

Half of Australian managers have never hired a person with disability, survey shows

YouGov poll indicates nearly one in 10 HR professionals were not open to recruiting a person with disability in the future

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📷 Many Australian managers and HR professionals say they faced challenges using the disability employment services program. Photograph: Bianca de Marchi/AAP

Half of Australian managers and human resources professionals say their organisation has never hired a person with disability and nearly one in 10 admit they wouldn't want to in the future, according to a new survey.

The YouGov survey of 501 Australian middle managers and HR professionals also found dissatisfaction with the \$1bn-a-year disability employment services program (Des), which pays private providers to place jobseekers into work.

government urges businesses ahead of its upcoming jobs summit to employ people with disability to meet labour force shortages.

The survey found 50% of Australian managers/HR professionals said they or their business have never hired or worked with a person with disability.

In a separate question, respondents were also asked how they had hired people with disability. Nearly one in ten (8%) who said they hadn't added that they weren't open to doing so in the future.

Among those who said their company had hired a person with a disability, 40% said they'd done so using internal recruitment to hire a person with a disability, while 26% used an external recruitment agency.

A further 21% were connected through a [Disability](#) Employment Services provider.

The disability royal commission last year heard only 53.4% (1 million) of working-aged people with disability participate in the labour force.

Disability employment rates have remained stagnant in Australia for decades and are well below the OECD average, prompting the former disability discrimination commissioner, Graeme Innes, to label the efforts of companies in employing people with disability as "abysmal".

The royal commission heard last year that at 10 major companies who reported figures to the inquiry – and which collectively employ more than 341,000 people – there was an average of 1% of employees who had a disability. About 18% of Australians have a disability. In the public service, people with disability make up 4% of the workforce, despite a goal of 7% between 2020 and 2025.

Data shows people with disability are also much more likely to live in poverty, according to the [Australian Council of Social Service](#), in large part due to sub-poverty line welfare benefits.

The YouGov survey also found 91% of the managers who'd used the Des program faced challenges with it.

Guardian Australia last year revealed the program had been criticised as ineffective by a [government-commissioned report](#).

Jigsaw, a social enterprise that provides training, traineeships and a pathway to award wage work, is essentially a competitor to disability employment services providers.

The Jigsaw chief executive, Paul Brown, said participants receive training in soft skills through an "academy" component, which is funded by national disability insurance scheme plans, before working for award wages in a data-processing job with the organisation's social enterprise, which has contracts with major companies.

“An example of that is we do all of Allianz Australia’s motor claims processing,” he said. “That creates an environment for people to train and prepare for work. It also creates their first award wage job opportunity.”

These positions are paid at award wages – without the use of government wage subsidies – and last 12 months, with the experience used as a “springboard” to connect the trainee with a new, mainstream employer.

This makes the program distinctly separate from Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs), which employ about 20,000 people with disability at below award rates, sometimes as much as \$2 an hour.

Some advocacy groups told the royal commission ADEs should be scrapped. The inquiry has also heard damning evidence about other trainee schemes for people with disability, such as a barista course that lacked basic equipment.

Brown said the payment of award wages had been “non-negotiable” for Jigsaw.

Jigsaw trainees are between 16 and 29 years of age and while there is no focus on jobseekers with a particular disability, about 60% live with autism spectrum disorder. Most are referred via the school system.

Britt Lloyd, graduated from Jigsaw in 2021 after two years. “There’s a lot of stigma around the words ‘autism’ and ‘Asperger’s’,” she said. “Interviewers wouldn’t know what to do with me, mostly, and when I mentioned Asperger’s they would usually end the interview there.”

Lloyd is now working at the New South Wales government Department of Premier and Cabinet.

Brown argued the model – which has seen has supported more than 750 people with disability on their pathway to mainstream employment at award wage since – could be scaled up.

“[The traineeship] allows people to truly prepare for the mainstream workforce when they step out,” he said. “I think that’s the difference with ADEs and Des models, which are really just focused on that [job] placement.”

Amanda Rishworth, the social services minister, said the government was looking at ways to “improve employment outcomes for people with disability”.

“I intend on hosting a disability employment roundtable in addition to the jobs summit to centre our focus in this space,” she said. “There is an amazing, skilled workforce that is sadly underutilised. Hiring a person with disability makes good business sense and is good for the nation.”