

Govt pledges to close disability work gap

By Maeve Bannister

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Dylan Alcott said changing attitudes towards people with disabilities will require a major overhaul. (Lukas Coch/AAP PHOTOS)

A commitment to close the gap in employment for people with a disability has been announced as a key outcome of the federal government's jobs and skills summit.

Working with the peak body representing businesses, the government will commit more than \$3 million to ensure more Australians living with a disability can access work.

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A disability employment initiative pilot would be established in partnership with the Business Council of Australia after a memorandum of understanding was reached, Social Services Minister Amanda Rishworth said.

Everyone deserves the dignity of work and people living with disability, once employed, should also be supported into leadership roles, she said.

The government also committed to embed employment into National Disability Insurance Scheme plans to ensure participants who want to work are provided with support to do so.

The announcement came after Australian businesses were urged to take action on workplace discrimination to remove barriers to employment and encourage more people to enter the workforce.

During the second and final day of the summit a series of panel discussions examined ways to tackle discrimination and boost workforce participation.

People who experience barriers to work not only have trouble finding employment but are twice as likely to experience discrimination when they do accept a job, Ms Rishworth said.

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"Bias and community attitudes have a significant economic and social cost (and) we are missing an important opportunity to contribute to Australia's economic growth," she told the summit on Friday.

Ms Rishworth said gender, age, disability and race discrimination in workplaces were holding Australians back from entering the workforce.

Australian of the Year Dylan Alcott said changing attitudes towards people with disabilities would require government, business, education and the community to buy-in to reform.

He described the government's announcement as a "huge step forward".

"We need to continue to listen to lived experience, invest in building capacity, lift our expectations of what people with disability can do in

the workplace, and continue to provide opportunities across all industries," he said.

The widespread lack of understanding was a major barrier to work for people with disabilities, an employment social enterprise said.

"With record employment and vacant job roles across Australia right now, we need employers to shift their mindset and give people with disability a go," Jigsaw co-founder Paul Brown told AAP.

"Instead of thinking of diversity as being 'the right thing to do', businesses need to know they are missing out on critical talent if they don't become more inclusive."

Mr Brown wanted the government to play a greater role in breaking down perceived barriers to employment by encouraging employers to implement formal diversity and inclusion policies.

"The government could also facilitate employers to collaborate on approaches at an industry level, identifying areas where a talented workforce of people with disability could fill industry-wide gaps," he said.

Employers must ensure flexibility in their diversity policies because a one-size fits all approach won't work, Australian Industry Group workforce development head Megan Lilly said.

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She said women, First Nations people, refugees, people with disability and culturally and linguistically diverse people were over represented when it came to Australia's most disadvantaged.

"Disadvantage can impact an individual's life in often complex ways (and) it's an important starting point for employers to understand," she said.

Successfully raising workforce participation among disadvantaged groups was not only about increasing the number of hires, Ms Lilly said.

"It is also about the experience in the workplace, about retaining and equipping people with generic and specific skills that will help their continuing participation," she said.

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