



Myths and stereotypes



FACT: Disability may be visible or hidden, permanent or temporary and may have a minimal or substantial impact on a person's abilities. Disability may affect mobility, the ability to learn, or the ability to communicate easily. It can have a minimal or substantial impact on a person's capacity to work and no two people will experience disability in the same way. People with disability are part of every section of the community. The only thing that distinguishes them in the workplace is that they may require some form of adjustment to help them overcome the impact of their disability.

The Australian Public Service (APS) is committed to ensuring it accesses the best talent pool possible and reflects the diversity of the community it serves.

People with disability have a broad range of skills and capabilities. It makes good business sense to employ people with disability. Evidence has shown they tend to:

- a. take less sick leave and stay in jobs for longer than other workers
- b. have fewer compensation incidents and accidents at work compared to other workers
- c. build strong relationships with customers
- d. boost workplace morale and enhance teamwork.

▶ **Myth: People with disability are best suited to unskilled work**

A common assumption is that people with disability can only do basic unskilled jobs. The opposite is actually the case—people with disability bring a range of skills, talents and abilities to the workplace. They work in all sorts of jobs and hold a range of tertiary and trade qualifications.

There is no significant difference in employment rates of people with disability and those without disability across industry sectors. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that in 2012:

- a. 19.9% of working-age people with disability who were employed, worked as professionals,
- b. 14.1% of working-age people with disability who were employed, were clerical and administrative workers,
- c. 15.2% of working-age people with disability who were employed, were technicians and trade workers,
- d. 11.6% of people with disability who work, run their own business, and
- e. 33.7% work from home.¹

People with disability who were working were more likely to run their own business (11.6%), and/or work from home (33.7%). The flexibility of working arrangements makes it easier for people with disability to participate in the workforce.

People with disability usually have a clear understanding of their abilities and are unlikely to apply for jobs they cannot do. Most people with disability do not require any changes to their work or workplace.



¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4433.0.55.006 – *Disability and Labour Force Participation 2012*, viewed 8 March 2016, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4433.0.55.006>



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▶ **Myth: My insurance costs will increase if I hire someone with disability**

A common misconception is that workers compensation costs will increase due to hiring people with disability and that people with disability will have more accidents at work.

Whether an employer employs people with disability is irrelevant to the calculation of such premiums. Premiums are based on accidents at work and not the characteristics of particular groups of employees. There is no proof that employees with disability are more susceptible to workplace injury than others.

In fact, research suggests that people with disability can have fewer accidents at work. The workers compensation costs for people with disability can be as low as four per cent of the workers compensation costs of other employees.²

▶ **Myth: People with disability are less productive**

Some employers might believe that it is not financially viable for them to hire people with disability as they work too slowly. But the reality is that most people with disability work at productivity levels equivalent to other employees and receive full wages.

People whose productivity is significantly reduced as a result of disability may consider the Supported Wage System. With the Supported Wage System, eligible people with disability can access a reliable process of productivity-based wage assessment to determine fair pay for fair work.

▶ **Myth: People with disability will not fit in**

It is common to hear employers say that hiring a person with disability will not work as clients will complain or the person will not 'fit in' with co-workers. Neither statement is true. In most cases client and co-worker acceptance comes with awareness and observing that workers with disability are competent and efficient in their jobs.


People with disability make up 20 per cent of the Australian population and the likelihood of clients and co-workers having a relative or friend with disability is high. Employer initiatives in hiring people with disability can have positive bottom line results, increased staff morale and community recognition as good corporate citizens.

▶ **Stereotypes**

None of us like to be pigeonholed based on any single personal characteristic, so it is important to avoid falling into the trap of stereotyping people with disability when it comes to considering them for roles in your organisation.

Never make assumptions about what a person with disability can or cannot do on the basis of their disability.

Stereotypes are used by all of us every day in all sorts of situations, including the workplace. It is important to be aware of the stereotypes we hold and appreciate what some of our own personal biases are—be they conscious or unconscious.



² Graffam J, Shinkfield A, Smith K and Polzin, U 2002, 'Employer benefits and costs of employing a person with a disability', Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, vol. 17, pp. 251-263.



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▶ **Countering unconscious bias**

In the context of the recruitment process, it is important to be aware that our preconceptions often govern important hiring decisions that can have a major impact on people's lives.

If you have limited exposure to people with disability in the workplace, your unconscious bias may lead you to believe that most people with disability can not work.

Research shows that the most effective way of countering unconscious bias is through direct exposure to people with disability. Direct exposure is a great way to learn about the diversity of disability, break down myths and stereotypes, enhance understanding and, most importantly, get great staff.

Giving careful consideration to the way the recruitment process is set up provides an opportunity to minimise the impact of unconscious bias on hiring decisions. Offering interviews to all candidates with disability who meet the basic requirements of your roles, through the *RecruitAbility* scheme, is a good place to start. See *Information sheet: Recruiting a person with disability using affirmative measures*.

▶ **Pulse check**

- I can see that labelling a person only reinforces stereotypes and limits opportunities
- I understand people with disability can work in all sorts of jobs including those that are highly skilled
- People with disability tend to be productive, safe and loyal workers
- It is likely I already employ people with disability
- I feel more confident now that I have a broader understanding of disability and employment.

