Thriving at work, growing a career

Voices of employees with disability in the Queensland public sector

Queensland Government

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

The Queensland Public Service Commission respectfully acknowledge Australian Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation and recognise their ongoing ties with land, winds, waterways, skies, and seas.

We recognise the contribution that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples have made and continue to make within the Queensland public sector in the design, delivery, and evaluation of government policy, programs, and services.

Acknowledgement of lived experiences

The Queensland Public Service Commission would like to thank all participants who generously shared their time, experiences, and candid responses for the purpose of this research.

The project team expresses their gratitude to those who shared with us their journey and personal stories. The openness, honesty, and willingness to participate for the purpose of this research is very appreciated.

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Executive summary

As Queensland's largest and most diverse employer, the Queensland public sector (the sector) can lead the way in fostering diverse and inclusive workplaces. As such, the sector is purposefully working towards building a workforce that better reflects the community we serve, to strengthen our ability to meet the needs of all Queenslanders.

The sector vision – to be a workplace where everyone can feel safe, respected and included – is particularly important to under-represented groups who seek equitable opportunities.

The Queensland public sector workforce profile March 2021 shows the sector well below the 8 per cent target for people with disability, set by the Leadership Board in 2016. With only 2.83 per cent of employees self-identifying as living with disability, more work is needed.

This research project set out to understand the experiences of employees living with disability who currently work or have previously worked in the sector, to learn more about their career journey and job satisfaction.

While many research participants shared past negative experiences, there was broad acknowledgement that some things have changed for the better.

Sector-wide and agency specific strategies and policy settings to promote inclusion and difference have improved employee experience. However, strengthening implementation and ensuring more consistent practice, will be critical to creating truly inclusive cultures.

Commitment to inclusion and diversity will continue to drive change and to make a positive contribution to the experiences and career success of employees who live with disability.

Key findings

- Accessibility in the workplace is essential to support employees living with disability. COVID-19 has normalised flexible work practices and this has significantly improved wellbeing and feelings of job satisfaction amongst this cohort.

- Authentic leadership and genuine relationships built on trust (from leaders and supervisors) are seen as critical to inclusion. This kind of leadership fosters job satisfaction and supports career development.

- Participants were strongly of the view that fostering inclusive practices, such as designing work for blended workplaces, is of universal benefit to all employees.

- Inclusive human resource policy, such as employee leave entitlements which take a broad lens on diversity and inclusion, will contribute more to improved engagement and productivity, than disability specific practices, policies and plans, although both are needed.

- Participants advocated for policy implementation that takes a person-centred approach and seeks to incorporate intersectionality so that employees don't have to navigate through a variety of diversity specific policies to access support.

"I am a woman with disability from a culturally and linguistically diverse background with a policy skillset. They are all parts of my identity, and I am one person."

Project overview

Purpose of the research

While mainstream human resource management research explores the various parts of the employee experience (including employee attraction, work environment, employee attitudes, job enrichment and satisfaction, quality of work life and retention), research related to employees who live with disability is often focused on understanding and improving under-employment.

The Public Service Commission identified an opportunity to address aspects that had not yet been explored for people with disability:

- conditions that contribute to, or influence job satisfaction
- career development and progression
- career outcomes.

In line with the Queensland public sector Inclusion and diversity strategy 2021–2025, these factors are critical to building a public sector for all, where everyone feels safe, respected and included.

This project used lived experience research to understand past and present experiences of employees within the sector.

The research engaged the voices of those who live with disability to build a nuanced understanding of the range of employee journeys and understand the conditions that enable people to thrive at work. The research sought to identify opportunities for change.

Background

In 2016, the Chief Executive Leadership Board set workforce diversity targets to be achieved by 2022. Targets were set as a mechanism to drive action and achieve an improved representation of the community we serve.

Diversity targets for most cohorts are progressing steadily in the right direction, except for employment of people with disability. The Queensland public sector workforce profile for March 2021 report shows a 2.83 per cent representation for people with disability – well below the 8 per cent target.

In contrast, the 2020 Working for Queensland employee opinion survey showed 9.2 per cent of employees identified as living with disability. One theory for the discrepancy in data is that the confidential nature of this employee survey supports people to feel safe identifying a disability, compared to self-reporting as part of identified employee payroll data.

In 2021, the Commission led work across the sector to implement an updated definition of disability for payroll data collection. The new definition captures mental health and long-term health conditions, often associated with ageing. Along with the new definition, an employee census program encouraged people to update the demographic information on their payroll system.

Since 2016, various sector-wide initiatives have been implemented to increase participation and improve the experience of

people in the workforce living with disability:

- Disabling the barriers project – exploring challenges for existing employees who live with disability.
- Disabling the barriers to employment in the Queensland public sector implementation plan 2021.
- Disability awareness online training – developed and made available to all agencies.
- Queensland public sector Inclusion and diversity strategy 2021–2025.

Several sector-wide initiatives and policy changes implemented over the past four years, whilst not specific to disability, have contributed to improving inclusion and diversity:

- Flexible by Design – allowing for a negotiation of when, where, and how employees could work. This was complemented by the introduction of the industrial relations legislation regarding the right to request flexible work arrangements.
- The establishment of a sector-wide Inclusion and Diversity Community of Practice, to promote and build capabilities for inclusive workplaces.
- Creating mentally healthy workplaces project, fostering workplaces that support mental health and wellbeing.
- Establishment of agency employee networks, including those for employees with disability. The networks provide a mechanism for advocating for the needs of people who live with disability in the workplace.

Research methodology

The social model of disability

The social model of disability provided the lens for this research. According to the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, this model recognises that people are disabled by barriers in society, such as buildings not having a ramp or accessible toilets, or by people's attitudes.

In contrast, the medical model of disability implies that individuals are disabled by their impairments or differences, and assumes they are therefore unable to do certain things.

Because of its focus on people as being disabled, rather than systems and environments, the medical model is limited in its ability to inform systemic improvements.

Since commencing work on the Disabling the Barriers project in 2018 and developing subsequent action plans, there has been a growing understanding and application of the social model of disability.

Recruitment

The project team reached out to whole of sector networks to attract and recruit research participants who:

- are working, or have worked, in the Queensland public sector
- live with disability and are willing to share their career journey and experience of working in the Queensland public sector.

In line with government protocol, information sheets and consent forms were distributed to participants prior to the interview.

Guiding principles

The project adopted a set of design principles to guide the research:

- **Lived experience** – the individual's experience was placed at the centre of research.

- **Non-judgement** – the research did not apply diagnostic labels or a definition of disability or restrict participation to anyone who may or may not have previously shared they lived with disability.

- **Intersectionality** – this research acknowledged the disadvantage for employees when disability intersects with other identities; people with disability are different ages, have varying gender identities, are from a full spectrum of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and have a range of other experiences.

- **Humility** – the project took an inclusive and accessible ethical approach, open to seeking out and welcoming feedback where gaps of knowledge existed. Learning in real-time was integrated into the work.

- **Strengths-based** – the project sought to highlight positive representations of success for employees living with disability. Without wanting to dismiss existing challenges, this research took a strength-based approach to understanding employees' lived experiences.

The research project acknowledges that there is no singular experience for people living with disability. In addition, it recognises that disability is not interpreted uniformly across diverse cultures, for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander conceptualisations and experiences of disability may not align with non-Indigenous constructs.

The language used in this report represents the perspectives of the participants. Mirroring the language used by participants, the report uses the term "sharing" rather than "disclosing" of disability. This is also the preferred terminology recommended by the Australian Network on Disability.

Qualitative data collection: interviews

Interviews were conducted with 51 participants, with an average interview length of 60 minutes. Interviews were held face-to-face or virtually on Microsoft Teams, and were audio recorded. Some employees elected to provide written responses. The interviews were designed to explore:

- career journeys in the Queensland public sector

- experiences that support or diminish job satisfaction

- career aspirations and how individuals define success

- what changed for them in response to COVID-19.

Participants were invited to share an artifact representing a moment of success during their career journey. Participants shared written reflections, photos, drawings, poems, and videos.

Other data sources

The research project also used relevant data sources and information to provide additional context.

Literature review

A literature review drew insights from academic and other sources relating to job satisfaction, career development and progression for people living with disability.

Much of the current research regarding job satisfaction appears to primarily consider the perspective of workers without disability (Romeo, Yepes-Baldo & Lins 2020).

Perhaps due to under-employment, literature on the experience of employment for people living with disability is skewed towards the benefit of having a job, rather than understanding other factors that drive satisfaction and career progression.

Sector datasets

Workforce statistics*

Minimum Obligatory Human Resource Information is used to produce bi-annual Queensland public sector workforce profiles. The March 2021 collection was used as reference in this research project.

Working for Queensland employee opinion survey*

The employee survey measures Queensland public sector employee perceptions of their work, manager, team, and organisation. Completion by individuals is voluntary during the collection period.

LEAD4QLD capability and assessment process*

LEAD4QLD is a capability and assessment process underpinned by the Leadership competencies for Queensland. The process is accessible for employees across all levels – individual contributors, team leader, program leader and executive.

*Note that MOHRI, WfQ and Lead4Qld rely on voluntary self-reporting, therefore may not be representative of all in the sector who live with disability.

Voice of candidate: candidate experience research

Research was undertaken by the Commission in 2019, to understand the candidate experience in recruitment and selection processes. Of the 978 participants, 3.07 per cent identified as living with disability.

Working for Queensland factors

There are ten factors measured through the Working for Queensland survey – these metrics are used widely across the Queensland public sector. When compared with those survey respondents who do not identify as having disability, employees with disability tend to have less positive perceptions across all 10 factor scores.

Of the ten factors, the Learning and Development factor has the most significant gap in perceptions. People who do not identify as living with disability reported 11 percentage points higher satisfaction (at 57 per cent positive) compared those with disability (46 per cent positive). Within that factor, the question "I am satisfied with the opportunities available for career development" has a gap of 13 percentage points.

For the question "Disability is not a barrier to success in my organisation" (within the Anti-discrimination factor) people with disability were significantly less positive with an 11 percentage point difference in levels of satisfaction.

2020 Working for Queensland survey

Factors scores: Gap in % positive between people with and without disability

- With disability
- Without disability
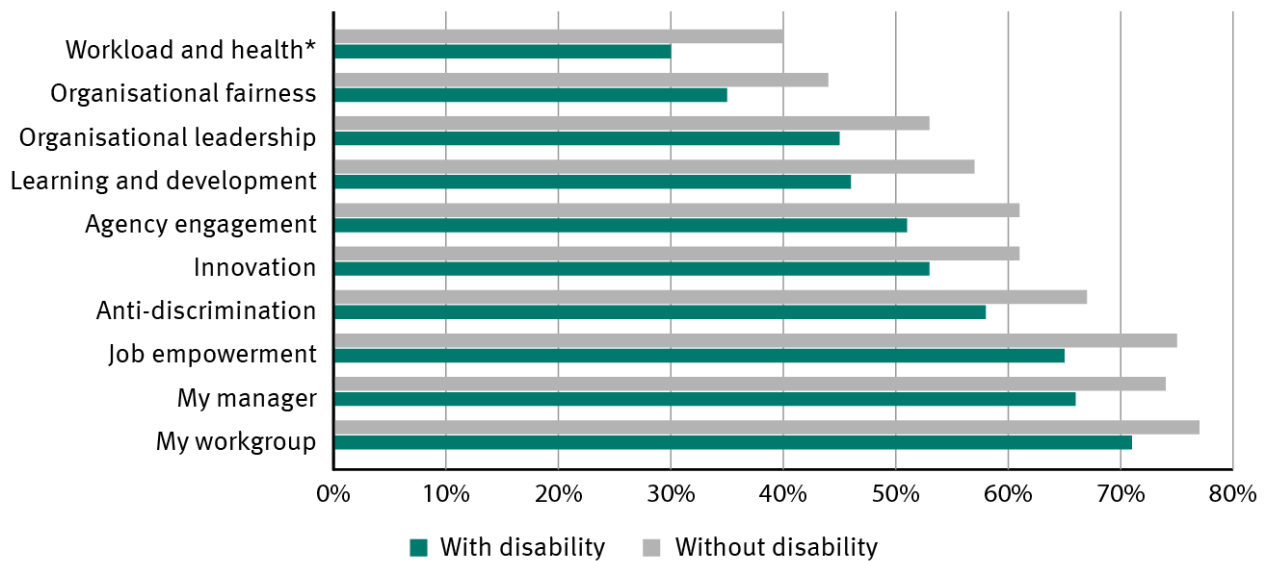
Findings

The findings suggest that the sector is on the right path to improving work and workplaces for people with disability. Rather than needing to revolutionise policy settings to achieve a positive employee experience for people with disability, managers and organisations could better leverage existing policy and drive improved practice to ensure the public service embraces diversity as the norm.

Findings are organised into:

- thriving at work
- progression and career success.

The foundational support that HR teams provide in enabling these outcomes is also featured as an important area for findings.

Thriving at work

The importance of work

Participants told personal stories to emphasise how work brings them purpose and creates meaning. It improves confidence and provides a sense of choice and control. Almost all participants spoke of the importance of meaningful work to their health and wellbeing.

One participant spoke of an extended period of unemployment which meant they had to choose which medication to purchase, due to limited finances. Another spoke of work being good for their mental health, as they were helping other people in their professional role. Yet another participant shared that working has allowed them to buy a home to raise their child, so

that they can provide a future that is easier for their child than it was for them.

"When I am there, you know I am giving it 150%...I want to work and not be a burden on family, workplace, society."

Security, safety, and trust

Participants indicated that job security is a strong contributor to feelings of job satisfaction and safety. The importance of work to provide an income to meet basic survival and comfort needs was shared by many.

The MOHRI dataset indicates people who share their disability (66 per cent of whom are female) are just as likely to work full-time and be permanently appointed, as those with no disability.

However, a third of participants shared stories of employment experiences in the public sector that had been unpredictable or short-term in nature and which had resulted in negative impacts on both career and health.

A number of participants cited the experience of having a temporary contract or having to apply for their roles during periods of major workforce change. Whilst participants who had separated in the past had been able to return, and despite the Employment Security Policy, they spoke of a remaining anxiety and fear related to organisational change.

The right to request conversion from fixed-term temporary employment after 12 months continuous employment has been a welcome relief for some who have been on multiple fixed-term contracts.

Participants described their experiences of leaders who model authentic leadership, and their impact. Leaders who invite and respect employees' contributions create an environment where it is safe to share, which is particularly important when an employee is having a difficult day or needs to ask for help.

These leaders create the necessary conditions for safety and inclusion. Participants told us these environments made them feel supported and safe to learn, contribute and to challenge the status quo to improve outcomes.

With their value recognised and encouraged, they were provided an opportunity to shine and supported to aspire to grow professionally.

Participants were more likely to share their disability identity with team members and managers when they felt safe and included.

They indicated that feeling safe allowed them to be themselves at work and gave them confidence to seek relevant adjustments or flexible working arrangements. Some spoke of conversations with team members about their disability which led to disclosure of mutual experiences of lived disability. More than one participant relied upon a therapy dog for assistance and spoke of the importance of safety being extended to the dog also.

Participants overwhelmingly expressed the desire to feel seen and included at work – not just as a person who has a disability identity but as a valued multi-dimensional worker.

Those who experienced leaders in their workplace who did not demonstrate authenticity and compassion were reluctant to seek further opportunities to learn, found it difficult to have honest conversations about their needs or their professional goals, or to challenge decisions made in the team.

Participants told us that stigma, stereotypes, and instances of discrimination still exist for some people with disability. The literature tells us that this can often result in increased organisational cost and greater administrative burden (Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt & Kulkarni, 2008).

The Working for Queensland survey data tells us employees with disability experience higher rates of bullying and harassment and sexual harassment compared with employees who do not identify as living with disability.

One third of research participants expressed that there had been a point in their career when they had experienced workplace bullying, harassment, or discrimination. Those who also identified as First Nations people, parents/carers, or being from other cultural backgrounds experience feeling they have higher levels of vulnerability in the workplace than others.

Working for Queensland data indicates employees with disability are significantly less likely to feel that people are treated fairly and consistently in the workplace than people who do not identify as living with disability.

Flexible work

Participants shared stories of how the experience of COVID-19 had highlighted the benefits of flexible work. The resultant changes in work patterns, attitudes to remote and flexible work and supporting technology, provided a significant improvement in support for participants to manage their work. For some, it was the first time there was broad recognition of vulnerable workers being given permission to adjust their arrangements to support their needs. COVID-19 brought acceptance from workplaces to support flexibility that helped maintain safety and wellbeing.

Remote work also enabled:

- participants with complex and/or multiple disability to conserve energy otherwise expended navigating peak hour travel

- those with conditions such as fatigue and chronic pain to manage the episodic nature of their disability

- participants to use leave entitlements such as recreational leave for their intended purpose, rather than for appointments or recuperation, creating improved opportunity for balance

- the end of physical access issues for those living with physical disability

- participants who are neurodiverse to set working conditions that best suit their needs. These participants indicated they found the change from the office environment (noise levels, lighting, open plan workspace) refreshing.

The 2020 Working for Queensland survey responses verifies the participants' experiences relating to flexible work, with the proportion of people living with disability who have requested flexible work arrangements increasing from 30 per cent in 2019 to 34 per cent in 2020.

Indicative data appears to show a continuing increase in uptake of flexible work in 2021, and an increase in the number of people with disability requesting flexible work arrangements.

A number of participants had not yet returned to the office since March 2020, due to their level of vulnerability relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some expressed a feeling of exclusion, and of being "out of sight, out of mind," with a lack of visibility and connection to their team, who are now working in a hybrid model.

Some participants described feeling forgotten by their workplace, particularly when working remotely, but also during return-to-work processes. Their separation from the rest of the team minimised their ability to contribute and further amplified their feelings of difference.

This created a physical and emotional distance from team members and managers, as well as a disconnection to their workplace vision and purpose.

For others, the perception that there should be a uniform approach to approving requests for flexible work arrangements was cited as a challenge. Some participants had been denied requests, due to supervisors who shared with them that they did not wish to be seen to treat anyone as "special."

Regional and frontline employees living with disability indicated they faced different and at times more complex challenges

than their corporate or metropolitan Brisbane colleagues, when seeking to have their needs met at work.

Frontline participants have limited capacity to work remotely and shared that their workload increased during COVID-19, due to the change of work that needed to be undertaken to support their client group. Even many of those who worked in office-based environments in regional locations cited a culture that didn't support flexibility.

Technology advancements

Advancements in technology have allowed participants to work more productively. The swift introduction of Teams and Zoom to enable remote work during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant positive impacts for participants.

For example, one participant who described themselves as hard of hearing had not been able to take minutes in meetings previously but was able to do so with Teams when an automatic captioning feature was introduced.

In addition to Teams, other assistive technology and software advancements benefited employees who live with disability. For example, a participant with degenerative vision indicated that technology will enable them to continue doing compliance activities even when they eventually lose all their sight.

For others, noise cancelling headphones assist in maintaining focus when working in an office environment. Participants cited examples of assistive technologies that significantly benefit individuals and support business improvement including interactive whiteboards and the addition of braille to timesheets to support teachers who are blind.

Physical accessibility and adjustments

Buildings, work environments and adjustments do not always meet the requirements of employees who live with disability. In many cases, the burden of seeking and advocating for adjustments fell to the person with disability.

A major issue participants identified is that policies supporting accessibility for people living with disability are based on the medical model of disability, with requirements based on a diagnosis. This can create a difficult threshold for people with some disabilities to achieve. There are adjustments that can be made for people with invisible, episodic or other forms of disability that will have significant impact on their ability to thrive at work and grow their careers.

Participants perceived that workplaces tended to view accessibility for employees who live with disability through the provision of "things," for example an iPad, ergonomic chair, or software.

They shared that workplace adjustments extend to things that do not attract a financial cost but will lead to a sense of inclusion, increased innovation and business improvement that will benefit all, for example:

- documenting instructions, conversations, processes so people do not have to rely solely on memory recall or being present

- externalising thinking and decision making to colleagues/teams to improve transparency and shared understanding

- using agile project updates or simply writing to-do lists which make workload and progress visible for accountability

- requesting meeting agendas in advance to help prepare and have focused meetings.

Many participants shared stories of making adjustments themselves to ensure they are at their best at work. Some of the self-made adjustments mentioned by participants included:

- stepping away from the workplace to calm down

- requesting telephone interviews for improved focus

- using noise cancelling headphones

- smart watches

- turning on captioning in virtual meetings

- using notes apps or voice assistants (Siri, Google, reminders) on mobile phones

- scheduling regular times to eat and exercise

- using alternative transport options to travel (Uber business account, cab charges).

In some instances, past experiences of not being supported for workplace adjustments made participants reluctant to ask again, even in new workplaces. Self-adjustments, for these participants, were at times potentially problematic, and included self-medicating, purchasing their own items for workplace set-up, and avoiding or limiting certain environments. This also often included requests for flexibility to manage fatigue or appointments.

Eco-system of support

The support required to be able to thrive at work extends beyond the immediate workplace. Participants spoke of a range of supports, including formal and informal carers, family members, support workers and employment agencies.

Nearly 15 per cent of participants spoke of leaning on these supports to enable them to work. In addition, some participants were supported by medical practitioners and specialists and through JobAccess, who provide workplace adjustment funding.

A number of participants who lived with a mental health diagnosis or chronic illness, both of which can be episodic in nature, related storied of being referred to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) by their manager. Their perception was that this was often a risk mitigation strategy rather than a genuine offer of support or a valid way of addressing the support needs in the workplace.

Progression and career success

This project explored experiences that support thriving at work and growing a career for people with disability in the public service.

Participants who were currently in leadership roles (specifically AO7 equivalent and above) had varying views on what the next career choice would look like for them. Participants often acknowledged their career success as being symbolic of the possibilities of those living with disability. They attributed their success to being self-motivated, continuous learning and actively seeking opportunities to further progress their careers.

The 2020 Working for Queensland survey data indicates that only 58 per cent of all respondents did not consider disability to be a barrier to success. Proportionally, people with and without disability are equally represented in the Queensland public sector at the $60,000 and $99,999 earnings brackets (roughly AO3 to early AO6 equivalent classification). People with disability are under-represented at the $110,000 and above earnings brackets.

Some participants shared that while they were on the cusp of progressing to the next level in their career, their preference was to remain in their current role.

Some of this related to a fear of the loss of flexibility, with some workplaces expecting managers to be present in the office. Another issue identified with progression or mobility was concern about the risk to their wellbeing if the balance they have created in their current job was to be impacted. So, whilst the decision to seek career progression or not is a very personal one,

this research suggests that employees with disability need to factor in some considerations that other employees might not.

Participants who had negotiated tangible adjustments to meet their workplace needs identified concerns that items may not move with them if they changed agencies. The time, energy and effort required to negotiate for adjustments in a new role has in fact led to some participants self-selecting not to apply for roles. This issue creates unintended barriers to mobility and may serve to limit opportunities for development.

"[adjustments] things' don't travel with you because it has been paid for from another businesses budget…"

For some of our participants, experiencing multiple rejections for higher level roles had led to a belief that their aspirations were not going to be realised. These people expressed a level of sadness associated with this perception. In addition, participants expressed that the current recruitment and selection process and practice of appointing on merit reinforces a culture that does not embrace the value of difference and diversity.

Participants relayed experiences of recruitment and selection processes that they did not consider to be inclusive. Issues raised by participants are in fact not unique to those living with disability. Candidate experience research undertaken by the PSC in 2019 highlighted deficits in existing selection processes.

For example, written applications are difficult for employees where written communication is not a strength, and

interviews can tend to favour those who are able to promote themselves.

Participants in this research spoke about the different ways in which they communicate or express themselves, where their particular strengths lie and how they have felt disadvantaged when they didn't fit into the standard way of working and thinking. In particular, participants who identified as being neurodiverse or living with anxiety spoke of the interview process not allowing them to showcase what they could bring to a role.

Being seen and valued (behaviours and attitudes)

Rather than focussing on their disability, many participants spoke of wanting to be seen for their abilities. Some participants spoke of having "superpowers" with their capability enhanced by their disability. These abilities enhanced their contributions in their current role, and if seen by others could provide an excellent foundation for career advancement and mobility opportunities.

Some of the enhanced capabilities cited include:

- attention to detail
- empathy for others
- hyper-focus
- adaptability
- solutions-focus
- seeing connections and patterns
- resilience.

"People with disability are used to taking alternative routes to achieve the same goal...you don't survive without problem solving strategies."

In contrast, some participants believed that assumptions had been made about their capability to be a manager including that it would be too stressful for them, or they would not be able to regulate their emotions due to their neurodiversity.

In some instances, participants felt that the views of others about their disability pigeon-holed them into certain roles. For some, this experience had resulted in them remaining at lower levels, despite many attempts to progress – this was particularly relevant for participants who were neuro diverse. One participant spoke about wanting to be able to do strategic thinking, which is not always associated with people who live with autism.

"Diabetes is not the first thing I want people to see about me. It's my work ethic and seeing me do things first."

Some participants spoke of working harder to try and prove their value, and sometimes felt they were seen as, "a problem to be fixed." At times this had negative consequences for their wellbeing as they worked longer hours to be seen and considered 'worthy.'

Managers investing time in understanding a person's disability and the strengths they can bring to the workplace instead of assuming what they cannot do, represented the most positive type of workplace experience for participants.

Participants described positive examples of being asked about their needs, rather than being offered solutions. This built a sense of autonomy, purpose and meaning that resulted in improved confidence, health, and wellbeing.

Disability advocate role

Employees living with disability may voluntarily take on the role of disability advocate in their workplace.

This may extend to educating team members about the impact of work on their disability, advocating for improved accessibility or promoting disability awareness days. While this is something that gives their work additional meaning and is often cited as a highlight in their career journey, they also spoke of the additional workload this carries.

Many participants spoke of a sense of personal responsibility to help shift workplace cultures and practices around inclusion for people living with disability. While some participants were members of their agency disability employee networks, for most, talking and educating others about disability was not connected to their core work, but it still made their job more rewarding.

"It is great to talk to someone about your experience; and have it taken seriously, not minimised, having an opportunity to be open and honest...so that (my experience) can benefit other people."

Impact of episodic or mid-career diagnosis

Disability that presents episodically can be complex to navigate at work. Some of the episodic disabilities shared included multiple sclerosis, mental health disorders or living with cancer. For those with episodic disability there can be unexplained periods of fluctuating performance capability, poor health and unplanned leave. These unpredictable occurrences impact on their teams and workplaces. These participants spoke of putting on a "happy face" to mask their experiences during these times.

Individuals talked about reframing their career and having to navigate the intersection of work and their disability when they were diagnosed mid-career. The way they managed their time, energy and life was re-evaluated, and for some, their career aspirations were impacted.

Learning and development

Participants reinforced that continuous learning and growing at work contribute positively to their job satisfaction. Over one-tenth of participants had recently completed or were undertaking some form of further study. They expressed a powerful desire to continue learning – whether that was further formal study, gaining skills on the job, or workplaces providing on the job learning opportunities.

For others, learning and development opportunities were inaccessible, or they described not being provided access to training, despite their willingness to learn. Some, who for safety reasons continued to work remotely since the commencement of the COVID-19 pandemic, had at times found themselves excluded from face-to-face learning and development opportunities.

"Attending conferences – they're not worth the money for me. I can only hear the two people immediately beside me, so group work is just impossible."

However, other participants spoke of the opportunity online accessibility gave them, for one, this enabled them to participate in international conferences, without the requirement of travel or other associated costs.

Some participants indicated that their managers were either ill-equipped or reluctant to have meaningful performance conversations and provide constructive feedback. Participants felt these interactions were critical to building positive relationships with their managers and essential to developing and growing their own careers.

Career journeys

Life stage and responsibilities outside of work often informed participants' career progression goals for the near future, noting that this may be a temporary, not permanent impact.

The following summarises key themes from participants at various life stages.

Early adulthood participants (aged 20–40 years) – 30%

- Tertiary educated, starting public sector career in a mid-level role
- Public purpose work appeal – making a difference and influencing change as a value proposition
- Disability advocates see work identity shaped by disability identity
- Some avoid sharing their disability status, for fear of being treated differently or career being hindered
- Value in letting skills seen before sharing disability status
- If no workplace adjustment required, no benefit to share disability status
- Not sharing status may see the forfeit of adjustments that would support them at work

Middle adulthood participants (aged 40–60 years) – 60%

- Increase in the diagnosis of disability and/or health conditions; learning to manage a new identity
- Caring role: parents, children, partners
- Mid-career diagnosis can create interruption in career advancement, with self-doubt around capability and change of capacity
- Progression stalling as perceived to be judged as a risk; felt pigeon-holed into certain work or roles
- Recruitment processes not inclusive of difference, providing limited opportunities for success
- Barriers around mobility – physical accessibility issues
- Forgoing of progression for balance and stability
- Disability advocate role at work, while emotionally draining, provided satisfaction

**Mature adulthood participants
(aged 60–80 years) – 10%**

- Assisted technologies enabling career longevity

- Experiences of environmental and management workplace discrimination and barriers

- Perception of low expectations of them due to their disability

- Witnessed introduction of legislation about the rights of people with disability

- Positive changes in the workplace have increased job satisfaction

- Pride in ending career advocating for inclusive workplaces

HR support

In examining the factors that support job satisfaction and career growth for people with disability in the public sector, several opportunities to improve HR practice were raised by research participants.

Although workplace policies to support employees living with disability exist, in practice some participants had experience of such policy being applied in a way that was not person-centred. Rather than involving people as part of the resolution of issues and enabling them to gain the specific support they required, participants felt policies were often just a set of generic processes to be followed. The resultant resolution was often about items, rather than supporting behaviour change or other intangible adjustments.

Human resources interactions

Many participants indicated that interactions with the human resources (HR) area were not always supportive or productive. While several participants described their interactions with individual HR practitioners as being understanding and respectful, overall participants indicated they often felt let down by HR.

Participants surmised that HR managers often did not understand how to manage episodic or complex disability or medical conditions, although they also felt this was more an issue of lack of capability rather than lack of good will.

Many interactions described by participants demonstrated HR practices that were more aligned with the medical model than the social model of disability. This model can result in an expectation that the individual would change to fit in, rather than a view that the working conditions or environment needs to be adapted to support their needs.

For some this meant they experienced being seen as a problem or a risk to be managed, instead of a person who needed a level of support to enable them to contribute to their full ability.

HR mechanisms to provide support were sometimes seen as transactional, with responses only aimed to meet a defined, point in time need, instead of seeing the whole person. This approach does not recognise the complex and changing nature of disability, or that the individual may be discovering what they need as time passes. Ongoing revision and change are required.

Participants who were HR practitioners

A small number of participants were HR practitioners and these people spoke of being ill-equipped to apply tailored and empathetic responses where policies were process driven.

Some of these participants also shared that it was not until they gained lived experience of disability themselves that they were able to appreciate the complex and changing needs and support employees were seeking.

"Until I got sick, I didn't understand disability and mental health...as a HR practitioner, when it's physical disability, I know what to do...when it is invisible, I was told to treat it like a cold."

Participants who were managers

Relying on HR to translate and navigate policies was problematic for our participants who were managers. Finding information to support their own journey of disability was often difficult, and they also experienced this when they managed staff who lived with disability.

The stories they shared related to not having sufficient awareness of or exposure to policies.

Navigating the policy frameworks around disability employment, as well as finding relevant mainstream policy such as flexible work or special leave directives can be time consuming. Participants indicated they sometimes relied on previous experience or modelling good practice in former work environments to guide them.

Opportunity areas

Core insights will inform ongoing efforts to create meaningful change and support the success of employees living with disability.

In collaboration with participants the desired future state has been defined as one where:

- disability does not hinder career success or progression
- employees are seen for their skills and capability
- employees are supported to flourish in an environment that allows them to safely develop and thrive at work.

The following opportunity areas will inform planning at sector level through the Disabling the Barriers Implementation Plan 2022. It can be used at an agency level to inform planning, policy and practice.

Designing solutions that meet the diverse needs of different public sector agencies and their employees is key to embedding meaningful, long-term change for employees with disability.

The research promotes change across four levers: co-design, co-creation, leadership capability and systems capability.

Co-design – person centred design

- People with disability are at the centre of the policy design process.
- Data is used to understand the experience of people with disability as a basis for policy and planning.

- People with disability are involved in strategic and workforce planning:
  - meaningful performance measures are monitored and inform action (e.g. employment rates, job satisfaction).
- Recruitment and selection processes are more inclusive, and people with disability are involved in design.

Co-creation – person centred implementation

- Managers, including HR practitioners, take a person-centred approach to reasonable adjustment policy implementation.

  Meetings, forums and social events are accessible for and inclusive of people with disability.

- An annual diversity census and supporting awareness campaign is supported by agencies to encourage and support employees to self-identify.

- The Commission continues to support HR capability building to ensure a person-centric approach when providing support to people with disability.

Leadership capability – equipping people to drive inclusion

- Leaders value and model authentic leadership.
- Disability and other related policy is easy to find when needed
- More people in HR teams have lived experience or live with disability.
- More people in leadership positions have lived experience or live with disability.
- Agencies gather and share stories about:
  - the value of involving people with disability in policy/planning
  - colleagues and stakeholders who live with disability
  - the value of diversity and inclusion.
- Managers are supported to develop capability and to create inclusive work practices, including how to manage performance and development.
- The Commission continues to support HR capability building to manage invisible, episodic, complex and chronic disability.

System capability – enabling systems that support inclusion

- Employees can take reasonable adjustments resources with them to another role and another agency.
- The Commission develops resources to support agencies to implement Flexible by Design with a focus on working in a hybrid environment.
- A reactivated Inclusion and Diversity Community of Practice builds inclusion policy, strategy and capability across agencies.
- People with disability have more access to learning and development opportunities.
- The Commission incorporates relevant research findings into the Mentally healthy workplaces program.

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Appendix 1

About the participants

The 51 individual participants represented 16 agencies. One quarter of the participants had experience in manager, senior leadership and/or decision-making roles. Participants were from a variety of occupations, including:
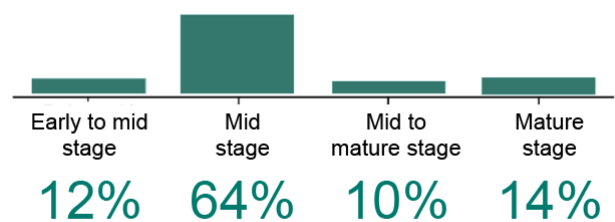
- Service delivery involving direct contact with the public (e.g., education, healthcare, customer/counter service)

- Policy and/or program design and/or management

- Corporate (Human Resources, finance/accounting, information and communications technology (ICT), procurement

- Other corporate (including information management, legal, audit services, records management)

- Exercising regulatory authority (e.g., setting of compliance with statutory standards, professional registration, legal enforcement)

While 47% were living with multiple disability, 78% of participants shared that they lived with invisible disability. An invisible disability is a physical, mental, or neurological condition that is not visible to others. Invisible disabilities mentioned by participants included but were not limited to multiple sclerosis (MS), mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism.

Location

60% metro   40% non-metro

Career

Early to mid stage	Mid stage	Mid to mature stage	Mature stage
12%	64%	10%	14%

51 Total number of participants

47% of participants have more than one disability

22% Visible disability

78% Invisible disability

Caring responsibilities

20% of participants were also carers of family members with disability (partner, spouse and/or children)

Appendix 2

A number of key external and internal influences over the past twenty years have positively impacted the lives of people living with disability.

Participants mentioned the notable efforts across the community and workplaces to improve the experiences for people living with disability. This includes public sector and broader community behavioural and attitudinal changes, increased public representation of people with disability as well as structural workplace changes.

"20 years ago, you just needed to adapt. If you didn't fit into the niche of the job, you wouldn't get hired."

The introduction of the NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme) in Queensland in 2016, and the establishment of the Disability Royal Commission in 2019 were instrumental in raising awareness about people living with disability in Australia.

The 2018 Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast mixed able-bodied and para-sports for the first time, giving each equal billing on the global stage and legitimising para-athletes. Kurt Fearnley, a para-athlete was the Australian flag bearer for the Games. Television coverage saw parity of the event, shining a public light on what people with disability were able to achieve, instead of seeing limitations.

"Don't ignore the disability, don't look through the disability and don't say that these are superhumans, because we are wonderfully human and wonderfully normal." Kurt Fearnley

Key milestones

2002 Disability standards for accessible public transport (Federal)

2005 Disability standards for education (Federal)

2008 UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

2010 National Disability Strategy 2010–2020 (Federal)

2012 Establishment of National Mental Health Commission (Federal)

2014 Queensland Disability Plan 2014–2019 (internal)

2015 First Queensland public sector Inclusion and Diversity Strategy developed (internal)

2016 NDIS launched in Queensland, CEO Leadership Board set diversity targets, IR right to request flexible work introduced (internal)

2017 Flexible by Design framework implemented (internal)

2018 Commonwealth Games integration with para-athletes (community based)

2019 Disability Royal Commission, Disability Connect Queensland established (external)

2020 Directives – Appointing a public service employee to a higher classification level and Fixed term temporary employment (internal)

2021 Dylan Alcott wins the Golden Slam in men's international tennis (community based)

Implementation of updated diversity definitions, review of Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, with more of a focus on intersectionality (internal)

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