



# Case Studies of Employees with a Disability

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Department of Education & Training



Published by Policy and Employee Relations Division  
Department of Education & Training  
Melbourne  
November 2005

Also published on <http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/hrweb/diversity/equal.htm>

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# 1. Introduction

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Profiling people employed in this organisation who have disabilities is such an important thing to undertake. It sends out a message that this organisation sees value and benefits to the employment of people with disabilities. It also gives us the opportunity to give voice to our employment experiences and provide insight into what works and what doesn't. We can really build on this to create an organisation that everybody wants to work for. (Case Study Participant)

This report is based on six case studies documenting the experiences of employees with a disability and their managers. The case studies were undertaken as part of the development of the Department's Disability Action Plan; they include a range of staff at varying classification levels and occupations, and cover a range of disabilities. The employment experiences of staff members who are carers of people with disabilities were also recognised and covered in one of the case studies in the report.

The project team was greatly encouraged by the positive responses of case study participants, who welcomed the opportunity to participate and have input into this project and were willing to share their thoughts and experiences.

Overall, the report highlights the challenges and benefits that are brought to the organisation by staff with a disability. It also discusses various adjustments that are required, the role of management, and suggestions for change. A number of additional issues for carers are also identified; however, the bulk of the report focuses on employment issues for employees with disabilities.

In undertaking the project, DE&T has demonstrated a willingness to engage in critical self-examination in the way in which it has worked, and is currently working, towards ensuring effective and successful workplace strategies in relation to the employment of people with disabilities.

While the case studies have undoubtedly highlighted the considerable benefits to workplace culture and productivity achieved through the employment of people with disabilities, a number of important organisational learnings have also emerged.

The Department now has an important opportunity to seize and position itself as a leading-edge organisation, willing to embrace the idea that innovation, adaptability and diversity have become the key behaviours of successful organisations. How the organisation adapts, adjusts and responds to the challenge of diversity is vital.

## 1.1 Background

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The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring that people with a disability have the same employment opportunities as all other Victorians, particularly in public services and in local government. (Department of Human Services 2002)

*The Victorian State Disability Plan 2002–2012* (DHS 2002) guides the development of disability action plans by Victorian Government departments and agencies. One of the main objectives of the state plan is to make public services accessible, including increasing employment opportunities for people with a disability.

*The DE&T Corporate Plan* (DE&T 2003) discusses the need to extend the capability of education and training professionals, including attracting and retaining a high-quality and professional work force. Attracting people with disabilities who are quality applicants with sought-after skills is another way in which the Department could strengthen its human resource base.

The Victorian Government's *Growing Victoria Together* (DPC 2005) policy also highlights the need for increased participation in the work force as the population ages and work force growth stagnates. Increasing the participation of people with disabilities at DE&T by improving accessibility, as well as improving attraction and retention, could also support this objective.

All Victorian Government departments and agencies are required to develop a Disability Action Plan as part of the strategy to eliminate discrimination and provide people with disabilities equal opportunities for inclusion and participation.

In 2004, DE&T Human Resources Division established a Disability Action Plan – Employment Working Party. The Employment Working Party discussed a range of issues and suggestions about improving employment outcomes for employees with disabilities. In March 2005, the Employment Working Party decided to undertake six case studies to highlight the experiences of employees with disabilities in DE&T who have successfully negotiated the recruitment and selection processes. In July 2005, MyriaD Consultants were contracted to undertake the six case studies and report on key issues.

## 1.2 The Objectives of the Case Studies

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The objectives of the case studies were:

- to provide a profile of five employees with disabilities across the organisation and to obtain information about their employment experiences within DE&T;

- to provide a profile of one employee with carer responsibilities and obtain information about their employment experiences within DE&T;
- to explore the employment opportunities open to people with disabilities and carers within DE&T;
- to examine the career development of the employees and produce a report providing a foundation from which the organisation and other government bodies could seek to improve opportunities for the recruitment, retention and career development of people with disabilities; and
- to encourage exchanges of information across the organisation and so disseminate the benefits of good policy and practice, for example the business case for diversity/disability employment.

Overall, the case studies would provide models of best practice for the Department and identify the successes, challenges and opportunities for change. They would also provide an important opportunity to promote DE&T as a positive place to work for people with disabilities.

## 1.3 Methodology

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### Approach

This study utilises a case study methodology. A case study approach provides important qualitative insights into the experiences of a selected group of individual staff with disabilities.

No additional quantitative methodologies were utilised in this report. However, it is strongly suggested that quantitative assessments of existing data, as might be collated by Human Resources, be undertaken in future organisational activities related to the development and implementation of the Disability Action Plan.

A case study approach is suited to the task of building a picture of current employment experiences for a select number of staff members and their respective managers. The employment journeys of each of the staff members interviewed is unique. However, their experiences and insights exemplify the range of issues confronting people with disabilities in employment. Therefore, the report draws general implications and learnings from each interview.

In undertaking the case study project, the project team did not want to repeat many of the methodological errors that have informed past approaches to working with people with disabilities. Therefore, ensuring inclusive and empowering research and consultation practice became an important goal. Indeed, as the project continued, scrutiny and commitment to process was of equal importance to the project outcomes, if not greater importance.

## Recognition of Diversity

The case studies incorporate a range of staff at varying classification levels and occupations and cover a range of disabilities. However, it should be noted that all of the disabilities as far as they were disclosed were of a physical and sensory nature.

The project team provided participants with the opportunity to decide whether or not they wished to disclose the nature of their disability. All participants were willing to discuss the nature of their disability as it related to their work experiences. Whether the disability was congenital or acquired and its impact on the employment history of the participant was not a focus of attention for the case studies.

One participant was eager to highlight the importance of ensuring that future efforts at documenting case studies should ensure broader representations of the range of disabilities:

I think that what often happens is that people who have visible physical or sensory disabilities are picked to get involved in projects like this. I hope that in the future we can look at cognitive or psychological issues and their impact on employment. I know that we have some staff here who have issues related to mental health but that the stigma is so great that they wouldn't come out and get involved.

Several participants advocated the view that the employment experiences of people with disabilities can vary considerably depending on the nature and extent of their disability. Furthermore, there might be a diverse range of needs, including adjustments and workplace support that might stem from the nature and severity of a person's disability or disabilities.

The issue of 'representation' is an important one that will need to be considered in future discussions or activities related to progressing issues for people with disabilities within the Department.

The process adopted by the project team has also confirmed the importance, wherever possible, of analysing the situation of people with a disability in a way that acknowledges the diversity of people with disability and takes account of these differences.

As noted previously, a decision had also been made to include a specific case study that would document the unique and particular experiences of employees who are carers.

It should also be highlighted that while the selected participants were also characterised by differences in sex, ethnicity, educational backgrounds, geographical distance from their workplace and other factors, the impact of these intersectional aspects of their lives was not explored.

## Interviews

Interviews were undertaken with six DE&T employees and the six managers with whom they worked.

Staff participants were asked to address the following key interview themes:

- a) description of work history
- b) overview of key strengths/contributions to the organisation;
- c) recruitment experiences
- d) initial work experience
- e) adjustment issues
- f) experiences of management and organisational support
- g) improvements required and recommendations.

Managers were asked to reflect on the following interview themes:

- a) the benefits and strengths of the employee
- b) recruitment successes and challenges
- c) retention issues
- d) managing people with disabilities, including overall successes and challenges
- e) improvements required and recommendations.

For the purposes of clarity and readability, the report sets out the responses of the above themes in sections 3 and 4.

The second part of this report includes the case studies of each of the six participants

### 1.4 Confidentiality

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The issue of confidentiality of participants' views was crucial in this study. In order to obtain genuine thoughts and perceptions about sensitive topics related to employment experience and organisational effectiveness, all participants must feel comfortable to speak their mind without risk of identification. Therefore, the report provides details of key themes emerging across all of the interviews, rather than detailing the outcomes of each interview.

The project team has taken great responsibility and care to ensure that the representation of the issues raised during the interviews has been done in a manner that is respectful of the voices, wisdom and insights of those participating, while at the same time meeting the highest research standards. At every stage, the project team has ensured high levels of rigour because of the corresponding importance of the issues at hand and the need for valid and sound data that can inform future intervention and support efforts. Quotations from individuals have also been selected to illustrate the range of viewpoints identified. The use of quotes is considered an important part of ensuring that the voices of participants are integrated into the core of this report. The names of individuals, however, remain confidential.

## 2. Brief Literature Review

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Employment places a pivotal role in providing people with disabilities with a sense of inclusion, not only in the workplace but also in other social networks. Having a job can provide the means to improved participation in other areas of life, and the interactions that result from this can greatly enhance the wellbeing of people with disabilities. Accordingly, discrimination that erects barriers to the full and equal involvement of people with disabilities in the work force can have widespread and profound negative ramifications. (Productivity Commission 2004)

Employment is regarded as one of the key areas where people with disabilities have felt disadvantaged. The issue of employment has evoked considerable attention by both the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the Productivity Commission.

This brief literature review draws on both international and Australian research. The review is set out under the following headings and provides an important foundation for the remainder of this report:

- defining disability
- current employment status of people with disabilities, particularly within the public sector
- approaches to strategies targeted at disability employment
- the business case: identifying the benefits
- barriers
- recruitment and retention
- organisational strategies.

In summary, the literature review indicates that:

- The attitudes of employers and fellow workers tend to create a greater barrier than any physical barriers.
- Senior management commitment is critical to the successful employment of people with disabilities.
- Employers need to know more about the support services and funding available.
- Employers need to know more about the business case for employing people with disabilities:
  - low absenteeism
  - low turnover
  - low accident rates
  - high productivity
  - high motivation. (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2000b).

## 2.1 Defining Disability

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The Government recognises that the nature of disability is changing, and that new and different types of disabilities are now being recognised. Advances in technology have made it possible to find out about and treat many medical conditions, when this was often not possible in the past. As things continue to change and develop, the way that society thinks about disability in ten years' time might be very different. As the Government puts this Plan into place, it will look at these changes and the new challenges that emerge, so that it can respond appropriately. (Department of Human Services 2002)

There is much debate about the best way to define disability, and the scope of this paper does not allow for a comprehensive discussion of the range of approaches that have been canvassed in the literature. The issue of definition has also been further complicated by the links to individual eligibility criteria for program and financial assistance or to legal implications. For example, some programs determine disability through self-identification, while others require detailed information from medical specialists.

The literature, however, suggests that it is very important that in developing programs and policy, clarity and agreement are reached about a shared definition or understanding of 'disability'.

As stated, disability is difficult to define because it is a multi-dimensional concept with both objective and subjective characteristics. When interpreted as an illness or 'impairment', disability is seen as fixed in an individual's body or mind. When interpreted as a social construct, disability is seen in terms of the socioeconomic, cultural and political disadvantages resulting from an individual's exclusion.

People with disabilities, advocacy groups, legal and medical practitioners, policy-makers and the general public all have a different view of disability. Furthermore, the meaning of disability has evolved and changed over the years through various perspectives – for example, moral, medical, social and human rights perspectives.

In summary, the literature suggests two major classification systems, or disability perspectives or models, which have helped define disability over the decades:

- the impairment perspective or medical model; and
- the social and human rights model. (Newell 1998).

The various perspectives have an effect not only on how we define disability, but also on social planning and program design, employment strategies, and how decisions are made regarding such things as program eligibility (Nagi 1965).

In seeking to emphasise the distinction between impairment and disability, and promote a 'social model', the Physical Disability Council of Australia has stated:

Disability means the disadvantage or restriction caused by a contemporary social organisation, which takes no account or little account of people who have impairments and the functional or behavioural consequences of those impairments, leading to social exclusion or resulting in less favourable treatment of and discrimination against people with impairments.

Therefore people with disability are people with impairments who are disabled by barriers in society. [The] central theme in this definition is that disability is external to the individual and is a result of environmental and social factors. (Submission by Physical Disability Council of Australia to Productivity Commission 2004)

There are many variations of the social model, but all portray disability as a social construct created by ability-oriented and ability-dominated environments. According to the social model, even though impairment has an objective reality that is attached to the body or mind, disability has more to do with society's failure to account for the needs of people with disabilities.

It is important to note that this report and the methodology adopted in undertaking the case studies is informed by a combined social model and ecological approach. The ecological approach identifies disability as involving interrelationships between a person and their environment. Characteristics of both the person and environment impact on a person's experiences and development (Productivity Commission 2004).

## 2.2 Current Employment Status of People with Disabilities, Particularly within the Public Sector

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Despite the introduction of national and state legislation aimed at preventing discrimination in areas such as employment, and with the increasing recognition of the benefits of employing people with disabilities, the employment rate has remained low compared with the rate for people without a disability. The National Inquiry into Employment and Disability was launched by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in March 2005 in order to address this well-known inequity.

The goal of the inquiry is to identify the primary reasons for low participation and employment rates for people with disabilities, and to work towards practical, achievable solutions.

The inquiry identified that Australians with a disability are much less likely to be employed than people without a disability. They have a comparatively lower labour force participation rate (53.2 per cent compared with 80.1 per cent) and

a higher unemployment rate (8.6 per cent compared with 5 per cent) than those without a disability (HREOC 2005). The statistics also show that people with disabilities participate in the workforce at lower rates, they are less likely to be employed when they do participate, and they will earn less if they do get a job. This has been the case for a long time and the problem seems to be getting worse.

The Productivity Commission, in its Review of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (2004, p. 211), further reported that while there was a slight improvement for males with a disability, employment for females with a disability was worsening. This suggests that the Act has been more successful in furthering the employment of males than females.

A report prepared for the Office of Public Employment (Graffam, Smith & Hardcastle 2005) identified that within the Victorian public sector as a whole, approximately 5.0 per cent (11,473) of the total weighted population of 229,647 are reported as having a disability that restricted them in performing everyday activities, lasting more than six months. Of employees with a disability, 86.2 per cent reported an acquired disability and 13.8 per cent a congenital disability; and 48.2 per cent reported requiring some adjustment to their workplace or work conditions to enable them to complete their work.

It is important to note that disability is not reported uniformly across the sub-sectors of the public sector. It was suggested by the Office of Public Employment report that under-reporting is related to perceptions and conceptions of disability, which vary individually, culturally and across contexts.

With respect to gender, 6.2 per cent of males and 4.4 per cent of females reported having a disability. With respect to age, 4.4 per cent of respondents under 50 years and 6.5 per cent of those 50 years and older reported a disability. Looking at country of birth, lower than average (5.0 per cent) rates were reported by Southeast Asian-born respondents (2.3 per cent) and Americas-born respondents (1.3 per cent), while a higher than average rate was reported by sub-Saharan African respondents (8.5 per cent).

## **Types of Disabilities and Their Impact on Employment Experience**

Not a great deal of the research undertaken has compared the types of disabilities and their impact on employment experience. However, research into work participation carried out by the NZ Ministry of Social Development concluded that the more severe a person's disability, the lower the likelihood that the person will be in employment (Jensen et al 2004). According to this research, having a hearing impairment appeared to have a much smaller impact on employment than other disabilities, and this did not alter according to the severity of the impairment. It was noted that people who were blind or visually impaired were perceived by employers to be the hardest group to accommodate.

The recent NZ EEO Trust survey (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005a) also found that the type of impairment appeared to have some influence on whether a person was in employment. Those with intellectual, brain injury or concentration impairments were more likely to not be in paid work.

## 2.3 Approaches to Strategies Targeted at Disability Employment

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Embracing and celebrating diversity within the Victorian community is a key theme of the *Victorian State Disability Plan 2002–2012* (Department of Human Services 2002). Valuing and managing diversity is considered an important strategy in effective work force management generally and in preventing workplace discrimination in particular (Stoner & Russell-Chapin 1997).

While numerous research documents have confirmed that people with a disability are valuable contributors to a diverse work force, the benefits of diversity in employment have not flowed to people with a disability. Research such as the report prepared for the Victorian Office of Public Employment (Graffam, Smith & Hardcastle 2005) and HREOC (2005) have highlighted that people with a disability remain disproportionately excluded as employees. The Australian Public Service Commission (2004) reported that in the decade between 1994 and 2004 there had been a decline in the employment of people reporting a disability as a proportion of APS employees. In 2004, people with a disability represented 3.8 per cent of continuing APS employees, down from 5.8 per cent ten years prior (Australian Public Service Commission 2004). This suggests that although promoting a diverse work force is well advised, there is still much room for development and improvement in relation to people with a disability.

A great deal of the literature suggested a dual approach combining both work force diversity approaches and equal employment opportunity (EEO) approaches to improve employment for people with a disability. The EEO legislation is a well-recognised tool for promoting a diverse work force. Seen in its historical context, EEO promised equality of access and opportunity for under-represented groups, and, through this, social and economic change.

While there has been an increasing shift in recent times from EEO to an emphasis on diversity management, it is clear from the research that for people with a disability, a substantive equal opportunity framework is required. Such a framework needs to address the social and structural barriers to full participation.

In drawing on the Office of Public Employment research (Graffam, Smith & Hardcastle 2005), this report therefore adopts the recommendation that a dual approach is appropriate. Such an approach combines ‘the traditional approaches for measuring and managing EEO, which are based on setting

targets as indicators of performance, and diversity management strategies, which will promote optimal participation’.

## 2.4 The Business Case: Identifying the Benefits

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The EEOT research (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b) highlights the following benefits of employing people with disabilities:

- The ‘disability market’ is important, as is accessing their growing spending power.
- Employees with disabilities are as productive as, and often more productive than, other employees (supported by research conducted by Swinburne University, State Services Commission 2002).
- Employees with disabilities often have better attendance than non-disabled staff (Hall 2002).
- Accessible workplaces are suitable and safer for all staff (ibid).
- The experiences of staff with impairments can help identify the needs of other disability stakeholders.
- The employment of staff with a disability provides access to a wider pool of workers.

Similarly, research conducted by Disability Works Australia ([www.dwa.org.au](http://www.dwa.org.au) 2005) demonstrates that workers with a disability benefit employers by improving their operations and strengthening business links with the community. Numerous businesses and organisations are increasingly realising that diversity in the work force makes good business sense. The benefits for employers include:

- Workers with disabilities often have better attendance and safety records. It has been shown that people with a disability are more loyal, dependable and productive than their non-disabled colleagues.
- Workers with disabilities often have a higher staff retention rate, which saves recruitment and training costs.
- The employment of workers with disabilities is often viewed positively by co-workers and can have a positive effect on workplace morale.
- The employment of workers with disabilities improves access to a growing and largely untapped market.
- The employment of workers with disabilities minimises opportunities for litigation as employing people with a disability is evidence that an employer is taking steps towards implementing an equal opportunity policy.

Employers who employ workers with a disability gain a better understanding of their customers or clients. Customers and clients come from every walk of life, so it makes sense that the staff do too. It is likely that approximately 19 per cent of customers will have a disability, and these people could increase

trade through allowing the organisation to access this significant segment of the market. (www.dwa.org.au 2005) The use of case studies illustrates the positive experiences of people with a disability and their employers. It also allows relevant experts to answer a broad range of questions and to promote good practice (European Commission 1997, as quoted in Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005). The literature has also highlighted the strong business case for providing flexible employment practices to employees who are carers. The benefits of such support include reduced staff turnover and associated costs, lower absenteeism and sickness, and retention of skilled staff. Such support also delivers better motivation and greater staff loyalty.

## 2.5 Barriers

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In an excellent summary of the range of barriers facing people with disabilities, either trying to enter the work force or already working, the NZ EEO Trust (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b) identified key areas including:

### **a) Attitudes**

- employers' lack of disability awareness and negative and stereotypical attitudes towards disability. In some workplaces employees with disabilities have been segregated from colleagues and customers. (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2001; European Commission 1997; Gray & Neale 1991; Murray & Heron 1999; Smith 2004)
- interviewers' lack of expectations, and focus on a person's impairment rather than on their skills and abilities (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b)
- colleagues' lack of understanding and flexibility. In some cases workers with impairments have been shunned and harassed. (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2001; Robert 2003; State Service Commission 2002)
- public perceptions focusing on impairments rather than ability (International Labour Office 2002)
- low self-esteem
- overprotective families.

### **b) Stereotypes**

- the perception that people with disabilities are more likely to have accidents and be less productive (Perry et al. 2000; La Grow & Daye 2004)
- the low expectations of the people supporting the people with disabilities in finding work; they may stress the moral and legal obligations of employing people rather than the benefits and skills of people with disabilities.

**c) *Physical and communication barriers***

- transport – inaccessible public transport or lack of car parking at work. This can be a significant barrier for people who are visually or physically impaired (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b; La Grow & Daye 2004)
- physical barriers – access to the building and facilities is an issue for people with mobility and visual impairments (Brake 2001; Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b; La Grow & Daye 2004)
- accessibility of information for people who are vision, learning or hearing impaired. This includes lack of specialised equipment and low vision aids, specialised training to use this equipment and the availability of sign language interpreters for interviews, training and meetings. (Bruyère 2000; Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b; La Grow & Daye 2004).

**d) *Workplace policies and procedures***

- inadequate recruitment and selection procedures
- recruitment agencies imposing selection bias, even though an employer may promote an inclusive environment (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b).
- lack of awareness of the funding and workplace disability support available to employers (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b; Pernice & Lunt 1998).
- lack of flexibility around hours worked (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b)
- lack of flexibility to work part-time (Gray 1993)
- restrictive work practices which are impossible for people with some impairments to observe (Murray & Heron 1999)
- support for employed people who acquire an impairment (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b)
- lack of policy support.

**e) *Education and training***

- unequal access to education and training, resulting in a relative lack of employable skills (Mintrom & True 2004)
- lack of previous experience
- Adequate housing, education and access to support are all interrelated with employment. It is not possible to look for work if you do not have adequate and reliable support at home. (Barnes et al. 1998)

Research undertaken in Australia highlights similar barriers. Work force exclusion in Australia is reflected in the consistently high proportion of employment-related complaints under the Disability Discrimination Act – in

2003, 53 per cent of all complaints (Productivity Commission 2004). The Productivity Commission cautions that complaints made to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) may not give a true representation of all people who have experienced discrimination.

The Australian National Audit Office (1997) suggested that discrimination complaints were made by approximately 10 per cent of employees. The Productivity Commission further reported that employees with a disability were more than twice as likely as other employees to report having been harassed, bullied or subjected to discrimination at work (39 per cent versus 17 per cent) (Productivity Commission 2004). The literature clearly demonstrates that the biggest barrier to gaining and advancing in employment for people with disabilities is not the physical environment, but the negative attitudes often displayed by employers and co-workers towards people with disabilities.

The Australian Law Reform Commission (1996) identified employers' perceptions as an important barrier to the employment of people with a disability, and this is partially supported by the literature. Negative stereotypes are considered an important contributor to the under-representation of people with a disability in the work force (Green & Brooke 2001). Prejudicial attitudes towards the employment and promotion of employees with a disability have been highlighted in the literature. Martz (2003) found that when the person's disability was 'invisible' (for example, asthma or arthritis), they were 16 times more likely to find employment than those with a visible disability.

Barriers to employing people with disabilities from the perspective of employers have been well researched and include:

- lack of related experience
- lack of required skills. A lack of keyboard and writing skills was perceived to be a major obstacle. (Stevens 2002)
- for some employers, the type of impairment. Impairment of speech and vision were perceived as barriers. However, impaired physical strength and mobility were not considered to be major obstacles. (Stevens 2002)
- attitudes of co-workers and supervisors (Bruyère 2000)
- lack of supervisor knowledge to make any required adjustments
- societal attitudes. The perception that hiring a person with a physical disability might upset customers who expect staff to have a 'normal appearance', and might impact on their company image. (Studholme 1994)
- the perception of disability as an illness and linking it to more sick leave and lower productivity
- the perceived time and cost of recruitment and workplace support, and the lack of awareness of what support and funding is available.

## 2.6 Recruitment and retention

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Overall, the literature highlights that all human resources practices should be reviewed to identify and remove barriers to recruitment, retention and career development for people with disabilities. Changes that flow from such reviews can include:

- considering the job analysis, job description and person specification to avoid assumptions that exclude people with disabilities (Brake 2001).
- including an EEO statement in job advertisements. Recent research has shown that people with disabilities think the use of an EEO statement or logo is helpful. (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b)
- reviewing when health and disability information is requested during recruitment so that candidates with impairments are not disadvantaged
- providing and offering communication support at interviews, appropriate orientation, and on-the-job support, for example, providing an interpreter for a deaf employee (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b)
- using inclusive interviewing techniques, and training managers to ask the hard questions rather than just assuming that someone is unable to do a task. It may help to offer people the option of an initial phone interview to avoid eliminating candidates because of mobility or vision impairments. (McInnes 2004)
- on-line recruiting, also known as e-recruitment, has been used in the United Kingdom, and a barrier-free guide has been developed to help companies ensure that their online recruiting is accessible to people with disabilities.
- providing negotiated flexibility of hours and days worked and having flexible leave and/or the option of building up time in lieu to use for disability-related appointments
- ensuring promotion and career development is included as part of the review and appraisal process, and providing the same opportunities as other employees receive
- providing accessible car parking or access to transport to and from the workplace (Equal Employment Opportunity Trust 2005b).

Practical guides targeted at employers and human resource managers contain detailed suggestions outlining ways that employment practices can be made more inclusive. Some examples include guides produced by the Australian website *Employers Making A Difference and A Fair Go For People With Disabilities*, produced by the Victorian State Government (2004).

Finding and maintaining employment are not the only issues for people with disabilities. The research also identified issues relating to opportunities for job-related training and career advancement.

- Employees with impairments are less likely to receive job-related training.
- In the state sector, employees with impairments often receive less support and guidance from their managers regarding career advancement.
- There is a gap in the research relating to the issues of maintaining a job and developing a career (Perry et al 2000).

Ensuring the commitment of senior management is one of the most effective ways of creating an inclusive workplace that is open to employing people with disabilities. This top-down approach is seen as being critical to changing attitudes and breaking down employment and advancement barriers (Bruyère 2000).

Policies are most effective when all relevant groups are involved in identifying the barriers in the organisation, and developing and implementing measurable policies to remove these barriers. These groups include senior management, staff with disabilities and other staff, workers' representatives and organisations representing people with disabilities.

The International Labour Office report (2002) on managing disability in the workplace suggests that a disability management strategy should include:

- recruiting jobseekers with disabilities, including those who have not worked before and those who wish to return to work after a period of non-employment.
- providing promotion and career advancement to ensure that employees with disabilities have the same opportunities to acquire the skills and experience to advance their careers; and providing these employees with information and encouragement
- ensuring that training, both in-house and external, is accessible for people with communication needs and intellectual impairments
- facilitating communication and awareness raising.
- ensuring job retention for employees who acquire an impairment.

## 2.7 Organisational strategies

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In considering the strategies required for employment of people with disabilities, Graffam, Smith and Hardcastle's report for the Office of Public Employment (2005) considered a range of important principles that should underpin organisational strategies:

- The promotion of 'disability literacy' must be multidimensional, and must occur at the levels of the individual, the organisation, the relationships and partnerships, and public policy as a whole.
- Disability should not be treated as a special issue or set of issues, but incorporated into overall work force diversity management plans.

- Valuing difference underpins work force diversity management.
- For organisational change to proceed, leaders must believe there is a need for change and actively participate in driving the change process.
- Approaches to the promotion of optimal employment participation should be comprehensive, with individual, organisational and whole-system attention.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of workplace culture change, and the important role that senior management can take in achieving successful workplace change. The implementation of disability awareness education for employees and management is strongly supported by the literature.

### 3. Key Findings: Issues for Staff Participants

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This section details the responses provided by the staff participants during the interviews.

The following people were interviewed for the case studies:

- Jim Asimakopoulos, Manager, Ability Education Program – Manager interviewed: Jim Claridge
- Wes Brockett, Finance Officer, Corporate Services Division – Manager interviewed: Craig Webster
- Laura Carrington, Programs Officer, Student Wellbeing and Disabilities, Grampians Region – Manager interviewed: Jim Bond
- Helen Furmanczyk, Edumail Team, Information Technology Division – Manager interviewed: Tony Pincus
- Merry Young, Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority – Manager interviewed: Robyn Timmins
- Kerry Lyall: Office of Resource Management and Strategy – Manager interviewed: Les Walker

Disability types included:

- cerebral palsy
- paraplegia
- visual impairment
- hearing impairment
- short statured.

As stated, one of the case studies included a carer with children who have disabilities.

The educational backgrounds of interviewees varied, as did their employment histories prior to gaining employment at DE&T. The length of employment with DE&T also varied. The specific details of work histories are captured in the individual case studies in the next section of this report.

The case studies highlight a range of factors that shaped the participant's experiences of their individual employment journey, from their decision to seek out employment with the Department, right through to the attainment of successful, enduring employment. Some entered through graduate recruit programs, others by beginning part time and then being offered full-time employment.

This part of the report seeks to identify and analyse factors associated with successful employment outcomes, and to portray the range of challenges revealed by the participants. Both successes and challenges serve to expand individual and organisational understanding of the complex factors that

determine the employment experiences of people with disabilities at DE&T.

It is important to note that each of the interviewees was highly supportive of the decision to undertake the case studies. Furthermore, participants expressed the hope that their insights and experiences would contribute to bringing about a workplace culture and an organisation that actively promoted the employment and retention of people with disabilities:

I am hoping that by talking to you about my personal experiences, highlighting the positives, but at the same time bringing your attention to the things that could be improved, the employment opportunities for people with disabilities in the organisation can increase significantly.

Each of these individuals, in their own way, has contributed towards a recognition and appreciation within DE&T of the richness of their diverse skills, talents and life experience.

### 3.1 Overview of key strengths and contributions to the organisation

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I really believe that people with disabilities have inherent natural advantages. The main one for those of us who have experienced adversity is that we have the drive to be able to ensure good policy and practice; for people with disabilities, we want to help the organisation achieve what it wants with our input and assistance.

Interviewees identified a number of strengths they bring to the organisation, including:

- Bringing new ways of thinking and problem-solving;
- increasing the awareness among staff and managers of issues relevant to disability and diversity generally, and its impact on workplace relations;
- improving the profile and image of the Department as an employer of choice for people with disabilities;
- acting as positive role models for other employees.

The real value of a diverse work force, whether its disability or culture, is the synergy that flows from this – that people learn about each other and that you have more collaborative work teams.

### 3.2 Recruitment experiences

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Participants were asked to reflect on their recruitment experiences with DE&T and identify the range of factors that had an impact on their decision to apply, and on the application and interview processes.

Participants identified several factors in their decision to apply for a position within the Department. These included:

- income and economic factors
- issues related to personal confidence
- previous experience in the public sector
- restructuring in previous employment or redeployment
- the encouragement of family and friends
- the reputation of the Department as a positive place to work.

I had heard from others that working for Education [DE&T] was rewarding and that someone like me would be valued.

In reflecting on the interview process itself, several participants expressed the view that they believed it was their merit and the willingness of their managers to identify their skills that ensured their successful recruitment:

I wasn't just a person with a disability. I was someone who could really add value to the team. I had a willingness to try anything and a drive that was picked up on. It's important that employers move past just the physical disability to seeing what contributions people can make.

A number of barriers were identified by two participants in the application and interview process:

The first phase of gaining entry was an online application form. It couldn't be filled out.

Other barriers identified included a lack of understanding of the various communication needs of people with disabilities, including an over-reliance on the phone when setting up interviews or following up:

No one ever asked me if I had a preferred communication style or requirements. I was asked if I had any needs after the interview. That was good, but I think prior to organising the interview, the manager or the panellist should ask if there are any requirements as part of the interview itself.

The environment within which interviews are conducted was also raised as an important consideration. In the case of people with hearing impairments, ensuring that interviews are conducted in quiet areas was critical. The number of people on panels, and ensuring that panellists speak one at a time, were also highlighted as possible barriers for applicants with visual and hearing impairments.

Although these participants identified some of the barriers experienced as part of their recruitment into DE&T, they were quick to highlight the willingness of their managers to address some of these:

Once I highlighted how the interview process can act as an inadvertent block to people with disabilities, attention was given to looking at different ways of doing things.

In two instances, a Disability Employment Provider was accessed and provided support in gaining employment.

### 3.3 Initial work experience

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While most participants indicated a 'smooth' entry into the Department, several identified a number of issues that, if identified early in their work experience, would have alleviated more long term challenges, particularly in relation to other staff attitudes and required adjustments:

I think if it was picked up earlier it would have helped. There is a tendency to rely on people with disabilities to speak up and have the confidence to demand certain requirements. This isn't fair. There should be an expectation that the workplace assesses in advance what your needs might be and then opens up the discussion with you. This way you feel more confident to discuss your needs. Training for other members of the team would have been good as well.

For one participant, quick intervention and preliminary planning on the part of the manager ameliorated the responses of colleagues:

Initially, some staff were shocked, but as they got to know me they relaxed around me. Now I am treated as part of the team. I think it takes some time, and the fact that the manager was open and discussed issues with the team helped.

For several participants their initial experiences were not of discrimination, but rather a lack of awareness on the part of both other staff and managers:

I don't think it's deliberate discrimination. It's just that people don't get proper training around it. Managers might be good at managing people, but haven't received any support or training on particular issues that might come up for people with disabilities. Simple things like technological adjustments or even the way that they assume communication will happen – these have to be introduced into their day-to-day thinking.

I have never experienced attitudinal discrimination. The only thing I have experienced is ignorance. People not knowing that certain things might be required both legally and ethically.

## Induction

Several participants expressed the view that there were inadequate induction programs for new staff with disabilities. Suggestions were made about the need to develop an induction program that would incorporate specific disability components. This would also include a list of supports provided to people with disabilities within the organisation:

[ If someone had come to me and suggested how I could go about navigating my way around this place it would have been a lot easier than asking for things all the time.

## Training and development opportunities

Most participants who addressed the issue of training and development opportunities were extremely positive about the opportunities presented to them:

[ Professional development is extremely good here. I would need a reason why I wanted to do something, but if it's related and I can show how it will improve my skills, then it is greatly encouraged.

Another participant also highlighted the degree to which the organisation promoted professional development opportunities:

[ I have never felt inhibited in asking for training.

However, two participants pointed out that in their experience opportunities for further development were often presented in an ad hoc manner rather than an outcome of performance planning or formal training needs assessments:

[ It kind of relies on you saying you want to develop more skills. It needs to actually be something that is assessed properly as part of your performance cycle. I'm not always going to know what further skills I need to develop. This is where the role of a supervisor or manager is important – to sit down with you and identify strengths and performance gaps, and training that will address those gaps or build on the strengths.

They suggested the need for more concerted attention on issues of career development as part of the overall employment experience.

## Complaints processes

[ Sometimes it can be difficult to have a grievance taken seriously as a staff member with a disability.

Two participants raised some concerns about their perception that there were no avenues or opportunities to lodge complaints, or that when complaints were made, they would not be followed up.

There was also a perception that a person making a complaint would be seen as a ‘trouble-maker’ or discriminated against in future employment opportunities:

I realised that I needed to be sure that I wasn’t constantly making complaints and demanding adjustments and changes. There is a danger that you get seen as a trouble-maker rather than as someone trying to pave the way for others who will come here with disabilities.

### 3.4 Adjustment and accommodation issues

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The interviewees mostly felt that structural and technical adjustments were needed and subsequently they were made to make the work environment more accessible and safe for staff with a disability:

[ I feel that once I identified what I needed to be able to get the job done, there was no problem providing me with the necessary adjustments.

To ensure accessibility and a positive work space for participants, reasonable adjustments such as installation of various adaptive computer technologies or placement of work stations at quiet areas, or removal of potential obstacles in getting to and from the office space were provided by the Department.

Additional adjustments included:

- appropriate lighting, computer screens, telephones and height levels
- equal access to documents and files
- technological support
- equal access to meetings and promotions.

Several participants identified that the range of adjustments made served to empower them by improving communication with colleagues, providing greater learning opportunities, providing access to organisational information and improving productivity.

While participants highlighted positive examples of a range of adjustments made, several emphasised that these adjustments were often made only after they were pointed out:

[ Again, the issue becomes whether you are the one who each and every time has to point out what you might need rather than someone doing an audit and identifying this so that you don’t end up being seen as that demanding person.

Several reasons were provided for the unwillingness to request accommodation or adjustments:

- uncertainty about the effectiveness or usefulness of the adjustment
- concerns about how the requests would be considered by colleagues without

disabilities; for example, it may be regarded as 'special' or 'preferential' treatment

- concerns about the reaction of senior management – for example, whether a request would be regarded as an admission of inability.

For two participants, the adjustments were made at their own expense:

[ I brought in what I needed myself. Sometimes you feel that this is better to do than have to hassle people about what you need.

Several participants also highlighted that the issues of adjustment, such as the need for assistive technology, arises during the course of employment, and not just at the commencement. Therefore, there is a need to continually focus attention on how adjustments made need to be aligned with the changing nature of the work environment, or the deterioration in the nature and severity of the disability:

[ My disability is deteriorating and so I will require further adjustments to be made. It is important that we don't just focus on the initial experiences, but that like any employee, your requirements change as does the working environment. This, however, might be further compounded by a condition that worsens.

Cost information was not sought as part of this study, but issues of cost were raised by both staff and managers. It is suggested that a cost–benefit analysis of adjustments undertaken and required be conducted in the future.

While adjustment strategies are essential, such adjustments must be accompanied by broader organisational strategies, including training for all staff and managers. No single factor is likely to dominate the employment experiences of people with disabilities. Rather, there is a complex interaction of a variety of factors, one of which might be the structural barriers to successful employment experiences.

### 3.5 Experiences of management and organisational support

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On the whole, participants emphasised the high levels of support from their managers and viewed this support as critical to their levels of job satisfaction:

[ The support I have received here is excellent and has helped me develop the skills and build on my confidence.

I have been really supported in giving things a go, and in being provided with opportunities.

Several participants have suggested that the support they have received from managers might be more personality driven than organisationally planned and supported:

I am not sure that I feel that the support I get is due to an overall organisational commitment. I think it's because [name of manager] is so good and committed that I am able to feel supported. Not sure if I am totally confident that if [name of manager] left, I would get the same level of support. No real organisational statements of support.

Others suggested that the low levels of work force representation of people with disabilities across the Department may serve to reduce the willingness or capacity of staff to draw attention to their needs and concerns.

Several participants also suggested that managers could benefit from having more formal training and broader organisational support in place that they could draw on to assist them:

I don't think that [name of manager] has received any formal training or has been supported by HR to be able to develop skills in managing people with disabilities. It would be good if that could be developed.

Additional issues raised by staff as needing to be addressed included:

- the lack of monitoring of staff with a disability
- insufficient attention to performance reviews that take issues of disability into account
- infrequent discussions with managers around general progress
- accountability of managers to address issues around diversity management
- the need to review recurring problems and address them at a policy level.

Overall, participants emphasised the importance of developing an approach to the employment of people with disabilities that recognised employment not as a series of events, but as a process that requires continuing attention and scrutiny:

There is a tendency to focus on recruitment issues, then look at adjustment issues as if they are single events. They are all linked, and it is important that the strategies that we do adopt as part of the action plan locate the employment experience as a process that is ongoing and interrelated. Otherwise we will continue to get segments right, but not the overall process right.

### 3.6 Improvements required and recommendations

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The willingness of managers and supervisors to take on identified areas of improvement was applauded by all of the participants.

As much as things might frustrate me at times, when things change it is exhilarating.  
The thing that marks this organisation from others is that when I have raised issues it has been taken on, even if it's not what people want to hear.

It is important to note that all interviewees expressed the view that with appropriate training for managers and other staff, and a recognition of the structural barriers that implicitly limit inclusion, the potential existed for most barriers to be removed.

However, it was agreed that while the willingness and commitment to improvement was extremely evident, this was not enough. Participants advocated the view that managers needed training in management issues related to working with people with disabilities and diversity management generally.

Other more systemic suggestions included the development of performance reviews that were cognisant of the specific issues impacting on staff with disabilities. This would also ensure more adequate monitoring of the working experiences of people with disabilities:

There is no monitoring of the experiences of people with disabilities once they are employed. It is important that this happen if we are to ensure that the process is more than just about getting people through the front door. What happens to them after that is just as important, if not more.

Most participants were also keen to see the case studies extended to include more people in the organisation and receive follow-up on the impact of the process of undertaking the project:

I would like to see ongoing consultations with people beyond these case studies. What will be the effect – it should be monitored.

## 4. Key Findings: Issues for Managers

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Six managers were interviewed about their perspectives and experiences of having employed (in some instances) people with disabilities and the range of successes and challenges in managing an employee with a disability.

Managers were extremely open and candid about their experiences and insights, and regarded the interviews as part of their commitment to continuous improvement in the employment experiences of staff with disabilities. While managers were overwhelmingly positive in their reflections, some indicated that they would benefit from additional organisational support.

A number of the managers interviewed had previous experiences of employing and working with people with disabilities. One manager identified that he himself had a disability.

Interestingly, much of the research asserts that the attitudes of employers towards hiring people with a disability are strongly influenced by any prior experiences of working with members of this group. It is further indicated that employers who have employed people with disabilities have more positive attitudes than those who have not. This seemed very much to be reflected in the interviews conducted.

### 4.1 The benefits and strengths of the employee

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Managers were able to describe a range of benefits to the organisation. Most commonly it was appreciated that diversity within the workplace opens up passages to new and innovative ways of thinking and conducting business:

It undoubtedly introduces you to the notion that everyone doesn't have to follow the same process to get to the outcome. In fact, different processes can lead to a better outcome.

The insight and wisdom from a life experience often characterised by adversity, I think, means that you have to be innovative and creative to get by. I see that in [name of staff member], in the way that [name of staff member] approaches any task.

Two managers identified what they referred to as the 'work values' or 'work ethics' of the staff member with a disability:

I have been involved in employing several people with disabilities, and I think I can confidently say that there is a work ethic that characterises the approach by most of the staff I have had. There is a level of commitment that is quite significant.

Several managers also identified the benefits to their own personal and professional development as a result of their interactions with staff:

I gained a real understanding of the broader issues for people with disabilities. You develop a greater sensitivity and awareness of the ways in which things which you just take for granted can become sources of barriers. I have taken this understanding to not only this workplace but also outside of it.

Two managers highlighted the importance of extending the message of the organisational benefits of disability employment strategies to staff at an operational level:

I think the benefits to me as a manager were obvious, but I needed to be able to show this to staff. To be able to show staff that employing people with disabilities isn't done out of a preference or special treatment, but because people bring experiences and skills that we all can benefit from.

## 4.2 Recruitment successes and challenges

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The levels of direct involvement in the recruitment of staff participants varied considerably, and so the comprehensiveness of responses to this question was limited. However, all managers identified the fact of recruitment as a successful outcome in itself:

Just the sheer fact that [name of staff] was employed, is in itself, I think, an indicator of success. I know that there are still many barriers to getting through the interview process that we have to do some work around, but the fact that someone like [name of staff] got through is a testament to their courage and determination. Give me someone like that for my team any day.

Several managers were quick to argue that considerations of 'merit' should still constitute the most important component of a decision to employ someone with a disability:

I am not sure that targets are the way to go. I think people who are employed want to know that it's because of their skills and not the fact of their disability.

For one manager, the issue of merit was a given in the decision to employ the staff member:

She came to us as a casual. We needed a short-term worker who could fill the vacancy. She demonstrated so much skill and ability and enjoyed working here so much that when a full-time job became vacant she applied for it and got it.

## 4.3 Retention issues

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In considering issues related to the retention of staff with disabilities, most managers made reference to the critical role that workplace culture plays in providing a supportive and proactive learning environment, not only for staff with disabilities, but for all staff:

If you asked me what was the most important factor in not only employing people with disabilities, but keeping them, then I would have to say it's the culture of the place. It's changing in my view – slowly, but it's changing. When a culture is one that values everybody irrespective of their disability, their gender and so on, then you know you're getting there.

It has to be embedded into our culture – into the way that we do things in the team and across the entire organisation. It's about systems, it's about people's behaviour and it's about making sure that people feel that once they have come in they are valued and belong.

Several managers identified the value of ensuring appropriate accommodation and adjustment to ensure the retention of highly productive staff members:

I do acknowledge, however, that it's been [name of staff] who has brought the required adjustment to my attention. Implementing simple assistive technologies has vastly enhanced the capacity of [name of staff]. However, we really do need, as people managing staff with disabilities, to get training on the ways in which technology can be used, and the sort of adjustments that the Department as a whole can authorise.

While there was widespread recognition of the benefits of implementing adjustments as required or requested, several managers acknowledged that they had little or no awareness of the range of resources that they could call upon to assist them in identifying and developing effective accommodations in order to better recruit, hire and support staff with disabilities. It was suggested that good practice examples of adjustments made and their effectiveness be shared across the organisation to assist managers better identify the need for them.

## 4.4 Managing people with disabilities, including overall successes and challenges

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Overall, managers were extremely satisfied with the work performance and productivity of staff with a disability. Various descriptions of staff contributions and performance were offered, including 'committed', 'innovative and creative', 'consistent and high-performing'. Interestingly, the attitudes to the work performance of their staff were not affected by the length of time of their own employment or that of the staff members.

On the whole, managers expressed the view that their experiences of working with staff members who had disabilities were extremely valuable and positive. Indeed, one manager argued that the issue of disability should be rendered irrelevant in the considerations of contributions to workplace productivity:

In my view the fact that [name of staff] has a disability should be totally irrelevant. Maybe in the future we won't need to think in these terms. Just that we all have different abilities, and policies and procedures should be there to ensure these abilities are valued equally.

The importance of modelling the value of disability employment strategies was emphasised by several managers:

It's important that we as managers are able to show our staff that this is more than just tokenism. That we expect everyone to be involved in a diverse team that values everybody's contribution.

However, a number of key challenges were identified:

- improving managers' understanding of what is and what is not 'accessibility', and what constitutes 'reasonable adjustments'
- lack of infrastructure support and resources to ensure appropriate adjustment
- insufficient support and training in relation to managing people with disabilities
- lack of knowledge about grievance procedures – both management and staff were often not aware of procedures for complaints
- broader organisational culture not 'inclusive' – there was more rhetoric than reality, given the low numbers of people with 'visible or obvious' disabilities.

## 4.5 Improvements required and recommendations

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Managers suggested many activities or strategies that would address the challenges identified, including:

- providing formal diversity management training for managers that would include issues such as recruitment and retention, performance appraisal, managing other staff reactions, career progression options, and change management strategies generally
- providing training in relation to 'reasonable adjustments' and legal obligations
- providing broader HR support, or further information on how HR can provide support to managers
- developing communication strategies by HR to inform staff with disabilities about their rights and obligations as staff members
- developing organisational statements of support, particularly from senior levels of leadership.

## 5. Implications: The Way Forward

I think government departments have a greater capacity to lead the way. Government can make investments in employing people with disabilities that lead to better outcomes for all.

The interviews conducted with staff and managers have provided an important foundation upon which the Department can continue to develop the Disability Action Plan. Critical to the development of the plan are the following core findings that have emerged from the interviews:

- There are considerable benefits, and there is a business case, in employing people with disabilities.
- There are opportunities for organisational learnings around the broader issues of diversity employment programs.
- There is a need for managers to discuss career expectations with each employee.
- Emphasis should be placed on an employee's responsibility for self-development.
- The employee's interests, talents and skills should be taken into consideration, and appropriate goals developed.
- Lateral movements, job rotations and team assignments that will give employees problem-solving skills and leadership opportunities should be encouraged.
- Mentoring should be encouraged.
- Training opportunities should be provided.
- Appropriate induction programs should be developed.
- Disability awareness among all staff should be developed.
- A 'productive' diversity framework that identifies the advantages of employing people with disabilities should be developed.

Most participants highlighted that while there were extremely positive examples of management practices, these were 'personality driven', often ad hoc, and not systemic. Therefore, it is strongly suggested that the following be considered as part of future discussions and activities:

- the need to undertake an organisation-wide 'mapping' of the initiatives and strategies currently being undertaken
- the need to develop specific and targeted employment programs for people with disabilities
- the need to develop indicators to measure the effectiveness of employment strategies – employment practices in relation to people with disabilities appear ad hoc rather than directed and strategic
- the need for a 'structural access' audit to assess structural barriers within the organisation, including off-site locations

- the need to give greater consideration to external disability employment agencies and their contribution to employment strategies within the Department.

The project team were not able to map or assess what training, if any, is currently provided about diversity awareness and diversity management. Therefore, in the event that training is currently being provided, consideration might need to be given to the outreach capacity of the training and the need to incorporate specific modules on disability diversity management.

While recruitment considerations are essential, there is also a need to ensure that appropriate retention strategies are a core feature of the Disability Action Plan. Retention strategies should include specific consideration of career pathways, complaints processes and induction support, particularly during the preliminary employment period of staff with disabilities.

Further attention also needs to be given to required adjustments, particularly in relation to training for managers. The training should emphasise management's responsibilities to provide necessary and reasonable adjustments, rather than relying on employees with disabilities to request changes.

There is also a need to have written procedures that clearly define the responsibilities of everyone involved in the reasonable accommodation and adjustment process, and enable tracking and prompt resolution of accommodation requests.

Not every requested adjustment can or should be granted. Managers can minimise the chance that an adjustment will be inappropriately denied by establishing procedures that ensure a denial has been properly reviewed and can be justified. Employees should also be given an opportunity to have an initial denial reviewed.

The resource and time limitations of this project did not allow for the project team to scrutinise more closely current departmental policies in relation to adjustment.

A particular issue in relation to carers was the need to consider more closely promotional opportunities for part-time employees. A view was expressed that there is a tendency to see promotional opportunities as largely the domain of full-time workers. The need to revisit this perspective was emphasised, with a view to embracing alternative arrangements such as job-sharing.



## 6. Case Studies

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### **Helen Furmanczyk: Information Technology**

*... it would look like a field of multiple species of flowers, tall, short, any colour...So colourful, all shapes. People who have the knowledge and ability and doing their work to improve things and contribute.*

This is how Helen Furmanczyk describes her idea of an organisation that values all people, including people with disabilities – a vision she says shouldn't be too far removed from possibility:

Your disability should never hinder you from doing what you want to do in the future.

Following a varied work history, ranging from retail and factory work, to working as a bench clerk in the Department of Justice, Helen applied to work initially at the Department of Education & Training on a casual basis. She was then offered full-time work, and has now worked in the Department for eight years. She currently works in information technology as part of the Edumail system.

‘There’s nothing Helen can’t do,’ says Tony Pincus, Group Manager, Network Communication and Infrastructure. Helen’s skills make her a valued member of the team. Never one to shy from a task (‘anything I am given, I attempt to do’), Helen has developed a broad range of skills, including a capacity to be adaptable to her environment:

Because I am an aware person, I adapt quickly to my environment. A lot of people didn’t think I was really blind. They thought that I was clumsy. As people gained more exposure, they became more understanding.

Helen refuses to allow disability to hinder opportunity, is keen to continue to explore further learning opportunities, and has identified an interest in learning more about the Outlook program. Importantly, she says, she has the support of her manager to pursue this.

Tony Pincus is quick to emphasise the importance of management support and in particular the need for managers to show leadership by committing to eliminate barriers that tend to alienate people on the basis of their differences. Identifying and removing barriers, he argues, simply leads to maximising organisational productivity and ensuring that people contribute to their full potential.

Helen does not feel that she has experienced any real barriers or acts of discrimination, but agrees that attitudinal and structural barriers need to be addressed to ensure

that discrimination does not happen. There is a tendency at times, she says, for workplaces to be reactive rather than proactive in taking up the challenges presented by diverse work forces:

Some don’t think about disability issues unless I am in front of them. Out of mind and out of sight unfortunately.

She also points out that a common stereotype people have is that all people with disabilities are the same:

It is good to know that other people in the organisation have a disability. It made me feel less alone, but everyone is different. Everyone’s disability is different. We are not all the same.

On the whole, Helen feels that her team and manager have been extremely supportive and have been willing to make the structural adjustments needed to ensure her full contribution to the workplace:

There was one time when, because they were moving me out of one building into another, I ended up missing a step, so they put a bright yellow strip and lights shining on what I needed to see.

In identifying the key factors critical to her high levels of work satisfaction, Helen makes reference to her colleagues’ thoughtfulness and willingness to accommodate:

People here are lovely. A lot of them are very thoughtful. People alert me to obstacles. If there is

anything that I do need that is extra, I can go to HR and they will try and accommodate me.

Tony highlights how instead of narrowly focusing on an individual's inabilities, attention is now given to measures such as accommodations in the workplace and barrier-free architecture to create more inclusive environments. He particularly refers to some of the technological adjustments made:

Being in an IT area we are more focused on accessibility in that area. Helen has a computer with a special screen on it.

Tony is quick to emphasise that by accommodating her physical requirements, he is ensuring that Helen is supported to do the job that she is employed to do:

The fact that we've been able to accommodate her physical requirements means that she can do that job, so that if we were an uncaring employer who wasn't prepared to give her a good screen and a better seating position, she would be suffering in an unpleasant location and struggling to do her job.

Tony also points out that simply being conscious of not putting boxes in corridors where they can be tripped

over can greatly assist in ensuring a safer and more adequate work environment.

While structural barriers can limit people's contributions, both Helen and Tony point out the need to address and challenge attitudinal barriers to people with disabilities. Tony emphasises how stereotyping people with disabilities or having fixed views and expectations of staff members with disabilities can limit the opportunities and choices people have. By challenging these perceptions within the workplace, an organisation will widen their choice of people to recruit and retain.

In line with her ideal of a discrimination-free workplace, Helen is keen to challenge limiting views, opinions, perceptions and prejudices about people with disabilities in the workplace:

It would be nice if people could see people just doing their work, and get rid of the stigma attached to disability. If people have the ability and perform, then promote them.



**Merry Young:  
Project Officer,  
Senior Secondary Curriculum,  
VCAA**

*I know that I am a positive role model, particularly for young people who are short statured. People see me walking around this precinct and get the message that this Department is open to employing people with disabilities.*

Merry Young is an energetic and committed individual who is determined to demonstrate to colleagues and managers the benefits of employing people with disabilities. Her manager, Robyn Timmins comments:

She has had a tremendous impact on raising people's awareness of the capabilities of people with disabilities – she's motivated, she has skills, and she has a profile that reflects her energy and drive.

It was as a result of Merry's drive that she came to the Department in 1999 as a casual, then took on a variety of roles, including executive assistant for the CEO, and her current role as the Project Officer of Senior Secondary Curriculum, VCAA.

'Bring it on' is Merry's mantra, and her many and varied roles are evidence

of her commitment to her own personal and professional program of continual growth. At 26 years of age, Merry has coached softball and netball in both junior and primary teams, completed an Advanced Diploma in Marketing and Business, and has chaired the Victorian branch of the Short Statured People of Australia (SSPA) for the past two years.

Merry draws on her personal experience in her work, and is often required to present talks to a range of different audiences, from high school students (when new students with disabilities have enrolled), to genetic medical students at the Royal Children's Hospital. Learning, she says, is a key to acquiring and maintaining motivation and commitment:

I don't want to get too comfortable – if I am not learning any more, that's when I will start moving on.

Merry believes that she has been extremely fortunate in working within such a supportive team environment, and doesn't feel that she has encountered any particular barriers:

I love the team – I love the project. I can't speak highly enough of the team. No one has stopped me from going any further.

In considering the significant contributions that Merry has made to the workplace, Manager Robyn Timmins highlights how tapping into the benefits that increasing diversity brings means thinking about certain things differently:

The positives of employing Merry are that it makes you think differently about the way you do

things – makes you more aware of how you need to structure things differently to get the best out of everybody.

Managers, she says, play a key leadership role in promoting the business opportunities that are presented, but only by making a thorough, continuing commitment to learn new concepts and skills, and assisting staff to do the same.

Robyn also highlights the importance of moving past your own lack of awareness and being open to the range of skills people can bring. The public sector, she says, is often one of the best in employing people with disabilities and should be applauded. Merry agrees about the importance of ensuring that structural barriers do not inadvertently block people with disabilities from reaching their full employment potential:

You need to check what the occupational health and safety issues might be. Kitchens around the Department are too high. I have to wait until someone else can help.

Treating people equally, Merry states, is not the same as treating them the same or treating them as being 'special' rather than employees who have particular needs:

It all comes down to not wanting to be seen as having any 'special' attention or treatment. There is a fear that I get treated more 'special'. I want to be seen as one of the crowd.

In Merry's view, interview processes and assessment processes have been fair and equitable across the organisation:

As far as their assessment of my capabilities, I feel that I am treated equally. They [managers] are very aware.

Robyn reflects on how staff initially had very little awareness of issues related to disabilities in the workplace. She feels that Merry's contribution through her participation on various staff consultative committees, her invaluable skills and her personality have had a tremendous impact, not only on raising people's awareness but on shifting team culture. Merry believes that her willingness to be open and to be herself has helped to break down people's initial anxieties:

I wouldn't call it a barrier, but people are inquisitive and don't know how to ask. I will be open about my short stature and people can ask me questions. I get it out there.

Merry jokes that she has more recently achieved the status of a media personality. On a more serious note, though, she highlights how it is this kind of exposure that challenges people's stereotypes about the capabilities of people with disabilities: A few work colleagues have seen me in the media. I was in Woman's Day and also on the radio. You do see the relaxation in my colleagues' faces when they see me being so active.



**Wesley Brocket:  
Finance Officer, Accounts  
Receivable Finance,  
Corporate Services**

*Treat people with respect and they will feel that they can contribute.*

Wesley has worked in the Department for over three years and was initially employed on a part-time basis under the Youth Employment Scheme, a 12-month traineeship in Certificates II and III in Business Administration, prior to receiving full-time employment in his current department.

He completed one year employment in HR and then transferred to his current role as Finance Officer.

Wesley is keen to learn and gain from a range of experiences. His history of employment is diverse and includes a carer role at Yooralla, and a range of work in hospitality.

Though Wesley excels in his current administrative role, his manager – Craig Webster, Manager Accounting Services – is confident that Wesley will continue to diversify his skills and experience within a range of different roles in the organisation.

Not one to feel limited, Wesley has enjoyed numerous sports achievements, including playing basketball during the deaf Olympics in 2005, and representing Australia in deaf cricket, state football, state basketball and state cricket. There is also a chance for Wesley to receive a secondment to the 2006 Commonwealth Games.

Wesley has found his manager and colleagues at DE&T to be pleasant and supportive. He has encountered very few barriers in his work. However, he has acknowledged that his shyness, particularly in using the phone, might need to be looked at:

I didn't like using the phone, I'm shy and I don't like using the phone but since I've been here it's been a natural progression.

Wesley and his manager identified a number of key strengths and achievements that influence his invaluable contribution to the team. Wesley believes that he adds

diversity to the workplace. In his view his 'inner comfort with himself' is also an exceptional strength.

Craig Webster highlights Wesley's excellent interpersonal skills, and states that Wesley is a 'very nice person who gets on with people'. Craig is keen to see the organisation as a whole capitalise on the benefits provided by people like Wesley at the personal, interpersonal and organisational level:

His colleagues have learned so much. The organisation can learn so much.

Craig also points out that Wesley's intellect and young age will be of great advantage to him in his career path.

He's had two lots of higher job opportunities in the last 12 months ... He's punctual and, hard working; he has quite a future in front of him. I don't see any problems if he continues in this way.

Both Wesley and management recognise the importance of workplace equality and fairness, and are pleased with the Department's approach to these.

I don't feel I've been left out; they treat everyone equally, I'm pretty lucky...they give me options and training.

For Wesley, organisational strategies don't need to be complex or overwhelming. In his view, the simple issues of trust and mutual respect need to be highlighted:

It's about treating people equally and it's been done in a cordial way.

In August, Wesley's planning to travel to Europe to expand his professional development and experience. He also aspires to further his academic qualifications.

I'm about to go overseas to London, Spain and Greek Islands...I have a diploma but that doesn't give me much satisfaction; I would like a degree. I want to just keep improving myself.



**Jim Asimakopoulos:  
Manager, Abilities Education  
Program**

*I approached the Department, introduced myself, explained that I was unemployed and I wanted a job.*

With his 'can do' attitude, Jim Asimakopoulos pioneered the Department of Education & Training's Abilities Education program in 1988. Jim was initially only employed for a six-month period, but as a result of the success of the program he is now its manager. The Abilities Education Program has delivered over four thousand presentations to kindergartens, primary and secondary

schools, TAFEs and universities, Rotary, and community and sporting groups.

The Program for Students with Disabilities provides additional support to either a regular school or one of the various specialist schools for eligible students with disabilities and impairments. It is a critical program; Jim, together with his colleague and project officer, Joanne Damn, ensure the continuing development of high-quality resource material, publications and programs for use by teachers and the wider school community. Together, they have attended hundreds of schools and community groups and presented one-hour ability awareness workshops to groups of between 50 and 100 people.

Jim, who has cerebral palsy, spreads his highly regarded message about the powers of positive thinking. In his presentations, Jim encourages his audiences to focus on the 'can' not the 'cannot':

[ The purpose of the presentation is to make people aware of what people with disabilities can do.

Jim is clear about the fact that he has made much of his life despite the difficulties of disability:

[ People doubted me because of my speech disability and I had to work extremely hard.

Jim has been coming up against people's attitudes and misunderstandings for most of his life. While he has found this frustrating, he has refused to allow it to limit his

approach to work and life. Through his presentations, he has challenged people's misconception of him and other people with disabilities:

[ I may look 'disabled' but I am NOT.

Jim's passion is obvious, and it is his life experiences that drive that passion and commitment to his work:

[ I believe I am the best public speaker in the world, because my material is based on my experiences and the things that have impacted on me and made me who I am.

His wall at work reflects his achievements: it is filled with awards, commendations and heartfelt thanks from the people he has touched.

As a manager of the program, Jim has demonstrated his versatility and his diverse range of skills, including effective decision-making, planning strategies and negotiating with stakeholders.

Jim's skills are highly regarded by his manager, Ian Claridge, who stresses the importance of valuing the contributions that people with disabilities can make to a workplace:

[ I have employed a number of employees who have had disabilities. Those people were chosen on their abilities to undertake specific tasks. People with disabilities bring with them an understanding and wisdom that isn't always apparent in other parts of the population.

Ian insists that people in workplaces recognise that in many ways we are all different:

Part of the richness of life is that we have a range of people with diverse abilities.

The support of management in ensuring that barriers to employing and retaining people with disabilities are removed is vital. Ian states that it's not enough to just employ people:

It has to be embedded into our culture – to develop an action plan isn't enough.

Jim acknowledges the support that he has received from his managers and the team around him:

It takes a special kind of person to work with someone with a disability, and Joanne in particular, and the team, are the backbone of my support. In many ways, we all complement each other.

Ask anyone who has been to one of Jim's presentations, or review any of the forty thousand evaluation sheets and the numerous letters of thanks – Jim inspires people to see life in a new light.



**Laura Carrington:  
Programs Officer, Student  
Wellbeing and Disabilities**

*People who come after me hopefully won't have to get such a hard time and have to fight for things. It's getting better, and it's exciting.*

Laura Carrington has long been challenging physical and attitudinal barriers to employees with disabilities. Her vision is of a society 'free from discrimination where people would get jobs based on their abilities and not on the basis of their appearance'. She believes this is now, more than ever, possible.

Laura migrated from England to Australia in 1982, where she began studying for her Bachelor of Education. She went on to work as a primary school teacher for 10 years. During that time, she also became a qualified French teacher and was responsible for establishing the Languages Other Than English (LOTE) program in the school.

While her employment as a primary school teacher with a disability in the 1980s was a challenge, Laura is clear that her passion and commitment to her work and to the students continued to drive her towards her vision:

The children were the best thing about my work. They wanted to know more about me, and so I took them out to the car park and showed them how I got in and out of the car. They would ask me so many questions. Their attitudes proved to me that it could be done. I focused on doing more and more.

Her decision to change careers eventually brought her to her current place of employment, the Regional Office of the Grampians Region in Ballarat, in the area of Student Wellbeing and Disabilities. She has been working there for eight years.

During Laura's 20 years of employment with DE&T, she has seen many changes, including changes to legislation that allowed disabled children to be integrated into the school system. These changes have had a huge impact on the operation of schools and on people's attitudes. Now, she says, 'there are

so many children in schools with varied disabilities and it's seen as the norm'.

Laura is also able to reflect on the range of gradual changes in people's attitudes and responses to employing people with disabilities in the education sector. Her tireless commitment to improving and expanding opportunities for people with disabilities has inspired many, particularly her manager.

Laura insists that the role of managers in supporting employees with disabilities is essential. Her manager, Jim Bond, agrees:

As a manager, it is important that I take responsibility for ensuring we have a workplace that is inclusive – a work environment that gets the best of every member of the team.

Jim is emphatic that when employing people, managers need to be cognisant of how their own attitudes might block their capacity to identify the range of skills that people can bring. It's important he states, 'to look at people's abilities rather than disabilities'.

As a manager, Jim is aware of the importance of organisational culture and how it may inadvertently pose barriers for people with disabilities:

We just make sure that if we have staff meetings now, there is space for a wheelchair. It's become second nature now that people's awareness has been enhanced by Laura's presence.

Laura agrees that workplace culture is a critical factor in ensuring positive

working experiences for people with disabilities:

The manager is a very supportive person. It's great when you can be just part of the environment and part of the work force.

Jim is very clear that Laura has contributed significantly to the success of the team and the program as a whole:

Laura has been part of a number of projects. She has also been involved in developing partnerships with other organisations, such as Ballarat City Council. She is part of a number of innovative projects enhancing opportunities for all kids, including those with disabilities.

The challenge, says Jim, is to ensure that the organisation doesn't become complacent about the issues, but rather commits itself to ongoing learning and continuous improvement:

It is important to have open communication and create opportunities where staff with disabilities can highlight to me and to others how we can do better. We can always learn more and always do better.

During Laura's career with the Department of Education & Training she has broken down many barriers with children and parents, and also with other agencies, particularly local government:

I'm on a disability advisory committee for Ballarat Council. Parking [for people with disabilities] is so hard, but they are making it easier.

Laura has raised the importance of ensuring that physical and attitudinal barriers do not act to limit people's capacity and contribution. She agrees that things are slowly changing:

Changes I hear about, with other people with disabilities who are now teaching. Sometimes you forget how it has been and you take it for granted. You forget how it is built up and how you earn respect for your work from colleagues based on the work that you do.

Laura states that in many ways she feels that she has had two distinct parts to her life. One in England she says, and then one as a paraplegic, where in many ways she feels she has done far more than when she 'was walking'.

All that she has achieved can be attributed to a particular desire to prove 'that it can be done'. 'Don't tell me something can't be done,' she says. 'I never give up.'



**Kerry Lyall:  
Office of Resource  
Management and Strategy**

*As a carer of children with a disability, and as someone working part time, when I am at work, I stay focused, use my excellent time management skills to get my work done. In offering flexibility, the Department gets quality outcomes.*

Kerry Lyall came back to work for the Department of Education & Training in 2002 after a seven-year absence. As someone who had an Honours degree in History, a Masters in Public Policy, and extensive experience in working in seven State Government departments, Kerry offered a diverse range of skills and expertise.

She now works in the Office of Resource Management and Strategy, in Human Resources, and spreads herself across three teams: as a team leader of the diversity functional team, the recruitment team and the knowledge management team. She has applied her extensive experience in policy development and implementation through her work on the DE&T Wur-cum barra Implementation Plan and the DE&T Disability Action Plan.

Her manager, Les Walker, was certainly keen to ensure that Kerry was on board:

Kerry brought with her a vast degree of policy experience in public service departments. She has an analytical approach, a huge degree of personal commitment and a perspective that can only come from a person with her personal experience. I need people with a vast range of capabilities and different strengths. Kerry offered this.

As a carer of two children who have disabilities, Kerry needed to negotiate workplace arrangements that would take into account her need for flexibility. She was able to have a frank discussion during which she laid out not only her requirements, but also her willingness and commitment to working for the Department:

Prior to returning to work, I explained that I had children with a disability. I wanted to work between 10 a.m. and 2.30 p.m. so that I could pick them up after school. There are a lot of medical appointments and I need flexibility to ensure that I can get to them.

Les is quick to point out that while flexible working arrangements have benefited Kerry, providing support for employees with caring responsibilities in the workplace makes good business sense. Certainly, Les has benefited from Kerry's motivation and loyalty:

You give people the opportunity, and you get it back tenfold.

Kerry agrees:

I don't know where else I would get these kinds of work conditions. The fact that there is flexitime and carers' leave means that the organisation gets the best out of people. When you accommodate people's requirements you have people who want to stay in the organisation.

In working with Kerry and other staff who work from home, Les has identified significant benefits that can be gained for both the employer and their employees:

There are many workplace policies and practices that can provide the necessary support for carers, so that they are able to balance work and caring responsibilities. Kerry attends work every day, and she is available should the need arise at home. It works well for both parties.

Kerry is, however, very aware of striking a balance between her needs as a carer and the achievement of organisational goals. 'Flexibility goes both ways,' she says. There have been times when she is required to be at work or to attend training. With enough notice, she is able to make alternative arrangements for her children:

I am always conscious that flexibility is a two-way street.

They have been very good here and I try to return the goodwill and the flexibility. If there is an emergency, I can be contacted and accessed at home.

As a manager, Les is more than aware of the need to be innovative and flexible in managing employees who are carers and have diverse employment needs. He agrees that it requires a willingness on the part of managers to think differently, particularly about employees working at home. The benefits to the organisation, he says, are that it has retained a highly motivated and creative employee:

Kerry took up the opportunity and ran with it. Her personal commitment is extraordinary. Her productivity and commitment on things like the DE&T Disability Action Plan have been well and truly demonstrated.

In Kerry's view, the introduction of more flexible working practices allows individuals greater control over when and where they work, matching their work more closely with their lifestyle. Better and more creative use of 'work sites', such as working from home, enables consistent productivity:

Working from home is not a barrier at all. However, it does mean that people have to think differently about 'work' and where you do it. There have never been any questions about what I might be doing when I am at home. There is a level of trust and

I know what I need to do to get the work completed.

Staff support has also played an important role according to Kerry:

If I have been caught up with work, and it is nearing 2.30, often a staff member will remind me of the time and tell me to go home. This kind of support is extremely important.

Kerry has actively modelled a way of working that has undoubtedly influenced others in the organisation to think about alternative working arrangements. The appreciation of these issues, she agrees, has 'shifted considerably'.

It is important, states Kerry, that staff in a similar situation feel confident to disclose their requirements:

Don't be scared of telling your manager and co-workers – it has been a positive experience for me and I certainly haven't experienced any discrimination. There has been a lot of variety in my work and my level of job satisfaction is very high. There is never a day when I have to do the same thing twice. It's wonderful!

Flexible work arrangements have clearly ensured that a highly dynamic and experienced staff member is continuing to provide a committed, professional service to DE&T, while also maintaining her carer's responsibilities.



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