

Disability Employment Australia's Response to the 5 Pillars Productivity Inquiries Interim Reports

15th September 2025

About DEA

Representing providers of disability employment services, we are devoted to the purpose of helping people living with disability to find meaningful, productive, and fulfilling work.

Background

In June 2025 DEA made a submission in response to the Building a Dynamic and Resilient Workforce paper. Our response focussed on the more than 1 in 5 Australians with disability, many of whom are under or unemployed despite being committed to finding a suitable career.

We highlighted cost effective measures that could be introduced that would create demand for employees with disability, and in doing so boost the number of Australians in the labour force. While this approach sat somewhat outside the areas highlighted by the government as part of these inquiries and the Economic Round Table, the recommendation met Treasurer Chalmers parameters for boosting productivity while simultaneously upholding Australia's commitments under Article 27 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRDP).

Our Response

DEA, its member organisation and affiliates are disappointed to see that increasing the employment opportunities for people with disability is not mentioned in any of the interim reports. Even the reports that refer to reforms within the care economy focus only on efficiencies and cost savings - they mention nothing of how the sector could be repositioned to better meet the needs of people with disability and those in their circle of support, increasing the opportunities to obtain employment for both the individual and those who currently provide unpaid care for them.

We feel that this is a significant missed opportunity and a stark display of ableist thinking in assessing that productivity is a question that can be addressed without a quarter of Australia's population. By omitting people with disability from these reforms their opportunity to participate in the labour market is further limited and as a result, Australia will continue to experience the impacts of higher welfare spending, reduced tax income, and ultimately, continued limitations to productivity.

Perhaps the greatest overall productivity gain in the last century was the increase in labour force participation of Australia's women. In 2009, Goldman Sachs calculated that the rise in female employment since 1974 boosted Australian economic activity by 22% i. All that unlocked potential made a material difference to Australia's productivity, through an increasingly vibrant labour market, more diverse workplaces, and better allocation of skills.

After women, the next largest diverse cohort is people with disability. While substantial gains have been made ii, there are approaching a million people with a disability of working age who are not currently employed and countless more who are in work but could be add exponential value to the workforce with the right support. A report by Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre demonstrated that an increase of 10 per cent in the number of people with disability who are employed would increase national economic output by \$16 billion per year. Deloitte Access Economics has used HILDA data to calculate a potential cumulative inclusion dividend of \$84bn per annum, if Australia were to deliberately include more people with disability.

To this point, Australia's approach to this issue has been supply-side dominated, by commissioning programs to connect people with disability to the labour market. This has proven somewhat effective, but a) it would be more effective still if more Australian employers were committed to inclusion; and b) most employing organisations are never in touch with these specialist employment services so cannot benefit. Greater inclusion is strongly in employers' interests. Accentureiii found that companies that lead on key disability inclusion criteria achieve 1.6x more revenue, 2.6x more net income, 2x more profit and are 25% more likely to outperform on productivity. Many disability employment providers are already working with businesses around practice change to overcome fears, bias, and practical challengesiv.

Our Recommendations

Establishing a Disability Confident Employers Scheme - The UK's longstanding Disability Confident scheme offers three levels of accreditation based on self-assessed best practice. While not flawless, it has over 10,000 participating employers. An Ipsos survey (n=1333) found that 71% believe hiring people with disabilities boosts staff morale, 83% report no negative impact on productivity, and the majority are aware of and use related benefits. A strengthened Australian version would:

1. be simple enough for all organisation sizes;
2. require participating organisations to employ people with disabilities, potentially setting minimum benchmarks tied to accreditation levels;
3. incorporate independent assessment, but keep costs manageable for smaller companies;
4. serve as a clear signal of disability-friendly workplaces in job ads;

5. clearly define standards of "good" practice, adaptable to employer size and sector; and
6. offer networking opportunities and resources to participating employers, particularly SMEs who often lead the way in disability employment.

Mandatory Reporting – we have long advocated for the establishment of mandatory reporting of disability employment data, similar to current procedures for reporting gender diversity and pay parity^v. Disability advocates, including former Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes AM have also expressed their support for a mandatory reporting scheme^{vi}. Our position aligns with the Employment White Paper which stated improvements in employment outcomes for under-represented groups are only possible where they are closely monitored, with “transparent reporting on workplace diversity... reflects the standards the community expects workplaces to meet.”^{vii}

In an AusDN survey of 400 member organisations, it found that 86% of private and not-for-profit providers do not have targets for the employment of people with disability^{viii}. Most businesses are unaware^{ix} how many people they employ with disabilities. Consequently, they do not feel the impetus to change. As with workplace gender reporting, mandatory disability employment reporting should apply to all organisations with 100 or more FTE staff. The process could even be rolled together under the WGEA (making it the WDGEA) to promote simplicity and cost effectiveness. Psychologically safe and robust processes for collecting this data must be designed, but we can learn here from the UK which is currently implementing a comparable policy – with excellent thinking detailed here: [IoD & Disability@Work - Progress Through Transparency](#).

Public Sector leadership and procurement - the government cannot expect the rights of people with disability to be realised in the workforce and the workplace unless it leads the way. This is explicitly referenced in Article 27(g) of the UNCRPD^x and applies to federal, state and territory governments. DEA endorses the Disability Royal Commission recommendation to set targets to increase the proportion in the public sector of employees with disability at entry, graduate, and executive levels, including specific targets for people with cognitive disability^{xi}.

Using the purchasing power of government to encourage organisations to engage with disability employment is mentioned in both the DRC Final Report^{xii} and the Employment White Paper^{xiii}. We support this idea, noting that it dovetails with the mandatory reporting function discussed above. If we can establish a mechanism for determining the quality of inclusive practices, then Disability Procurement Policies could provide a powerful mechanism for driving disability employment forwards. Government can also utilise its purchasing power by embedding functional accessibility requirements into its contracts for the purchase of goods, including property, equipment, and digital platforms. By intentionally creating accessible workplaces,

employees with disability will have many of the adjustments and accommodations they require already integrated into standard work practices to ensure a seamless transition to work.

For more information

Please contact:

Sally Karandrews (She/her)

Disability Employment Policy Manager

Disability Employment Australia



ⁱ Australia's hidden resource: the economic case for increasing female participation | VOCEDplus, the international tertiary education and research database

ⁱⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Survey on Disability, Ageing, and Carers 2022
The Disability Inclusion Imperative

^{iv} Microsoft Word - PWD Lab evaluation 16 May updated

^v Disability Employment Australia. (2022). Response to the Recommendations of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability

^{vi} Life Without Barriers. (2022). Disability Done Differently.

^{vii} Employment White Paper, p.237

^{viii} AND Members Survey, 2023

^{ix} Ibid

^x United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 27.

^{xi} Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of People with Disability. Final Report

^{xii} Ibid. P.118

^{xiii} Employment White Paper, p.236