



The compelling case for disability employment in Australia

The unrivalled benefits of an underutilised labour market

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JobAccess respects and honours Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and future.

We acknowledge the stories, traditions and living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on this land and commit to building a brighter future together.

Introduction

Low unemployment rates and a fall in skilled migration have characterised the Australian labour market over the past 24 months.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics found one in three businesses faced difficulty finding suitable staff, with large and medium sized organisations more likely to be impacted when hiring new talent¹.

Employers are turning to untapped sections of the labour market, including people with disability, to bridge the skills gap. This is not surprising given the positive impact disability engagement has on business growth and profitability.

Global professional services company Accenture found that disability inclusive organisations grew sales 2.9 times faster and profits 4.1 times faster than their peers².

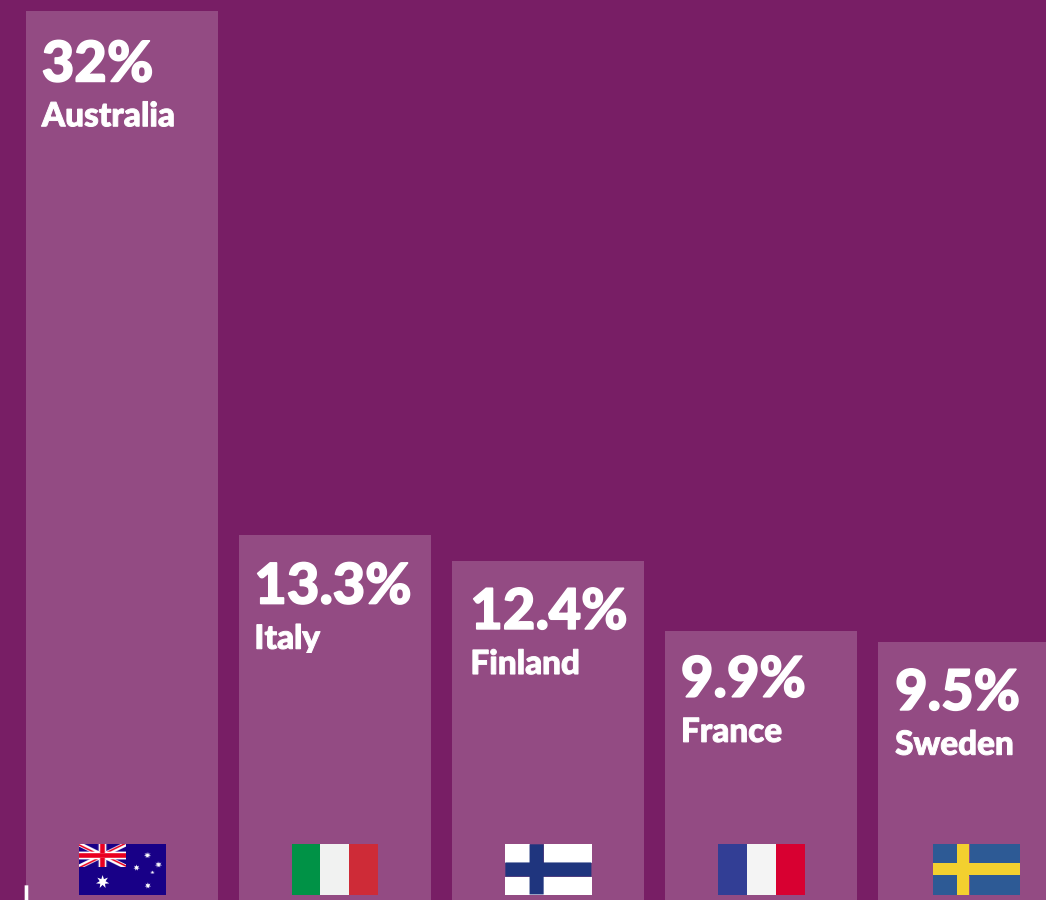
However, research has shown Australian businesses are under prepared for disability employment, with many not confident in their ability to support people with disability³.

The lack of employer confidence and awareness has contributed to poor labour outcomes for people with disability in Australia, with just over 50 per cent of people with disability of working age in the workforce versus 84 per cent of those without disability⁴. This employment gap of over 30 per cent has remained unchanged since 2003.

According to the National Disability Strategy, most people with disability can and do want to work more to have greater financial independence and social connection⁵.

This research update looks at prevalent fallacies about disability employment and examines the benefits reaped by those businesses embracing disability inclusion.

The disability employment gap



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Findings

MYTH 1

The cost to employ people with disability is high

There is an employment bias against people with disability. Managers and employers are often concerned that productivity benefits might not be enough to justify perceived additional costs to the business⁶.

Assumptions around the cost of workplace adjustments are inflated for employees with disability, particularly when noting that adjustments are also required by workers without disability.

Not all people with disability require adjustments to do their jobs, and in most cases, implementing such adjustments are often low-cost or incur no cost, for instance providing flexible working arrangements.

In a national survey on workplace adjustments by JobAccess, twice the number of respondents than those who identified as living with disability said they benefitted from a workplace adjustment, indicating that all employees can benefit from adjustments⁷. The same study revealed that 70 per cent of Australians have not heard of workplace adjustments – one of the most effective ways to enable people with disability to gain and retain employment.

Expert opinion suggests that while employers generally hold positive attitudes toward people with disability, when hiring an individual with disability, many employers appear conflicted and reluctant to do so, perceiving the costs to outweigh the benefits.

This belief may be underpinned by misconceptions or lack of knowledge regarding disability, like the assumption that hiring individuals with disability will incur higher costs due to poorer productivity.



MYTH BUSTER

Employers reap \$40 savings for every \$1 invested in workplace adjustments

The cost to accommodate employees with disability is no more than that to support those without disability. And these adjustments are usually cost-effective. One study has estimated a **\$40 savings for every \$1 invested in workplace adjustments**.

A review of the benefits of hiring people with disability found perceived benefits of workplace adjustments for people with various types of disability, including an increase in profits, primarily through cost savings of not having to re-hire and re-train new workers⁸.

Three other studies identified by the review also reported the cost-effectiveness of hiring people with disability.

One study analysed an administrative rehabilitation services database and found that supporting employees with intellectual disability had a cost-benefit ratio of 1:21 (for example, through a vocational rehabilitation program). A similar study discovered that hiring people with autism was cost-effective, with an average cost-benefit ratio of 5:28

A recent Australian study found that employing an adult with a developmental cognitive disability, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), provides benefits to employers and their organisations without incurring additional costs⁹.



The findings contradict employer attitudes that hiring adults with disability, such as ASD, may result in a loss of productivity and increased costs associated with workplace modifications and additional training and supervision.

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MYTH 2

Employees with disability have a high turnover rate

There are several benefits to disability employment, but this is likely to vary according to the type of disability, industry and job type, according to a systematic review by a Canadian team⁸.

Potential benefits include:

- **Improvements in profitability** (for example, profits and cost-effectiveness, turnover and retention, reliability and punctuality, employee loyalty, company image)
- **Competitive advantage** (for example, diverse customers, customer loyalty and satisfaction, innovation, productivity, work ethic, safety), inclusive work culture, and ability awareness.

Eight studies in the review reported evidence demonstrating that hiring people with disability improved retention and reduced turnover.

For example, one study of janitors with intellectual disabilities reported a significantly higher retention rate than workers without disabilities (34% compared to 10% after one year). Another study found that although turnover is a common problem in the supermarket industry, it was 20 to 30% lower at supermarkets employing people with disability.

Six additional studies of the systematic review sample reported that people with disabilities are loyal employees.



MYTH BUSTER

Employees with disability stay on the job 4 months longer on average than those without disability

The review also identified secondary benefits for the employees and society. These include improved quality of life and income, enhanced self-confidence, expanded social network, and a sense of community for the people with disability who are employed.

It found that employees with ASD have fewer absences and are more likely to arrive at work on time than other employees. Research has also determined employees with autism to have dramatically lower turnover rates than neurotypical employees. For example, one study showed a low turnover rate of seven percent for employees with autism¹⁰.

Another study found that employees with disability stayed on the job 4.26 months longer than employees without disability¹¹.

Another example of lower turnover among people with disability is Pizza Hut's "Jobs Plus Program". The program had over 4,000 participants, and over two-thirds of them identified as living with disability. The turnover rate among people with disability was much lower, just 20%, compared to their non-disabled co-workers who had a turnover rate of 150%¹².

Findings

MYTH 3

Employees with disability won't fit in

Discrimination remains very real. Studies show some employers do not employ people with disability, due to outdated stereotypes and notions of disability that are incorrect¹³.

Two of the most common misperceptions held by many employers regarding employees with disability were¹⁴:

- Co-workers are not very comfortable working with people with disability
- People with disability have trouble getting along with others on the job

Employees sometimes incorrectly assume that a person with disability just will not fit in with their workforce. However, the evidence of improved loyalty and lower turnover for employees with disability shatters the myth that employees with disability won't fit in with other employees.

In today's market, there is also a definite competitive advantage associated with hiring people with disability by positively impacting workplace culture through diversity and inclusivity and creating a positive client-facing image.

Studies show that working alongside employees with disabilities increases general awareness and confidence of how to make the workplace more inclusive and better for everyone. Staff turnover is also lower – by up to 30 percent – when a well-run disability community outreach program is in place¹⁵.



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MYTH BUSTER

Staff turnover is lower by up to 30% when a well-run disability community outreach program is in place

Findings from a recent Australian study point to some organisational benefits of employing people with disability such as ASD which are difficult to quantify.

Employers indicated the positive impact employing an adult with ASD had on the workplace culture – including the addition of new and creative skills, the increase in disability awareness and a conscious positive shift in workplace inclusion.

A diverse and inclusive workplace where employees feel valued plays a critical role in the work performance, productivity and job success of employees with disabilities.

Diversity and inclusion benefit organisational success, offering a competitive edge in creativity, enhancing relationships with the community, improving job retention, and overcoming unhelpful and ill-informed stereotypes.

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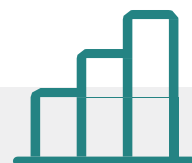
MYTH 4

Productivity for people with disability is lower

Employers may have preconceived beliefs and attitudes due to limited knowledge of the capabilities of people with disability¹⁶. Australian businesses should act strategically and capitalise on the unique perspectives people with disability can bring to the workplace. Instead, there is too much focus on potential limitations with little supportive evidence.

Nine studies reported productivity as a benefit of hiring people with disability. In a study of various disability types across different industries, 61% of employers considered productivity a benefit of hiring people with disability. In the hospitality industry, most employers reported that people with disability could be as productive as any other employee.

Another study also identified the benefits of employing an adult with ASD such as significantly better attention to detail in work tasks and their positive work ethic compared to neurotypical employees.



MYTH BUSTER

61% of employers consider productivity a benefit of hiring people with disability



Instead of negative attitudes and perceptions, employers need to start seeing the opportunities that disability brings.

Companies such as Microsoft are purposefully recruiting people with autism who have enhanced abilities to see patterns and pick up mistakes faster and more accurately than their peers¹⁷.

Evidence is emerging that providing supportive employment services for adults with ASD is a positive investment and that they have many skills that can contribute a great deal to the workforce.

Employees with ASD typically pay close attention to detail, enjoy specific job tasks that other employees may find repetitive or socially isolating, and bring a different perspective to issues, allowing for innovative solutions to common problems. Research also shows them to have high levels of trustworthiness, integrity, and honesty, and they are reliable, precise, efficient, and consistent.

MYTH 5

There is a higher risk of injury for employees with disability

Four studies found evidence that the presence of employees with disability improved workplace safety⁸.



MYTH BUSTER

People with disability have 34% fewer accidents than other employees

One study reported that physical and psychological safety – i.e. the culture and support from the company that creates the best conditions for people with and without disabilities to work safely side-by-side – improved in the hospitality and retail industry with the presence of people with disability.

In a similar industry, another study reported that people with disability had 34% fewer accidents than other employees. People with cognitive impairments in the hospitality industry also reported an above average safety record.

Yet another study showed that providing workplace adjustments to people with disabilities improved overall workplace safety.

Unlocking the disability inclusion potential

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Lack of required skill sets and high staff turnover are among the highest concerns facing business leaders in the context of risk management¹⁸.

Mitigating adverse talent risks requires businesses to adopt long-term, sustainable measures to attract, employ and retain people with disability. Building disability confidence and embedding inclusive employment processes is integral to this.

Practical approaches businesses can take include:

- **Assess workplace accessibility:** [Start by assessing](#) where your organisation currently sits in terms of accessibility, flexibility and inclusive policies and practices.
- **Put a plan in place:** [An overarching plan](#) that sets out the organisation's objectives relating to the employment of people with disability and promoting inclusion and diversity. Invite staff members with disability and capture lived experiences to co-design solutions that align with business needs.
- **Engage experts:** A range of disability employment program providers is available to support employers with finding qualified candidates, accessing government assistance and on-the-job support.

This includes the [National Disability Recruitment Coordinator \(NDRC\)](#), which supports large businesses through every stage of the recruitment process. The NDRC partners with employers to develop workplace policies and practices that remove barriers to employment for people with disability.

- **Get the workplace ready:** Your team members likely possess different levels of disability awareness and confidence. Disability awareness can help break stereotypes, overcome preconceptions, and provide staff with the skills, knowledge, and tools to confidently work alongside colleagues with disability.

You can organise general disability awareness training courses for all staff and specific training for managers and supervisors. Tailored awareness training for a specific disability, such as deaf awareness, Auslan, blind awareness, or mental health awareness training, is also available.

JobAccess offers free disability awareness training for NDRC partners and alumni, and advice about financial assistance for disability awareness through the [Employment Assistance Fund](#).

- **Offer career progression opportunities:** Targeted professional development opportunities that support the career aspirations of staff with disability can drive innovation, productivity, retention and business growth.

Research shows that teams with employees from diverse backgrounds are better at innovative thinking and embracing unique perspectives in the workplace. They are more attuned to understanding the unmet needs of consumers with similar experiences, helping organisations cater to diverse audiences and grow market share.



About this research

The content of this paper was informed by a scoping review conducted in late 2022. The review systematically explored the past 15 years of peer reviewed literature and relevant statistics on the topic of the costs and benefits of disability employment.

It identified emerging key concepts from high quality, reliable sources of evidence that could be used to inform practice in the field of disability employment.

Contributing research was provided by Dr Dianne Sheppard, Senior Research Fellow at Monash University.

Dr Sheppard's projects facilitate social and work related rehabilitation from injury or post disease diagnosis. A key part of her work is assessing the psychosocial barriers to returning to wellness and work for individuals.

In addition to her work with Monash University, Dr Sheppard also heads up the Research Hub at MedHealth to ensure that research and best practice inform their innovation and thought leadership.



Job Access

Driving disability employment

JobAccess is Australia's national hub for workplace and employment information for people with disability, employers and service providers. The service is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services and managed by genU on behalf of the Government.

JobAccess offers a wide range of services. These include a comprehensive website hosting wide-ranging expert resources, a **dedicated national advice helpline**, the **Employment Assistance Fund (EAF)** for workplace modifications and training, and the **National Disability Recruitment Coordinator (NDRC)** team providing free and practical support to employers to become disability confident.

JobAccess also delivers two vital reporting services: the **Complaints Resolution and Referral Service (CRRS)** and the **National Disability Abuse and Neglect Hotline (the Hotline)** to support for people with disability.

JobAccess is recognised internationally for its innovative approach to disability employment. The United Nations Public Service Award¹⁹ and Essl Foundation's Zero Project initiative²⁰ have recognised JobAccess for improving the delivery of services and innovative policies, respectively.

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