**Employer attitudes toward the recruitment of people who are blind or have low vision**

**Research highlights from Vision Australia’s 2016 Employer Attitudes Survey**

**Introduction**

In May 2016, Vision Australia’s Advocacy and Engagement department distributed an employer attitudes survey to a cross section of Australian businesses.

The purpose of the survey was to examine employer attitudes to recruiting people who are blind or have low vision and to inform Vision Australia’s ongoing work to improve the 58% unemployment rate in our community (Vision Australia Employment Report 2012).

This 14 question survey was sent to employers through Vision Australia’s employer data base, through employer contacts provided by staff, and through the Australia Network on Disability’s newsletter, social media channels and email distribution list.

**Who responded?**

There were 41 respondents to the survey, representing 21 businesses.

The majority of respondents were large companies that employ more than 500 staff.

* 59% of respondents are in a workforce of 500+ employees

The remaining respondents were:

* 20.5% in a workforce of 0 – 50 employees
* 7.7% in a workforce of 50 – 100 employees
* 12.8% in a workforce of 100 – 500 employees

**Research sample analysis**

Over half the research sample for our survey, work in large companies and organisations. Traditionally, big organisations are more likely to employ people with disability due to sufficient resources and as a strategy to improve and maintain brand reputation.

The results of this survey are over representative of diverse workforces and do not represent general disability employment statistics. Many respondents for this survey were sourced from the Australian Network on Disability membership base and from Vision Australia’s employer contact list. This group are more likely to be engaging people with disability in employment and so the results of this survey should be reviewed accordingly.

According to the Australia Bureau of Statistics, Australians with disability are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed compared to those without disability (10.0% compared with 5.3%, annualised figure for 2015).

1. **Result highlights**

When asked to state if anyone with disability works in their organisation, respondents said:

* 90%: Yes
* 5%: No
* 5%: Don’t know

When asked what are the main challenges in employing someone with disability the majority of respondents (29%) said there were no challenges.

Of the respondents who did identify challenges in employing someone with disability, the top two challenges identified were:

1. Customising documents and the workplace to suit this person was time consuming

2. The person struggled to keep up with the assigned tasks

Coming in as a low rating concern was:

3. Integrating the person into the workplace culture

There was also an ‘other’ option to choose from in this question and those that chose ‘other’ said:

* “On-boarding – ensuring they were set up for success with the right equipment.”
* “Adapting our software packages to suit screen readers was difficult.”
* “There were some limitations to the type of work that would be considered usual for the work role.”
* “People’s perception of their capability and issues with non-mainstream software.”

1. **Diversity strategy**

To build a diverse workforce involves the development of strategies, targets and ongoing workforce evaluation. The majority of our survey respondents (83.8%) said that the business they work for has a diversity or inclusion strategy.

When asked if their diversity strategy is linked to managerial performance targets:

* 54.8% of respondents said that there was no link between their diversity strategy and manager performance targets.
* 9.7% said that there was a link between their diversity strategy and manager performance targets.
* 35.5% responded that they didn’t know.

1. **Barriers to employing people who are blind or have low vision**

When asked which of the below reasons would they see as the biggest barrier to employing someone who is blind or who has low vision, respondents said:

* 20.60%: Adjustments and technology needed to employ a person with severe vision loss may be too expensive.
* 14.7%: The person may require adjustments to our building or computer systems which are disruptive.
* 11.8%: The person may be less efficient than other staff members.
* 14.7 %: The job requires vision.

When asked to choose why the job requires vision, the top three answers were:

1. Job requires a driver’s license

2. Job requires workers to make detailed markings on paper

3. Job requires the use of specific software that cannot be made visually accessible.

* 23.5%: Other. “Other” responses included:
* “Some roles within the organisation require use of complex visually based software systems that are not particularly accessible. Some roles in my area require visual observation, whilst others do not, but the Access database that we use is not accessible.”
* “We don’t see any barriers to employing a person with vision impairment as we are more than happy to undertake reasonable adjustments.”
* “We have employed two people with vision impairment who have now left. There were limits to working with particular clients whose behaviour must be closely supervised for safety reasons. Client behaviour could put staff at risk if they cannot see the physical signs and if they cannot respond very quickly.”
* “None, I'm happy with what has been done and the assistance provided is rapid and professional when I ask for a fix.”
* “It is not clear which adjustments can assist with workshop scenarios, presentations. Some assignments may require vision, e.g. prototyping, wireframes.”

**4. Technology**

When asked to state if they were aware that software exists which makes creating accessible documents easier and is cost free, respondents said:

* 60.6%: Yes
* 33.3%: No

When asked if they are aware that with the right technology, people who are blind or who have low vision can work as productively as their sighted peers, respondents said:

* 87.9%: Yes
* 6.1%: No
* 6.1%: Don’t’ know

When asked if they are aware of the Job Access funding program that funds workplace equipment and adjustments for staff that have disability, respondents said:

* 69.7%: Yes
* 27.3%: No

When asked if they are aware of the existence of specialised software for people who are blind or have low vision (Jaws, Zoomtext, Magic or Dragon) respondents said they knew of:

* 38.7%: Jaws
* 25.8%: Zoomtext
* 3.2%: Magic
* 9.7%: Dragon
* 22.6%: Didn’t know of any software

**5. Recruitment process**

When asked about their recruitment process, respondents said: (could select more than one answer)

* 45.5%: They work with specialist disability employer services
* 45.5%: They aim to fulfil their diversity strategy
* 30.3%: They take into consideration whether their staff and managers have the knowledge and confidence to work with a person with special needs.
* 24.2%: None of the above
* 12.1%: Said they didn’t know

When asked at what stage of recruitment they would prefer a potential employee to share information about their disability, respondents said:

* 46.9%: When submitting their written application and CV
* 34.4%: Within the job interview
* 3.1%: When accepting the job offer
* 15.6%: said they didn’t know

**6. Employer’s reflections**

Finally we asked respondents to tell us of their experiences of employing a person with disability, for example: what has worked and what hasn’t worked.

**Reflections:**

“What worked: understanding up front what support we could provide to the applicant through the recruitment process. What doesn’t work: DES PROVIDERS”

“We have had success when employees let us know what they need so we can set them up for success”

“The Job Access process is difficult - we wanted to do an assessment of the role prior to offer, and were only able to do this through paying for an expensive third party to do this, as Job Access required a signed letter of offer. We wanted to make sure the job was OK first, and to educate our line managers that people with vision impairment can do pretty much anything other people can do”

“Our person challenged the way we do things and the accessibility of our systems. It was a temp contract so not eligible for Job Access funding, challenges with IT re. Jaws licencing, compatibility with phone system and PC for better access. Employee’s presence was a great delight and we were privileged to have him in our presence for three months.”

“We have employees with disabilities and it works well.”

“We have a young man with vision disability, however he is very independent and his work station has been adjusted to suit him. We find he has settled into the company and has been with us for 3 years.”

“I have various employees with disabilities including mental health, hearing impaired, physical disability and with MS. It has always worked for me apart from the difficulties of accessibility in some city buildings where we have offices. When seeking new premises this is always now taken into account.”

“We are a disability organisation who is also trying to place people with a disability in employment. We found that what worked was matching our clients’ needs to the staff member with vision impairment. This worked best when the client required one to one support with activities where the staff member was able to teach the client what they needed to know e.g. computer skills, artwork, etc.”

“Use of Job Access to provide evaluation and funding for equipment is a great benefit but expectations need to be clear for both the employee and employer. Suppliers equipment need to be available for installation and maintenance of equipment or software.”

**7. Conclusion**

Our research reveals that employer attitudes toward people who are blind or have low vision can be negatively impacted if:

* specialised software and equipment (adaptive technology) is perceived to be incompatible with existing software within the organisation.
* the process for acquiring the necessary adaptive technology is difficult, time consuming or costly.

The incompatibility, cost and potential disruptiveness of adaptive technology as a perceived employment barrier could be addressed in concurrent ways:

* Modifying existing computer applications within a workplace could accommodate specialised software (like Zoomtext for example) by bridging the gap between the two systems in a non-disruptive way.
* Job Access funding for people who are blind or have low vision can supply equipment, software and a technician for scripting of the specialised software (Jaws for example), which could allow conflicting systems to work together.
* Employers who are blind or have low vision may benefit from training to troubleshoot basic technical problems in their workplace when necessary.
* Employees who are blind or have low vision may benefit from self-advocacy skills to negotiate ways of dealing with adaptive technology incompatibility without the risk of putting their employment in jeopardy.
* An awareness campaign targeted at employers that provides multiple solutions to incompatibility of adaptive technology and existing company software could decrease perceived barriers.
* An awareness campaign targeted at employers that highlights the funding available through Job Access. Funding that supplies not only software and hardware but other supports, like technical support.

**Legislation**

To decrease incompatibility between computer systems and specialised software all computer programing should be undertaken following baseline accessibility standards from the design stage. These are the kind of standards which, for example, don’t presume the user can access a mouse or can see colours.

Vision Australia must seek to influence decision makers within government and business to follow best practise accessibility guidelines even where the accessible option may be more costly, less convenient or less aesthetically pleasing to the sighted community.

In America, *Section 508 standards* enforce government agencies to purchase accessible office equipment. American *508 Standards* apply to electronic and information technology procured by the federal government, including computer hardware and software, websites, phone systems, and copiers. Whilst this Standard only applies to Government procurement it helps to make the public service an equal opportunity employer for people with disability and because of the size of many Government procurement contracts, it pushes ICT providers to develop accessible technology solutions. This is an example of where successful legislation and policy exists which Australia could replicate and introduce to increase employment opportunities for people with disability.

While the majority of our survey respondents were aware of Job Access funding (69%) it is worth noting there is a gap in this awareness. Additionally the Job Access processes were highlighted by respondents as having limitations. For example, if an employee has a temporary position, or if an employee has not yet had a letter of offer, they are not eligible for a Job Access assessment, pushing costs onto the employers or employees.

Most respondents indicated that the organisation they work for has a diversity or inclusion strategy. Only 9.7% of respondents said that targets within their diversity strategy are directly linked to manager key performance indicators.

At present, 14.5% of Vision Australia’s workforce has a vision impairment, and these staff work at every level of our organisation, in our Leadership Team and on our Board. We have learned through experience that imposing performance targets upon diversity guidelines can further employment opportunities for people who are blind or have low vision.

**Further information**

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