DREAM

Employment Network Resources

Understanding disability

An overview for employers

What is covered in this fact sheet?

- The social model of disability
- Different types of disability
- How to talk about disability
- Benefits of making your workplace accessible
- Flexible workplace practice
- What are your rights and responsibilities?

What is disability?

The social model of disability

There are different ways to define disability. At Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), we talk about the social model of disability. According to this model, disability is what happens when a person with a long-term physical, psychosocial, neurological, intellectual or sensory condition is met with societal barriers that prevent them from participating on an equal basis with non-disabled people.

These barriers might be physical, like stairs. They might be attitudinal, like assumptions based on a person's appearance. They might be communication barriers, like information that is only shared in inaccessible formats.

It is not necessarily the condition that prevents people with disability from participating on an equal basis with non-disabled people, but the barriers we create with the way we choose to do things and build things as a society. This includes employment and the way we have historically done employment.

Diversity of disability

People with disability are unique and diverse. No two people with the same condition will have the same experiences, skills or challenges. Some people identify with their disability quite strongly and celebrate it. Others may not like to talk about their disability at all. It is important to treat people with disability as individuals and be respectful.

Visible / Invisible

Sometimes disability is easy to see. For example, a disabled person might use a mobility aid like a wheelchair or a walker. They might have a guide dog or use a cane.

Sometimes disability isn't obvious. For example, a chronic illness, mental health condition, neurodivergence or brain injury may not be immediately apparent.

It's important to remember that being able to see one aspect of a person's disability doesn't mean that you have the whole picture. An amputee might also be Autistic. A brain injury that causes blindness might also impact someone's memory. Someone with remitting relapsing symptoms may use a wheelchair today but be able to walk tomorrow. Someone struggling to communicate verbally may be very eloquent in writing.

Never assume that you understand a person's disability, or their potential, based on their condition or what you can see.

Congenital / Acquired

Sometimes people are born with a congenital condition that causes disability and sometimes disability is acquired later in life through injury, illness or trauma.

Sometimes people with disability do not have a diagnosis yet, or they have been diagnosed later in life. There are many roads and different experiences that lead to disability.

Types of disability

Disability is complicated, and individual experiences of disability are not easily categorised. Someone with one condition may be disabled in multiple ways. Someone else might have multiple conditions that create a unique experience in combination. It's important not to put people in boxes based on a disability "type".

That said, we do need to recognise that disability is diverse, and there are many ways to be disabled. There is no official list of disability "types" that is universally accepted or used by everyone. The Australian Government uses different categories depending on what department or agency you are dealing with. However, here are some terms that are commonly used to describe different types of disability:

Physical disability:

Disability that impacts someone's mobility, stamina or dexterity. Some examples might be a brain or spinal injury, neurological conditions that impact movement like Multiple Sclerosis or Parkinson's, or a variety of chronic health conditions.

Psychosocial disability:

Disability arising from mental health challenges. Some examples are depression, anxiety, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. A mental health diagnosis does not automatically mean that someone will identify as disabled. It's important to respect how people describe their own experiences.

Intellectual disability:

Disability that impacts a person's learning, intellectual skills and social behaviour in some situations. An example might be Down Syndrome or Fragile X Syndrome.

Neurodivergence:

Neurodivergence is a broad term used to describe people whose brains works differently to what is considered "normal". This might include Autistic people or people with ADHD (or AuDHD if you are both). Dyslexia and dyspraxia might also fall under this term. Some people with psychosocial disability will also identify as neurodivergent.

Sensory disability:

This term is used to describe disability that impacts any of the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste). This might mean people who are blind or have low vision. It might also mean a difference in sensory processing that makes it difficult for a person to process words or register pain (as examples). Sensitivities such as photophobia, aversion to certain tastes or textures, or becoming easily overwhelmed by noise or movement, might also be described as sensory disability.

d/Deaf or hard of hearing:

While hearing is one of the five senses, people who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing don't necessarily identify as "disabled". People who refer to themselves as Deaf with a capital "D" usually identify as part of the Deaf community or culture, which has its own language (Auslan) and conventions.

Language

It's okay to feel uncertain about what language to use around disability. We are all learning, and preferred language changes over time. It's good to be open to being corrected and to listen to disabled people when they talk about the language they prefer.

"Disability" is not a bad word.

Disabled people are generally comfortable with the word "disability". There's no need to find a euphemism. There is a disability community, and many people gain a sense of confidence and identity from disability pride.

Person–first or identity–first?

When talking about individual disabled people, you might use person-first language, (person with disability) or identity-first language (disabled person). Individual disabled people will often have a strong personal preference for one or the other. It is okay to ask someone what language they prefer if you are not sure. At CYDA, we use a combination of both.

"Disability" or "disabilities"?

When we think about disability using the social model, the term "disability" is used to describe a social construct rather than conditions or diagnoses. For this reason, when we refer to disabled people as a group, we say "people with disability" (singular) rather than "people with disabilities" (plural).

Similarly, we would say "person with disability" but not "person with a disability" as the latter implies the existence of many disabilities rather than one social construct.

Use strength–based language.

We all have things we are good at and things we are less good at, but no one likes to be defined by what they can't do. Taking a strengths-based approach to disability means identifying what people are good at, or skills that might be developed, and focusing on that. Language that centres impairment or deficit-based language is generally unhelpful. This is particularly relevant in an employment context, as you have presumably hired a person for the strengths and skills they bring to the table.

Can I ask someone what their disability is, or if they are disabled?

Disclosing disability is a personal choice. As an employer, it's best not to ask personal questions that employees might feel obligated to answer. Many disabled people have experienced discrimination in the workplace and might feel uncomfortable disclosing in this context.

If you are curious, and a disabled employee raises the topic themselves, it's okay to be part of the conversation, but make sure there is no pressure.

As an employer, the only thing you really need to know about an employee's disability is whether they need reasonable adjustments to do their job to the best of their ability. Offering reasonable adjustments to all of your employees, regardless of their disclosed identity, is a great way to ensure that the conversation is open, and everyone is getting the support they need. You can find our **introduction on reasonable adjustments here**.

To learn more about the language people with disability use to describe themselves, and what not to say, you can read **People with Disability Australia's language guide here**.

Working with young people with disability

Young people with disability are underemployed

People with disability are almost <u>50% more likely to be underemployed</u> (i.e. they would like to work more hours and are available to start soon) than non-disabled people.

Young people with disability (aged 15-24) are nearly <u>three times more likely</u> to be underemployed than other working age disabled people.

That's a large, underutilised talent pool that a savvy employer might like to pay attention to.

Benefits of making your workplace accessible

Embrace diversity and widen the talent pool.

A diverse workforce means diversity of perspectives and ideas. It makes for robust discussion, creative problem solving, and has been shown to increase overall productivity and potential for more diverse client, stakeholder and customer relationships.

Young people with disability might also have a lot more experience navigating complicated support systems and inaccessible environments than their non-disabled peers. They may bring unique thinking and skills to the table as a product of lived experience.

Inclusive recruitment and workplace practices also increase your chances of finding highly skilled employees by widening the talent pool. Where other employers have overlooked a high potential employee due to inflexible work practice or hasty assumptions, you can reap the benefits!

You know what they say about assumptions …

One of the biggest barriers to employment reported by young people with disability is incorrect assumptions made by people in recruitment about what they can or can't do.

There is a persistent idea that disabled employees are less productive, or more difficult to accommodate, than their non-disabled peers.

Like anyone else though, people with disability have individual strengths, potential and limitations. Be careful to avoid assumptions based on appearance or communication style. Very often, if you open a conversation about reasonable adjustments, a potential employee with disability will already have simple (and often free or low cost) solutions for how to make your workplace accessible for them.

Flexibility is key

A good way to make your workplace more disability friendly is to think flexibly about your general workplace practices and policies.

Can working from home be an option for all staff? Can work hours be flexible so everyone has the option to start later or finish later, or the option of taking extra breaks as needed? These kinds of changes can improve overall morale and productivity of a team in addition to making the work environment welcoming for people who need them as adjustments.

Very often, young people with disability find they are barred from employment because, even though they are very good at one aspect of an advertised job, another aspect is not accessible. For example, a blind law graduate with excellent marks might struggle to find an entry level job because they are expected to physically file documents. Flexibility around job descriptions at the point of hiring, and assigning tasks based on individual strengths, can help you maximise the overall potential within your team.

Another way to widen the talent pool when hiring is to advertise full-time positions as potentially shared roles. This way, you open the job to people who need part-time work and might only partially meet the criteria, as you can now hire based on complimentary skill sets.

You can find more detailed information on accessible recruitment and workplace practice here.

Your rights and responsibilities

As an employer, you cannot treat your employees with disability unfairly or favour their non-disabled peers.

People with disability are protected by the **Disability Discrimination Act 1992** from unfair treatment. They have the right to access and participate equally in the workplace.

You can find out more information about their rights and your responsibilities by the following links.

Helpful links

Here are some helpful links to help you explore and understand disability

Disability discrimination resource for employers | Human Rights Commission

Disability types and descriptions | National Disability Services

Hiring young disabled people | Youth Disability Advocacy Service

Recruiting and careers resources | Australian Disability Network

What is disability pride? (YouTube) | Youth Disability Advocacy Services

The benefits of employing people with disability | IncludeAbility

Disability Employer Resource | Myths and Facts.pdf (nds.org.au)

Disclaimer

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This fact sheet was current as of June 2024 and may not contain the most recent information and updates. Information is provided as a general guide and should not be considered legal or professional advice.