluntary staff surveys or other mechanisms in place to estimate the proportion of their staff with disabilities, including a number of large, well resourced organisations. Staff in HR departments also may not be the main holders of informal information acquired by managers and senior staff members with a long history in an organisation. For that reason much of the data about disability employment in the sector is unavailable, even at an informal or anecdotal level within organisations. The difficulty in acquiring basic information about staffing is an impediment to starting any discussion across the sector about setting targets and measuring progress in terms of disability employment.

Low visibility with policy makers

Many boards of disability organisations have little or no representation from people with disabilities and, whilst it is not completely clear from the survey what impact this has on policy development, it is likely that this contributes to low visibility of disability employment issues at the board level. A number of organisations in the sector do not have any deliberate policies or strategies in place by which to attract, maintain or promote employees with disabilities. It appears from survey responses more generally, that the issue of internal policy and practice on disability employment in the sector has low visibility amongst HR staff in a large number of disability organisations, and therefore across the organisation as a whole.

A sector wide approach to raise the profile of the issue would need to begin at the level of Boards, Executive Management groups and HR managers.

Employment ratios are low

The number of people with disabilities in management roles amongst the surveyed organisations that knew their employee numbers was about 1 in 300, whilst the estimated number of staff with disability across those same organisations was around 8%. This indicates that, relative to staff without disabilities, an extremely low proportion of people with disabilities who are working in the sector are being recruited or promoted into management level positions. In large organisations, it appears to be even less likely that people with

disabilities will be in senior positions. Even though eight percent is not very different from the Australian Public Service rate of disability employment, the figures were extremely variable across the survey respondent group, with some specialist organisations with much higher employment rates and other organisations employing no staff with disabilities at all.

The three key issues here are the general recruitment of people with disabilities into organisations, targeted recruitment of highly skilled and experienced staff with disabilities for team leader and management roles, and promotion and support of existing skilled staff with disabilities for senior positions within the organisation. For numbers of staff with disabilities to increase, particularly at the management level, the disability sector would need to begin a process of deliberately setting out to attract qualified graduates as well as skilled, experienced staff with disabilities. This would entail offering career opportunities, mentoring and training for staff with disabilities so they can progress into senior positions.

Work readiness

Most of the respondents framed the main challenges of employing people with disabilities in terms of work readiness. The implications of poor work readiness are often that employers must subsidise the costs associated with provision of additional mentoring, training and work based assistance. Costs around workplace modification, such as equipment, or building modifications were, by comparison, not often raised. As many organisations invest in modifications for clients with disabilities already, it is the other costs which are often seen as potential or actual barriers to them improving their practice.

Unclear organisational benefits

When asked to discuss the benefits of employing staff with disabilities, roughly one third of respondents saw staff with disabilities as a critical asset to the organisation because of their perspectives, networks or particular attributes and skills. A smaller number of respondents discussed the benefits of offering the employees with disabilities the opportunity to develop skill and confidence, and another smaller group mentioned the important benefits that progressive employer behaviour contributed to social progress. From this it would appear that the 'business case' for employing people with disabilities is only consciously articulated among one third of the respondents, whilst mainly social and educative benefits are articulated by another third. Still another group responded in ways that suggest there is not a lot of reflection on the specific benefits or otherwise of disability employment.

Boardman suggests that it is critical for employers to perceive the value that can be added to their organisations by employing people with disabilities. In order for this added value to be acknowledged and accepted in an organisation, there must be a clear articulation of the benefits of disability employment throughout the organisation. Senior HR and management staff in only one third of the survey group were capable of articulating the immediate business case for disability employment. These arguments however, are not being articulated by many senior staff in the disability sector and could form the basis for board and management level training in the sector.

Employer Interviews

In February and March 2008 the Equity Research Centre conducted interviews with five organisations to complement and expand on survey information. Whilst surveys provided a snapshot of the sector, case studies allowed a more detailed understanding of the strategies currently in place. Interviews focused on the ways organisations perceived themselves as employers of people with disabilities and how they planned to build their capacity as disability employers. The five organisations were chosen on the basis of their representativeness of the Victorian disability sector.

Methodology

Three large organisations in the disability sector agreed to be interviewed about their policies, practices and approaches to employment of people with disabilities. All three organisations are involved in employment advocacy in the community and employment support for clients and service users with particular disabilities. The process of setting up interviews was time consuming and demanded high levels of tenacity and diplomacy. Not all organisations interviewed had completed the on-line survey. Making an invitation at the right level and building a level of trust with individuals were key ingredients in securing an interview.

At face value, the research itself tended to have a low profile amongst senior HR staff. While senior staff recognised the importance of the issue, securing a commitment to be interviewed generally required a number of approaches over time. However, the Equity Research Centre found that even when it had been extremely time consuming to set up an interview and to establish a relationship, it was easy to maintain a dialogue and responses were very forthcoming. This indicated an openness to the discussion as well as a concern to ensure that the complexities of the issue were understood.

Unlike first interviews, which yielded some general information, second round interviews and subsequent email exchanges provided much greater depth of information and more examples. Second round interviews involved meeting with at least one other staff member involved in management or HR. In all three cases second round interviews were conducted with people who had a longer association with the organisation and a greater depth of personal knowledge about the cultural shifts that had taken place inside the organisation.

Two small advocacy organisations were also interviewed. AFDO, the peak body for disability organisations in Australia, and VCOSS, a peak body of social service organisations in Victoria, agreed to talk about their own practices as employers of people with disabilities.

Although the questions for discussion were semi-structured and known by interviewees in advance, the discussions usually strayed into more general areas about the issues facing the sector as a whole in terms of employment practice. Interviewees were told that the purpose of the interview was to create a 'snapshot' of their organisation, and to discuss the ways internal and external factors influenced practice in the past, present, and in the foreseeable future. Questions focused on organisational structure and priorities, the ways external advocacy priorities were determined, and the ways in which policy advances were effected within the

organisation. Interviewees were asked to talk about what motivated them to employ people with disabilities, what they had learned in the process of doing so and what challenges their organisations faced to improve their own practice.

Interview duration was one to one and a half hours. Stories from the interviews were drafted and sent back to the interviewees to add corrections of fact or emphasis and to provide any clarification or further examples.

Analysis of Interviews

Board composition

Organisations varied considerably in the constitution of their board membership. Amongst the three large organisations, practice ranged from having a policy that 50% of the membership must have a disability, to a policy that at least one Board member must have a disability, to no policy on the representation of board members with disabilities. AFDO Board members must all have disabilities and one of the VCOSS Board members has a disability.

Organisations with a high representation of people with disabilities on the board tended to have better articulation of policy in relation to disability employment and better measurement tools in place to ensure disability employment policy was observed. For example, the large organisation with 50% of people with disability on the board also had a quota for the proportion of staff with disabilities that must be employed within the organisation. The same organisation had staff training in place specifically designed to help staff without disability to work effectively with fellow staff members with disability. It also had leadership training in place to assist people with disability to move up the organisation ladder and five of the eighty or so management positions in this organisation were held by staff with disabilities.

The organisation with a minimum of one board member with a disability had no specific disability employment policy in place and no indicators or tools to determine the number of staff with disabilities, although there were anecdotally reported to be a significant number of employees with disabilities in positions at different levels across the organisation. Staff training was in place for employees without disability to understand more about people with particular disabilities, although this training was not specifically designed to assist staff to work effectively with their colleagues with disability. Five out of the sixty or so management personnel within this organisation are people with disabilities.

One organisation had no quota on the board for people with disabilities, although there are board members who do have a disability. This organisation also had no internal policies in place regarding employment of people with disabilities, no figures on the number of staff with disabilities and no staff with disability employed at management levels in the organisation.

Impact of corporate change

All three large organisations had been through large scale, demanding corporate mergers in the past four years. The merger process had influenced all three organisations in terms of

corporate priorities and focus, and this process invariably led to shifts in the prioritisation of internal policy regarding employing people with disabilities. In one organisation, the merger led to a re-evaluation of internal practices and a re-positioning of the issue of internal employment practices. Affirmative action policy was developed to ensure that applicants with disability would be given priority in competitive recruitment if their skill base was equal to their nearest competitor. According to the organisation, this ensured that the best person is recruited for the job and simultaneously redressed the attitudinal barriers to employment often faced by talented people with disabilities at interviews.

Another organisation, however, was affected in very different ways by the merger process. Even though the new board has members with disabilities, corporate skills rather than disability knowledge or networks are now sole prerequisites for board membership. Advice on disability is given to the board through an advisory group. Internal policy development on employment is still in its early days within the newly merged organisation and is not yet a priority. The requirements of branding, marketing and public and private fundraising have currently overtaken internal policy matters.

Disability employment initiatives

Each of the five organisations interviewed stated a commitment to providing opportunity for people with disabilities to work in a range of roles at different levels in different workplaces. This commitment is clear in the three large organisations' promotional material, in their advocacy programs, and in their community education work to promote the value of employees with disabilities. Although their approaches and progress varied considerably, all of the interviewees were passionate about their organisations being seen as leading on the employment of people with disabilities.

VCOSS, a small peak body with limited resources, acknowledged it had a long way to go in developing specific policy and developing conscious practice, as did one of the large organisations with significant resources. However, AFDO and two of the large organisations saw themselves as already performing at a high standard, with achievable improvements in sight in the near future.

Several organisations mentioned that, apart from ethical and social inclusion arguments, there are multiple 'business' benefits for not-for-profit disability organisations in placing skilled people with disabilities into public and senior jobs. Comments included:

You see a surprise on peoples faces that managers are so good at their job...This is not intended...Staff are in those positions for a reason and it's not because (they have disabilities)

(Our organisation) has found that employees with (disabilities) often have a range of work and life experiences and community relationships that are very relevant and an asset to the work of the organisation.

Not only has (the organisation) found that in many instances people with disabilities are best positioned to do the work, but also that additional costs associated with their employment are often offset by the benefits. For example, the organisation from time-to-time chooses to cover the significant costs of

support (which could be hundreds of dollars per week) for employees with (disabilities) where employing such a person was considered key to the success of a particular piece of work.

On one level, social policy makers are more likely to listen and to take advice from an organisation representing people with disabilities when staff in that organisation also have disabilities.

Having credible employment practices themselves can potentially strengthen their project proposals because it demonstrates that with appropriate adjustments, people with disabilities can be employed bringing a different skill set to the workplace.

A range of initiatives are being implemented by two large organisations in order to ensure that people with disabilities are actively encouraged, supported and recruited into positions across the organisation. In order to develop leadership as an employer of people with disabilities, an organisation must develop a reputation for both removing barriers in recruitment and positively encouraging promotion through the organisation. The following are some of the practices in place in two of the organisations interviewed.

Initiatives- Organisation One

Culture and language: In order to develop a culture of partnership, people with disabilities play a role in determining the focus and direction of the organisation at the level of the board, management and through client feedback.

Keeping statistics: A policy that fifteen percent of all staff have a disability ensures a high visibility of staff with disability in the organisation and that the organisation is accountable to the board regarding proportion of staff with disability.

Affirmative action: An affirmative action policy ensures that the organisation is known to discriminate in favour of any applicant with a disability who meets the key selection criteria to the same level as the nearest competitor without a disability.

Staff training and information: New staff with a disability undergo an extensive workplace needs analysis when they commence to ensure they can work with maximum speed and efficiency. Staff without disabilities are inducted into issues regarding meeting process, technological requirements and ways of working to reduce intimidation or awkwardness around specific issues which arise in the workplace in relation to staff with disability.

Internal training and promotion: Internal staff with disabilities who are identified as having leadership potential and who are interested in moving into senior positions are invited to take part in front line management programs to boost their confidence, qualifications and skills

Maximising team roles and job restructuring options: Managers are encouraged to consider the broad benefits of recruiting team members with disabilities. They are expected to consider team restructuring possibilities whenever a position becomes available, to ensure the greatest possible opportunity is provided for an applicant with a disability to be successful.

Creative advertising: To increase the number of applicants with a disability, positions are advertised through websites which are commonly frequented by people with particular disabilities.

Initiatives- Organisation Two

Resource allocation: From time to time funding is made available to ensure that board members and some key staff members with disabilities requiring a high level of support are fully enabled to participate in high level activities and day to day activities required to do their jobs. This ranges from expensive, specialised technological inputs to building modifications and personal care assistance.

Providing interview opportunities: Candidates put forward for any advertised position by a Disability Employment Network is guaranteed an interview.

Modelling team approaches in the community: People with disabilities are employed in community education roles, working with other staff without disabilities. This models an approach to mentoring and teamwork during community education activities.

Earmarking specific roles for people with disabilities: A permanent position for a person with disability exists to undertake community development. This ensures that the staff member in this role can bring the necessary networks and contacts to this position, and have a thorough understanding of clients out in the community of clients. During one service development project a person with disabilities was recruited to share a job, engaging with clients to identify their goals and preferences. Their understanding of the service experience, the trust placed in them by other people with disabilities because of their shared life experience, as well as their skills in consultation gained through a range of self-advocacy initiatives, meant they were ideally placed to undertake the work.

Sensitising all staff: Staff all receive generic training aimed broadly at disability awareness. The training provided to staff is the same training provided to outside organisations and aims to increase empathy towards people with disabilities through mutually respectful engagement.

These two organisations have utilised proactive strategies over a number of years to develop employment opportunities for people with disabilities within their organisations. As they have the resources, it is possible to make the necessary building adjustments to accommodate staff and board members with a wide range of disabilities.

Challenges for small organisations

Small organisations face a number of challenges in employing people with disabilities. The two peak bodies outlined some of the challenges they see for the sector and smaller organisations in particular.

Costs: In order to address the practical needs of people with some disabilities, building specifications need to be looked at. Addressing the limitations of space and building modifications costs money and such modifications need to be built into funding proposals.

Education of staff and partner organisations: There are issues which require time and thought in order to be addressed properly at the organisational level. For example, certain common meeting practices such as relying on body language, eye contact, and tabling last minute agenda items need to change. When meetings involve partner organisations, these partners must also be educated to understand the need for inclusive practices and accessible buildings. This requires discipline and additional allocation of time.

Policy development: Many small social service and disability organisations do not have the HR support to do the policy development on staffing issues such as disability access. There is a need to designate policy resources and time to this task in order to focus on the issue.

Support and mentoring costs: These include the costs of assisting a new staff member with a disability in getting up to speed, and being able to work at full capacity. For some employees, lack of experience is an issue, because they may have had 'knock-backs' or disruptions to their work experience, which leads to the need for time and mentoring.

Additional staff, equipment and travel costs: An extra person is sometimes needed to accompany the worker with a disability, and this can sometimes increase both employment and travel costs. There can also be aspects of the worker's disability which keeps them away from the workplace at times, which may require having a computer set up at home. Sometimes extra support may involve a support worker or sign interpreter in the workplace, or at meetings.

Challenges for large organisations

Large organisations with experience in dedicating resources to employment of people with disabilities identified a number of challenges they have either dealt with along the way or continue dealing with.

Whilst creativity and job restructuring can overcome some challenges, the costs of targeted recruitment, ongoing support and training time can be daunting. In addition there are sensitive issues involved in managing expectations and selection processes so that staff with disabilities are not promoted prematurely. The restructuring of teams and job roles is often a critical aspect of integrating people with disabilities into teams and requires thought about transport as well as security provisions.

The following examples from the case studies illustrate these issues:

Challenges- Example One

"Attracting skilled staff with disabilities into the organisation requires resources and... this presents a challenge...it (can be) extraordinarily difficult to source skilled staff with disabilities... A not-for-profit organisation would have to invest significant funds to recruit in this way. The costs associated with this practice would be even higher if it also involved supporting people with disabilities to work effectively in (direct) disability support roles.

Once staff with disabilities are recruited, finding funding for adequate support can also present a challenge. Two disability support workers require Auslan interpreting in order to participate

fully in the workplace. In order to fund an ongoing Auslan worker, extra funding needs to be sourced.

[The organisation] is aware of some of the challenges that need to be addressed to improve employment prospects for people with high physical support needs and practices in the disability sector. These include the cost of transport, work-based personal assistance, highly specialised adaptive equipment and regular physical assistance to complete key elements of work processes. [The organisation] has found a number of practical ways around these issues, but such costs remain a significant barrier to further employment]"

Challenges- Example Two

"The most important learning was the 'work readiness' of the individual in the role. We found that some applicants had strong academic skills but little ability to fully participate in the workplace. This was extremely stressful for the employee and difficult and confusing for the manager. This issue is currently being addressed through the development of a long term program... of offering work experience for graduates, cadets and work experience students, with a view to preparing people with disabilities for the demands of different roles and different workplace stresses.

There were cases where aspiring staff (with disabilities) did not wish to go through training and qualifications offered by [the organisation] because of poor perceptions and experiences of formal education. In other cases, some staff who were seen as 'management material' by others on the team did not always have the confidence to put themselves forward.

In terms of the challenges in creating a level playing field for people (with disabilities),[this organisation] along with some of the other large organisations in the disability sector, did not have to worry about the employer costs of building accessibility, wheelchair access, lighting and technology, as this was already built into the work environment. However, support in the immediate period following recruitment does sometimes provide a challenge to the organisation.

Many factors can impact on the progress of providing the appropriate equipment for a new staff member with a disability. (An example was given regarding the time and effort this can take by talking about a trainee recently recruited to work in [the organisation]). At the time of recruitment this particular new employee, who had low vision, experienced a worsening of vision, requiring a dramatic change in the technology needed in the job...Adjusting to and getting up to speed with required new technology resulting from changes in vision can take an adaptable and computer-literate employee up to six months, and... many people will need longer. If an employee has a change of job in the middle of the adjustment this can be a real challenge for the employer and the employee.

Apart from difficulties with adapting to new technology, two other issues create challenges for managers and teams. The first is ensuring there is enough appropriate transport for staff (with disabilities) who do a lot of work outside the office or with clients in the community. The second is ensuring that the balance between staff (without a disability) and staff (with a disability) is right in any given team, in the interests of security.

One large organisation, still at an early stage in developing organisational practice around employment of people with disability, described the small changes that were being implemented in one part of their program. The recruitment of one staff member with a disability has led to a number of internal shifts through persistent advocacy backed up by management support. However there is a continuum of challenges that the organisation is dealing with starting with corporate resources, running through to staff education and changing workplace culture, and the intricacies of attracting skilled employees with disabilities to the organisation in the face of financial disincentives and personal risk for people with disabilities."

Challenges - Example Three

"At present, there are no staff designated at the corporate level to write organisational policy on HR and other internal issues to do with the employment of people with disabilities. As a result, [the organisation] does not have policies in affirmative action, recruitment strategies or measurable targets in relation to the employment of staff with disabilities. The current management team does not include staff with disabilities.

Putting even one staff member with a disability into a visible position in the organisation does have an obvious internal impact. [This staff member] was headhunted for the position for .. strong advocacy skills and knowledge. [This staff member] has recently become responsible for the induction process for new staff. The induction introduces new staff to the conditions associated with a specific disability, and how it might affect people in the workplace or in their day to day lives. [The staff member] tells staff about the lesser known issues associated with the particular disability, such as the mood swings and the extreme fatigue. This information is much more powerful coming from a fellow worker who has (a disability), and forces... staff to see it as an issue affecting them at work, not just their 'clients' in the community.

Having a strong (disability) advocate working on staff has meant that there has been someone persisting in putting small and achievable changes in place in the organisation. One example of this is the recent change of practice around speakers for the [a yearly program run by the organisation]. Whilst the primary speakers for the program are paid, they are usually accompanied by a person (with a disability), who is not paid. Recently there has been an opportunity for internal dialogue and staff education to take place through discussion of this situation.

[Program staff had] considered that people with (a disability) might find it tough to do the primary speaking job because of the problems (associated with the disability). Staff were asked to think through their perceptions. What would they do in any situation where a paid speaker rang in too ill to do a talk they were booked to do? What is the problem in providing an assistant to carry the books for the speaker? [The staff member/advocate] saw the situation as arising out of poor induction for the staff, and a poor understanding of the many logistical possibilities to support a speaker with a disability. A job share arrangement was suggested to bring in paid speakers with a disability. The HR department took up the suggestion and the CEO backed it.

The next step... is to source willing speakers. Although there are many experienced and skilled people (with disability) in the community, there are... several disincentives for people to take on a public role. Disclosure is still a major issue... and if they are still employed they may not wish to go public with their disability. For those who are receiving a Disability Pension, taking on any paid work will result in having engagement with Centrelink. Many people have negative experiences of their interactions with Centrelink, particularly in relation to declarations of small amounts of paid work."

KEY FINDINGS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Key Findings

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

Poor data collection

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

This research found that employer data about employment levels of people with disabilities was lacking or non-existent. This makes it difficult to benchmark practice, measure improvement, and evaluate the effectiveness of disability employment strategies and policies.

Lack of a sector wide strategy

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

This research found that good initiatives amongst employers were not shared within the sector and that there are no sector wide strategies, support networks or resources for addressing disability employment.

Low level of work readiness

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

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

Lack of policy or strategy

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

Employer responses indicated that specific policies and organisational strategies on disability employment are not common practice in the Victorian disability sector. Without this level of corporate focus it is difficult for the sector to develop and record good practice and monitor improvement, suggesting that good practice, when it occurs, isn't a result of organisational-level strategies.

Lack of funding

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

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

Lack of high level representation

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

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

Lack of proactive marketing and recruitment practices

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

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

Poor understanding of “value”

Only one third of survey respondents saw the value of employing staff with disabilities as a critical asset to their organisation above the perceived benefits to the person with a disability or society in general.

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

Discussion of the findings

Leading from the front?

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

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

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

Sector wide strategy

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

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

Lack of work-readiness

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

Funding shortage

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

The future?

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

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

Key Future Directions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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