



## POSITION PAPER

### EMPLOYMENT WITHOUT BARRIERS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

#### Contents

Introduction .....	1
Employment barriers faced by people with disability .....	3
Snapshot of the current experience for people with disability in the workforce .....	3
Why create employment opportunities without barriers? .....	4
What can employers across Australia do to create employment opportunities without barriers? .....	6
Life Without Barriers' Commitment: .....	6
Contacts .....	7

#### Introduction

The barrier to gainful employment is a complex and often invisible problem faced by people living with disability.

Despite 50% of people with disability being of working age (15-64 years), only half – around 53% – have been able to secure a job. This means the unemployment rate for people with disability is twice that of the general population.

What we know is that this is a collective issue that requires a collective solution. For many people with disability, a major obstacle to obtaining work is unconscious bias. This barrier is one that's incredibly tough for people to overcome on their own, and frankly one they shouldn't have to.

Changing workplace culture – and smashing this barrier – requires sustained effort from people and employers Australia-wide. Words are not enough and Life Without Barriers continues our commitment to a robust Accessibility, Inclusion and Employment Plan. We have pledged to make 12% of all new recruits being people with disability by the year 2022.

Our [Strategy 2025](#) is our commitment to improving employment opportunities for people with disability. The people we support face barriers and challenges created by our society, policies and systems. These are complex, long-standing challenges that no one individual, organisation or group can solve. Real and lasting change requires trusted partnerships, collaboration and a purpose that unifies people to a collective ambition. Over the next five years we will invest significantly in relationships and partnerships that help disrupt workforce barriers and break open employment opportunities that many of us take for granted.

We're also working towards continually growing our long-term employment target to increase the number of people with disability who comprise our total workforce.

Not only are people with disability missing out on the personal, social and financial benefits of work – but employers and workplaces are also missing out on the diverse and valuable contributions people with disability can provide.

My colleagues and I recognise the vital importance of accessibility and inclusivity. Our doors are always open, and we will share our approach and learnings with government and any employers who want information about our own experience as we work towards creating a workforce that is inclusive of the 20% of Australians living with disability.

This position paper has been developed to provide insight into this significant and entrenched barrier facing Australians with disability, and that we must take organised action to change. It is our collective responsibility to ensure the rights of people with disability are protected – and this includes their right to work.

I look forward to continuing to partner with people with disability and employers to ensure we can create meaningful employment – without barriers.

**Claire Robbs, Chief Executive Life Without Barriers**

## Summary

All organisations and companies stand to reap the benefits of employing people with disability. As a large social purpose organisation and provider of disability services, Life Without Barriers recognises that employing people with disability has immense benefit for the whole of society.

9% of Life Without Barriers total workforce is currently comprised of people with disability. We are steadfastly committed to increasing this number and aim to achieve this vision by setting new and ambitious targets to employ more people with disability. The goals are to:

- 10% by 2021
- 12% by 2022.

Life Without Barriers' comprehensive employment targets and inclusivity commitments are stepped out in the full Accessibility, Inclusion and Employment Plan, accessible here (or go to [www.lwb.org.au/AIEP](http://www.lwb.org.au/AIEP)).

In order to ensure that people with disability are offered greater employment opportunities, we are committed to share our own experiences and knowledge with the broader workforce.

The only way to change the experiences of people with disability and improve access to labour market participation is for employers to change their approach.

It is critical for the community services sector – of which Life Without Barriers is a part and is the fastest growing sector of the Australian economy – to lead by example. This can happen

only when the sector works collectively to commit to tangible action to remove existing barriers to meaningful employment for people with disability.

## Employment barriers faced by people with disability

The Australian Human Rights Commission Right to Work and Rights in Work document, with reference to the Convention of the Rights of People with Disability (Article 27), states that:

“... Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.”<sup>1</sup>

The Convention on the Rights of People with Disability also states that parties must take appropriate steps to “prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability”, and to protect the rights of persons with disability to access fair and favourable conditions of work “on an equal basis with others”, including in regard to “equal opportunities” and “equal remuneration for work of equal value”. Such rights are enshrined in Australian industrial legislation, including in the Fair Work Act (2009) and in health and safety legislation.

Despite the mandates outlined above in Article 27, people with disability in Australia still experience barriers to employment disproportionately to the rest of the population. Unconscious bias, based on outdated stereotypes of people with disability, is an entrenched aspect of Australian workplace culture. Today, people with disability still report taking longer to find gainful employment than those without<sup>2</sup>.

## Snapshot of the current experience for people with disability in the workforce

- According to the Australian Network on Disability, people with disability aged between 15 and 64 years have both lower participation (53%) and higher unemployment rates (9.4%) than people without disability (65.8% and 7% respectively)<sup>3</sup>.
- People with disability of working age are therefore twice as likely to be unemployed than the general population (10% versus 7% respectively)<sup>4</sup>.
- People with disability of working age are doubly likely to be unemployed for at least 1 year (30% of people with disability compared with 15% for those without disability)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/right-work-and-rights-work>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/right-work-and-rights-work>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.and.org.au/pages/disability-statistics.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/employment/unemployment>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/employment/unemployment>

- 1 in 10 (11%) people with disability of working age who are employed want to work more hours than they do, compared with around 1 in 13 (8%) without disability<sup>6</sup>.
- Youth (aged 15–24) with disability are more likely than people with disability of other ages to want to work more hours—23% are underemployed, compared with 8% of those aged 25–64<sup>7</sup>.
- Most (95%) working-age people with disability who are unemployed or not in the labour force report at least one difficulty finding work.<sup>8</sup>
- Unemployed working-age people with disability (46%) are more likely than those who are employed (41%) to have avoided work in the last year because of their disability.<sup>9</sup>
- For about 2 in 5 (40%) employed working-age people with disability, their main source of discrimination came from an employer. For about 1 in 3 (34%), it was a work colleague.<sup>10</sup>

## Why create employment opportunities without barriers for people with disability?

Creating greater employment opportunities for people without disability is not just a ‘good’ thing to do. It is critical to the fabric of society, and something that is enshrined in Australian industrial legislation and reinforced by articles such as the Disability Discrimination Act (1992). Fundamentally, it is the right of all people – to have equal access to employment and participation in the labour force.

Varying outdated stereotypes exist in relation to what it means to employ someone with disability. Rohmer and Louvet (2016, p.1) state that people with disability are subject to “considerable discrimination when it comes to employment”, which is perpetuated by “negative attitudes” and “stereotypical beliefs” that include perceptions of people with disability as “dependent, incompetent, unemployable, passive, and weak” (Colella, De Nisi, & Varma, 1998; Fichten & Amsel, 1986; Gouvier, Sytsma-Jordan, & Mayville, 2003; Louvet, 2007; Louvet, Rohmer, & Dubois, 2009; Nario-Redmond, 2010; Ozawa & Yaeda, 2007).<sup>11</sup>

In fact, research has found that people with disability are more productive workers than their counterparts. They take less sick leave and have more organisation commitment (Graham, Shinkfield, Smith & Polzin, 2002, p.251). Contrary to the belief that people with disability require multiple adjustments in order to do their job, recent statistics from the Australian

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/employment/underemployment>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/employment/underemployment>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/employment/employment-participation-needs-and-challenges/difficulty-finding-work>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/employment/employment-participation-needs-and-challenges/difficulty-finding-work>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/employment/employment-participation-needs-and-challenges/discrimination>

<sup>11</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1368430216638536>

Institute of Health and Welfare show that “most (88%) employed working-age people with disability do not require additional support from their employer to work”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/employment/employment-participation-needs-and-challenges/workplace-arrangements>

Of those who do:

- 44% need special equipment.
- 24% need a special support person to assist or train them on the job (applies to salary or wage earners only).
- 22% need to be allocated different duties.

Additionally:

- Employers benefit from diverse and inclusive workforces. Employing people with disability is a true reflection of the community in which your organisation operates. Like all employees, people with disability bring a range of skills, talents and abilities to the workplace.
- Employment leads to better life outcomes. It can give people a sense of purpose and identity.
- Employment costs for people with disability can be as low as 13% of the employment costs for other employees.
- Workers' compensation costs for people with disability are as low as 4% of the workers' compensation costs for other employees.<sup>13</sup>

## What can employers across Australia do to create employment opportunities without barriers?

- Better understand the legal rights of people with disability, including their right to equal opportunity of employment.
- Examine their workplace recruitment process to understand whether it is inclusive of people with disability.
- Explore and challenge whether their workplace perpetuates outdated perceptions of people with disability and their abilities in the workforce.
- Connect with the Australian Network on Disability to access their resources about employing people with disability.
- Check out Life Without Barriers' AEIP as a template for how organisations can set their own accessibility and inclusivity targets.

### Life Without Barriers' Commitment:

- To continue to work to be an attractive employer for people with disability, by remaining committed to our accessibility and inclusivity goals (see Life Without Barriers' AEIP here [[www.lwb.org.au/AIEP](http://www.lwb.org.au/AIEP)]).
- To not only offer jobs, but meaningful careers to people with disability, including varying opportunities, diversity of experiences and significant pathways to professional development.
- To challenge ourselves, as a significant social purpose organisation, to meet higher targets and always ensure that our actions align with core values of the community services sector.
- To constantly assess and refine our recruitment processes to ensure that people with disability know that we are actively looking to include them in our workplace.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.jobaccess.gov.au/employers/benefits-employing-people-with-disability>

- To continue to foster an inclusive and accessible workplace of open-minded, supportive and flexible staff, who live Life Without Barriers' values.
- Through our Strategy 2025 truly influence the large scale systemic barriers people with disability face in relation to employment by working in partnership across sectors and communities to drive real change.

## Contacts

If you would like to know more about the campaign, please contact:

Chris Chippendale – Executive Lead Disability Engagement [chris.chippendale@lwb.org.au](mailto:chris.chippendale@lwb.org.au)  
or call 02 9307 9302

Tabatha Feher – Executive Lead, Communications and Media [tabatha.feher@lwb.org.a](mailto:tabatha.feher@lwb.org.a) or  
call 0436 655 034

You can read our [Strategy 2025](#) here