**Disability Employment Framework Submission**

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This submission is based on a number of research projects which explore the experiences of workers with disability, chronic illness and also ASD. Employees with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) face particular disadvantage in their workplaces. Our research of employees with ASD shows that normative expectations within their workplaces were often inflexible and that disclosure of an ASD diagnosis may result in the loss of employment or difficulties within that workplace.

Disclosure of any form of disability may be detrimental to the achievement of positive outcomes for the employee. ASD is particularly disadvantageous because of the stigma and misunderstanding which accompanies such a label. Previous studies have found that labour market power, in the form of education or extensive work experience can help people with disability achieve positive working outcomes, this did not seem to occur for employees with ASD. Workers with ASD are reliant on the goodwill and understanding of colleagues and supervisors for the provision of accommodations. We found that it was not uncommon for the requests for accommodations to be ignored or only granted when it suited others in the workplace. Where workplaces were not willing to provide the understanding, the employees often resigned in an attempt to find a more accommodating place of work. Participants in our study reported that they had often worked in other jobs before eventually finding one that was suitable for their needs. Others who did not find suitable work, exited the labour market or were employed in work which was at a lower level than their qualifications indicate that they could perform.

**What can improve employment outcomes for people with disability?**

For workers who fall outside the need for formal support in their workplace, there is still a need for an advocate who might be able to represent these employees in their negotiations for accommodations. Alternatively, training for these workers in effective ways to represent themselves would be useful. We note that Unions are sometimes effective in assisting workers with these negotiations. Often employees with ASD prefer not to disclose and manage any negotiations on their own, which may prove to be problematic for employees who are not neurotypical.

Training for employers is critical in changing existing attitudes towards employees with disability, particularly ASD. And we note that there are good quality training programs available to employers from a number of sources, but many appear to be unaware of the rights of the employees and their responsibilities towards them. Bringing about change, we believe, is going to require a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including workplaces and their advisors (such as employer associations), Government and non-government support organisations, researchers and employees themselves and their representatives. Legislation and regulation also needs to be more rigorously enforced and shouldn’t rely on a complaint mechanism where employees with disability are expected to report their employer when they suffer discrimination. Many employees with disability would prefer to resign and find a more suitable workplace, rather than experience the stress of dealing with their employer at a formal hearing, particularly when they may not want to continue working for that employer.

Understanding is the key factor in the success for employees with ASD. Where there is understanding, employees are more likely to be able to access accommodations, even if those accommodations are simple courtesies such as advance warning of change, or adjustments to workload. However, many employers are unwilling to accept even these small extra tasks in order to make the work of their employees more manageable. Some participants said that they were reported as bullies and any disclosure of their ASD meant that they were ‘making excuses’ and their diagnosis was not considered to be credible and was therefore disregarded leaving the employee in a difficult situation. These instances of disadvantage are all mediated by the normative expectations of workplaces.

**What can help reduce barriers for people with disability seeking employment?**

Normative attitudes have been repeatedly shown in research to negatively influence the outcomes of workers with disability. Loss of employment after disclosure for those with ASD, was a common theme in our research. Enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation in workplaces, in the same way other forms of industrial legislation and regulation is enforced by the Fair Work Commission, is necessary and must be responsibility of Government rather than individuals. Employees must be kept safe through these processes.

**What can help reduce barriers for employers hiring people with disability?**

Many people with invisible disabilities have fewer problems with being recruited than they do with disclosure and support once they are in the workplace. Where aspects of a condition are more obvious at the recruitment stage, employers who are intolerant of disability are less likely to employ people with an obvious disability. While this is discriminatory, in the current regulatory environment where employees with disability are forced to make complaints against their employer in a largely unsupported environment, it might be preferable for individuals with disability not to be employed in those organisations. This is far from a desirable situation, but until social attitudes regarding the compatibility of work and disability are improved, it is the situation with which many capable employees with disability need to live.

**How can we encourage more engagement between employers and people with disability?**

Many organisations, such as social enterprises which operate in a business environment, are great advocates for employment of people with different forms of disability. There is a café in Toowoomba called “Bounce” which employs individuals with disability and is a great example of how an organisation can incorporate understanding and flexibility in a business environment. Lessons from these businesses need to be learned by the broader business community, the outcomes can benefit both employer and employee. The difficulty lies in encouraging organisations to rethink existing poor attitudes about what constitutes a valuable employee.

**What other supports or approaches could increase employment participation of people with disability?**

For people with invisible disabilities, such as ASD or a chronic illness, mentors are extremely valuable. Individuals who have navigated the difficulties of disclosure and accommodations can provide useful advice about the unspoken workplace rules regarding these issues. These mentors and advice are sometimes provided informally through existing support groups. Support groups also provide more formal support where workers are not able to access the help they need in the workplace. An example of this is where the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society arranges information sessions for workplaces where a colleague has been newly diagnosed. The symptoms of MS, which can include loss of balance and difficult navigating steps, might be misunderstood and assumed to be caused by alcohol or drug use by colleagues. The provision of assistance by support groups is important, but a broader approach to attitudinal change is needed.