



Pathways to Possibilities

Harnessing the economic potential
of people with disability

ssi.org.au

SSI For equality
of life.



Artwork by Bev Garces, a proud Gidabul, Widjabul, and Wonnarua woman. The artwork was developed for the SSI local area coordination program in partnership with the NDIA, for the inclusion and belonging project. The painting tells of the artist's family journey with disability and reflects inclusion, identity and belonging.

Acknowledgement of Country

SSI Group acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise their continuous connection to water, sky and Country. SSI Group remains committed to reconciliation and to working with First Nations peoples to realise "Makarrata" - a Yulngu word meaning the coming together after a struggle.

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Cover image: 'Possum' artwork
by Bridget Kelly.

Foreword

I loved facilitating the SSI Pathways to Possibilities symposium in February. The highlight was the diversity of attendees and chatting with disabled panellists. I've collaborated with SSI in the past and I love the organisation's commitment to supporting disabled people¹, especially through an intersectional approach.

The fact that the unemployment rate has not changed significantly for disabled people for over 30 years is concerning. But we have the potential to influence this. We can do it by providing meaningful and accessible employment for disabled people, and providing training and confidence to employers who are wanting to welcome disabled people into their workplace.

On the day of the symposium, we heard that some managers don't know if they have disabled staff in their teams. One in five people are disabled – probably more than this because people choose not to disclose. So, chances are, there are staff in your teams who are disabled.

Accessibility looks different for everyone – and needs to be tailored for every individual employee. When you make the workplace safe and welcoming for disabled people to disclose their accessibility needs, you make it safe for your disabled employees to be themselves. Because disability is an important part of them that shouldn't be hidden.

As part of the panel discussions that took place at the symposium, I spoke to disabled people about their experiences in the workplace, both good and bad. While it was an insight to the discrimination and low expectations that disabled people face regularly, the discussion also highlighted

how easy it can be for access provisions to be implemented. All the panellists said that when their access needs were met, and when employers saw their potential, they felt confident, supported and valued in the workplace.

The Pathways to Possibilities symposium was a great way for disabled people to be heard; this report is an opportunity for meaningful action to be taken while the momentum is still high.

Carly Findlay OAM (she/her)

SSI hosted the Pathways to Possibilities Symposium in February 2024, in partnership with Jobs Australia, National Disability Services (NDS), and the Canterbury Bankstown Chamber of Commerce. We explored the current state of this vital area and identified ways to drive meaningful change for people with disability. Together with 165 attendees, and driven by our MC Tim Ferguson and facilitator Carly Findlay OAM, the day's discussions centred on the voices of those with lived experience, whose leadership and guidance are essential to our progress.

1. This report uses the term 'people with disability' as an example of person-first language. However, we acknowledge that some members of this community prefer the term 'disabled people' and identify accordingly.

“When their access needs were met, and when employers saw their potential, they felt confident, supported and valued in the workplace.”

Carly Findlay OAM

*Together we
are building
a vibrant
flourish
communi
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Carly Findlay facilitates a panel discussion with a microphone in hand at the Pathways to Possibilities symposium.

Introduction

Whilst Australia is facing an unprecedented skills shortage, there is an untapped pool of one million people with disability who are looking for work. This situation presents a prime opportunity for businesses and employers to bridge the gap.

We are at a critical juncture in the employment and disability sectors, offering us a unique window of opportunity for creating greater inclusivity and economic productivity.

About SSI

SSI supports approximately 56,000 people each year, including a substantial number of people with disability through our local area coordination (LAC), IgniteAbility Self-Employment and Disability Employment Services (DES) programs.

As an employer of over 1,200 staff, 10.5 per cent of whom identify as having disability, SSI recognises the benefits of a diverse workforce. By tapping into this valuable talent pool and supporting the diverse needs of individuals, we recognise and value the advantages of an inclusive disability workforce.

SSI's aspiration is for all people with disability to reach their full economic potential. Our vision is for people with disability to be given a fair go to use their professional skills, experience and qualifications to build lives and livelihoods that are productive and fulfilling.

Collectively, we must create an inclusive and supportive work environment where everyone can thrive, benefitting from the social, health, and wellbeing advantages of employment and financial security.

About reform

Freedom from discrimination and exclusion is a key pillar in the Australian Human Rights Commission's declaration on disability rights. Recent ABS² data shows the participation of people with disability in the labour force is improving. However, progress is slow and unevenly spread, especially for those from First Nations communities or culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

People with disability continue to experience injustice and inequality, as highlighted in the Disability Royal Commission and the NDIS Review. SSI endorses their subsequent recommendations to eliminate barriers and champion disability inclusion in employment, including:

- Establishing a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence to build employer capacity through training and support.
- Co-designing the revised Disability Employment Services (DES) model, ensuring the inclusion of flexible employment support and job customisation.
- Ensuring NDIS participant employment goals consider open employment as a first option.
- More pathways for employees with disability to transition from supported employment into open employment, whilst acknowledging the importance of informed choices by participants who elect to work in supported settings.

The implementation of these reforms, if coupled with genuine co-design, consultation and collaboration, should strengthen local ecosystems for jobseekers with disability, leading to better outcomes for employees and employers alike.

“Our vision is for people with disability to be given a fair go to use their professional skills, experience and qualifications to build lives that are productive and fulfilling.”

**Violet Roumeliotis,
CEO, SSI**



Moreover, giving individuals the tools to make informed employment choices could lead to enhanced interest in entrepreneurship and self-employment. To ensure that those pursuing independent career pathways retain full control over their trajectory, we implore governments to prioritise providing access to vital educational and vocational training resources.

While governments have set the direction through major reforms, we call on businesses to do their part and embrace the four commitments outlined in this report to bring sustained change to our workplaces for people with disability.

About Pathways to Possibilities

This report translates insights, data, and real-life stories into tangible actions that can drive change in our workplaces and communities. It provides practical approaches for

employers to maximise the skills and talents of people with disability by dismantling barriers to their employment.

Four barrier-breaking commitments:

- 1. Put disability inclusion at the heart of your business.**
- 2. Become disability confident.**
- 3. Empower your leaders to drive change.**
- 4. Create a safe, supportive and accommodating culture.**

In addition to the diverse case studies included in this report, we consulted with representatives from 10 different organisations on how to facilitate the inclusion of people with disability in the economy.

At SSI, we're committed to achieving real, tangible impact in this sector. We are already making strides through our Community of Practice, bringing together a wide network of businesses and local councils to develop, share and promote inclusive employment strategies.

After reading this report, I encourage you to deepen your engagement by visiting the [Pathways to Possibilities webpage](#). It offers a suite of resources for businesses to jumpstart crucial conversations and guide your journey to becoming an accessible and inclusive organisation.

Last year brought reviews and recommendations. Now is the time for action. This responsibility and opportunity shared by all of us requires a collaborative approach to improving the economic participation of people with disability. We hope to see cross-sector engagement to elevate workforce competence and drive real change.

Violet Roumeliotis, CEO, SSI (she/her)

2. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability, Aging and Carers, Australia: Summary of findings*, July 2024
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release>

Snapshot

People with disability provide a rich untapped talent pool giving employers a competitive advantage

One in three Australian businesses struggle to find talented, loyal employeesⁱ. Yet around 113,000 Australians who identify as having a disability are unemployed and looking for workⁱⁱ. This represents a large untapped pool of skilled and dedicated workers.

Smart organisations are discovering the benefits of making their workplaces more inclusive and hiring people with disability:

- Absenteeism rates drop for inclusive workplacesⁱⁱⁱ
- The retention rate increases^{iv}
- The talent pool widens
- Brand reputation improves
- Customer base expands

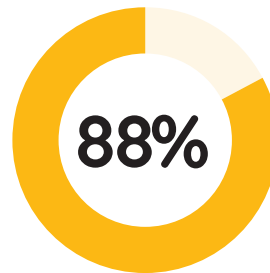
“There are 4.4 million people with a form of disability. If we are genuine about exercising co-responsibility, social impact, community minded attitude...this is the time to change culture and do something about it.”

Wally Mehanna, CEO, Canterbury Bankstown Chamber of Commerce

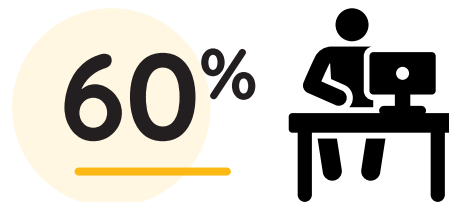
Myths debunked

A 2017 survey of 1,200 businesses showed that although **93%** of large and **89%** of medium-sized businesses were open to hiring people with disability, only about one third actually did^v.

Employers incorrectly believe hiring people with disability will be costly when in fact:



88% of Australians with disability do not require any specific arrangements from their employer to work^{vi}.



60% of workplace adjustments cost nothing – for the ones that do cost – government help is available to cover expenses for eligible persons^{vii}. Job Access, for example, provides funding through the Employment Assistance Fund (EAF) to cover the costs of making workplace changes. This can include buying equipment, modifications or accessing services for people with disability^{viii}.



People with disability are less at risk of occupational injury when compared to their colleagues without disability^{ix}.



Employment improves wellbeing and offers a host of financial, social and health advantages

\$33,379 – \$35,779/yr

is the average net financial benefit for a person with disability getting a job^x.



People with disability who have a job feel proud, have a sense of purpose, feel challenged and enthusiastic^{xi}.



Young people with disability who have jobs have better mental health^{xii}.

“Disabled people are more than disabled people. We have lots of facets in our lives...employment means that we [can] have a wholesome life...money, finance helps our entire life, not just the disabled part of our life.”

Carly Findlay, Writer and Disability Activist

Snapshot

People with disability face multiple barriers

People with disability often experience intersectional barriers, where their disability intersects with multiple factors that shape their identity, such as race, gender identification, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background. These identity markers and circumstances can overlap and have compounding effects for people with disability looking for work.



1 in every 4 people with disability is culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)^{xiii}. Many experience

barriers due to racism and ableism and are at greater risk of violence and/or abuse. Only **38.3%** of people with disability born overseas work compared to **48%** for people with disability born in Australia^{xiv}.

24%

of First Nations people live with disability.

Many encounter racism and disability-related discrimination. Only **28.3%** of First Nations people with disability are in employment^{xv}.



Women with disability are 40% more likely to be the victims of domestic violence than women without disability^{xvi}.

40%

of women with disability aged 25-34 are more likely to have parenting responsibilities than men (25%)^{xvii}.

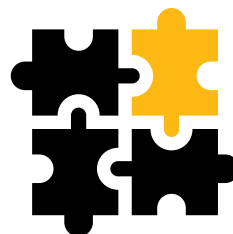


1 in 10 people with disability experience discrimination. LGBTQIA+ people with disability are 3 times more likely


to experience discrimination compared to heterosexual people with disability^{xviii}.

\$557/week

is the average weekly wage for a person with disability, while those without disability earn **\$1055** per week^{xix}.



30-40% of Australia's population are neurodivergent, with **34%** of these unemployed – 10 times the national unemployment average^{xx}.

A photograph of Tim Ferguson, a man with glasses and a light blue button-down shirt, sitting in a wheelchair. He is speaking into a microphone at a podium. A name tag on his shirt reads "SSI". The background is a blurred office or conference room setting. A large yellow circle in the upper right corner contains a quote.

“ Nearly 50% of people with disability are chronically underemployed for their entire life, and that has to change.”

**Tim Ferguson, Comedian
and Screenwriter**

Tim Ferguson, MC for the Pathways to Possibilities symposium, addresses the audience in his opening address.



Employer Case Study

Showcasing what's possible

Allianz

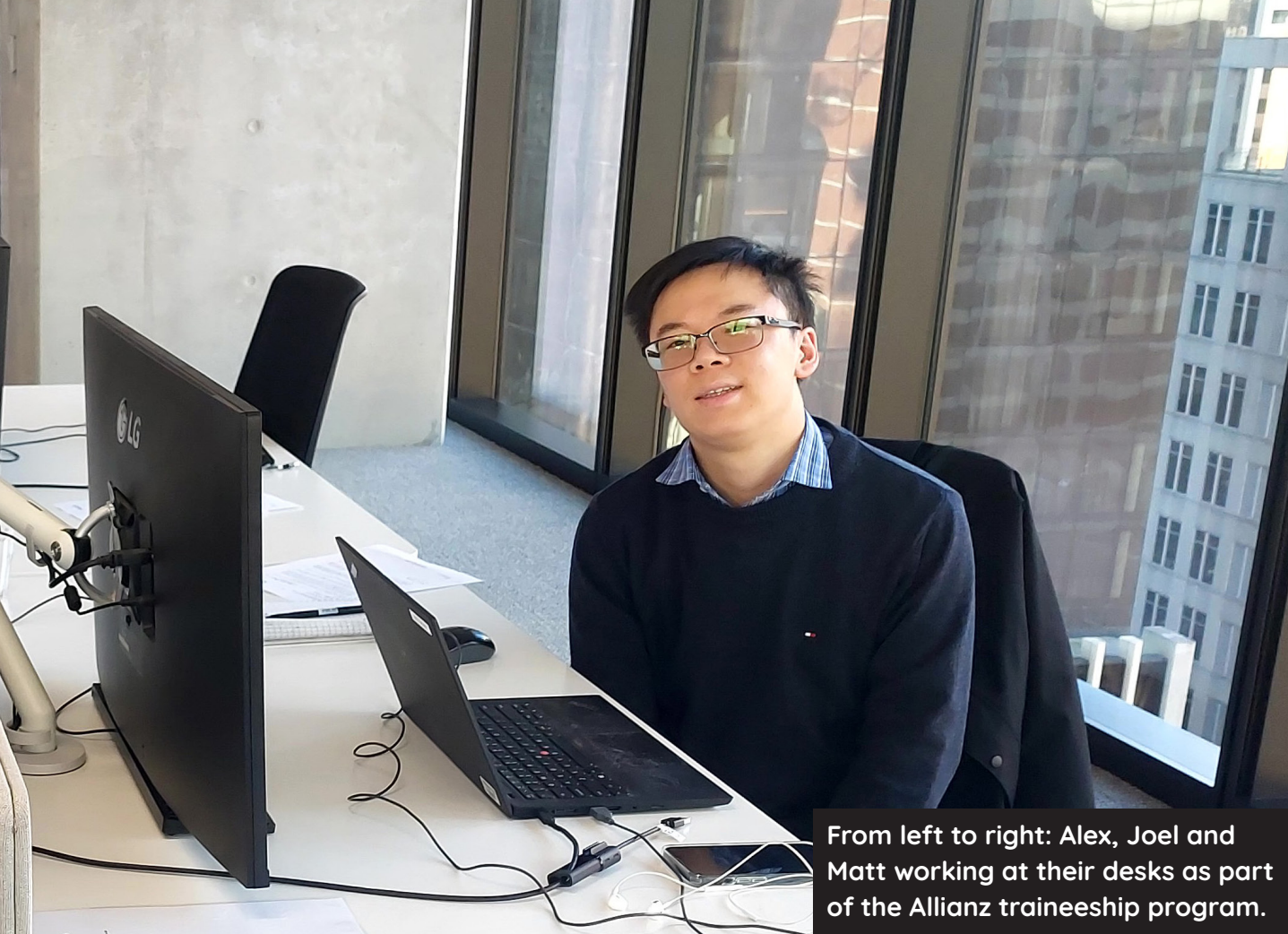
Even as one of the world's largest insurers, Allianz was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting the need for more temporary employees to handle claims processing.

Recognising an opportunity for both business and social impact, Glenn Slater, Senior HR Business Partner at Allianz, initiated a partnership with disability service provider Jigsaw in April 2021. What began as a discrete project of four neurodiverse trainees in the Motor Claims team has now

grown to an established program across four states with nearly 50 trainees at its peak.

"It produced a ripple effect where it positively impacted our people... and it's getting more and more traction," says Slater.

The project's scope and the effectiveness of these recruits exceeded expectations. The initial team reduced a backlog of 2500 motor claims assessment reports to 50 within two weeks, showing the value



From left to right: Alex, Joel and Matt working at their desks as part of the Allianz traineeship program.

of specifically designing roles that match worker capacity. Allianz immediately recognised the initiative's value and senior leaders decided to collaborate with Jigsaw to employ people with disability into appropriately matched jobs. The Allianz traineeship program was born.

Given the partnership's success, trainees with disabilities have been assigned to various teams such as Dispute Resolution, Workers Compensation, and Remediation, processing claims and assisting with customer service enquiries.

Other aspects of Allianz's business model have also benefited. The Learning & Development department, for example, has collaborated with Jigsaw and adopted elements of their 'Train the Trainer' model, creating training materials that simplify complex roles and reduce risks.

Since October 2023, 21 trainees with disabilities have transitioned into permanent

“It solved a real-life business issue, and it's really benefitting our customers.”

Glenn Slater

roles, including one now serving as a Team Coordinator. This has highlighted the importance of diversified leadership roles to better represent the workforce and reflects an aim of the program to provide opportunities for the advancement of trainees.

Engagement from Allianz coworkers is high, with many feeling pride in the achievements of their Jigsaw colleagues. This engagement encourages participation in advocacy initiatives, while trainees feel a strong sense of loyalty to their workplace, especially with the prospect of sustainable permanent employment opportunities.

Pathways to New Possibilities

Placing people with disability at the heart of the workforce is not just the right thing to do but also makes good business sense. When employers prioritise disability and genuinely adopt the ideas and experiences of employees with disability, they unlock a wealth of new possibilities for their business. When employers grow their disability confidence, empower their leaders to be disability champions and make their workplaces accommodating, they open up new benefits for staff and customers alike.

From boosting reputation, to attracting more customers and increasing productivity, employers who embrace disability inclusion enjoy greater business success. Change your workplace for the better by applying these four commitments:

1. Put disability inclusion at the heart of your business
2. Become disability confident
3. Empower your leaders to drive change
4. Create a safe, supportive and accommodating culture



Commitment 1: Put disability inclusion at the heart of your business

Unlocking your potential by co-designing better workplace practices with people with disability

We know from experience and research that many employers do not feel knowledgeable or confident enough to hire and support employees with disability. Only half of employers believe their companies are well-equipped to support employees with disability, and over 53% think their workplace culture is not welcoming to them^{xxi}. A significant barrier is the fear of appearing discriminatory or intrusive, leading to a lack of open discussions about disability.

Yet, by simply asking, listening and genuinely working with people with disability to co-design inclusive workplace practices, businesses can become more disability confident. They can start to transform their business practices one step at a time and build a more productive, resilient workplace that benefits everyone.

Harnessing the voice of people with disability: Why it's essential for your workplace success

Employees with disability bring unique insights and problem-solving skills. This is because they've had to navigate a

“Listen to people with lived experience, they have the solution.”

**Insight from
Symposium Participant**

world not designed for their needs. Their contributions are therefore often broader, innovative and outside the box. Their voice and actions can lead to improved workplace morale, better teamwork and in-turn, better customer service.

Harnessing their voice and experience to transform your workplace is an obvious decision. Actively listening to their perspectives and insights and acting on what they have to say makes good business sense and creates a more welcoming and supportive environment for everyone.

The first step is committing to championing disability inclusion and making it central to your business.

The second step is putting your commitment into action and shaping a culture where everyone's voice is heard and valued.

Practical steps your business can take

The key to unlocking this commitment is creating a culture of respect and equity where disability allies and champions can offer advice and help co-design new business practices.

A few practical steps to achieve this in your workplace:

- **Appoint and empower Disability Champions in your workplace** to support

and guide employees with disability and elevate the value of making the workplace more inclusive and accessible. Make sure they are given the time and resources to be a champion, and provide them with training and support where needed.

- **Seek the assistance of an external organisation** specialising in disability inclusion to provide resources and ongoing guidance. This is particularly useful for small businesses with limited resources, and those just starting their disability inclusion journey. Organisations such as the [Australian Disability Network \(ADN\)](#) and the [Council for Intellectual Disability](#) have a wide range of resources available to assist employers.
- **Set up a Disability and Inclusion network** dedicated to diversity and inclusion efforts to build greater awareness among staff, champion change, and lead to long-lasting impacts. If your business is too small to set up your own committee or group, explore being part of one in your local area.
- **Establish open feedback and dialogue channels** so employees with disability feel empowered to be themselves and voice their ideas and experiences. This might be in the form of surveys, regular meetings or forums.
- **Develop a clear process** to ensure that suggestions from your employees are not only heard but also acted upon. Collaborate with employees to implement their ideas and regularly review the outcomes to assess what works and what can be improved.



IMAGINE....

**if each of the 584,097¹
businesses registered in
Greater Sydney alone hired
one person with disability,
we could eliminate the
unemployment of all
people with disability
aged 15-64² four
times over**

**Scott Taylor at the SSI Local
Area Coordination Staff
Meeting in April 2024**

Employee Case Study

Showcasing what's possible

Scott Taylor (he/him)

After noticing that the listing for a role at SSI strongly encouraged people with disability to apply, Scott Taylor's decision was an easy one to make. His time being unemployed had been disheartening, with his extensive experience as an advocate and consultant often looked over.

Scott recognised that working for SSI would not only mean making a difference in a community-minded sense, but also working for an organisation that resonated with his core values. Through a conversation with his leader, a hybrid work policy allowed Scott freedom to have increased flexibility with his work arrangements. Another access need, a height-adjustable desk, has allowed Scott to work comfortably in the office. These workplace adjustments are simple steps that can make a world of difference to those that request them.

As a Disability Confident Recruiter, SSI works with individuals to understand what they need, whether it be throughout the recruitment process, during onboarding, or on an ongoing basis. SSI's Head of Disability Services, Nicole Smith, says that "building in that flexibility is often straightforward. We have seen huge advantages to hiring talent with disability."

Through Scott's work as a Community Development Officer within the Local Area Coordination (LAC) program, he is focused on delivering projects targeting community engagement and capacity building outcomes for people with disability and the broader community. Working with businesses and community leaders to raise awareness around the challenges that people with disability face, as well as devising solutions to those barriers, has allowed the voices of those with lived experience to come to the fore in conversations that may have previously shut them out.

His perspective as a person with disability has been crucial in the co-design and development of a range of internal projects and initiatives at SSI, including this very report and the International Day of People with Disability launch event. "Scott is an exceptional communicator and has strong skills in facilitation and advocacy that have been hugely beneficial to our business and sector," says Nicole.

Scott's ability to thrive in his role, as well as generously give back to the communities he serves, has been a clear indication that hiring people with disability can lead to impressive outcomes and refreshingly diverse workplaces.

1. Economy.id, *Greater Sydney economic profile*, August 2024, <https://economy.id.com.au/rda-sydney/number-of-businesses-by-industry>
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *People with disability in Australia*, April 2024, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment/unemployment>



Commitment 2: Become disability confident

Unlocking your potential by becoming disability confident and learn the value of hiring talent with disability

Employers often feel there's not enough information, advice, or guidance on how to hire, rehire, or support employees with disability. There's also limited awareness about government programs like JobAccess, Disability Employment Services and the Employment Assistance Fund.

This means employers miss out on crucial resources that could help them feel more confident and make their workplaces more inclusive and accessible. Small to medium businesses in particular face challenges due to limited time, resources, and less formal HR processes compared to larger companies. Consequently, they are less likely to engage with initiatives that they see as adding more administrative work.

Changing policies, investing in training, and creating new ways of working can be daunting. But having access to support, training, and resources can help break down common misconceptions businesses may hold about employing people with disability. Building links with specialist disability organisations that can provide training and advice on workplace modifications, inclusion practices and government grants is a critical first step, as is engaging with disability employment agencies for hiring and retaining skilled people with disability.

The key message is to start small and build on success. Becoming a disability confident employer may take a little time, but each small step taken can make a significant positive impact for your business and for people with disability. There are resources and support organisations that can be part of your workplace's journey.

Disability training and collaboration: Why it's essential for your workplace success

Businesses lose out when they fail to tap into the broader talent pool that people with disability provide. They fail to capitalise on the advantages of stronger workplace morale, higher retention rates, lower absenteeism, and enhanced innovation. They believe the time and cost to employ people with disability is too great or that it's too hard to make it happen. They also believe that there's a greater safety risk involved in hiring people with disability or that they lack necessary skills.

Yet we know that while there may be some costs associated with employing people with disability, most accommodations are inexpensive or free and can often be subsidised. In fact, people with disability have 34% fewer accidents than other employees^{xxii}. And employers reap \$40 in savings for every dollar spent on workplace adjustments to accommodate employees with disability^{xxiii}.

Hiring people with disability and investing in workplace supports makes sound business sense.

Practical steps your business can take

The key to unlocking this commitment is starting a conversation with the right people. It involves educating your staff, engaging specialist advice, and evaluating what does and doesn't work.

A few practical steps to achieve this in your workplace:

- **Connect with disability specialist organisations** such as the [ADN](#), [Disability Awareness](#), and [Mental Health First Aid Australia](#), who can offer invaluable advice when it comes to specialised training, available subsidies, and mentoring. Ask them to help your business set



“Our internal research shows that half of the modifications cost less than \$1,000 and that many adjustments can be made at no cost at all, like providing flexible working hours or locations.”

Daniel Valiente-Riedi,
JobAccess General Manager

clear goals for disability training and employment, as well as access the government supports that are available.

- **Contact disability employment and recruitment agencies** to recruit skilled candidates with disability and help support them to transition into a new workplace. Ask them how to do pre-employment training and capacity building for people with disability.
- **Undertake an audit of your workplace** to assess just how disability friendly it is for employees. If you're not sure how, contact one of the specialist disability organisations listed above. ADN, for

example, can undertake a 'Dignified Access Review' of your workplace's accessibility and help you to address any gaps. When you begin to understand the simple and cost-effective measures that can serve as accommodations, you become more confident in hiring a person with disability.

- **Start with a trial program** such as an internship or mentorship program so you can experience first-hand the benefits people with a disability bring to the workplace.
- **Continually assess progress** with making your workplace more inclusive, ensuring it is responsive, flexible, and helps all employees – particularly those with disability – to thrive. One way is to monitor the satisfaction, wellbeing and career progression of staff with disability via annual surveys, and comparing results against the workforce without disability. This is particularly important for larger businesses but may not be as easy to do for smaller businesses without help from external experts.



Abraham Darouiche speaks to the audience in the lived experience segment of the Pathways to Possibilities symposium.

Lived Experience Case Study

Showcasing what's possible

Abraham Darouiche (he/him)

With a passion for accounting and both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Business and Commerce, you wouldn't expect Abraham Darouiche to struggle finding a job as an accountant. Yet, recruitment barriers saw Abraham moving in and out of jobs, often in unrelated industries.

"People look at you and they assume, and that's the most dangerous thing," Abraham says.

From the outset, Abraham faced challenges trying to identify suitable roles, as information regarding workplace accessibility was rarely provided in job descriptions. Then, applications featuring time-sensitive tests didn't accommodate his motor skill impairment, placing him at a disadvantage despite his qualifications.

"Some recruiters never responded at all," says Abraham. "You lose your confidence. People say don't give up, but how much can you apply for before you burn out?"

Fortunately, a government grant from the Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) program was given to the association that Abraham volunteered for, the Diversity & Disability Alliance (DDA), providing him with a more stable income, though

"People with disability are willing to work and be involved. They just have to be given that chance."

Abraham Darouiche

employment in Abraham's desired field of accounting remained elusive.

A networking event eventually provided Abraham the opportunity to bypass the ruthlessness of online recruitment systems and present himself directly to potential employers. This led to securing an ideal part-time role as an Accounts Manager at Hope and Care.

Reflecting on his job search journey, Abraham acknowledges the challenging task of achieving a truly egalitarian job market but suggests simple initiatives for employers. He advocates for volunteer and internship programs targeted at jobseekers with disabilities that allow gradual assessment of recruits' strengths and alignment of tasks with their skillsets.

Abraham encourages employers to proactively accommodate individuals with disabilities in both recruitment and workplace environments, recognising the untapped potential within this community.



Commitment 3: Empower your leaders to drive change

Unlocking your potential by empowering your leaders to champion disability inclusion

Investing in effective leadership is key to advancing the employment of people with disability. As role models, what leaders do and say can really drive significant change in an organisation. Their words and actions can shift attitudes and perceptions and create a better work environment, making it easier for people with disability to thrive in their jobs.

People with disability holding senior leadership roles is also crucial for the workplace, as it enriches organisational diversity, fosters an inclusive workplace culture, and brings unique perspectives that drives innovation and problem-solving. The lack of visible representation of leaders with disability, or those willing to disclose their disability, makes it hard for others to envision themselves in such roles.

“When senior champions are part of the leadership group, they can influence change within the organisation as a person with disability.”

Donna Purcell, Branch Manager and Participant Advocate, National Disability Insurance Agency

Leaders with influence: Why it's essential for your workplace success

Leaders set the tone for organisational culture. They have the power to remove barriers to employment and advocate for greater change and investment. When they prioritise disability inclusion, they encourage an environment where people with disability are valued and included.

Their influence can pave the way for accessible work environments, greater supports and training programs, encouraging more people with disability to participate.

By sharing success stories and promoting benefits they can inspire other employers and organisations to follow suit, in turn creating more employment opportunities for people with disability.

Commitment by senior leaders to focus on workplace inclusion for people with disability cannot be underestimated but it takes time and investment. Small, medium, and large organisations can all take steps to create more disability-inclusive workplaces.

Practical steps your business can take

The key to unlocking this commitment is understanding that representation matters. This means encouraging and supporting leaders with disability to take on visible roles within the organisation.

Offering tailored disability and awareness training to help senior leaders understand the unique challenges faced by people with disability is also critical.

A few practical steps to achieve this in your workplace:

- **Invest in pathways** for career development and advancement for employees with disability to become



leaders (tailored mentorship programs and leadership training opportunities). Showcase career progression successes at every opportunity. This might be via your internal staff portal website, or during staff meetings and celebrations.

- **Set targets for employees** with disability in leadership roles, including Board membership. But remember, targets take time to get right. They need to be realistic, measurable and long-term so seeking advice from a disability specialist organisation might be a useful first step.
- **Provide disability awareness and inclusion training** for senior leaders and middle managers so they have the confidence and skills to foster an inclusive workplace and help ensure equal opportunities and support for all employees. Connect with disability specialist organisations to find out what training is available, not just for leaders but all staff.
- **Set clear inclusion goals and metrics** for senior leaders and incorporate them into performance reviews. Remember, what gets measured gets done.

“**Introducing senior leadership roles held by people with disability that lead and champion [inclusion]...ensures there is a strong focus on accessibility and inclusion for employees and customers with disabilities.**”

**Dwayne Fernandes,
Symposium Participant**

Donna Purcell’s research showed that if a top leader really understands and wants to help people with disability get and keep jobs, their organisation is more likely to do a good job at hiring and supporting these individuals. She noticed that the senior leaders who really cared about making the workplace better for people with disability often had someone in their family with a disability, or they had a disability themselves.



Commitment 4: Create a safe, accommodating and supportive culture

Unlocking your potential by making flexibility, accessibility and accommodation a reality

Making a workplace accessible, accommodating, and supportive for employees with disability is much more than a 'tick-the-box' and 'set-and-forget' exercise. It's a deeper commitment to inclusivity, equality, respect, and diversity. When it's done right, it reaps significant rewards for individuals and businesses alike. From better team dynamics to greater job satisfaction and employee performance, everyone wins.

While building a truly inclusive workplace takes time and understanding, each small step makes a huge impact. Simply asking an employee: 'what do you need?' can be the difference between an employee thriving and struggling. Investing in assistive technology, offering flexibility so an employee can work from home and handling support requests promptly and respectfully can mean a lot yet requires little effort.

Acknowledging and integrating intersectionality into inclusion efforts is also critical. People experience barriers based on multiple aspects of their identity such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability. Recognising this is key to developing effective workplace practices that properly deal with each employee's unique challenges.

Fostering a safe culture: Why it's essential for your workplace success

Creating workplaces that encourage people with disability to feel safe to disclose their disability, that normalise adjustments and customises jobs to their unique needs brings huge rewards.

Using inclusive language and addressing biases is also critical. It improves how we see and treat people with disability at work, boosts equality awareness, fosters

open conversations, and enhances accessibility. Importantly, it debunks myths about employees with disability and helps leaders and colleagues see the resilience, contribution, and value their peers with disability bring to the workplace.

Employees with disability who feel valued, respected, and included, are more likely to be engaged with their work. They're likely to experience greater job satisfaction and increased wellbeing, not just in terms of their professional lives but also their overall quality of life. It means they feel safe to express themselves and discuss their needs without fear of judgment. They feel optimistic about their career prospects, confident that their wellbeing is a priority and proud to work for an organisation that champions inclusion. They feel empowered.

For employers it means increased productivity and performance, lower employee turnover and an enhanced corporate reputation. In short - improved organisational health and prosperity.

“Everyone has the right to have their access needs met, and we should be saying to anyone who applies for a job and gets a job, ‘What do you need?’”

**Kyle Goldfinch,
Screenwriter/Filmmaker**

Practical steps your business can take

The key to unlocking this commitment involves understanding that there are many impactful steps employers can take to help employees with disability contribute effectively and thrive professionally.

A few practical steps to achieve this in your workplace:

- **Provide training and education** for employees at all levels to understand the importance of inclusive language and to recognise and challenge their own biases. This includes doing Bias Checks to review and assess workplace practices, policies, and interactions for unconscious bias. Engage with organisations specialising in disability inclusion to provide guidance.
- **Customise jobs** to reflect the unique strengths, needs, and preferences of individuals. Understanding that what works for one employee might not work for another, even if they have the same disability. If you don't have the HR resources for this, seek some help in tailoring job roles to fit the employee rather than offering inflexible mainstream job roles that eventually fail.
- **Ensure inclusive hiring practices** by providing accessible job ads, flexible interviews and adjustments to online assessments. You don't want to miss out on a top applicant because your job ad was inaccessible and had not been updated.
- **Offer flexibility and accessibility** (part-time work, flexible hours, or option to work from home) to accommodate individual needs, mobility issues, medical appointments, or energy levels. Conducting an audit of the physical workspace helps to identify barriers to accessibility.
- **Train supervisors and managers** to ensure they know how to respond appropriately and supportively to disclosures of disability. Ensuring policies and procedures are straightforward and accessible for requesting accommodations is key.
- **Apply an intersectional approach** by recognising that different people need different resources and support to achieve similar outcomes.
- **Optimise the use of technology for improved accessibility** (screen readers, speech-to-text applications, and adaptive hardware) to streamline work processes, foster collaboration and help employees with disability work independently and more effectively.
- **Access government support and financial incentives** that actively work to accommodate employees with disability. Remember to use the expertise of specialist disability organisations and providers so you optimise the support available.

“Before anyone has considered my skills, my knowledge, my experience or my abilities, I am not able to apply for a job online as I must have a driving licence. I will never be able to drive... quite often the comment was, we forgot to take it out... you're immediately putting in barriers from day one.”

Brendan Buchanan, SSI Local Area Coordinator with disability



Donna Purcell addresses event attendees as part of her keynote address at the Pathways to Possibilities symposium.

Disability Advocate Case Study

Showcasing what's possible

Donna Purcell (she/her)

Donna Purcell is a disability advocate who has led organisational and community change, resulting in greater workplace inclusion and access for people with disability.

Donna has her own lived experience of disability, having been born with a rare eye condition called Goldman-Favre Syndrome. She grew up with low vision and gradually lost most of her sight in her early thirties.

Donna now works as the Participant Advocate at the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), where she leads a team that ensures all participants are empowered and heard in the design and delivery of the agency's priorities and reform strategies.

In 2022, Donna undertook a Churchill Fellowship researching leadership, initiatives and culture change resulting in increased recruitment and retention of people with disability in the workforce. Donna's fellowship took her to the USA, UK, France and Switzerland, meeting with 22 organisations who generously shared their knowledge and insights on how they were successfully improving employment opportunities for people with disability.

During her fellowship, Donna discovered that job customisation plays a crucial role in not only providing opportunities for people with disability, but also creating ongoing employment for many jobseekers with disabilities.

“I found that the employers who had the greatest success in employing people with disability were ones tailoring jobs to meet the specific needs of the jobseeker and the employer.”

Donna Purcell

“This was most evident when it came to young people transitioning from school to work and for jobseekers whose disabilities didn't suit mainstream jobs.”

Donna found that the employment specialists consulting on the customised programs gained a thorough understanding of the tasks and role gaps within a client's workplace, and then worked with jobseekers to understand their specific areas of interest, skills and their likes and dislikes. A job description was then compiled in consultation with the jobseeker and then the candidates and jobs were matched to an employer.

“Often the initial response of employers is they don't have suitable jobs for people with disability,” Donna says. “However, it is incredible just how many opportunities exist should a business collaborate with a disability employment specialist.” Donna encourages all employers to consider customising jobs, knowing this makes a significant difference to both the employer and the jobseeker.

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Carly Findlay is an award-winning writer, speaker, and activist, making appearances at a wide variety of arts festivals, academic lectures, and community events. Carly received a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2020 for her work as a disability advocate.

Tim Ferguson

Tim Ferguson is a renowned comedian and writer, having toured internationally and worked in film and TV for over 30 years. Ever since his multiple sclerosis diagnosis, Tim has become a fierce advocate for people with disability in the arts.

Donna Purcell

Donna Purcell is an accessibility and disability specialist whose global research has led to important findings regarding the employment of people with disability. She continues to push for greater co-design protocols as part of her role as a senior leader of the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA).

Abraham Darouiche

Abraham Darouiche, diagnosed with a neuromuscular disorder at 5 years of age, is a committed advocate for people with disability, with extensive experience in community-led organisations such as the Diversity and Disability Alliance.

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