

Improving the recruitment and selection of people with disabilities

"Increasing the labour force participation of people with disability brings benefits to individuals, businesses and the economy."

AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMISSION, "WILLING TO WORK"

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What if Steven Spielberg could not complete his application as a film producer because of his dyslexia? Or Susan Boyle was unable to wow audiences with her amazing singing voice because her Asperger's prohibited her from entering Britain's Got Talent? Where would Microsoft be without Bill Gate's drive, ambition and imagination?

These are but three examples of the incredible and unique talents that may be overlooked by organisations if they fail to see the benefits of diversity within their candidate pool. Yet despite this, people with disabilities, both physical and neurological, are underrepresented in the working population and face several unique challenges when it comes to obtaining employment.

The past 40 years have seen a trend towards organisations putting greater emphasis on diversity and inclusivity in the workplace¹. While substantial progress has been made in some areas, such as gender equity, there remain significant gaps when it comes to the employment opportunities and experiences of other minority groups, such as those living with disabilities².

Disabilities come in many forms and encompass a wide variety of conditions and experiences. They may be visible or invisible, present from birth or acquired through illness or injury, temporary or permanent. They can have either a minimal or significant impact on a variety of physical or cognitive functions. As such, people living with disabilities can differ vastly in their skills, challenges, and daily experiences.

The variability within disabilities can present challenges for organisations attempting to attract and select people, as there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. However, it also means that people with disabilities possess a wide and diverse range of unique skills from which organisations could benefit.

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There has been particular interest in recent years from organisations that recognise and wish to tap into the unique strengths and skill sets of 'neurodiverse' candidates – namely, those with neurological variations such as Autism, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, and ADHD³.



Given the increasing interest in diversity and inclusion in general and disability specifically, it is important for Australian workplaces to look at which policies, strategies, and practices will best support them in attracting, recruiting and selecting candidates with disabilities in a fair, unbiased and equitable way. Research indicates that there are policies and strategies that are especially important when attracting and selecting people with disabilities, however the number of organisations employing these strategies is unknown.

To address this, we interviewed and surveyed a broad spectrum of Western Australian organisations on their current practices around employing people with disabilities. This paper outlines the current state of employment for people with disabilities, the common challenges faced by employers in recruiting them, and compares actual versus best practice across three stages of recruitment:

- 1. Recruitment policy and targets**
- 2. Attraction and accessibility**
- 3. Selection processes**

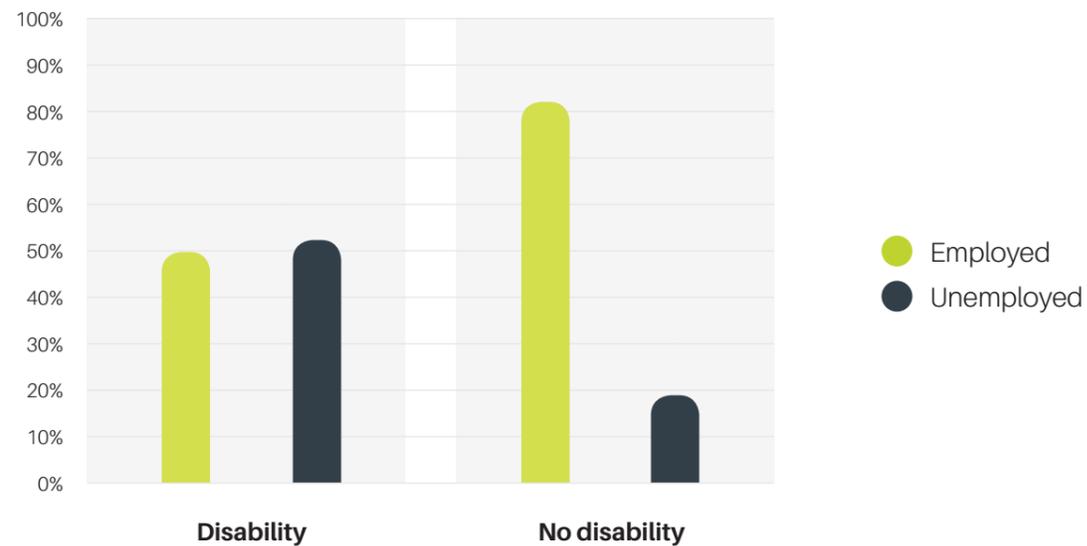
The findings and recommendations in this paper cover both people with disabilities in general, as well as specific information pertaining to neurodiverse candidates. Given the variability among people with disabilities, these recommendations are intended to be a general guide that can be tailored to the needs of specific organisations and candidates.

The current state of employment for people with disabilities

A significant portion of Australians currently live with a disability - 4.4 million (or 17.7% of the population) according to the latest estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics⁴. This number is predicted to increase in line with our increasingly aging population, as people experience the declining physical and cognitive effects of age.

Nearly 1 in 5 Australians live with a disability

Despite being as likely to want a job and as likely to have prior work experience, just under half of all working-aged people with a disability are employed compared to over 80% of other Australians⁴. This number was even smaller for those with a severe disability, of whom only 11% are working full-time⁴. This has further implications for income and standard of living, whereby the median gross personal income for those with disabilities is half of that earned by those without disabilities.



The nature and impact of someone’s disability affects not only everyday functioning, but their ability to find and maintain meaningful employment.

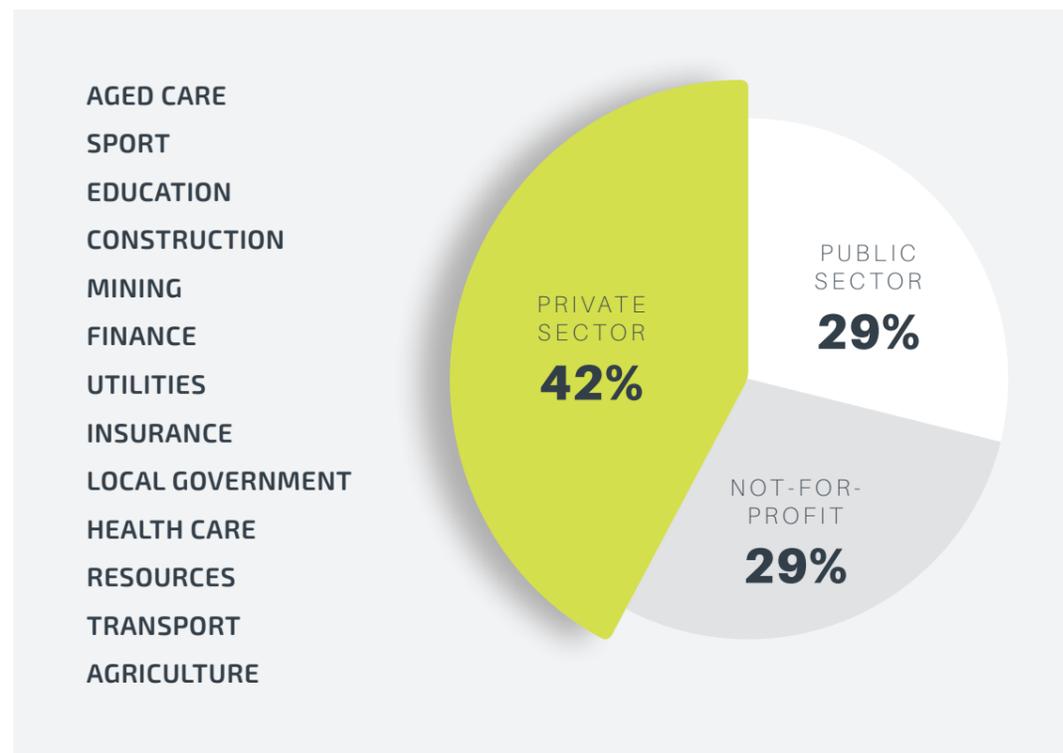
For example, those who reported a psychological disability are more likely to be unemployed (20.4% unemployment) and working part time, in comparison to those with other types of disabilities, such as physical or speech impairments⁵. This difference is even more profound as the severity of the disability increases.

Several barriers to employment have been identified for people with disabilities, ranging from the accessibility of the recruitment process, to unconscious bias, false perceptions, and negative stereotyping. Discrimination is a significant barrier, with the Australian Human Rights Commission reporting that the largest numbers of complaints in 2017-2018 were allegations of disability discrimination, comprising 42% of all complaints⁶. Australia has a long way to go in terms of improving the employment of people with disabilities, lagging other OECD nations⁷.

Participating organisations

To obtain a snapshot of current practice in Western Australian organisations, we conducted 22 face-to-face interviews and collected online survey data from 33 organisations. Interview and survey questions were based on best practice recommendations, obtained from both academic research and relevant industry bodies.

Participating organisations represented a wide range of industries and ranged in size from 75 to 40,000 employees. The majority came from the private sector, as seen below.



Only six organisations were able to provide data on the number of employees they currently have with disability, with responses ranging from three to 127 employees.

Actual and perceived benefits of hiring people with disabilities

Hiring people with disabilities can have numerous benefits for the employee, their employer, and the broader economy^{8,9}.

Employee benefits

- Financial benefits
- Learning and development opportunities
- Social connections
- Build professional networks
- Access support resources



Employer benefits

- Lower human resources costs (including recruitment)
- Fewer safety incidences
- Less sick days and unplanned absences
- Increased diversity enhances team performance
- Positive cost benefit ratio



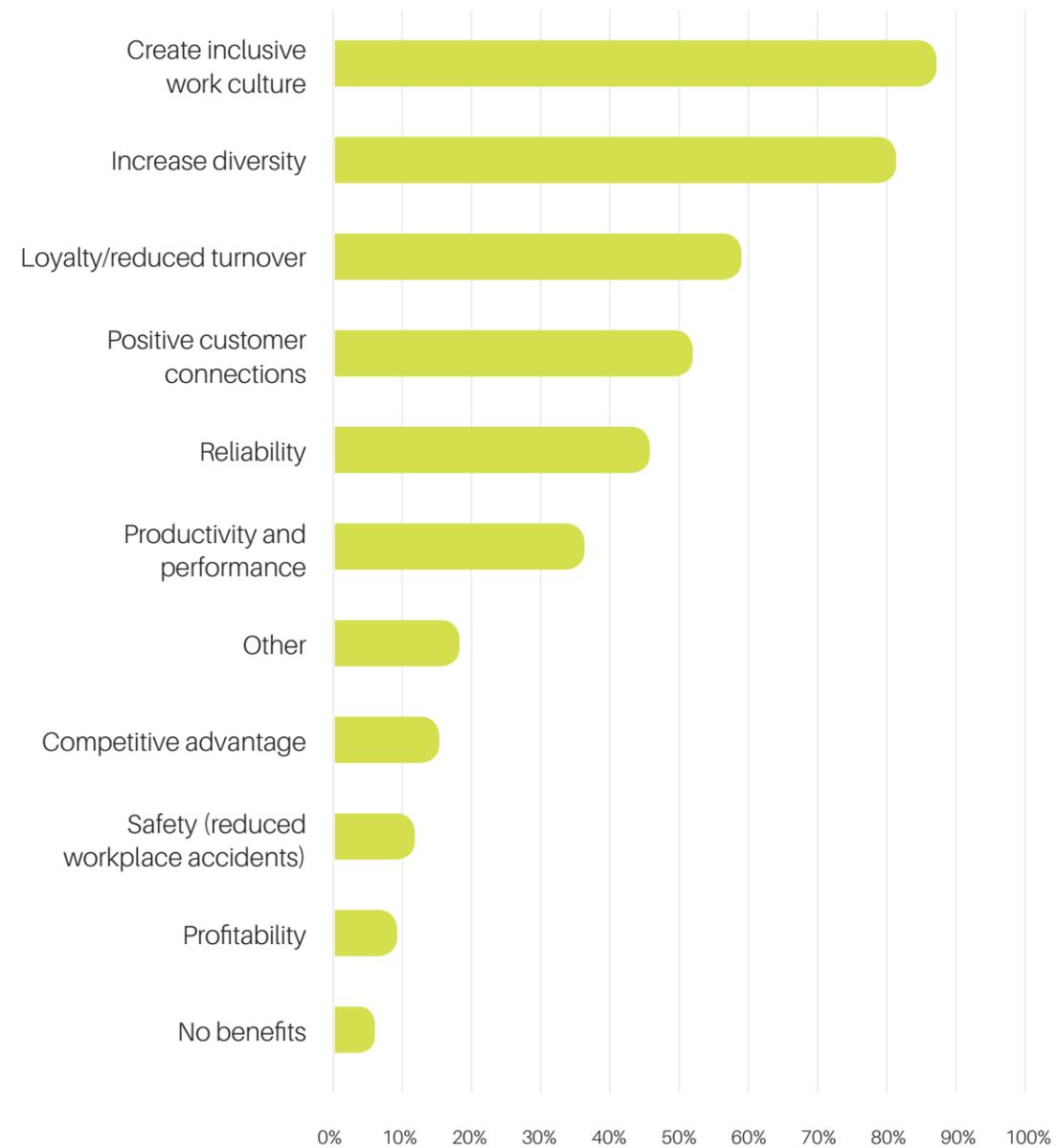
Community benefits

- Lower carer costs
- Positive engagement
- More independence in the community
- Reduces unemployment
- Reduces reliance on the welfare system (est. \$191b in 2010¹⁰)



Promisingly, the organisations we surveyed were able to identify numerous benefits related to hiring people with disabilities. These benefits mainly centered around the increase in diversity and inclusion in the workplace, which research has shown to be positively correlated with organisational performance and increased profit⁸.

What do you see are the benefits of hiring people with disabilities?



Common challenges and concerns

There are unique challenges faced by both job seekers with disabilities and the organisations hiring them^{7,11}.

Challenges for job seekers with disabilities

- Inaccessible recruitment processes
- Lack of awareness/understanding of disabilities
- Unconscious bias
- Fear of discrimination if they disclose their disability
- False perceptions/expectations



Challenges for organisations

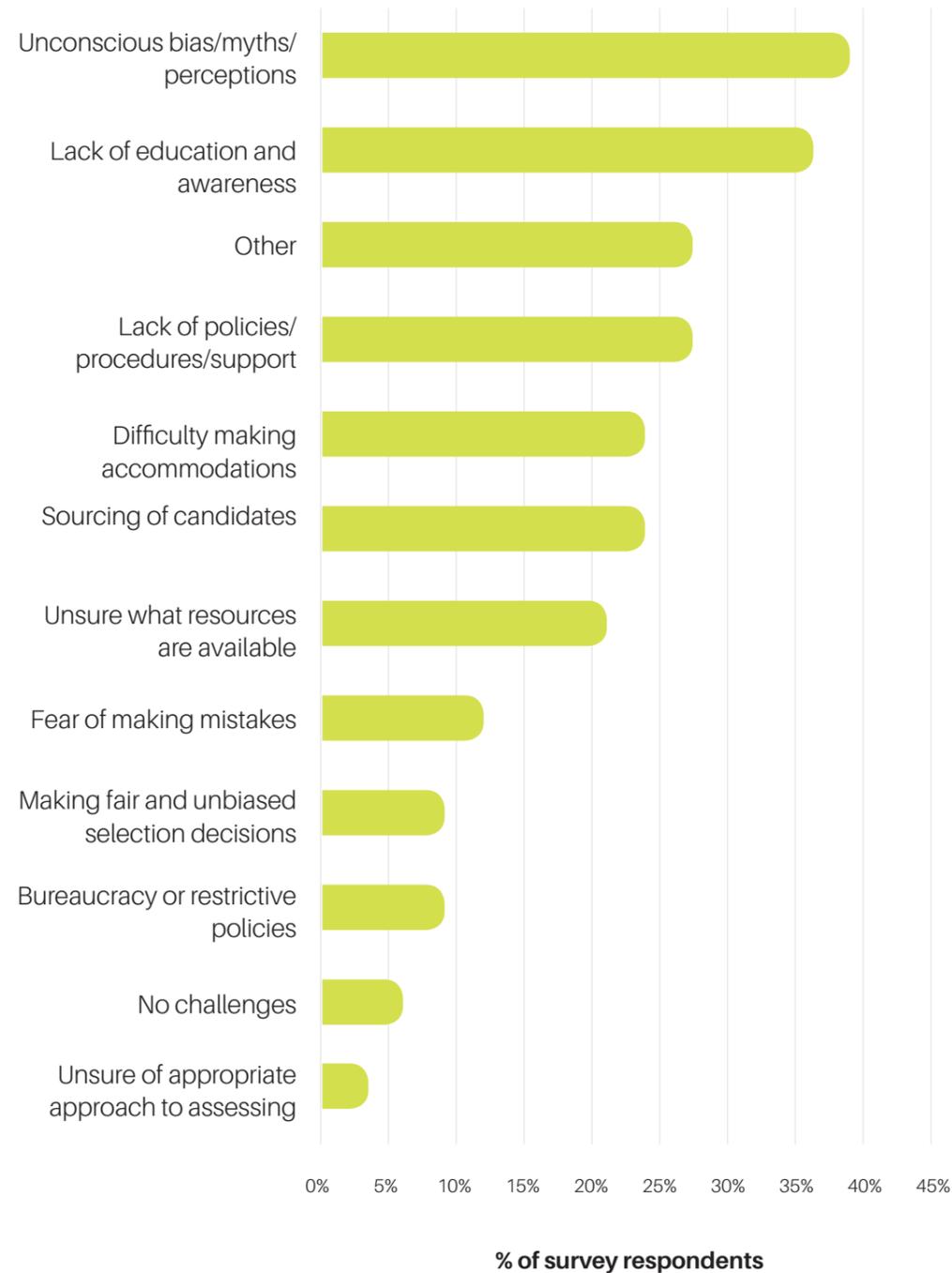
- Internal bias and misperceptions
- Lack of education
- Timing of disclosure regarding disabilities
- Lack of policies, procedures and support
- Difficulty making accommodations



The most common barriers or challenges faced by organisations we surveyed and interviewed were internal biases and misperceptions, followed by a lack of education.

Disclosure was also raised during the interviews, with a number of respondents pointing out that very few candidates share information about their disability, making it difficult for the organisation to make appropriate accommodations.

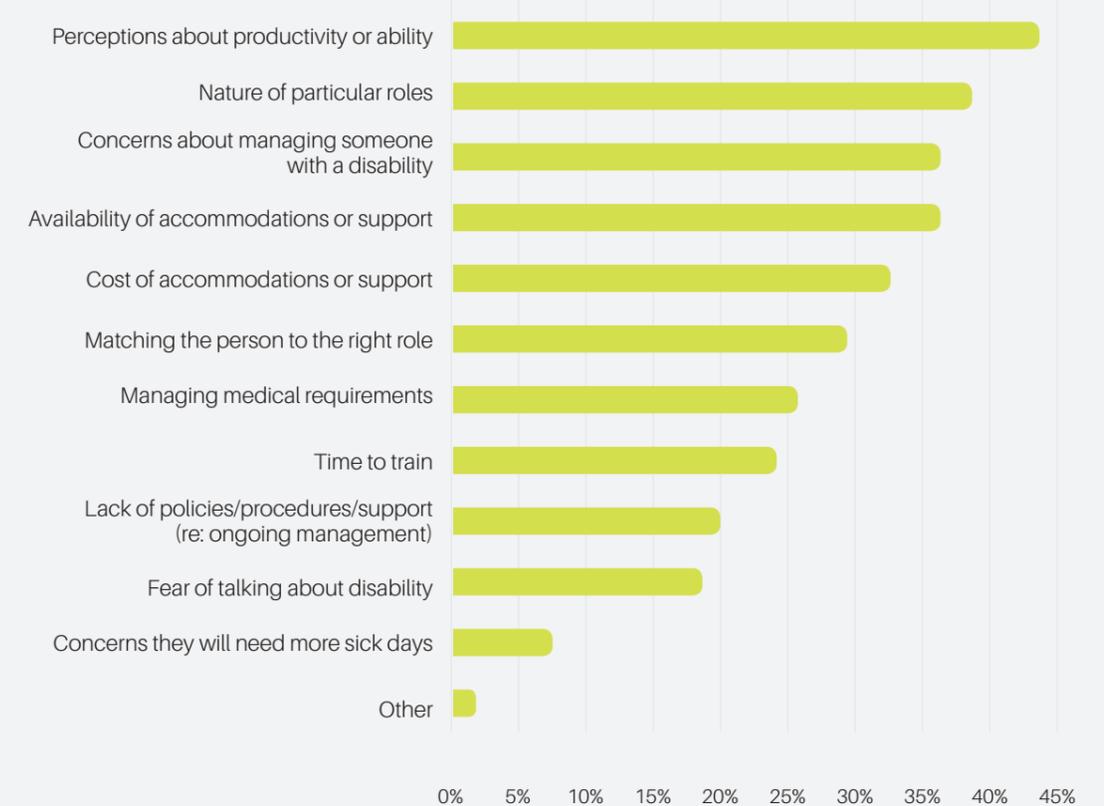
Which challenges or barriers has your organisation faced when it comes to assessing and selecting people with disabilities?



Given the challenge around hiring manager awareness and bias, we explored the types of concerns hiring managers might have about employing someone with a disability. Nearly 60% felt that their hiring managers would be apprehensive about the productivity and overall ability of these candidates to fulfil the requirements of the role or that they would be unsuitable for particular roles. This was despite nearly 40% of organisations citing productivity as a benefit of hiring people with disabilities. There were also perceived concerns that employees with a disability would require more time and effort to train and manage than their counterparts.

In the interviews, one organisation cited a case whereby an employee with an intellectual disability utilised a large amount of supervisory time which caused a strain on the business. Another organisation believed that it was untenable to make individual accommodations for employees as they were a smaller company and highly specialised.

Perceived hiring manager concerns



Setting the stage

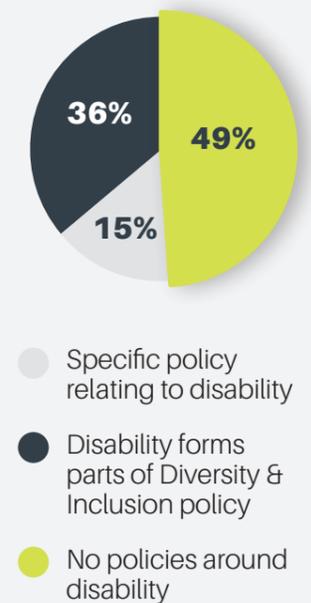
Establishing policies, targets, tracking, and support

In order to effectively improve the recruitment and selection of people with disabilities, it is important for organisations to first set the stage through appropriate policies, targets, measurement, and leadership support¹¹. Our survey and interviews revealed significant gaps between recommended best practice in each of these areas and current practice among participating organisations, indicating that many organisations were missing the foundations for implementing and measuring successful initiatives.

Best practice versus actual practice

1. Policies

One of the first steps in improving the attraction and selection of people with disabilities is to develop a business case and specific policy around disability equity^{11,12}. Of the organisations we interviewed and surveyed, very few had specific disability employment policies. Those who didn't have a specific policy either included disability as part of a broader diversity and inclusion policy or had no policy at all.



2. Setting and tracking targets

Establishing hiring targets and collecting and monitoring data on the number of employees with disabilities enables organisations to track progress and ensure their initiatives are effective, while creating accountability^{12, 13}. Only nine organisations in our study had explicit hiring targets for people with disabilities (ranging from 1.6% to 10%). Most organisations surveyed (67%) did not currently collect and monitor this data, though most had some opportunities for employees to inform the organisation about their disability.



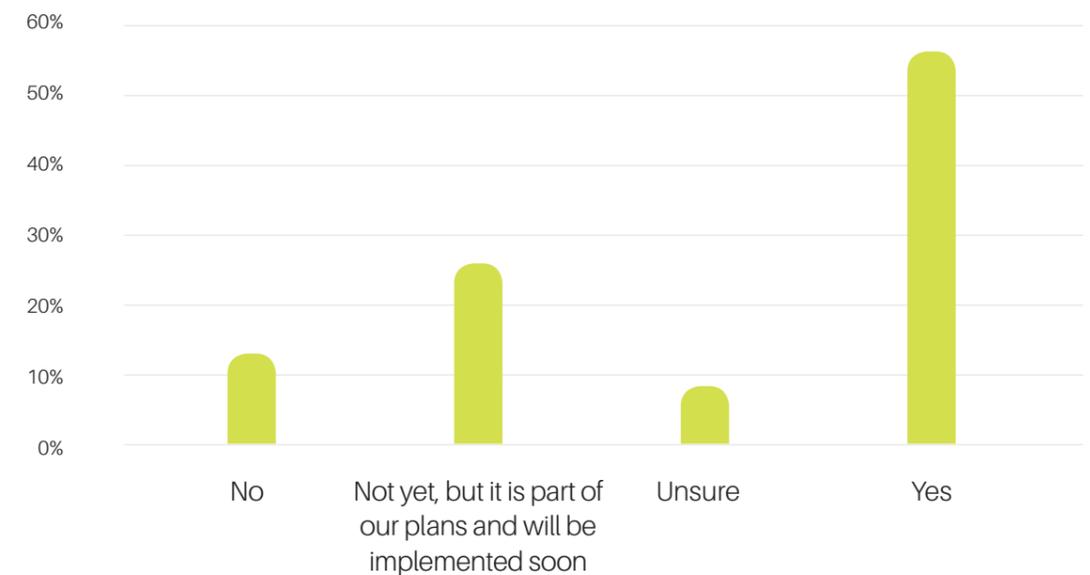
3. Senior management commitment and support

Leadership support drives workplace initiatives and contributes substantially to their success. For organisations working to increase disability representation, having senior managers who are committed and acting as “champions” increases their chances of success and helps embed initiatives throughout the organisation¹⁴. Most survey respondents said that their senior management would approve disability employment initiatives but otherwise had minimal involvement. Four said that their senior leaders would initiate the process and assist as needed, and four others felt that their senior leaders were not at all supportive (showing no involvement or interest and less inclined to approve initiatives). None were completely supportive (owning initiatives and actively advocating or promoting them).

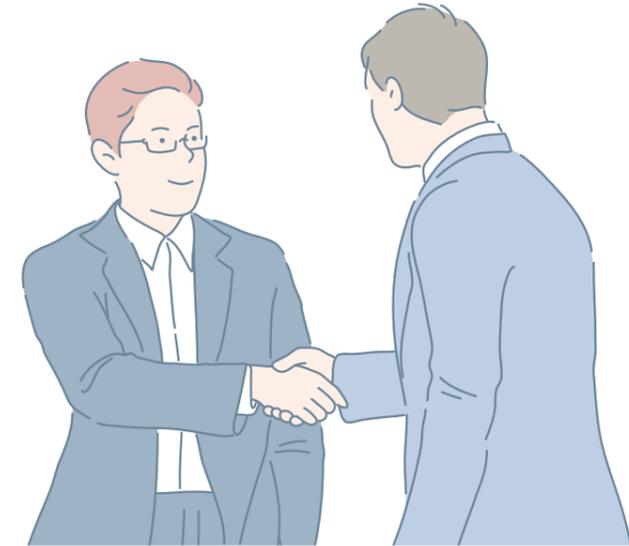
4. Training

Despite the mixed evidence around the effectiveness of diversity training, capacity building across an organisation has been recommended as an important step for establishing organisational readiness and tackling unconscious biases¹⁴. In general, it is recommended that diversity training programs should form part of a network of learning opportunities, rather than occurring in isolation, and be aligned to organisational goals. Most of the organisations surveyed (57%) already include diversity training as part of their learning and development program for staff, with a further 18% intending to implement training soon.

Is diversity training part of the learning and development program for staff?



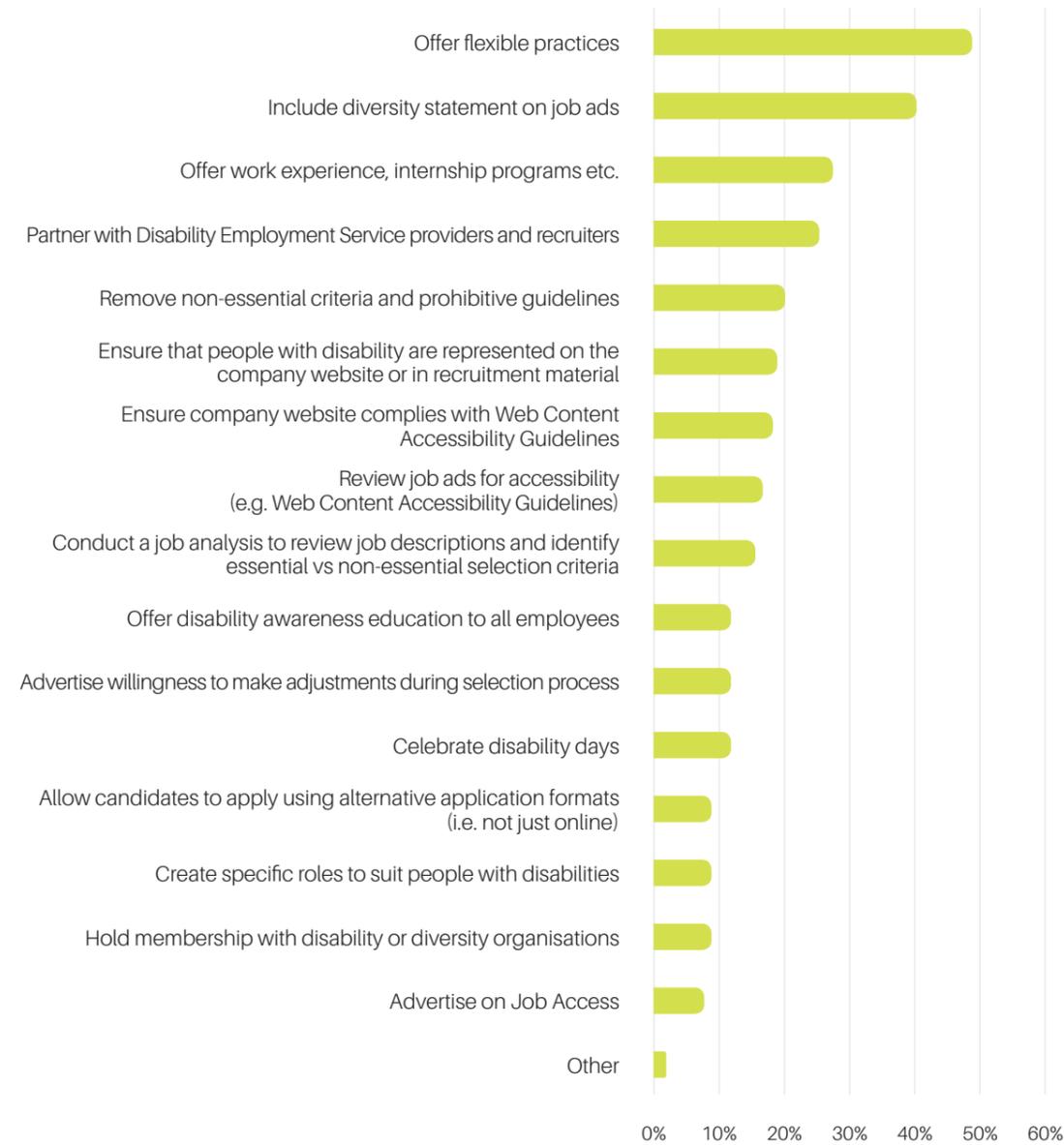
Becoming an attractive and accessible employer



Once the stage has been set through policy, targets, and leadership support, there are a number of strategies organisations can employ to make them a more attractive and accessible potential employer for people with disabilities. We identified a list of 16 recommended practices through discussions with Disability Employment Service providers, best practice guidelines, and the academic literature. Below is a summary of the practices currently used by surveyed and interviewed organisations. Respondents reported using an average of 3.9 practices, with four organisations employing 10 or more practices. The two organisations that selected the greatest number of practices were public sector organisations. Four selected no options, all of whom came from the private sector.

Many organisations did nothing to specifically attract candidates with disabilities

Attraction practices implemented



The two attraction strategies most commonly employed by surveyed organisations (flexible work practices and diversity statements) are those which are easily implemented and which support diversity and inclusion overall, rather than being disability specific. Among interviewed organisations, diversity statements were the most commonly employed strategy.

Improving attraction practices

There are a number of easy steps that organisations can take to improve their attraction practices and increase the number of people with disabilities applying for jobs.

1. Visible representation

Websites and job adverts provide companies with an opportunity to communicate to all candidates that they are an equal opportunity employer, particularly through images conveying the diversity currently present within the organisation. If the role is specifically targeted at individuals with a disability, then using a representative from this cohort would be beneficial.

2. Accessible job advertisements

One way to make job ads and the application process accessible for everyone is by following the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, which require the content of the advertisement to be presented in multiple formats such as audio or large print. Very few of the surveyed or interviewed organisations said that they considered accessibility in their advertising. Advertising through websites such as JobAccess also provides organisations with an immediate and large pool of candidates with disabilities. Very few organisations in this study utilise JobAccess.

3. Job advert content

Choosing what to include and exclude from a job advertisement is essential to eliminate direct or indirect discriminatory content. Best practice recommends that job adverts should be reviewed to reflect the core functions of the role, check for discriminatory criteria, and remove unnecessary requirements¹¹.

This not only attracts a larger candidate pool, but also ensures that candidates are not put off by inappropriate or unnecessary criteria. For example, is a driver's license really necessary or can other transport accommodations be made? In our findings, only two interview respondents and eight survey respondents said that they have amended job descriptions and job advertisements to exclude non-essential criteria.

4. Promotion of disability-friendly workplaces

Research suggests that offering flexible work options such as flexible hours, part time work and working from home can make an organisation more attractive employer to people with disabilities, while also supporting other employees across the organisation¹¹. Of those surveyed, 76% said that they offered flexible work practices within their organisation.

5. Celebrate disability days

The awareness of and understanding about different disabilities is increasing, and there are now a number of national and international days of acknowledgement. These events celebrate diversity and recognise the contribution that people with disabilities make to the communities within which they live. Acknowledging and celebrating these days helps send a message that an organisation values and accepts people with disabilities. Only one interview respondent and five surveyed respondents reported that they celebrate disability days.

6. Alternative application formats

Utilising standard application processes such as online forms and extensive selection criteria can be limiting for candidates with a disability. Providing alternative application formats can make the process more accessible for a more diverse candidate pool¹¹.

This may include enabling candidates to phone a member of the recruitment team and express interest in the role or providing extra time for candidates to respond to selection criteria. Three surveyed organisations and no interview respondents reported using alternative application formats.

7. Partner with Disability Employment Services (DES)

Who better to seek advice and support from in relation to disabilities than those organisations that specialise in the employment of such clients? Partnering with DES providers can help organisations with everything from education and training, providing resources, sourcing candidates, and supporting both candidates and hiring managers throughout the hiring process. These services were under-utilised by those we interviewed and surveyed, with 27% of both groups reporting that they used DES providers.

Below is an example of a diversity statement that could be adapted for a job advertisement and on the website vacancy page

"We are committed to a diverse and inclusive workplace, where we value unique perspectives and encourage all employees to contribute their whole selves.

We specifically encourage people with disabilities to apply for vacancies within our company and will endeavour to make all reasonable accommodations to support you in your career with us."

Creating a fair and unbiased selection process

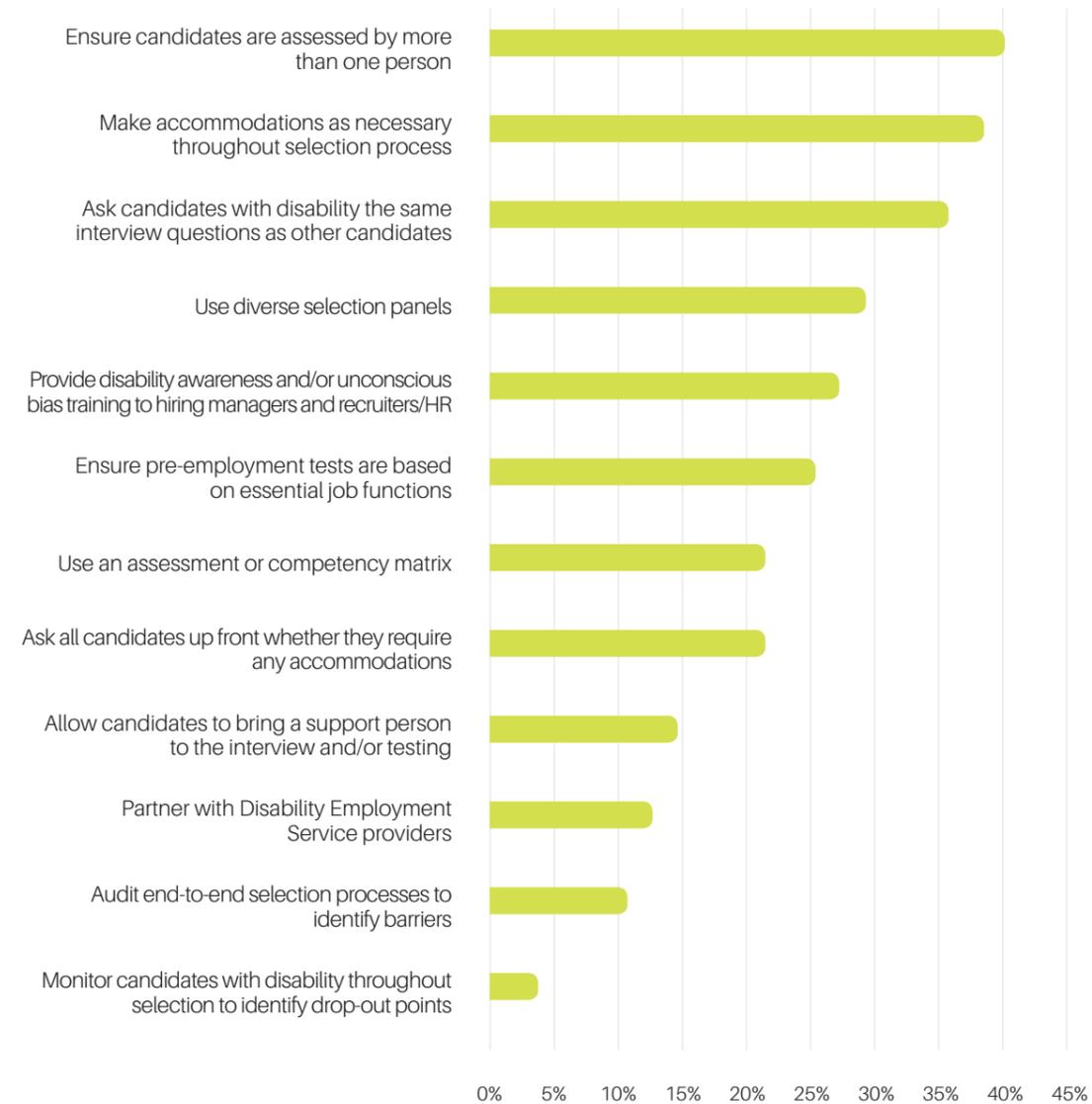


One of the areas where candidates with disabilities experience discrimination and bias is during the selection process¹⁵.

The following recommendations for making the selection process as fair, accessible, and free from bias as possible were identified through discussions with Disability Employment Service providers, best practice guidelines, and the academic literature.

The graph below illustrates the range of strategies employed by interviewed and surveyed organisations. Out of the 12 options provided in the survey, the average number of strategies selected by each individual organisation was 3.94. Three organisations employed 10 or more of the options provided, two of which were private sector organisations. Five selected no options, which is consistent with the 32% of interviewed organisations that said they just used standard processes for all job applicants.

Steps taken to ensure equity in selection



The two most commonly employed strategies, asking all candidates the same interview questions and using more than one assessor, are consistent with general best practice in recruitment, rather than being disability-specific.

Improving selection practices

There are a number of steps that organisations can take to improve their selection practices and create a fairer and accessible selection process for candidates with disabilities.

1. Offer accommodations to everyone

Not all disabilities are visible or obvious and, unless a candidate chooses to share this information, recruiters and hiring managers may be unaware of and fail to make concessions for them. Asking all candidates up front about any accommodations or adjustments they may need, not just those with disabilities, can help address this problem and make people feel more safe sharing such information. It was far more common for organisations in our study to offer accommodations as required or requested, rather than asking up front.

2. Support person

In certain circumstances it may be necessary or helpful for a candidate with a disability to bring with them a support person to help with the recruitment and selection process. This could be a representative from a DES provider or someone the candidate organises themselves. In the survey, 24% of organisations said they allow candidates to use a support person for various stages of the selection process to improve accessibility.

3. Audit selection process to identify barriers

Taking a proactive approach to identifying and removing barriers can help organisations address any issues in their recruitment process and identify areas of opportunity to improve attraction and retention of candidates with disabilities¹⁶. Only 18% of survey respondents reported that they routinely audit the selection process and 6% of those surveyed reported that they monitor candidates with a disability throughout the process to identify drop-out points.

4. Interview

Ideally, interview panels should consist of personnel trained in disability issues and general diversity and inclusion practices¹². Interview questions should focus on job requirements, with the same structured questions being asked of all candidates. Other recommendations for making interviews more accessible include checking venue accessibility, providing alternative interview formats, and allowing candidates to bring a support person, where possible. Survey respondents reported previously utilising phone or video interview as an alternative to face-to-face interviews.

5. Psychometric testing

Psychometric testing is not always appropriate for people with disabilities and should be used with caution¹¹. Any tests being used should directly relate to the inherent requirements of the job and any necessary accommodations should be addressed up front before testing. This could include adjustments to venue, time limits, supervision, rest breaks, or support. Standard norm groups may also not be appropriate for comparison, so consultation with test providers or administrators is advised. Consider omitting or altering tests if the results will be invalid.

6. Streamlining processes

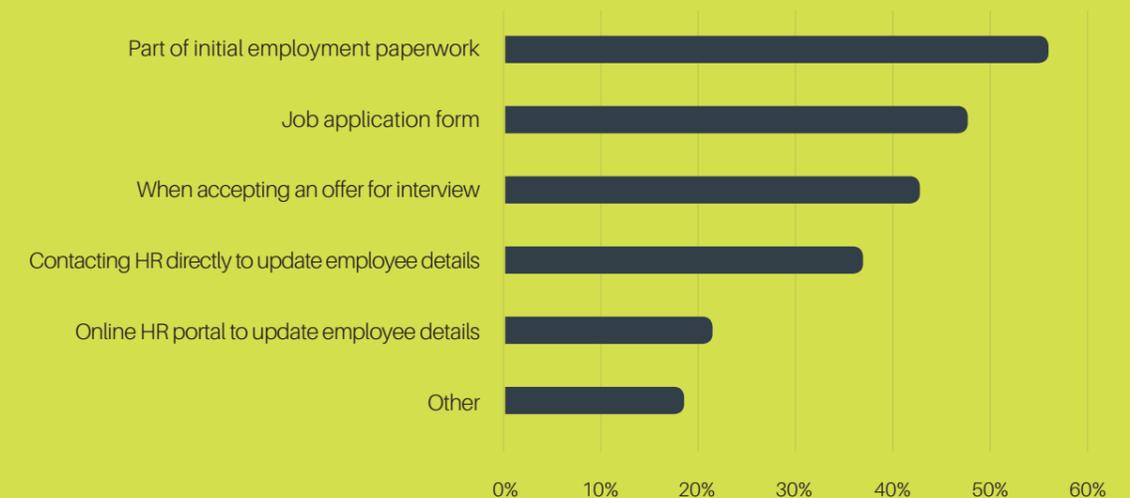
There are provisions within the Equal Employment Opportunity Act¹⁷ that allow organisations to streamline the recruitment process for candidates with a disability to ensure they are given a fair and reasonable chance at success. Organisations that choose to use such provisions may allow candidate to proceed to interview if they meet the minimum selection criteria, circumventing the shortlisting process.

Disability disclosure

As mentioned earlier, not all disabilities are obvious, and many people choose not to share information about their disability out of fear of discrimination¹⁴. Providing multiple opportunities for a candidate to inform the organisation about any required accommodations creates a safe space to share information about disabilities and a more accessible recruitment process. The most common time for surveyed organisations to collect information about disability status was at commencement of employment (55%), long after the recruitment process has been completed. On average, organisations reported two opportunities for people to share information about their disability. Two organisations did not provide any opportunity for candidates or employees to inform them about their disabilities.

Many people choose not to share information about their disability out of fear of discrimination¹⁴

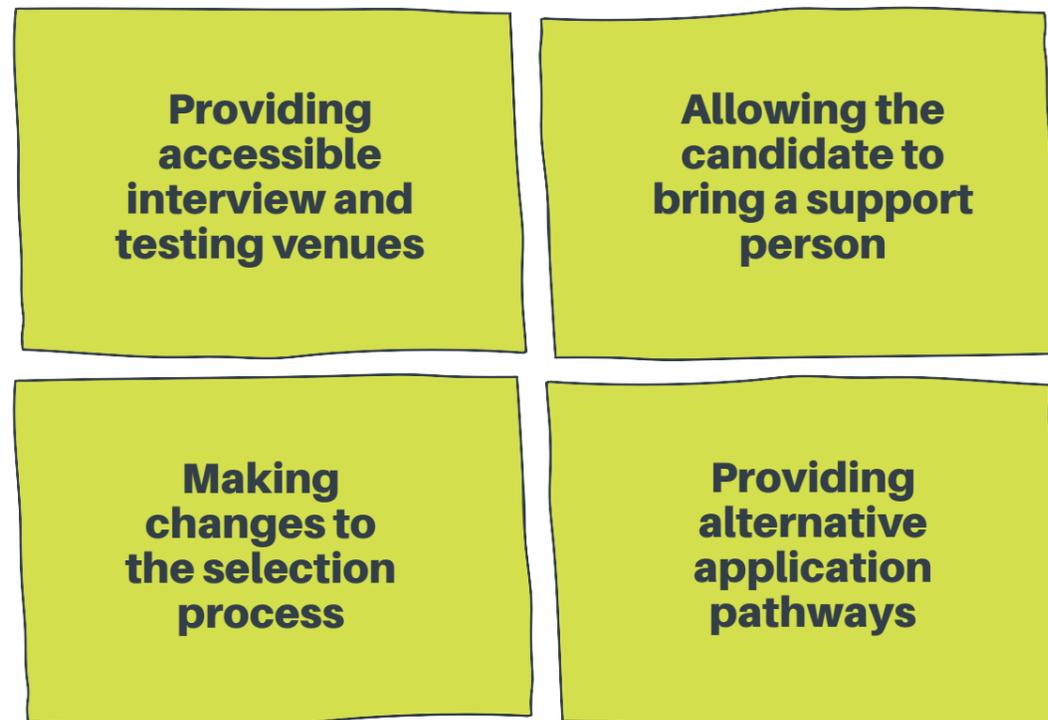
What opportunities do candidates/employees have to inform you about their disability?



Previous accommodations during the selection process

Sixty percent of surveyed organisations have previously had candidates with disabilities apply for jobs with their organisation. Several provided information about the types of accommodations that they had previously made for different types of disabilities.

For those with *physical* disabilities, accommodations included:



Fewer organisations had made concessions for candidates with a *cognitive* disability. The accommodations they had made included allowing the candidate to bring a support person and using a less-structured interview.

Recruiting for neurodiversity

There has been an increasing trend in recent years of organisations recognising and leveraging the unique skillsets of neurodiverse employees¹⁸. Whether this is the ability to hyper focus, to think outside the box and innovate, a greater awareness and attention to detail, or greater honesty and authenticity, employers are realising that these skills could give them an edge over their competition, particularly in a rapidly changing and technologically-driven environment³.

Only three of the organisations we surveyed had specific programs aimed at attracting neurodiverse candidates, including internships and targeted recruitment into specific roles.

One organisation reported that they do not do anything specific as diversity and inclusion is an integral component of their culture, “We treat all people the same”. We spoke to two organisations in more detail about their neurodiversity programs and what has worked for them. For both, their programs sat solely within their IT departments and completely independent of any formal policies or Human Resources initiatives. However, there are lessons to be learned from their success.

One organisation reported that they do not do anything specific as diversity and inclusion is an integral component of their culture, “We treat all people the same”.



CASE STUDY 1

4 years ago, Bankwest partnered with Curtin University, ACS foundation and Autism WA to create an internship program for students with Autism within their IT department. This was born from a desire to support people with Autism, a drive to promote diversity and inclusion, and the need to address a skills shortage in IT testing. The program is run by an internal working group made up of volunteers, who are both people leaders and specialists within the department. The internship runs for three months, with the possibility of a further three-month extension, and is offered to one to three students each year.

To make the selection process more accessible, Bankwest swapped structured interviews for a group workshop, where students come in groups of three and are asked to work on a hands-on task. They are also taken on a walking tour of the building while an interviewer runs informally through questions that the student has been given ahead of time. Successful students are hosted by a team that is carefully chosen for its people and dynamics and are assigned a mentor for the duration of their placement. All staff involved in the program or who will work with the student first participate in awareness training with Autism WA.

While there have been challenges around managing expectations and ensuring the teams have capacity to support a student, Bankwest have also seen numerous benefits from the program. These include improvements in disability and autism awareness, team morale, as well as leadership skills and capability.

It has also helped to create a safe space for other employees to discuss their disabilities and needs. For students, it has provided valuable job application and work experience and helped them build a professional network. Several interns have also been offered permanent or contract positions after the completion of their program.

This large resources-based business knew from experience that their most inclusive and diverse teams perform better than the company average in areas such as safety, production, cost efficiency, employee engagement and mental health. Stemming from the diversity priority, key leaders in the IT area saw an opportunity to invest time and effort into supporting neurodiversity.

CASE STUDY 2

In 2017, this resulted in creating an internship program for individuals with a passion for technology, who are living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The aim was to provide a career development pathway and an opportunity to apply their studies in a real-world context, with further opportunity for potential employment post program.

In partnership with Curtin University, the Autism Academy of Software Quality Assurance (AASQA), the Australian Computer Society Foundation (ASC), the Autism Association of WA and AIM Employment, the organisation has welcomed approximately 20 interns since 2017, with two intakes of 6-7 interns per year. They have completed placements in fields including data science, software development and testing, engineering and environmental safety.

To make the selection process accessible, the organisation has changed the job application process. For example, traditional one-on-one interviews are flipped to put the focus on hiring managers selling what they do and driving the conversation in a relaxed, round-table informal environment. Afterwards, candidates are taken on a tour of the areas they will be potentially working. This process allows potential interns to have the opportunity to meet multiple hiring managers and ask questions, while allowing hiring managers to gauge interest in their area of business. Successful candidates are selected based on role match, are paired with a 'buddy' for the duration of their program, and are exposed to various areas within the business function.

Apart from the direct benefits to interns, the organisation has noticed an increase in the 'culture of care'. For example, team mates proactively look out for each other, better collaboration, and a better understanding of each other's differences. Additionally, there have been requests from other divisions of the business as to how they might replicate this program.

Central to the program's success has been an internal committee of volunteers who drove the initiative from the beginning, collaboration and support from external agencies and institutions agencies, and buy in from senior leadership and the board.

Additional tips for hiring neurodiverse candidates come from organisations that support these candidates¹⁹.

Inform candidates about the details of the recruitment process and what to expect. This could include names of interviewers, photos of the venue where assessments will take place, and any other information that will enable them to familiarise and prepare for the recruitment experience.

Ensure all recruitment processes occur in a quiet and distraction-free environment. Inform the candidate if there are any changes so that they are not caught by surprise.

Prior to the interview, allow the candidate to preview the questions and prepare answers.

Consider removing or changing any time restrictions during testing or answering interview questions.

Look for alternatives to traditional recruitment methods (e.g. work trial, portfolio, or presentation instead of resumes, psychometric testing, and interviews).

Final recommendations

People with disabilities are just as likely to want interesting and engaging employment as their counterparts and making recruitment processes accessible for them enables organisations to capitalise on the skills and abilities of a more diverse candidate pool²⁰. Through our research, we have identified a number of gaps between best practice and what organisations in Western Australia are currently doing to attract, recruit, and select people with disabilities. While there seems to be an appetite for improvement in this area, our research revealed that many organisations are unclear about where to start and what to do.

For organisations wishing to improve their practices and increase the diversity of their workforce, we provide the following recommendations:

1. Start at the beginning

Invest time into establishing policies, hiring targets, and support from senior managers within the business to create a sound foundation for recruitment practices. Set up systems for capturing and reporting on the number of employees (and applicants) with disabilities to track success.

2. Be willing to try something new

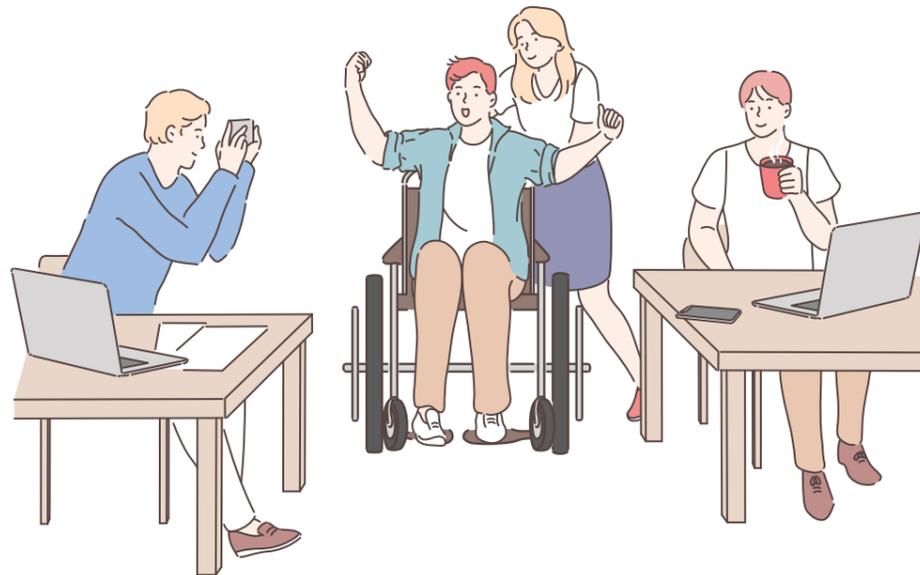
While many organisations were implementing good HR or general diversity and inclusion practices, making a recruitment process more accessible to everyone often requires using non-traditional selection practices. See pages 11-13 for examples of these.

3. Partner with Disability Employment Services

DES providers are an invaluable resource for both employers and employees. They have access to a large pool of candidates, provide training and resources, and support both organisations and job seekers throughout the recruitment and onboarding processes.

4. Embrace neurodiversity

Partnering with support organisations and setting up programs to leverage the skills of neurodiverse candidates can both support this cohort into employment, while providing a competitive advantage to their employer.



Hiring employees with disabilities is not only good for business, but is essential for individuals, communities, and the economy to thrive.

The results of this research are promising in that the majority of organisations surveyed and interviewed are aware of and make accommodations for people with disabilities. However, there is plenty of scope for improvement and managers can capitalise on some quick and effective methods to lift their diversity and inclusion profile. As the Australian workforce gets older and the availability of skilled and talented individuals decline, organisations are well placed to challenge old paradigms and embrace an inclusive and agile culture. In this way, everyone wins.

Useful links

The following links contain useful resources for organisations wishing to take the next step in improving the recruitment of people with disabilities:

Department of Communities (Disability Services)

[GO TO SITE >](#)

Australian Human Rights Commission - Disability Discrimination and Disclosure in Recruitment and Employment

[GO TO SITE >](#)

Australian Network on Disability

[GO TO SITE >](#)

National Disability Service

[GO TO SITE >](#)

JobSearch (list of service providers)

[GO TO SITE >](#)

Disability Discrimination Act

[GO TO SITE >](#)

Job Access

[GO TO SITE >](#)

NDIS

[GO TO SITE >](#)

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