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National Youth
Disability Summit

What young people with
disability said:
Employment

Insights, ideas, and solutions from young people with disability
The outcomes of the inaugural National Youth Disability Summit
Presented by Children and Young People with Disability Australia
(CYDA)



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About Children and Young People with Disability Australia

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) is the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability aged 0 to 25 years. CYDA has an extensive national membership of more than 5,000 young people with disability, families and caregivers of children with disability, and advocacy and community organisations.

Our vision is that children and young people with disability are valued and living empowered lives with equality of opportunity; and our purpose is to ensure governments, communities, and families, are empowering children and young people with disability to fully exercise their rights and aspirations.

Background to the National Youth Disability Summit

At the end of September 2020, the inaugural National Youth Disability Summit ('the Summit') took place. The Summit was established with the vision to create an inclusive environment where young people with disability from across Australia could come together as a community and use their voices to shape the future.

The Summit was designed by and for young people with lived experience of disability. Over nine months, the Co-Design Committee, consisting of 20 young people with disability from across Australia, designed the vision, content and delivery of the Summit.

Hosted over five days, the Summit was an entirely online conference that offered young people a range of sessions and workshops, the opportunity to meet other young people, share their ideas, insights and expertise, and develop new skills and knowledge. Over 250 young people attended, with four of the five days being 'youth only'.

Each day had a focussed topic, as chosen by the Co-Design Committee. The topics were:

- Education
- **Employment**
- Mental Health and Wellbeing
- The NDIS and Housing
- Awareness, Access and Inclusion.

This paper will focus on the findings that came out of the Employment day. Four different papers have been released to reflect the respective learnings from the other days.

The National Youth Disability Summit was presented by CYDA and funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency, with support from the Department of Social Services and Equity Trustees.



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Background on employment and young people with disability

Young people with disability are one of the most disadvantaged cohorts in the labour market. They experience the intersectionality of systemic disadvantage and oppression of both being a person with disability and a young person – with this disadvantage being even further amplified by other demographic factors, such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender or sexual diversity, or living in a regional or rural area.

Young people¹ with disability in the labour force are more than twice as likely to be unemployed than older adults² with disability (24.7 per cent compared to 7.9 per cent).³ Young people with disability are also more than twice as likely to be underemployed⁴ – meaning they have the capacity and desire to work more hours than what they are currently employed.

As a young person entering the labour force, the ability to participate is impacted by a range of external factors. This includes the decrease of entry level jobs, the rise of professionalised industries, and the increased demand from employers for prospective employees to hold employability skills and work experience. Young people are also more likely to work in service-based industries (such as retail or food and accommodation), which commonly offers fewer hours, precarious employment and reduced economic security.⁵ It is widely acknowledged that within the youth cohort, those with disability face increased disadvantage in the labour market.⁶

Employment is inextricably linked with mental health. Evidence demonstrates that employment is related with good mental health outcomes.⁷ Similarly, research has shown unemployment and underemployment is associated with a negative decline in people with disability's mental health.⁸ Not only is it important to address the underutilisation⁹ rate of young people with disability in the workforce as socioeconomic issue, but it is also inherently a health issue.

Young people with disability's perspective on employment

CYDA has reviewed, analysed and collated the young participants' ideas into five key themes that emerged throughout the Summit week. These five themes are: Identity, Enablers, Barriers, Solutions and Social Movement.



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Key theme	Theme description
Identity	How do young people with disability define themselves
Enablers	The factors that enable or support young people with disability to live the lives they would like to live
Barriers	The factors that inhibit or prevent young people with disability to live the lives they would like to live
Solutions	Practical solutions for organisations, government, and the community to promote the autonomy, independence and power of young people with disability
Social Movement	How organisations, government, and the community can contribute to the greater social movement young people with disability want to see in the world

Here's what young people said:

Identity

Young participants at the Summit had varying views on employment and how it was linked to their identity. Some young people commented on how having quality employment “gives them purpose” and can be “life changing”, allowing them to develop skills, find their passions and meet likeminded people that “understand all parts of you”. Others commented on how the process of looking for a job, particularly when confronted with the highly structured nature of formal employment, impacted how they viewed and understood themselves and their disability.

“I got really frustrated and thought something was wrong with me. I was like, ‘Do I just have a really bad work ethic? Why am I so tired compared to all of my colleagues?’. That was around the same time I was reckoning that I actually am disabled, that I actually do have conditions that limit the way that I work and how long I can work for. So that was something that was quite hard to deal with but has been something that I’ve accepted and learned to work with over the last few years.”

Many young people also expressed how having a job is an important part of becoming an adult and “being an equal citizen”. Young people value being able to be independent, earn their own money, move out of home if they would like to, and not having to “rely on an unreliable government system”.

Enablers

Young participants shared their experiences of what helps them to find and keep a job.



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Many young people discussed how beneficial it is when their employers provide accommodations, such as having the option to work from home, allowing them to take breaks when needed, and ensuring the environment is accessible.

One group member added that flexibility in the workplace allows them to do their job in a *“way that’s good for [them], and because of that, [they] feel really fulfilled”*.

The group also commented on how they value employers being assertive in asking about and supporting young people’s needs. This includes proactively asking about accessibility-related supports, encouraging authentic discussion around disability, and fostering a culture of acceptance around gender diversity. As expressed by one participant, when employers are proactive, *“it feels so much more welcoming and that you’re not the big elephant in the room”*.

“Employers that are not just patient but wanting to make sure they have what they need so you can do your job in a healthy way. As opposed to you having to fight for it every step of the way, it’s them reaching their hand out first, I guess, and saying, ‘What do we need for you to make this work?’ ... as opposed to being scared of what might happen if you speak up.”

Young people’s opinions on disability employment services and supports were varied. Some described their experiences as *“life-changing”* and *“really, really good”*, whereas others commented that they were *“ineffective”*, *“did not try enough”*, and *“didn’t want to get to know me or my interests or skills”*.

Many also added that COVID-19, and its impact on how workplaces operate, has created many new opportunities for people with disability. As expressed by one young person, *“I think it has shown the wider community that [creating flexible workplaces] is possible. They can do it – they just don’t.”*

Barriers

Young people shared the barriers they had experienced to securing employment were largely the attitudes and misconception of others. The group shared the belief that while they felt they have skills and talents they could contribute to the workforce, employers often do not give them a fair chance because of their own *“false assumptions”* about disability. Participants added during the application processes, they are concerned that disclosure of their disability, or *“the ‘D-word”*, would impact their chances of getting the job. As described by one young person, *“[the application process] feels like they’re trying to cross you off, rather than see what attributes you actually have”*.

Young participants also discussed how employers need to do more to provide inclusive and accessible workplaces.



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Many commented that the typical jobs on offer and/or employer expectations are based on ableist¹⁰ understandings of what a 'good' or 'productive' employee is. Young people understood the widespread reluctance of employers and the community to push back on these norms as preventing their ability to participate in employment on equal terms.

"It's really important to view employment through the lens of social model of disability. ... [O]ur impairments have nothing to do with us lacking anything. It's more to do with the ways our workplaces are structured and the way that employers accommodate us. So they're the barrier. The barrier is not us."

"For me, a more disability friendly structure would have different views on how they handle work output and stress, and how supportive the work culture is."

"If people stopped listening to the things that are not true about us, and just saw us as people that are different, but still like them, because we're all different, wouldn't that help?"

Solutions

In creating genuine systemic change to make employment pathways more inclusive, the participants saw themselves and other young people with disability as being a core part of the solution. Through governments and organisations investing in the development of young people's leadership and advocacy skills, and providing platforms where they have power and can be heard, the group saw their generation as being in the best position to enact change within their communities. This includes young people being supported to lead the way in creating meaningful and inclusive employment opportunities. As advocated by one group member, *"our needs get met the best when we're the ones that get to define what they are."*

"Often you have to change the system to access it. So, through making it accessible for yourself, you're making accessible for everyone that comes after you."

"Lots of systems were designed in a way that don't reflect young people, and young people really want to shape these systems. And at the same time these systems are in crisis, and they really need to adapt to better meet the needs of young people. But also, young people within particular groups of lived experience."



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The group also saw the need for employees and job services to increase their awareness of disability and employment rights, and actively listen to young people with disability about their needs. While some young people believed education should be developed and targeted at employers, others saw it as a societal issue, and that intervention is required earlier in education settings, such as school and university.

“I feel like for everything to change in employment, it needs to come from the roots up.”

Social Movement

Employment, namely “meaningful employment”¹¹, was discussed as a human right that all young people with disability are entitled to. In disrupting the norm and moving towards more inclusive employment, the young people at the Summit saw it as vital to address existing power imbalances in advocacy and employment settings. This includes organisations implementing strategies that ‘level the playing field’, such as including young people on interview panels or providing interview questions before the interview.

The group also saw the need for social security reform to provide adequate safety nets and protect the rights of young people with disability when they encounter barriers in the employment system.

“[M]aking sure that people with disabilities have access to meaningful work, but [also] making sure that there is a safety net for us when we can’t engage in that meaningful work. So that means that there are welfare ... payments, like the Disability Support Pension and like JobSeeker, that actually exist above the poverty line and give us a chance to have dignified lives when we can’t engage in work for whatever reason.”

Where to from here?

Having a job supports a person to contribute their skills and talents to society, be independent, meet new people, develop new skills and explore new interests. In line with the perspectives of young people who attended the Summit, we all deserve to enjoy the good things that being employed can provide, though we don’t all get to participate in this aspect of life on an equal basis.

As emphasised by the young participants, one of the biggest barriers to employment for young people with disability is the attitudes and misconceptions of others.



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As such, interventions targeting employers are required.

This includes addressing misconceptions about young people with disability's capabilities and informing employers of people with disability's legislative rights. The skills, talents and distinct worldviews young people with disability can bring to the workforce must also be highlighted.

In understanding the increased barriers young people with disability face in securing employment, CYDA echoes young people's call for social security reform that provides a dignified standard of living. These payments should reflect the contemporary cost of living, as well as the increased living costs incurred when living with disability.

Organisations and employers also have an important part to play. They should be proactive in their hiring processes and meeting the needs of their employees. This includes reviewing and amending hiring processes so that they are safe and more inclusive for young people. Employers should also reach out to their young employees to ensure they are receiving the appropriate supports and accommodations that they may need.

Government, organisations and the community alike should all reflect on and make the most of the employment learnings that came from COVID-19. Workplaces demonstrated through innovation and commitment, the 'typical' working day could be more flexible and supportive of different life circumstances. This creativity and understanding should be reflected in future job creation and solutions to employment inequities.

Calls to action

Governments:

- Increase targeted, evidence-based interventions addressing the negative and misinformed attitudes of employers. The development of these strategies must include the meaningful involvement of young people with disability.
- Provide an adequate safety net for young people with disability that reflects the contemporary cost-of-living.
- Invest in the research and development of creative employment opportunities for young people with disability. Meaningfully include young people in research design, implementation and evaluation processes.
- Invest in young people's skills development and provide platforms across government levels where they can be heard and enact change.



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Calls to action

Organisations and Employers:

- Review and amend hiring processes to ensure they are safe and inclusive. If unsure, reach out to youth representative and advocacy organisations for guidance.
- Offer information and suggestions around supports available for young people with disability at work. If unsure, reach out to youth representative and advocacy organisations for guidance.
- Proactively reach out to young employees to ask how they may be best supported. Then follow through.
- Leverage learnings from COVID-19 to offer roles that have working-from-home or flexible hours options.

To learn more about what young people said at the Summit and this work, please feel free to contact CYDA's Youth Action Team at YouthActionTeam@cyda.org.au or on (03) 9417 1025.

Footnotes

¹ Aged 15-25 years old

² Aged 26-64 years old

³ AIHW. (2020). *People with disability*. Available at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment/unemployment>

⁴ 23.1% per cent rate of underemployment compared to 8.3 per cent of older adults with disability; AIHW (2020).

⁵ The Smith Family. (2014). *Young people's successful transition to work: What are the preconditions?* Available at https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/~/_media/files/research/reports/young-people-transition-to-work-report.ashx?la=en; Skattebol, J., Hill, T., Griffiths, A., & Wong, M. (2015). *Unpacking youth unemployment: Final report*. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jen_Skattebol/publication/292985748_Unpacking_Youth_Unemployment_Final_report/links/599a79abaca272e41d400911/Unpacking-YouthUnemployment-Final-report.pdf

⁶ Yu, P. (2010). *Disability and disadvantage: a study of a cohort of Australian youth*. Australian Journal of Labour Economics, 13(3), 265–286; Orygen Youth Health Research Centre. (2014). *Tell them they're dreaming: Work, education and young people with mental illness in Australia*. Available at <https://www.orygen.org.au/Policy>; Social Ventures Australia. (2016). *Fundamental principles for youth employment*. Available at <https://www.socialventures.com.au/assets/Fundamental-principles-for-youth-employment-report-FINAL.pdf>

⁷ Milner, A., Shields, M., King, T., Aitken, Z., La Montagne, A., & Kavanagh, A. M. (2019). Disabling working environments and mental health: A commentary. *Disability and Health Journal*, 12(4), 537–541.

⁸ *ibid*; Milner, A., King, T. L., LaMontagne A. D., Aitken, Z., Petrie, D., and Kavanagh, A. M. (2017).

Underemployment and its impacts on mental health among those with disabilities: evidence from the HILDA cohort. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, 71(12), 1198–1202. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2017-209800>

⁹ The combined rate of unemployment and underemployment.

¹⁰ Ableism refers to the discriminatory perspective that able-bodied persons are viewed as 'normal' or superior. As a product of ableism, people with disability experience prejudicial treatment and/or their needs are not factored in.