Lifting employer engagement and capability

When hiring someone with a disability, the employer needs to know that they have just as good a chance of working out as the candidate without disability. To give employers this confidence, Employment Assistance Fund needs to work with job seekers to develop strategies to overcome the barriers we face well before we are called to interviews. When we attend a job interview, we need to be able to confidently inform the employer as to what the options are to enable us to do the job at least as well as the non disabled candidate. If we can’t, the non-disabled candidate has a clear advantage. Employing them is easier.

At present, the EAF does not work with job seekers. They will only offer assistance after an offer of employment has been made. Employers will not make an offer of employment if they are not confident that the employee will be able to do the job. I have missed out on several job opportunities in the past because I was unable to layout a clear strategy for reasonable adjustments that would enable me to do the job. It's difficult for me to do that without support from someone who is familiar with what the options might be.

Employers need to be more flexible about the job requirements they set. I often find that I can do 3/4 of what's asked for in a job advertisement but there are some things I can’t. sometimes it's something as simple as “making coffee for guests” or setting up and packing up a conference space. When that's part of the job requirement, it puts me off applying because I know that they can easily find a candidate who can do those physical tasks as well as the other things I can do. I once applied for a job with a New South Wales Greens MP. The job ad said, “If you feel you meet most, but not all, of the key criteria, please do not be dissuaded from applying. We actively promote a diverse workplace. NSW parliament is an accessible workplace and accommodations can be made where needed.” That was an advertisement that actively invited me to apply and gave me confidence that I wouldn't be put in the “too hard basket” as soon as we needed to discuss possible adjustments, including adjustments to the job itself. This kind of wording and thinking needs to become commonplace. Job descriptions need to be flexible with room to work with the employee to adjust them to suit.

As a disabled job seeker, I don’t usually disclose my disability up-front, unless “lived experience with disability” is listed in the job criteria. I’ve been to too many interviews where “no” is written all over the employers face as soon as I enter the room. Intentionally or not, I know my disability is often a factor in failing to get a job. If employers want to know which candidates are disabled, they’ll need to assure us that disclosing our disability won’t end our chances of getting the job.

Employers (and commercial landlords) should be required to audit the disability accessibility of their property/workplace and take action to improve it. Changes that can be made easily should be made quickly. Changes that will require more resources should be planned for with a timeline and accountability for their achievement.

The government needs to recognise what percentage of jobs are, for example, not available for a wheelchair user due to lack of access, and take that into account when setting any requirements for the job seeker. They also need to take into account lack of access to public transport.

Medium and large businesses should have employment targets to employ disabled people and strategies to meet them.

Improving systems and services for jobseekers and employers

Many disabled people of working age have been refused the DSP because the government says we have the capacity to work. The questions used by the government to assess a person’s capacity to work and decide whether to classify them as a Jobseeker or a Pensioner fail to consider employability skills – despite the name of the document used; *The Social Security (Tables for the Assessment of Work-related Impairment for Disability Support Pension) Determination 2011*. The tables include such things as

*There is a moderate functional impact on activities requiring physical exertion or stamina.*

1. *The person:*
2. *experiences frequent symptoms (e.g. shortness of breath, fatigue, cardiac pain) when performing day to day activities around the home and community and, due to these symptoms, the person:*
3. *is unable to walk (or mobilise in a wheelchair) far outside the home and needs to drive or get other transport to local shops or community facilities; or*
4. *has difficulty performing day to day household activities (e.g. changing the sheets on a bed or sweeping paths); and*
5. *is able to:*
6. *use public transport and walk (or mobilise in a wheelchair) around a shopping centre or supermarket; and*
7. *perform work-related tasks of a clerical, sedentary or stationary nature (i.e. tasks not requiring a high level of physical exertion).[[1]](#endnote-1)*

I’ve never had a job interview where I’ve been asked whether I can go to the supermarket or clean my house! Only the final point has any evident relevance at all to capacity to engage in paid work and it is extremely vague. There are no questions in the Tables that consider the person’s capacity to perform actual tasks that might be part of a “clerical, sedentary or stationary” job such as “Can you use a computer keyboard and type at a speed sufficient for data entry work?” “Is your speech easily understood on the telephone?” The Tables make no reference to any specific employability skills or any specific jobs that the person might reasonably be expected to be able to perform, let alone secure in a competitive market.

The government’s expectation for disabled people to work has changed much faster than the willingness of employers to hire people with disability. Unfortunately, my own experience is that while I have some capacity to work, I lack sufficient capacity and work skills to satisfy employer demands and secure employment in a market where there is always someone else who can do the job faster, has more experience or is simply “easier” to employ because they don’t require the “reasonable adjustments” that I either need or am assumed to need.

When assessing people's capacity to work, account should be taken of their likelihood of actually securing suitable work. In my own situation, my closest train station is not accessible. I have to travel 20 minutes to get to an accessible station so that time will be added to my morning routine if I need to catch the train to work. That extra travel time makes it harder to find suitable work. My disability means that getting ready in the morning takes me longer then it takes other people. That has an impact on how far away I can work in what time I can start. Many workplaces are simply not spacious enough to accommodate a power wheelchair or they have steps. The government does not consider what percentage of workplaces are simply inaccessible to me when they consider my capacity to work. they need to consider my capacity to secure employment in a competitive market because that is what determines whether or not I am able to move off Jobseeker.

We need a system that provides pathways for disabled workers to change jobs and develop new skills. Perhaps we need something along the lines of properly paid white collar apprenticeships to provide disabled people with the chance to learn and demonstrate employability skills.

People whose disabilities have a significant impact on their ordinary ability to function in comparison to others should all be permanently eligible for the DSP, and able to move on and off it as they need to. At present, people on the DSP who would like to work or might be able to work more are scared to try because if they find they can’t handle it, or they lose their job and struggle to find a new one, they could end up on Jobseeker long term, with ongoing mutual obligations and few prospects. Staying on the DSP is a safer option.

I've spent many years in the DES system as a job seeker and never had DES provider who carefully considered my opportunities for employment, considered my opportunities, the barriers I faced and worked with me to develop strategies for how they might be overcome. It should be routine. I have rarely had a DES provider who had any training or experience in disability and most of the ones I've come across have few skills in recruitment. For the most part, they are compliance officers. Their job is to ensure that I attend appointments and apply for the required number of jobs a month. When I look at the job advertisements for DES consultants, I find that the main skill employers seek is the ability to do “reverse marketing”. They don't even ask for people with skills in recruitment, let alone disability employment. Reverse marketing has the potential to be a useful skill in disability employment services but consultants don't spend enough time understanding the goals and skills of their clients to be able to do it effectively. I am required to apply for a certain number of jobs each month. There is no clear requirement for my consultant to do anything to actually help me find work. There should be clear responsibilities for them to actually improve my employment prospects. The system only seems to require them to check my compliance.

Apparently, some employers approach DES providers with a desire to employ disabled people. I am entirely reliant on my consultant to make me aware of any such openings then I have rarely had them do so. If there is a list of openings with employers who are keen to employ people with disability, why not give people with disability direct access to it? We are much more interested in becoming employed than DES consultants are to get us there and we know our skills and interests better than they do.

As far as I’m aware, I’ve never had a disabled DES consultant. DES should be required to employ at least 50% disabled people – with a plan to work towards 90%+.

With regard to ADEs - No worker in Australia, disabled or not, should be employed at less than the minimum wage. Above that, pay should be equitable. Work done for less than the minimum wage is a hobby.

We need to build the employment skills experience and confidence of all workers and job seekers with disability regardless of age, not just for young people. Some people acquire a disability part way through their lives, significantly changing their employment prospects. Others find that the impact of our impairment changes as we age. I've spent much of my adult life using crutches but now need to use a power wheelchair most of the time outside my home. That impacts my work options.

My resume consists of quite a variety of different kinds of work. I've often got to a certain point in one type of job and then found that my disability made it much harder to progress then it would have been otherwise, so I've moved to a different field. I've also spent about 10 years of my work life either unemployed or significantly under employed. During those ten years my peers continued to accumulate work experience and relevant skills, often progressing along a particular career path. They've become ever more employable while I have become less so. The gap between their experience and mine has grown exponentially. My disability means that I am not able to wait tables, work in a kitchen, type at speed while talking on the phone or move around a shop floor serving customers. Those entry level / stop gap jobs aren’t an option for me. As a result, I haven’t had the opportunities these jobs provide to develop the skills which can help you get something better. If disabled workers can’t get the entry level jobs, we can’t get the experience, so how do we secure employment that requires, “Demonstrated experience in…”? Reasonably paid white collar apprenticeships could facilitate that.

Government needs to take the lead in providing employment for disabled people; especially those whom the government has judged able to work but who remain un or underemployed after months seeking work. If employers have shown no interest in employing us with the skill set we have, then the government who judged us able to work should do so, to enable us to gain skills and experience. Alternatively, they should grant us the DSP so that we can at least get on with the things we can do. Requiring disabled people to continue to apply for work based on a skill set that has already proved inadequate without providing them with a genuine opportunity for improvement is a cruel and pointless waste of time.

The granting of the DSP used to include a consideration of the likelihood of someone actually finding work. That consideration should be re-introduced.

Disability awareness training needs to be part of business degrees, not just rehab and disability qualifications if businesses are going to employ disabled workers. It is business leaders who make recruitment decisions. There will need to be quotas and a business rating that reflects social contribution, not just profits.

Changing Community Attitudes

Changing community attitudes is slow. Inclusive education will help because it will normalise inclusion but at present many parents find schools continue to resist it. At present, the general public has no idea how difficult it is to access the DSP. They expect disabled people to receive it. People are astounded when I tell them that, as a wheelchair user, I was judged “not disabled enough”. Businesses continue to treat disabled people as unexpected guests – failing to offer access, or asking us to book during office hours while others book online etc. People at bus stops often open conversation with “what’s wrong with you?” and have no concept of me seeking or being in work. The present system of putting disabled people on Jobseeker punishes disabled people for being unable to change the discriminatory and patronising attitudes of employers and the community. I once got into a lift at the cinema. The older man next to me said, “You’re doing well to be out on your own”. He meant to be kind but his low expectation of a wheelchair user was deafening.

We need a reportable disabled jobseeker rate so that it is clear how much (or how little) is being achieved.

We need disability access and inclusion to be standard, not an afterthought or optional extra.

1. Social Security (Tables for the Assessment of Work-related Impairment for Disability Support Pension) Determination 2011, p 13 <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2011L02716> accessed 5/4/20 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)