**Title page**

Employer Engagement in Disability Employment: a missing link for Small to Medium Organisations

A Review of the Literature

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**Abstract**

**BACKGROUND:** There is entrenched exclusion of around half the working age people with disability in Australia and elsewhere. There is something missing on the ‘demand’ side of efforts to improve the employment of people with disability, particularly in relation to small and medium sized organisations.

**OBJECTIVE:** To identify gaps in disability employment research, policy, and strategies in relation to small to medium employers; and to identify challenges for these employers in becoming disability confident and inclusive organisations.

**METHODS:** A systematic search of literature including published articles, books, reports and conference papers. Searches were also conducted on relevant government and disability employment related web sites.

**RESULTS:** First, although larger employers are contributing to the discussion of ways to increase the employment of people with disability, small to medium employers are largely not in the discussion. Second, reliance on the broad business case argument alone for employing people with disability, is not enough to change attitudes and organisational cultures that are at the root of the workforce exclusion of people with disability.

**CONCLUSIONS:** The major barrier to employment of people with disability is negative attitudes that result in discriminatory organisational cultures. Current initiatives in this area are not addressing the needs of small to medium organisations. Strategies for both these issues are suggested.

Key words: disability employment, inclusive organisations, engaging employers

**1. Introduction**

Employment of people with disability in Australia is ‘poor’ (Australian Government, 2015a), and getting poorer. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), while workforce participation has increased for people without a disability, from 76.9% in 1993 to 82.5% in 2012, participation has decreased for people with disability, dropping from 54.9% to 52.8% in the same time period (ABS, 2012).

The Australian Government is currently conducting national consultations in an effort to improve the economic and social inclusion of people with disability. A National Disability Employment Task Force has been established to lead this review of current supports and initiatives and to propose a National Disability Employment Framework for 2018 and beyond.

The issues paper for this review (Department of Human Services, 2015a), describes the range of current supports, from Disability Employment Services (DES) that assist job seekers with disability to obtain work, to more general resources to assist potential employers in the employment process such as the Job Access service (www.jobaccess.gov.au).

The government also funds the National Disability Recruitment Coordinator (NDRC) service that assists large employers to develop inclusive practices and a commitment to improve employment of people with disability in their organisations. However, the NDRC is restricted to organisations of more than 100 employees, and currently there exists no comparable service for the many small to medium businesses, which taken together employ the largest number of people in Australia. The Diversity Field Officer (DFO) Project in Geelong, Victoria, is an initiative currently being trialed that is designed to address this gap. In the Geelong area, small to medium businesses represent 95% of local businesses and employ over 50% of the area’s workforce (GROW, 2014).

In a comprehensive review of the literature, Waterhouse, Kimberley, Jonas and Nurka (2010, p. 27) reported that: ‘the voices of employers are largely missing from the research literature and policy discourse on disability and diversity employment’. They also highlighted that it is smaller rather than larger organisations that are most disengaged from the discourse. Waterhouse et al. (2010) concluded that rather than formal training, these employers want information and advice from ‘trusted brokers’ to build their disability awareness and confidence. The authors cited the Australian Network on Disability (AND), a business leadership network, who describe disability confidence as:

* Knowing how to make adjustments to the workplace to retain employees who acquire a disability;
* Knowing how to make changes to recruitment processes to allow skilled and talented job seekers with disabilities to compete on a level playing field; and
* Delivering accessible customer service that provides a great experience to customers who may have a disability.

Both AND and the NDRC (described earlier) do provide that ‘trusted broker’ connection, and information and expertise on disability confidence. However, as with the NDRC, AND is predominantly focused on supporting larger organisations.

DES and Group Training Organisation (GTO) Field Officers from the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector were also mentioned by employers as providing some of that ‘trusted broker’ connection to small to medium organisations, but both are currently too limited in scope and resources to provide the direct and ongoing specialist disability information and expertise needed by small to medium organisations (Waterhouse et al., 2010; Inclusion Australia, 2015).

Small to medium organisations do not have the diversity or HR capability that larger organisations may have, and even if they are aware of the supports available to employ people with disability, they don’t have the capacity to navigate the often changing and extensive matrix of programs and services available (Gustafsson, Peralta & Danermark, 2013; Waterhouse et al., 2010). They remain anxious about perceived legal, safety and cost issues around disability employment despite evidence to the contrary (Graffam, Smith, Shinkfield, & Polzin, 2002; Australian Safety & Compensation Commission, 2007; Hernandez & McDonald, 2010) and so avoid the issue. Evidence of this lack of engagement by employers was reported in an Australian Government review into Disability Employment Services for the period 2010 to 2013 (Department of Social Services, 2014). Of the 52% of employers in the sample who were aware of DES, only 3% had utilised the services in the previous 12 months. In addition, a DES service called ‘Jobs in Jeopardy’, which provides assistance to organisations and employees with disability who are experiencing difficulty maintaining work performance due to disability, has also been underutilised. In contrast, of those employers who accessed DES, 75% assessed the service as ‘good’ or ‘very good’. There does appear to be a missing link or lack of engagement between many employers and current disability support programs.

A series of Round Table Workshops with large employers who in combination employ over 375,000 Australians, agreed that they had been introduced to Job Access by the NDRC, or didn’t find it on their own (AND, 2015). They also agreed that the DFO concept as proposed by the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO), could perform an NDRC type role focusing on small to medium organisations (AND, 2015). As Cartwright (2009) cited by Waterhouse et al., (2010) found, the most important factor indicating best practice in employment of people with disability was strong connections with and understanding of disability support networks.

This review aimed to identify any gap in current disability employment research, policy, and strategies regarding the needs and perspectives of small to medium employers. It also aimed to identify major challenges for these employers to become more disability confident and inclusive organisations.

The review focused on employer engagement or ‘demand’ side issues and opportunities. That is, while looking into skills, training, job readiness, and pathways to employment (‘supply’ side issues) for people with disability is crucial, the needs and preferences of employers (‘demand’ side issues), especially in small to medium size businesses, has not been adequately addressed in the literature or in policy or programs.

The review will also inform the design and evaluation of the DFO Project, through the utilisation of best case initiatives identified. The DFO project established partnerships with around 50 small to medium organisations in the Geelong area during a 12 month period commencing September 2015. The project was supported by 19 local, state and national stakeholders, and included:

* Assessment of disability confidence prior to working with the business;
* An analysis of each business, their needs and motivation to participate;
* A ‘disability friendly check’ to identify areas for improvement including workplace culture and recruitment strategies;
* Support and information to assist build disability confidence and inclusion;
* The development of an access and inclusion road map/plan that can be readily implemented by the employer;
* Assistance for businesses to develop connections with local disability focused organisations and networks, including employment support organisations;
* A resource kit that includes success stories, local, state and national resources, and information about government funded support; and

Pre and post DFO service survey and comprehensive evaluation of disability confidence and inclusive policies andpractices.

This literature review compared the emerging innovations in Australia with international best practice to which we now turn.

**2. The Australian Government Perspective**

In response to consultations and submissions on the initial disability employment issues paper released by the Australian Government in May 2015 (see Introduction), the Department of Social Services (DSS) released a second discussion paper in November of 2015 (DSS, 2015b). The key principles developed subsequent to the first round of consultations were:

* ‘supporting individual need and choice;
* making best use of market-based principles; and
* working more closely with employers to create jobs’ (DSS, 2015b p.2).

Although we are focusing on the third principle around employer engagement, a description of the other two principles is important as they represent a major policy and potential paradigm change in disability employment support in Australia.

First, regarding supporting individual need and choice, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was trialled from 2014 to 2016 and is currently being implemented across Australia. The scheme represents a move away from block funding disability service organisations to providing 460,000 individuals with disability with their own budget to purchase the supports they need (e.g., attendant care, adaptive technology), and connections to mainstream supports and options for individuals not in receipt of a funding package. Central principles of the NDIS are greater choice and control for people with disability over their support services. In line with the NDIS, the first principle in the employment discussion paper (DSS, 2015b) points to a move away from block funding disability employment support organisations. Instead, the focus will shift to developing individual career action plans with people with disability, providing them with a budget to purchase the supports they need to achieve their career goals, and giving them the freedom to choose where and when they purchase those services. This means, for example, that as well as having more choice and control over pre-employment supports, a person also can potentially take that support into employment where the need for ongoing support has been identified.

The second and related principle of making best use of market principles points to further deregulation of the disability employment support sector. This will allow for increased competition and market driven organisations that potentially will focus more on individual preferences and business needs rather than contractual requirements from government. As the discussion paper highlights however, these major policy shifts would take some years to be implemented and would need a staged approach similar to the NDIS rollout.

The third principle described in the discussion paper highlights the need for more employer engagement and support as being critical to improving employment outcomes for people with disability. Significantly, the authors recognise that different levels and types of support may be needed for different employers in relation to the size of organisations. They recommend an expanded role for the National Disability Recruitment Coordinator (NDRC) described earlier, especially in terms of disability awareness, recruitment, job match, and the provision of a single point of contact for larger or national organisations. In relation to small and medium size organisations, the focus of this review, the discussion paper did not identify a specific mechanism or organisation. However, it pointed out that small and medium organisations have different needs to larger organisations in relation to perceived risks and costs, job match and ongoing support when employing people with disability.

Other issues highlighted in the discussion paper regarding employer engagement included:

* Improving awareness/attitudes and disability confidence, through such initiatives as a national disability awareness campaign, an awards scheme like the National Disability Awards, and accreditation of disability positive or confident organisations.
* Employer incentives such as wage subsidies, tax incentives, quotas or targets, and using procurement policies to preference disability confident organisations.
* A specific grants program to encourage innovation and partnerships with employers for best practice examples and job creation for people with disability.
* The expansion of the Employer Assistance Fund that provides such things as modifications to the workplace, to include awareness and disability confident training for co-workers etc.
* Ongoing support for employers was recognised as key to job placement success and long term duration of employment for people with disability. The NDRC was cited as having a potential role in supporting employers with current employee maintenance issues.

**3. Other Australian Perspectives**

The Business Council of Australia (BCA), representing over 100 of the largest businesses in Australia, released a report in October 2015, which reinforced major demand side challenges to improving the employment of people with disability. These included a complex employment service sector, and disclosure of disability or the lack thereof (BCA, 2015). In terms of ‘what works’ for businesses, the BCA survey highlighted:

* ‘Having a targeted recruitment strategy;
* Dedicated resources;
* External partnerships with specialist organisations to source talent;
* Being seen as an ‘Employer of Choice’ for people with disability;
* Articulating a purpose and being clear about your goals;
* Developing a business case for your company or industry; and
* Encouraging whole-of-business buy-in’ (BCA, 2015, p. 6).

Regarding disability disclosure, the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI, 2011) agrees that for many organisations disability disclosure is a challenge, but AHRI contends that a necessary and important first step in gaining greater disclosure of disability needs is the development of a broad and overt positive culture of encouraging and embracing diversity in the workplace, including disability.

The Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO), a national representative organisation of people with disability and family-led consumer organisations, highlighted five ‘critical’ components of a new disability employment model. Consistent with key principles in the government discussion paper described earlier (DSS, 2015b), AFDO [2014} recommends:

* Setting up a market driven approach based on the NDIS with a funding package allocated to people with disability to purchase employment related support;
* Supporting and encouraging all businesses to become disability confident;
* Adopting macro approaches to address the employment of people with disability, such as a disability employment strategy and targets in all public sector departments to increase employment and show leadership;
* Developing clear benchmarks, goals, resources, and accountabilities to close the employment gap experienced by people with disability; and
* Systemically addressing the concerns of business that relate to workplace health and safety including insurances, industrial relations, and disability discrimination.

In terms of practical ‘demand side’ or employer related strategies AFDO (2014) recommends:

* Encouraging disability champions at the top level of business management, and first-hand support to increase employment opportunities for people with disability in the form of a ‘Diversity Field Officer’ program to build disability confidence. (This recommendation informed the development of the Diversity Field Officer (DFO) Project currently being trialled in Geelong, Victoria);
* Preferential tendering for government contracts, grants, and procurement, with organisations that hire people with disability receiving preferential weighting in selection processes;
* Examining the effectiveness of tax incentives to encourage long-term change;
* Requiring organisations receiving funding or incentives to report the percentage of their workforce with a disability initially as part of a voluntary ‘national scorecard’, with a staged strategy for mandatory reporting by all businesses operating in Australia by 2025.

Disability Employment Australia (DEA), the national peak body for Disability Employment Services, also supports a shift to a career development approach, including more choice and control for individuals with disability in regard to support funds and service providers, and a more open market approach to services. DEA highlighted the need for a phased approach to ensure expertise in the disability employment sector is retained. In regard to ongoing support for employers with employee maintenance, DEA recommends the rebadging and expansion of the Jobs in Jeopardy program, described earlier. DEA (2015, p. 18) cites evidence that:

* ‘Businesses are losing $6.5 billion per year by failing to provide early intervention and support;
* Stress related workers’ compensation claims have doubled; and
* 60% of people will not seek help due to stigma’.

DEA (2015) concludes that providing early intervention support more broadly has the potential to reduce compensation costs, reliance on the disability support pension, and improve disability confidence in the workplace.

Inclusion Australia, representing people with an intellectual disability, also highlighted the need for ongoing employee and employer support in a recent briefing paper (Inclusion Australia, 2015). The authors cited Jobsupport, a specialist DES for people with intellectual disability, which has achieved a 64% open employment job outcome rate. This is significant given findings of the DES Evaluation of Disability Employment Servicesin 2013 that with the exception of Jobsupport, few people with moderate intellectual disability were achieving open employment’. Jobsupport do this by partnering with large organisations that have a high level of routine or repetitive tasks, which trained Jobsupport specialists can carve into an optimal job match for a person with intellectual disability. Crucial to the partnership is the guarantee of ongoing support as required for the duration of the job. Inclusion Australia recommend a disability employment model that involves a seamless interface with NDIS providing transition to work supports and links to specialist disability employment services that are skilled in partnership development, job analysis, job carving, on the job training and the provision of ongoing support for employees and employers.

Another initiative that focuses on partnerships and employers is the Ticket to Work (TTW) program that received Australian Government funding for a national rollout in 2013. TTW brings together schools, vocational education and training providers, disability support organisations and employers into local networks that facilitate vocational training and support for young people, predominantly with intellectual disability, as they approach the transition from school to work. The focus of TTW is an ‘employment first’ approach (Wakeford & Waugh, 2014; p.3), that is, work placements through Australian School-based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (ASbATS), work experience programs, along with training and support in real work settings. An evaluation of the TTW initiative in 2014 found that 86% of the 99 young people who had completed an ASbAT were still in open employment at the time of the review (Wakeford & Waugh, 2014). Moreover, over 200 students participated in work experience and workplace preparation activities; and, over 180 employers and 93 schools were engaged in the program. The TTW initiative has now also received further funding to expand into the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) trial sites. The success of local TTW partnerships is attributed to the support, resources and accreditation provided by the national TTW network (Wakeford & Waugh, 2014).

A similar initiative established in the Geelong area and funded by the Victorian Government is the GROW Project. GROW is an alliance of businesses and community support organisations who, through the coordination of the GROW Project, assist each other to increase employment of disadvantaged job seekers including people with disability in the Geelong region (GROW, 2015).

Two additional national employer engagement programs have relevance to the Diversity Field Officer (DFO) Project currently being trialled in Geelong: The Special Employment Placement Officer (SEPO) Project (Department of Family & Community Services, 2003), and The Disability Employment Broker Program (Department of Education, Employment &Workplace Relations, 2013). The SEPO project placed Special Employment Placement Officers in large organisations to build awareness and positive attitudes towards employment of people with disability in the host organisations. An evaluation of one organisation in the SEPO Project described in a broader government review of employer incentive programs (Department of Family & Community Services, 2003; p. 26), found that ‘within 15 months the SEPO’s work led to 113 people with a wide range of disability types being interviewed for positions, and 53 people with disabilities securing jobs…’. Another SEPO set up a work experience initiative that resulted in 22 people completing work experience and training, and of these, 10 secured jobs. The SEPO Project finished in 2002 with very little information as to why, except a note that the two year contracts may have constrained further achievements (Department of Family & Community Services, 2003).

In 2012, the Australian Government announced the Disability Employment Broker Program that funded five disability employment broker services to promote more positive disability awareness with employers, and create more jobs for DES job-seekers with small to medium organisations in regional areas. The Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) Annual Report 2012/13 (DEEWR, 2013) reported that the brokers found jobs for 68 people, work experience for 37 and training for 20 people. The broker program was criticised for duplicating the role of DES (National Disability Services, 2012). The program was only funded for one year, and no evaluation data was found in the area central to this review, that is, the ‘demand side’ or employer awareness/confidence/specific needs.

Finally, DES are constrained through contractual requirements to focus predominantly on supply side issues such as job readiness training and job placement outcomes (Wakeford & Waugh, 2014; AHRI, 2011), thus making it difficult for DES to take a demand side or employer focus as well. Some DES have provided good examples of employer engagement initiatives. For example, Work Solutions in Gippsland Victoria has created peer network opportunities for employers to learn and support each other in building more inclusive and disability confident organisations. This DES also runs an annual Job Shadow Day that gives employers and people with disability an opportunity to get to know each other first hand, explore potential roles and career areas for the mentee and expose the mentor to a more positive view of the potential of people with disability (Work Solutions, 2016). More will be said about the power of experiential programs in addressing stereotypes, negative attitudes, and unconscious bias in disability employment in subsequent sections.

**3. International Developments**

In research for the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, Bartolotta, Skaff, and Klayman, (2014), recommended a shift away from the focus on the economic business case argument for employment of people with disability, towards a strategy that addresses the underlying negative and often unconscious organisational culture and bias undermining employment of people with disability. The business case for employing people with disability includes: the ability to tap into a larger talent pool; increased protection against discrimination claims; less absenteeism and longer tenure; enhanced profile and marketing to a more diverse customer pool; and enhanced creativity and innovation in diverse work teams (Mor Barak, 2014).

Bartolotta, Skaff & Klayman (2014) support previous evidence (e.g., Graffam et al., 2002; Australian Safety and Compensation Commission, 2007; Hernandez & McDonald, 2010) that shows that employees with disability are on average no more costly than other workers in terms of performance and workplace costs, and that workers with disability tend to stay in jobs longer. Bartolotto et al. (2014, p. 4) also cited Becker (1971), ‘the Nobel Prize winning economist, who described the notion that if performance is equivalent, private firms are harming themselves financially by restricting their labor pool through discrimination against segments of the population’. Yet, despite this evidence, the employment situation for people with disability has worsened. Bartolotto et al. (2014) and others (e.g., Mor Barak, 2014) contend that due to the difficulty in gathering substantial quantitative economic data, the business case is not compelling enough to shift the underlying and often unconscious attitudinal resistance or biases against employing people with disability. Bartolotto et al. (2014) cited research conducted by Ravaud, Madiot, and Ville (1992) showing that highly qualified applicants without disabilities were 1.78 times more likely to receive a favourable response from employers than applicants with comparable qualifications who disclosed a physical disability in their application. Moderately qualified applicants without disabilities were more than 3.2 times more likely to receive a positive response from application materials than comparably credentialed applicants with a physical disability. Similarly, in Belgium, Baert (2014) found that subjects who did not disclose a disability in an application form were twice as likely to get a positive response than those who did.

At the root of these biased judgements are psychological processes termed social categorisation, where we seem to have an innate and often adaptive tendency to categorise ourselves, other people, and objects into groups as a way of making sense of the world around us (Mor Barak, 2014). Mor Barak (2014) cited renowned American psychologist Henry Tajfel and colleagues, who also showed empirically that we tend to be biased towards those in our ‘in’ group compared to others in the ‘out’ group. In recruitment this bias has resulted in people who are similar to the dominant or ‘in’ group in an organisation being most successful in recruitment to those organisations (Mor Barak, 2014). For people with disability, first, they are categorised as an ‘out’ group or at best different to the ‘in’ group (the non-disabled workforce) on the basis of a characteristic that does not have the same impact for any two individuals let alone the group of people assigned to the disability category. Second, another layer of bias results from the stereotypes assigned to those categorised as ‘disabled’ such as less productive, requiring more supervision, a safety risk, and requiring costly modifications to the workplace (Murfitt, 2006). The challenge for diversity management is to identify that categorisation in workplace cultures and develop strategies to build a more heterogeneous and inclusive ‘in’ group, and ensure that judgements about recruitment, promotion etc. are not influenced by attributes that are irrelevant to a person’s potential to perform the tasks required (e.g., gender, age, disability, cultural background, sexual preference). Strategies to counter stereoptypical attitudes include ensuring recruitment personnel are trained in equal opportunity, discrimination and diversity, and that interview panels reflect as much as possible the diversity of the applicant pool. However, the attitude literature shows that it is first-hand contact with members of the stereotyped group that is the most powerful strategy to shift those often deeply embedded cultural stereotypes (Allport 1954; Desforges et al., 1991; Murfitt, 2006; and Novak et al. 2011). Presenting examples of successful employees with disability, mentoring programs, work trials, internships, and real jobs where the contact assists managers and co-workers to experience the potential of people with disability first hand, and to understand that disability is most often irrelevant to a person’s identity and skills, are crucial in addressing those stereotypes and the resultant conscious and unconscious bias.

In exploring the idea of an alternative strategy to the economic business case, Bartolotto et al. (2014) conducted focus group research with employers interested in looking at employment of people with disability. Respondents believed that co-workers, including HR staff, felt uncomfortable around people with disability. In contrast, for some respondents, positive accounts and stories from trusted colleagues was enough to encourage them to develop their own disability inclusion programs. They wanted metrics, strategies, and technical assistance to educate and expose their colleagues to successful examples of employment of people with disability. Subsequently, Bartolotto et al.’s (2014) employer engagement marketing strategy focused on emphasising competency, skill, and the similarity of people with disability to the ‘non-disabled’ population. In addition, the strategy recognised the need to look at and tailor information and strategies to address the particular needs of different businesses. They identified three groups of employers: the Choir, the Inclusives, and the Uninitiated.

The Choir is usually represented by larger organisations who have policies and practices for employment of people with disability within their diversity programs, and could potentially provide a good source of positive peer mentoring. Strategies Bartolotto et al. (2014) recommended for this group include encouraging disclosure particularly through explicit policies and practices around a positive disability inclusive culture in the organisation, and establishing disability related Employee Reference Groups for internal peer-to-peer mentoring and disability advice to management.

The Inclusives have already recognised the value of diversity and have developed strategies targeting disadvantaged groups, but haven’t yet included disability in their diversity programs. They lack disability awareness and job accommodation knowledge. Bartolotto et al. (2014) suggest that this group can increase its interest in employing people with disability with exposure and experience. Bartolotto et al. (2014) also recommend increasing the understanding in these organisations by providing them with information, (for example, that over 100 countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which includes goals and expectations about employment of people with disability), by recognising that the population of people with disability are a large potential source of talent, and customers; and through peer mentoring from the ‘Choir’.

Finally, the Uninitiated have no active or passive strategies to recruit people with disability or people from other diversity groups. Bartolotto et al. (2014) recommend success stories rather than statistics for this group, exposure to people with disability for de-sensitisation, and more ‘nurturing’ than for the other groups.

Additional strategies listed that apply overall include:

* A “help desk”;
* Measures of progress; and
* A road map that includes best practices and frameworks so that companies have a clear path or plan to improve over time.

Burke, Bezyak, Fraser, Pete, Ditchman, and Chan, (2013), in a review of the literature into employer attitudes towards employing people with disability, cited various U.S. studies that confirmed that the most important issue reported by small and medium organisations was the need for more accurate and practical information to dispel preconceptions about employment and retention of people with disability. The major preconceptions were lack of essential skills, health costs, workers’ compensation costs, fear of litigation, and negative attitudes of co-workers. When looking at companies with up to 100 employees, Burke et al. (2013), reported that organisational representatives had altruistic feelings about employing people with disability and felt that employees with disability would have better commitment and loyalty. They were positive about financial incentives, but concerned about losing income, exposure to litigation, and physical and structural barriers at their worksites. These medium size employers were also concerned about the difficulty contacting disability employment support organisations, and the effectiveness of this contact.

Domzal, Houtenville, and Sharma, (2008), in the first nationally representative U.S. survey of employer perspectives in employment of people with disability, found that for small and medium employers the cost of employing people with disability, and the belief that people with disability don’t have the necessary skills and experience were concerns most often reported. Health care costs, workers’ compensation costs, and fear of litigation were also more important than for larger employers. Information about productivity and satisfactory job performance were seen by small and medium employers as most likely to persuade them to employ people with disability. Commitment from top management was seen as an important strategy in retaining people with disability. In addition, tax credits were seen by smaller organisations as an important retention strategy, probably because of their ‘cost’ concerns.

Regarding the use of current support services by US employers, Domzal et al. (2008) described three predominant services:

* One-Stop Career Centers are state based and provide services like training referrals, career counselling, and job listings. The use of One-Stop services increases with company size; small companies equate to 7%, compared with medium-sized companies 14.9%, and large companies 43.6%.
* The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) is a service that provides information on workplace accommodations etc., similar to Job Access in Australia. Large companies are much more likely to be familiar with JAN services than are small and medium-sized companies: 21.6% compared to 6% and 5.9% respectively. Of the 7.4% of companies that are familiar with JAN services, only 27.7% report using the services.
* The third service is the Employer Assistance and Recruiting Network (EARN). This is a service that assists employers in locating and recruiting qualified employees with disability, and provides technical assistance on disability employment-related issues. Eight per cent of employers are familiar with EARN services and large companies are more likely to be familiar with EARN services than are small and medium sized companies: 14.3% compared to 6.8% and 6%, respectively.

Overall, it appears that similar to the Australian experience; small to medium employers in the US are either not aware of the support services available, have difficulty accessing those services, or don’t see them as relevant to their businesses.

Hagner and Cooney (2003) emphasised a partnership model of employer engagement, reporting that: ‘It is clear that businesses cannot go it alone’ (Hagner & Cooney, 2003, p. 3). According to the authors good partnerships with disability support organisations contain: competent service delivery, trust, treating businesses as customers, mutual benefit, and ongoing, long-term service. Hagner and Cooney (2003) proposed four key partnership options with the aforementioned elements that offer ‘inclusive employment experiences to people with disability in a way that respects and empowers employers and, over time, strengthens their capacity to successfully employ individuals with severe disabilities’ (Hagner & Cooney, 2003, p. 4):

1. A consultant model, where the disability service is an expert who provides support and advice to the business to develop the inclusive knowledge and skills within the organisation to support workers with disability. This includes, for example, training co-workers to include workers with disability in both the formal work processes and the informal or social aspects of the business.
2. The development of business consortia, where the disability service facilitates regular meetings of a number of businesses to share best practice, discuss challenges, and share resources for building inclusive practices in employing people with disability.
3. Expanding diversity programs. Diversity programs are becoming increasingly important to organisations because of issues such as legal compliance requirements, broadening the potential talent pool, attracting a wider more diverse customer base etc. In addition, strategies designed to assist people with disability are often beneficial for other diverse groups. Hagner and Cooney give the example of flexible working hours that can assist staff with family responsibilities, as well as staff with disability needs such as medication effects that might mean different or varying optimal working hours. It makes good business and moral sense to broaden diversity to include otherwise disadvantaged or excluded workers who require some reasonable accommodations in the workplace. ‘Disability is just one aspect of human diversity’ (Hagner & Cooney, 2003, p. 8).
4. Directing service funding to employers or co-workers. According to Hagner and Cooney (2003) this option is especially relevant and important when costs for on the job training or worksite modifications fall outside that which is deemed ‘reasonable’. In addition, resources for ongoing support or training for employees with disability in some cases may be better directed at the business rather than a disability organisation as the support provided is then directly building the capacity of that organisation to independently assist other employees with those needs without external intervention.

Hagner and Cooney (2003) conclude that the above options are not mutually exclusive, and that it is important to assess each organisation to identify which options and strategies suit their particular needs.

**4. The United Kingdom (UK)**

In the UK, similar to Australia and the US, people with disability are twice as likely to be out of work than others (Purvis, Foster, Lanceley & Wilson, 2014). In December 2013, the UK State Minister for Employment, and the State Minister for Disabled People launched a paper on a new Disability and Health Employment Strategy (Department for Work & Pensions, 2014). For employers, a two year disability confident campaign aiming to alleviate concerns of employers about the costs of employing people with disability, entails forums and information distribution focusing on presenting the business case for employing people with disability and the financial and other supports available to employers. Other initiatives outlined revolve around an ‘Employer One Stop Shop’ via an online portal and a telephone service. Similar to Job Access in Australia, and the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) in the US, this Employer One Stop Shop will bring together:

* An ‘Information Portal’ providing links to a wide range of disability employment information such as access to funding for reasonable adjustments to the workplace, and information about the Health and Work Service (similar to Job Services Australia (JSA) and DES in Australia).
* An account management service for larger employers. The service will assist organisations to make the changes required to employ and retain employees with disability (similar to Australia’s NDRC). Although the strategy does say they will develop services for the specific needs of small and medium organisations, there is no detail given.
* A key element of the Employer One Stop Shop described in the paper is a job vacancy area where people with disability will be able to apply for jobs.
* For small and medium employers, the service will sponsor organisations to create a toolkit for employers in their business area. The tool kits will contain guidance on disability employment, examples of best practice, and support available.

The other UK initiative is the strategy described as the ‘Disability Two Ticks Symbol’, a disability accreditation awarded to organisations that make specific commitments to building inclusive workplaces for people with disability. As a result of evaluation research that indicated that the current approach was outdated, not administered robustly, and not offering enough employer support, the strategy will reform the initiative through wider publicity of the scheme, different levels of accreditation, a more rigorous assessment process, a feedback mechanism for employees, and better information and guidance (Department for Work & Pensions, 2014).

Finally, again emphasising the importance of exposure or experiential programs, O’Bryan, Daston, and Riehle (2014), describe an employer-led internship program for young people with intellectual disability. Called ‘Project Search’, the program started in a US hospital to address high turnover in jobs with a lot of repetitive tasks. Similar to Australia’s TTW initiative described earlier, and the job carving cited earlier with Job Futures, students are placed in a business in their last year of education for an internship of approximately ten weeks. They are coached by an instructor and a disability employment specialist and they also receive job-development support to translate their Project Search year into permanent, paid employment in either the host business or another organisation. Project Search now operates successfully across the U.S. and was recently launched in the U.K. and Europe. The three Scottish organisations operating Project Search in 2013 achieved a 70% employment outcome, and the project achieved a 60% job outcome across the UK. Key to the success of Project Search is ‘true collaboration’ between education partners, employers, agencies that serve people with disabilities, and young people with disabilities and their families (O’Bryan et al., 2014, p.46). Businesses in the project also report positive cultural development from hosting the interns in their businesses.

**5. Europe**

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) produced a synthesis of disability employment issues across Europe in 2010 entitled *Sickness, Disability, and Work: Breaking the Barriers*. In regard to demand side issues, financial subsidies were noted as the most commonly employed policy measure for promoting employment opportunities for people with disability, principally subsidies for making adjustments to the workplace, and wage subsidies. Research was cited (OECD, 2010), which claimed that many workplace adjustment schemes were too narrow and should also include training before and after employment, on the job support, and awareness raising for managers and co-workers. Although reportedly not well evaluated (OECD, 2010), wage subsidies that are well targeted and flexible to match the variations in productivity appear to be most effective. Examples cited in Luxemburg, Finland, and Sweden have subsidies available for a new recruit for up to two to four years.

Two main issues of concern were highlighted in the low take-up of labour market incentives to employ people with disability: a lack of awareness of the schemes, and often onerous procedures to apply for support (OECD, 2010). Initiatives developed to address this included personal contact officers in local workplace centres in Norway, where employers can get direct and individualised advice and support around disability employment issues. In the Netherlands, 30 new service institutions were established for employers to reduce cumbersome administrative procedures (OECD, 2010).

A more recent Norwegian pilot program appointed ‘Employer Guides’ to assist employers retain and become more inclusive of people with mental health challenges (Schafft, 2014). Through building a relationship with the employer rather than traditional supported employment interventions that focus on supporting the employee, an evaluation of the employer guide pilot found that 80% of the approximately 150 employers surveyed reported that they had improved their ability to employ people with mental health challenges, and their ability to deal with employees experiencing mental health problems. Schafft (2014, p.4) reported that ‘employer guides have moved the focus of attention from diagnoses and illness towards a specific methodology of guidance and empowerment — help to self-help’.

In a similar study in Sweden involving 20 organisations with experience in employing people with disability, Gustafsson, Peralta, and Danermark (2013, p.4) found that: ‘this research underscores the importance of considering the employer’s perspective, every-day reality, and needs when designing work support measures for people with disability’. Gustafsson et al. (2013) described the role of the disability employment specialists who provided assistance to these organisations as ‘brokers’, ‘guides’, and ‘trouble-shooters’, all of which were essential elements of the disability employment specialists’ role for success in hiring people with disability. ‘Broking’ involves the traditional job matching support for job-seekers with disability and the employer organisation; ‘guiding’ refers to on-the-job training and support for the potential employee with disability, co-workers and the organisation; and ‘trouble-shooting’ refers to the disability employment specialist being available for support when required on an ongoing basis. The majority of the organisations had not thought of employing people with disability until they were contacted by the disability employment organisation and exposed to the untapped potential workforce (Gustafsson et al., 2013). A reportedly unique element of this supported employment model in Sweden is the adoption of ‘facilitation policies’ (Gustafsson et al., 2013, p 104), that include introduction or on-the-job training programs, with no upfront requirement for the employer to guarantee ongoing employment. The key to successful employment of people with disability for these mostly small to medium employers was the direct partnership, where trust is established, the service is simple and flexible, the focus is on the employer’s needs rather than bureaucratic processes, and the elements of broking, guiding, and trouble-shooting are included.

OECD (2010) also highlighted the fact that employers who have had a positive experience employing people with disability are far more likely to hire again. Modelling of successful employment of people with disability by disability employment services was encouraged. OECD (2010), also found that developing and promoting the business case for employing people with disability is a key factor in encouraging employers to access supports and recruit people with disability. Finally, encouraging employer networks that can share best practice case studies and provide peer-to-peer support were identified as important initiatives to improve employment of people with disability.

**6. Conclusions and Recommendations**

The entrenched exclusion from employment of around half the people of working age with disability in Australia and across the world is recognised as a major challenge for our prosperity, both in human and economic terms. The Australian Government is developing a new policy framework in an attempt to lead the development of a more disability inclusive workforce.

This review was undertaken to assist this process and to explore a potential ‘missing link’ on the demand side of efforts to improve the employment of people with disability. The review’s research questions were:

1. Is there a gap in current disability employment research, policy, and strategies regarding the needs and perspectives of small to medium employers?
2. What are the major challenges for and needs of these employers to become more disability confident and inclusive organisations?

There are a number of important findings relative to these questions.

First, there is evidence that although the employer’s voice is becoming more prominent, particularly for larger employers, the voice of small to medium employers, while not missing altogether, is largely disconnected from the discussion. Moreover, small to medium organisations who together employ the largest number of people in Australia, are not engaging with current strategies to address the needs of employers in employing more people with disability.

The second major finding of this review relates to negative attitudes and misconceptions about the potential of people with disability. Virtually every reference cited in this review agreed that the major barrier to employment of people with disability is negative attitudes that result in discriminatory organisational cultures. These maintain the status quo of exclusion that has seen, at best, a stagnation in the low levels of employment of people with disability.

The review found that reliance on the broad business case argument for employing people with disability, is not compelling or comprehensive enough on its own to change these deeply embedded individual attitudes and organisational cultures that result in the conscious and unconscious bias at the root of the workforce exclusion of people with disability.

A comprehensive two-pronged solution is required. One action area is the employment of strategies for attitude change; the other is a focus on incentives and ways of engaging employers.

Changing attitudes to disability employment

First, and supported in the review is the concept of a national disability awareness/marketing campaign. At a general level, this should include personal stories of successful inclusion of people with disability at work, and the potential economic and social benefits for businesses and the community at large.

At the specific level, strategies should be individual, experiential and directly relevant to each particular business. This is particularly important for small to medium sized businesses. Examples are success stories of people with disability working in that specific industry, and diversity training that includes disability.

For attitude change at a deeper level, programs to assist organisations include such initiatives as work experience, mentoring and internship programs, work trials, and real jobs are the most powerful change agents. Of particular note is the importance of ‘employment first’ initiatives through internships and job carving, for people with intellectual disability who develop those specific job skills better through immersion in the workplace, and ongoing support for employee and employer for as long as needed. These employer-led initiatives are most successful when underpinned by a broad collaboration between local government, education and training providers, disability employment specialists, employers, people with disability and their families, and other relevant community organisations.

Other strategies identified as potentially valuable in a disability awareness campaign include: employer awards programs; disability confidence accreditation; quantifying the business case and adapting it for particular organisations or industries; and identification of disability champions from the leadership ranks of organisations and the community.

Incentives to engage employers

Recommendations include: tax incentives and wage subsidies that are targeted and flexible in terms of size and duration; broadening the scope of employer assistance funds to allay additional costs; ongoing support for employees and employers where required; employer networks for peer support and information; developing targets and reporting on progress; preferential contracting of disability confident organisations; early intervention in employee maintenance; specific grants programs to encourage partnerships with employers to develop best case examples and innovation; disability employee reference groups for peer support and advice to management; and developing a ‘tool kit’ for small and medium sized organisations.

Important for all organisations is the development of a positive and explicit organisation wide culture of inclusion where current and potential employees with disability feel their disability related needs will be respected and accommodated. This will then encourage more open communication and disclosure, the lack of which is one of the key concerns of employers.

The missing link in engagement

Finally, while a ‘one stop shop’ approach for employer information and supports is attractive and may reduce current complexities, most businesses are not accessing many of the available supports. Those that are, are doing so through a trusted broker such as the NDRC and AND, and in some cases DES. This highlights a significant missing link on the demand side of disability employment. The evidence in this review clearly establishes that small to medium employers need direct and individual connection with a trusted broker who can establish a partnership that provides support and information relevant to each organisation’s needs. The current Diversity Field Officer (DFO) trial is timely and may fill that identified gap in the program of supports currently available to employers.

**Acknowledgments**

This literature review is part of an Australian two year (2015-6) pilot project funded by the Helen McPherson-Smith Trust, Worksafe Victoria, and the National Disability Insurance Agency. The Diversity Field Officer (DFO) Project will provide one-to-one support and information to approximately 50 small to medium size businesses in the Geelong area of the state of Victoria. The service aims to address the expressed needs of small to medium businesses interested in becoming more ‘disability confident’ and in developing a more inclusive organisation for employees and potential employees with disability.

The project is being managed by the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations and being evaluated by Deakin University, with the evaluation report expected to be available in February 2017.

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