

# Disability in the workplace: 'Australia's mindset is shifting'

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HRD explores the challenges facing disabled employees in the workplace



BY [Jess Bell](#) / 10 Feb 2021 / Share [f](#) [t](#) [in](#) [✉](#)

As a nation, Australia is falling short when it comes to the employment of disabled workers.

Ranking 21 out of 29 OECD countries for labour force participation among those with a disability, it lags behind New Zealand and many European nations.

So what needs to change to improve the landscape for disabled workers?



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HRD spoke to Paul Brown, CEO of Jigsaw, a social enterprise that assists disabled people into the workforce, who said there are two key statistics that show Australia still has a way to go to improve employment accessibility.

“We’ve got a million people with disability, including neurodiverse individuals, who are of working age out of the workforce,” he said.

“But more concerningly 70% of people with disability lose their job within three months. So, we’ve got a really high unemployment rate but we’ve also got a challenge with retention.”

Despite the statistics, Brown said over the last few years, he has noticed a marked shift in the attitudes of Australian employers.

Many businesses have woken up to their social responsibility and the realisation that a truly diverse workforce drives growth, innovation, brand awareness and ultimately, profitability.

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While this trend is undoubtedly positive, Brown said changing the landscape for disabled jobseekers in Australia doesn’t lie solely with employers.

“I think the disadvantages start well before employment,” he said. “People with disability often lack work experience opportunities when they’re going through school.

“They very rarely have that paper round or that first job when they’re young, so they miss out on a huge amount of skill development and experiences around employment.

“When it comes to transitioning into formal employment, they have nothing to draw on in terms of the workforce.”

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These issues are compounded if their managers do not have the understanding or the right training to support someone through these early challenges.

It's more likely to lead to frustrations for both employer and employee and goes to explaining the low retention rate witnessed among those with disabilities.

A negative experience will have a knock-on effect on self-esteem and their desire to re-enter the workforce, creating a damaging cycle for both the individual, and for society as a whole.

That's why it is so important for employers to commit to investing support in the entire employee lifecycle, not just recruitment.



Jigsaw helps to transition people into employment through work-based training programs, as well as equipping employers with the practical skills to supporting disabled employees.

In the last year, we've seen growth in the hiring of neurodiverse jobseekers, particularly in the tech sector.

[IBM](#), [Telstra](#), [ANZ](#) and [JP Morgan Chase](#) are a handful of companies that have partnered with specialist organisations to create dedicated neurodiverse hiring streams.

Read more: [Diageo Australia HRD on diversity and inclusion: 'This is the sort of stuff you dream of'](#)

Brown cautioned that while addressing the recruitment challenges facing neurodiverse employees is important, the support mechanisms must also be in place.

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He encouraged HR professionals to ask tough questions about their workplace before embarking on specialist recruitment.

“They need to ask have I got the right programs to put in place as a business or as an employer to be able to manage the individual alongside their technical skills?” he said.

That question becomes even more important in a remote working set-up.

While the Covid-induced shift to flexible or agile working may increase job opportunities for those with disabilities, it also presents new challenges.

A lack of face-to-face interaction can lead to employees feeling unsupported, meaning managers need to be far more intentioned about checking in with their remote staff.

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Australia now has an opportunity to shift the dial on disability in the workplace, creating a more accessible and supportive labour landscape for its citizens.

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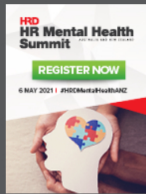
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