

A summary guide
for senior managers

Ability at Work

Tapping the talent
of people with disability



Australian Government

Australian Public Service Commission

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This document has been prepared to assist senior managers, providing a brief overview of some of the key messages from *Ability at Work—Tapping the Talent of People with Disability*, a toolkit to assist APS agencies recruit, retain and develop employees with disability.

For more detailed information about the employment and management of people with disability, you should consult the full version of the toolkit.

Introduction

People with disability make up a large portion of the Australian community but are significantly under-represented in the workforce, including in the APS.

A little less than one in five Australians have a disability that will last for a significant period of time.

The Management Advisory Committee (MAC) report *Employment of People with Disability in the APS* set eight objectives for promoting the employment of people with disability in the

Australian Public Service (APS), focussing on improving workplace cultures and policies. Endorsed by MAC, these objectives provide clear directions for the future:

1. a culture that values diversity and actively promotes the employment of people with disability
2. flexible recruitment strategies, accessible to applicants with disability
3. accessible training, cadetship and mentoring opportunities for people with disability
4. special employment measures to employ people with intellectual disability
5. accessible premises, workplaces and supportive work environments for people with disability
6. reduced complexity, cost and risk for managers employing people with disability
7. a consistent conceptual framework for developing APS recruitment and retention strategies and uniform arrangements for data collection
8. continuous improvement in recruiting and retaining people with disability

The Australian Public Service Commission has developed *Ability at Work—Tapping the Talent of People with Disability* to assist agencies in meeting these objectives.

Leadership and workplace culture

The APS needs to attract employees with disability more effectively and to establish work environments that better support the needs and aspirations of existing employees with disability.

An agency that embraces and encourages diversity is more likely to attract and retain employees with disability. In an environment where employees are comfortable disclosing that they have disability, agencies can provide any necessary support so that those employees, in turn, can make their best contribution to the agency's work.

Leadership is critical to fostering an inclusive and supportive workplace culture

Employees take their cues from their managers and their immediate environment. They interpret the behaviour of their managers as defining acceptable conduct in practice.

By modelling appropriate behaviour, you can ensure that people in your workplace understand the value of diversity.

You can demonstrate leadership by:

- displaying, through your workplace decisions and behaviour, your commitment to the APS Values and Code of Conduct
- making clear to all staff the importance you personally place on supporting diversity in the workplace

- reinforcing the importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive workplace environment for all staff, including those who have disclosed a disability, in discussions about workplace issues
- developing a workplace environment in which people with disability can talk about their condition, should they wish to do so, without being stigmatised.

The checklist at the end of this document provides more suggestions for demonstrating leadership in this area.

Tapping the talent of people with disability

It makes good business sense to employ people with disability

Australia is entering a sustained period of tightening labour supply. In a labour market with increasing competition among employers for qualified workers, people with disability are a potential talent pool that the APS needs to access.

As well as attracting and retaining the best of the talent pool, when employing people with disability, your agency can benefit from:

- improved customer service through a workforce that reflects and understands the diversity of the community it serves
- improved workplace morale as employees become aware that your agency values employees with a diverse range of abilities, and is willing to respond flexibly to their needs
- developing a reputation for being a good corporate citizen
- complying with legislative requirements and meeting international standards.

The facts about people with disability

Most people make assumptions about people with disability. Frequently these assumptions do not stand up to scrutiny. In fact:

- people with disability are employed across many occupations
- many are tertiary or trade qualified and hold senior managerial positions
- nearly 40 per cent of employees with disability in Australia are professionals, managers and administrators
- most people with disability require no workplace modifications
- if modifications are required they are usually simple and inexpensive
- employees with disability have, on average, higher job retention and better attendance rates than those without disability
- people with disability do not have a higher risk of occupational injury
- there is little difference between people with disability and other people when comparing levels of productivity
- employers report significant benefits to the organisation as a whole as a result of employing people with disability.

The odds are good that you are already working with someone with disability—you just may not know it.

Preventing discrimination in the workplace

The *Public Service Act 1999* specifically prohibits discrimination in the workplace (section 10(1)(c)) and requires all APS employees to comply with applicable Australian laws (section 13(4)), including

the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).

In relation to employees, the fundamental question the DDA asks of employers is:

Can the employee perform the inherent requirements of the job, with reasonable adjustments where necessary and where these adjustments do not cause unjustifiable hardship?

If the answer to this question is 'yes' then it is unlawful to discriminate against that person in relation to their engagement or dismissal.

What is reasonable adjustment?

Reasonable adjustment is a broad term. It reflects the reality that people with disability can often perform the tasks of a position where adjustments are made to accommodate the effects of their disability.

Although it applies to changes that allow employees to perform their duties, it also applies to changes that allow employees with disability an equal opportunity to be considered for transfer, promotion, training or other employment opportunities, and allow them to participate in work-related facilities or programmes.

There is no exhaustive list of what kinds of changes can be made. There are many different types of disability, and they affect people in highly individual ways.

Often adjustments made to meet the needs of people with disability will be beneficial for other employees. Better access to buildings, more functional software, and flexible employment conditions are just some examples. At the same time, having the proper systems, policies and infrastructure in place to begin with, reduces the need for ad hoc reasonable adjustments.

Most employees with disability will require no type of adjustment at all.

If you don't know what adjustments are necessary for a particular employee, ask them. The chances are that they will know, or can point you in the right direction.

Further advice about adjustments and solutions that are available is set out in the full version of *Ability at Work*, and is also available on-line using the JobAccess Workplace Adjustment Tool.

Am I obliged to provide reasonable adjustment?

APS managers are obliged under the DDA to make workplace adjustments that are reasonable and do not cause an employer 'unjustifiable hardship'.

In some circumstances, APS agencies can apply for reimbursement of modification expenses under the Workplace Modifications Scheme.

Employing people with disability is not as costly, or as complex, as commonly perceived. Information and support to help managers wishing to employ people with disability is readily available.

Who can help?

There are a number of organisations that can assist APS agencies to recruit and support people with disability.

JobAccess is a free, confidential service that can help you through all stages of the employment process. The JobAccess Advisers can advise you

about the full range of government programmes and services available and have particular expertise in workplace modifications and adjustments.

There are also many employment support organisations that can provide assistance and have their own 'database' of clients. In most cases these services are provided to employers at no cost.

Vacancies can be advertised nationally through the Disability Employment Network, and with Vocational Rehabilitation Services, by providing details to the National Disability Recruitment Co-ordinator (NDRC). Vacancies notified to the NDRC will be referred throughout the network across Australia.

Many of these agencies are also able to work closely with APS agencies to develop specific strategies, such as work trials, to support the employment of people with disability. They can provide advice on modifications to the workplace, or on modifications to selection processes to make them more accessible to people with disability.

Contact details for agencies in different parts of Australia are also available from JobAccess.

Where can I find more information?

The Jobaccess website contains more information about the Workplace Adjustment Tool, the Workplace Modifications Scheme, and the National Disability Recruitment Co-ordinator, referred to above. It is located at: www.jobaccess.gov.au.

The full version of *Ability at Work—Tapping the Talent of People with Disability*, is available on the APS Commission's website at: www.apsc.gov.au.

Checklist for senior managers

- I am familiar with, and take appropriate steps to implement, my agency's strategies in relation to people with disability, such as its disability action plan.
- My decisions in the workplace, and my behaviour towards managers and staff in my agency, openly demonstrate my commitment to the APS Values and Code of Conduct.
- I make it clear to the managers who work for me the importance I personally place on supporting diversity in the workplace.
- I am committed to creating a workplace environment in which people with disability can talk to their managers and colleagues about their condition, should they wish to do so, without being stigmatised.
- I seek, and give proper weight to, the views of staff with disability when discussing what reasonable adjustments my agency can make to help them work more effectively.
- When discussing staff management issues with people who work for me, I continually reinforce the importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive workplace environment for all staff, including those who have disclosed a disability.
- I ensure that reports of behaviour by employees in my area that may not comply with the APS Values and Code of Conduct are dealt with promptly in accordance with relevant agency procedures.
- I have taken stock of the mix of employees in my area to gauge whether it suitably reflects the diversity of the Australian community and the clients with whom my agency works.
- I have considered what I need to do to maintain a suitably diverse mix of employees in my area over time, e.g. marketing future employment opportunities in a way that will attract interest from a more varied cross-section of people.
- I have arranged for my workplace to be accessible to people with disability, both in terms of physical access and access to equipment and support.