



REPORT ON THE INAUGURAL DISABILITY ASSEMBLY WA (DAWA) SUMMIT HELD ON 29 JULY 2022

IMPROVING EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Disability Assembly Western Australia (DAWA) is a Collective Voice in Western Australia for people with disability.

DAWA has evolved in response to a void that has developed in the State with a loss of local system ownership, leadership, management, and connection within the disability community since the introduction of the NDIS, a void which impacts significantly on many individuals, families and their specialist providers.

A key pillar of DAWA's approach to fulfilling its purpose, is through convening a number of "Summits" each year.

By invitation for each summit, DAWA assembles and connects around 100 people from across the disability ecosystem to discuss and debate a priority topic.

Following consultation through two focus groups with people with disability, families and carers, "Improving Employment Outcomes for People with Disability" was selected as the topic for the inaugural DAWA summit. The selection reflected the strategic and state-wide importance of the topic, the potential to impact on a significant number of people with disability, and the alignment with the high priority identified within both Australian and State Disability Strategies.

The DAWA summit on employment of people with disability, was held on Friday 29 July at the Telethon Speech and Hearing Function Centre, 36 Dodd Street, Wembley.

85 participants attended, including 30 people with disability and family members/carers, around 20 representatives from employment services or disability services providers, and around 40 representing a mix of government bodies (state and local), peak bodies, and small to large businesses.

The morning session aimed to provide all participants with clear context on the topic of employment for people with disability, through information provision, clarification and group discussion with a range of highly credentialed keynote speakers and "experts" on the subject of "what works" in relation to the employment of people with disability.

The afternoon sessions of the DAWA Employment for People with Disability Summit were dedicated to facilitated participant discussion in small working groups – named "PODS." To ensure the individual perspective and lived experience was front-and-centre for each discussion, each of the ten (10) PODS comprised up to ten (10) Summit participants and included at least one person with disability (and a support person/family member/carer, if required).

The broad discussion topic for each of the PODS was:



Over the past 20 years, national and state disability strategies have included commitments to improve employment outcomes for people with disability, but we remain in the position where the unemployment rate for people with disability is more than double that for people without disability (and disproportionately worse for people with high and complex needs, including people with intellectual disability).

What must change to achieve the desired growth in employment for people with disability in Western Australia; and what are the priorities to avoid the prospect of looking back in ten years' time and again seeing minimal progress made?

The POD discussions lasted 1¾ hours, following which, participants regrouped to hear and help consolidate the overall feedback from each of the PODS.

A detailed discussion of the key themes that arose within the POD discussions is provided in Section 3 of this report. A summary is provided below:

- *Action is needed now!*

The *Employ My Ability – Australian Disability Employment Strategy 2021-2031* highlights that:

- Just 53.4% of people with disability are in the labour force, compared with 84.1% of those without disability.
- The gap of over 30% has remained largely unchanged for almost 20 years (since 2003).
- The unemployment rate for people with disability is double that of working age people without disability (10% compared to 4.6%); and
- More than 113,000 people with disability are currently unemployed and looking for work.

Against this background and frustration at the stubborn lack of real progress over decades, summit participants were loud in demanding that “It’s time for this to change!”

- *Focus on the person*

Summit participants expressed that the failure to be mindful of different disabilities, abilities and capabilities, and that work meets different needs in all of us means that “many people with disability are not getting a fair go.”

To achieve success, it is vital that all involved accept that jobs and careers are, by definition, personal; and that employment approaches should be as individualised as possible, designed and implemented to understand the person first and to fulfil individual ambition – including a process of “discovery” to explore their interests, skills, motivations, and the person’s situation.

- *Real Government, Public Sector and Industry Leadership is required*



A consistent theme in all POD conversations related to the lack of real leadership shown to date by government(s), employers, and industry leaders – resulting in a call from participants for these bodies to “step up to the plate” and actively drive the changes required, to improve employment outcomes for people with disability.

- *Consistent support required at the school to employment transition point*

Many of the POD discussions focused on participants’ experiences when transitioning from school and seeking employment opportunities.

All agreed the education systems need to be set up to enable all school students with disability to succeed. They also agreed that prioritising the focus on pathways for the younger generation would pay huge dividends in the longer term, and that if done well, it would help change the perceptions and expectations of employers.

Summit participants therefore called for additional funding support through Education Departments to enable the provision, in all schools, of the early support required for people with disability to explore employment / career opportunities and pathways as they move towards exiting high school.

Participants also requested that similar early support be made available for parents of a child with disability, for example to connect them to the supports and opportunities available.

Finally, summit participants called for greater engagement of and commitment from the TAFE, University and private RTO systems, to better engage in providing skills and job readiness training for people with disability, including through offering more flexibility in delivery. An opportunity was also considered to exist for these education bodies to provide and support ‘diversity’ training for employers (see below).

- *Training and Capacity Building of Employers*

Considering the evidence and their own experiences, summit participants considered that the development and delivery of a range of training for organisation leaders (and HR managers) is urgently required to increase disability awareness and confidence among employers (and to upskill their HR teams).

Increased disability awareness and capability training could be led / facilitated / delivered by industry groups and peak bodies, which would also demonstrate their commitment to improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

To accompany the above employer training, summit participants also called for the development of broader ‘employer and grass roots market education’ through:

- Sharing, celebration and promotion of the range of existing significant success stories and best practice examples;



- Storytelling of success stories for people with disability, to increase visibility of the issue and to seek to change the hearts and minds of leaders / potential employers;
- Using social media to raise the profile of the range of 'gifts and talents' that people with disabilities can bring to an employer; and
- Targeting presentations/expos at industry conferences, for example, tourism, hospitality and education.

- *Inclusive Recruitment Practices*

Many of the POD discussions identified recruitment 'bias' and the recruitment processes of potential employers, including the public service, as an inherent 'exclusion' barrier impacting on the employment of people with disability.

Summit participants therefore called for a fundamental reform of recruitment processes to ensure accessibility and effectiveness from the perspective of a person with disability. In this respect, they encouraged all employers to look closely at their policies around inclusion and at the accessibility of their recruitment process, to remove all potential barriers to people with disability even 'getting into the room.'

- *Address other Gaps, Disconnects, and Barriers*

As part of the POD discussions a range of other gaps, system disconnects, and barriers to improving employment outcomes for people with disability were identified by the summit participants.

Many related to 'fragmentation' in the system; for example, participants felt strongly that fragmentation of funding needs to be addressed.

The need for greater system navigation support was identified as another priority to help connect people with disability with job opportunities and employers, and DES providers with 'interested' companies.

Other gaps and barriers highlighted by participants as needing to be addressed included:

- A lack of available and effective advocacy (individual and systemic) for those who need it most;
- The 'competition' that exists between employment services providers (largely because of contractual incentives); and
- The need for genuine and meaningful employment-related targets to be set for each individual and monitored closely.



- *Funding Support Required*

Many of the calls for action described in the previous themes in this report will require funding support from the state and commonwealth governments. However, a few additional funding requirements were identified by summit participants.

Firstly, participants identified that some of the current funding incentives for businesses to employ a person with disability cease after around 26 weeks, making it difficult or challenging to continue to employ the person without some additional support. Participants therefore called for consideration of a period of additional funding, where an employer experiences difficulties, to cover a percentage of an employee's wages.

Secondly, participants called for funding to be made available to assist employers with exploring the potential engagement of people with disability, and to assist with training and any reasonable adjustments required to enable the employment of the person.

Thirdly (and finally), participants called for greater funding support to be available through the NDIS for 'items' such as employment exploration and development, for such funding to be made available for both a person with disability and a potential employer, for the funding to be able to be used flexibly, and to be able to be continuous and portable.

Drawing from the themes arising in the Summit POD and full group discussions, the final section of the report presents a series of key messages generated by the Summit participants.

The participants requested DAWA to ensure these messages were conveyed for consideration by the WA State Government (including messages for the State Government to include in their advocacy with the Commonwealth Government), industry peak bodies, employers (including in the corporate sector) and by other key influencers/leaders who should be able to effect change in the priority afforded to the employment of people with disability.

The Summit summary and key messages are as follows:

Summary of overarching messages from the DAWA 2022 Summit - Improving Employment Outcomes for People with Disability

- People with disabilities have the capacity to immensely add to the workplace. ***They are an untapped resource!*** But there are many barriers preventing them from making a meaningful contribution.
- Rates of employment of people with disabilities is significantly lower than people without disabilities, and the difference has not improved in 20 years.
- The benefits of employing people with disabilities is reflected in the performance, culture, and capacity of organisations.
- Navigation of the system needs to be simplified, for individuals and for employers. Supports are available but are often fragmented and not readily apparent.



- The State Government has a critical role to play to lead the change that will produce positive outcomes in employment of people with disabilities.
- The Commonwealth Government needs to address:
 - Funding supports for people with disabilities seeking employment - support needs to be more tailored to the individual
 - Disincentives, such as significant loss of pensions and medical benefits – disincentives need to be removed as people transition into employment
 - Lack of transparency of progress towards national employment and other targets
- Industry peak bodies and employers need to play a greater leadership role - Business can learn from others who have had success in the employment of people with disabilities, to make their own journey easier
- There are some simple changes that can occur ***now*** to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities – we don't need any further research or pilot programs.

Messages for the WA State Government

The State Government has a central role to play to lead the change that will produce positive outcomes in employment of people with disabilities:

- *As a champion employer* – leading the way in WA by:
 - As a minimum, achieve the current target of 5% employment in the public sector before 2025 and hold Directors General to account on their performance as part of its existing commitment to *Australia's Disability Strategy*
 - Co-design recruitment to ensure it is accessible, inclusive, and non-discriminatory
 - Ensure people with disabilities are involved in recruitment panels
 - Facilitate workforce training to create better workplace cultures that embrace disability employment
 - Ensure the public service has flexibility in job design, so roles are built around the strengths, passions, and capacities of people with disabilities
 - Publishing progress towards targets in key initiatives such as Employment Targeted Action Plan in the Australian Disability Strategy, from the State Disability Strategy, and other initiatives in a timely manner
- *As a facilitator* – providing people with disabilities, carers, families, employers, peak bodies with an effective and up-to-date service to guide people where to start their journey of employment or employment of people with disabilities by:
 - Providing information for industry, peak bodies, employers, etc with information, toolkits, and support to increase participation for people with disabilities in the workforce
 - Creating an easier interface between public sector agencies for the employment of people with disabilities



- Providing funding to small to medium enterprises to make their workplace appropriate for people with disabilities, and promote the availability of such funding
- *As a legislator* – reviewing existing and creating new legislation to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities
 - Create legislation / regulations that mandate employment of people with disabilities for the state public service and local government authorities
 - Reverse the onus of proof around discriminatory practice in employment for people with disabilities.
- *As an advocate* – holding the Commonwealth Government to account, and ensuring programs and funding lead to better outcomes in employment for people with disabilities by:
 - Strong and effective involvement with the Employment Targeted Action Plan, ensuring the commitments of the Commonwealth are met
 - Using the Disability Reform Ministers forum to ensure pre-election promises are delivered
 - Advocating for the removal of disincentives for transitioning into employment, such as the loss of pension and medical entitlements
 - Negotiating for funding reform, so employment related funding starts earlier and follows people through life stages and transitions
 - Ensuring the continuity of a spectrum of employment options (including Australian Disability Enterprises), whilst there is a transition into more mainstream employment.

Messages for Industry Groups, Peak Bodies and Employers

Employing people with disabilities makes good business sense:

- You enhance diversity and build your company's capacity, culture, and performance.
- By opening opportunities to people with disabilities you can widen your recruitment pool to meet your specific business needs.
- People with a disability often have the lowest absenteeism and turnover of any category of staff.
- Customer feedback shows the community often love the interactions they have with people with a disability in the workplace.
- There are wonderful businesses already making employment of people with disabilities a resounding success.

Yet, people with a disability in WA are **not getting a fair go**:

- They experience barriers and other discrimination when applying for jobs – and the onus is on them to prove it.
- Traditional recruitment methods can often disadvantage a person with a disability, despite the value they can add.



- Abilities of people with disabilities are not seen – overshadowed by a fear of offence, and a lack of familiarity with co-workers participating alongside them in all aspects of education, work, and community life.

“Businesses are missing out on an untapped resource”

Peak Bodies have a Role in Addressing this too:

- Commence the conversations with your members about the benefits of employing people with disabilities
- Facilitate training for members, getting them ready to make the experience of employing people with disabilities the positive one it should be
- Connect with disability employment providers and other agencies that will work with your industry and connect your members to them
- Work with your members and other peak bodies to identify and promote employers who are “disability employment champions”, and get them to share their successes
- Support the advocacy to government about integrated and more appropriate funding support for employers and for people with disability
- Lobby the State and Commonwealth Governments for effective supports and information for industry that will lead to an increase in participation for people with disabilities in the workforce
- Be a champion of disability employment by reviewing your own practices and commence the employment process.

“Start the conversation and take a first step now”

Messages for Employers

Actions Businesses Can Take Now

- Tap into the knowledge and understanding of your workforce to understand many of your staff already have a link to someone with a disability
- Develop and deliver education and training packages to ensure you provide a disability safe and discrimination free workplace
- Engage in “*job carving*” - examine the work you need doing and see what can be done to match the skills and strengths of a person with a disability
- Adjust your recruitment processes to remove the conscious or unconscious barriers people with disabilities face
- Note in your job advertisements (formal or informal) that people with disabilities are encouraged to apply
- Explore volunteering as a pre-cursor to your first step into employing people with disabilities
- Access support on how to recruit people with disabilities and inform and prepare your existing workforce for successful integration



- Connect with a specific Disability Employment Service or organisation what will support employers to provide you with opportunities and access to funding

While you are doing this, please:

- Have open conversations with your existing team about the desire to employ people with disabilities
- Ensure your induction programs include buddies to socially include the person with a disability to others in the organisation
- Connect with other businesses who have had success in employing people with disabilities.

“Start the conversation and take a first step now”