Disability Empowerment Facts Vs Myths

> "The reality is that important decisions made by intelligent, responsible people with the best information and intentions are sometimes hopelessly flawed" …..Our brains leap to conclusions and are reluctant to consider alternatives; we are particularly bad at revisiting our initial assessment of a situation."
>
> Campbell, A, Whitehead, J and Finkelstein S. *Why Good Leaders Make Bad Decisions.*
> Harvard Business Review February 2009 pp60-66

Too often, flawed decisions (often ignorance/prejudice based) inform flawed attitudes resulting in flawed interactions,

When it comes to disability employment the myths are at direct variance with the facts.

Worldwide there are some 650 million people with a disability. Most of these disabilities are 'visible' – blindness, lost of mobility, loss of hearing and so on and mental illnesses. However, many millions more have 'non-visible' – disabilities that can't be readily seen but which are none-the-less very real disabilities. In Australia alone it is estimated that 20% of the workforce suffer from some sort of depression.

Maybe more than a billion people worldwide suffer some form of disability. Many of these people are very employable but remain unemployed. In an era where management has identified that the recruitment and retention of staff is the number one challenge, why is it that many disabled people remain unemployed and, where employed, often underemployed?

Attitude

> In its Convention on *the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* the *United Nations General Assembly* states:
>
> (e) *Recognizing* that disability is an evolving concept and that *disability results from the interaction* between persons with impairments and *societal attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.*
>
> In Australia the Federal Government has stated that "The biggest change that needs to be made when considering the employment of people with a disability is a change in attitude."
>
> Australian Government Australian Safety and Compensation Council (ASCC)
> *A workplace with people with disability* 26/6/2007

A Report to the Victorian Department of Communities and the Workforce Participation Taskforce found that "Changing employer attitudes about potential employees, as well as their (accurate or inaccurate) perceptions of customer attitudes towards different types of employees, appears to be most important for mature age, disabled and Indigenous individuals".

In Australia the biggest barrier has been identified as attitude.

Discriminatory attitudes and/or practices could put employers at risk under two recent pieces of Federal legislation information that HR practitioners need to study carefully.

1. **Disability Discrimination Act (ADA) and**
2. **Other Human Rights (HREOC Act) Legislation Amendment Act 2009**

The amendments to the act place an obligation on employers to ensure that they do not discriminate against disabled employees and prospective employees.

According to the high profile legal firm *Deacons*, these new amendments means employers:

- need to understand the practical implications of these changes, particularly in relation to their approach to recruitment, the management of workplace issues and termination of employment;
- should review their existing policies and procedures to ensure that these changes are adequately addressed;
- should undertake refresher training for all staff on discrimination and appropriate workplace behaviour taking into account the new provisions under anti-discrimination legislation and the FW Act; and
- need to consider whether their document creation and management processes are adequate.

Fair Work Act

Under Section 351 of the FW Act which came into effect earlier this year an employer must not take **adverse action** against an employee or prospective employee because of the employee's race, colour, sex, sexual preference, age, physical or mental disability, marital status, family or carer's responsibilities, pregnancy, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin.

European Commission

In Europe the biggest barrier to workplace diversity was identified as lack of information and awareness. Perhaps these two barriers are just different faces of the same coin.

In a 2005 investigation into the barriers to workplace diversity the EC found that the major barriers were:

1. Lack of information and awareness (20.2%)
2. Difficulty of measuring results of diversity policies (20.0%)
3. Discriminatory attitudes and behaviors (16.4%)
4. Specific skills/expertise required (11.0%)
5. Commitment of leadership (9.8%)
6. Other – please specify: (8.7%)
7. Time (5.1%)
8. Financial resources for this purpose (3.4%)

European Commission: '*The Business Case for Diversity Good Practice in the Workplace'*
September 2005

Business Case for Disability Employment: Fact v Myth

The following Table (Table 1) lists the A-A of Common Advantages and Disadvantages of Disability Employment: Attendance and Employment Costs. The Table consolidates the results of three Australian reports on the advantages and disadvantages of the employment and attendance costs of disabled employees. It also identifies which report/s identified which advantage or disadvantage.

The reports analysed the cost associated disabled employees compared to average employees. The Table shows the average (+ or -) of disabled employees against the average for all employees.

TABLE 1.

ADVANTAGES and DISADVANTAGES - ATTENDANCE and EMPLOYMENT COSTS of Disabled Employees compared to the average for all employees **%'s are + or – of disabled employees against the average of all employees**

	ASCC	*Graffam	Allen	% Advantage	% Disadvantage
• Allen Consulting Group Parliament of Australia: *Working for Australia's Future: Increasing participation in the Workforce.* House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment & Workplace Relations & Workforce participation 2005 • Australian Security and Compensation Commission (ASCC) • Graffam, J, Smith, K. Shinkfield, A & Polzin, U. 2002 Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation 17 (2002) 252-263 OIS Press					
Accrued absent/sick leave costs		☑	☑	**64**%	
Accuracy/quality of work - note: accuracy/quality for average disabled employee **very near 'medium score'** for all employee average		☑	☑		-25.09%
Attendance - greater attendance rates - 62% of employee average absences **(* 86% rated average or better on job attendance)**	☑	☑	☑	**38%**	
Insurance (Other) - lower other insurance costs - 4% of employee average		☑	☑	**96**%	
OH&S Claims - lower OH&S rate of claims - 12 % of employee average	☑	☑	☑	**88%**	
OH&S Costs - lower safety/claims costs - 26% of average employee $cost (**90% of employers required no change to their insurance costs**)	☑	☑	☑	**75%**	
OH&S Incidents - lower OH&S incident rates - 12 % of employee average **(* 98% rated average or better in work safety)**		☑	☑	**88.%**	
Recruitment costs - 13% of employee average		☑	☑	**87%**	
Speed of Work -note: speed of work 'average' disabled employee **very near 'medium score'** for all employee average (* **90% rated average or better on job performance**)		☑	☑		-22. %
Workers Compensation Costs - lower w/c costs - 4% of employee average		☑	☑	**96%**	
Workers Compensation Incidents - lower w/c incidents - 18% of employee average		☑	☑	**82%**	

Only in the areas speed and accuracy of work did the disabled compare less favourably with the average of all employees. In all other respects considerable advantages attached to disabled employees.

Table 2 (below) shows the % of respondents reporting benefits, cost neutral or increased cost of disability Employment in a study conducted by the Australian Security and Compensation Commission (ASCC).

TABLE 2: Disability Employment – Impact on organisational performance: A-Z of advantages and disadvantages - organisational performance - cost benefit analysis.

Organisational Performance Factors % employers reporting benefits, cost neutral or increased costs	Benefit	Cost
Customer relations	**72.30%**	Not known
General work practices/Morale - Almost all employers reported distinct positive effect on staff morale	**73.20%**	Not known
Productivity	**61.30%**	Not known
Profits ($)	**40.90%**	Not known
Staff practices	**75.10%**	Not known
Staff relations	**78.70%**	Not known
Staff skills	**82.90%**	Not known
Staff supervision financial effect (cost neutral 55.9%)	23.00%	21.10%
Staff supervision outcomes	**70%**	30.20%
Training - financial benefit (cost neutral 62.20%)	24.90%	12.90%
Training outcomes	**75.40%**	Not known
Workplace modification (cost neutral 74.7%)		12.70%
Workplace modification, training & supervision (cost neutral 65.00%)	20.00%	15.00%

* Australian Security and Compensation Commission (ASCC)

A-Z of Common Benefits Of Diversity Employment Practices

The following table (Table 3) is based on current European research. It lists alphabetically common advantages/benefits of employing a diverse workforce.

Sources are: Charted Institute of Personnel Development CIPD *Diversity in business- a focus on progress* March 2007 London European Commission *The Business Case for Diversity Good Practice in the Workplace* September 2005.

Organisations Reporting Benefits Source & % of Respondents	EC %	CIPD %
Benefits – Enhanced Reputation, Image, Community Relations	38.20%	
Branding -To improve corporate branding		37%
Business sense - Because it makes business sense		60%
Competition - To respond to competition in the market		33%
Competitive Advantage - Competitive advantage compared to other organisations.	17.10%	
Compliance Legal compliance/avoidance of fines or sanctions	23.50%	
Customer base - Marketing opportunities to a wider customer base	15.80%	39%
Customer Relations - Desire to improve customer relations		43%
Customer satisfaction - Enhanced customer satisfaction & service level	15.40%	
Decision Making- To enhance decision-making		35%
Effectiveness - Economic effectiveness and profitability/improve business performance	16.70%	48%
Efficiency - Improved motivation & efficiency	24.40%	
Global market: To respond to the global market		30%
Innovation - Innovation & creativity	26.30%	43%
Organisation Values - Commitment to equality & diversity as org. values	35.40%	
Other	2.70%	
Product Improvement - To improve products and services		44%
Talent - To address recruitment problems		46%
Talent - to recruit & retail best talent		64%
Talent. Access to new labour/attraction of high quality employees	42.60%	

A-Z OF COMMON BARRIERS to DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT

The following table (Table 4) is based on current Australian and European research. It lists alphabetically common barriers/reasons used for not employing a disabled applicant.

TABLE 4: Common Barriers to Disability Employment

BARRIER	ASCC	AEDN	BCA
Age discrimination	x		
Application - difficulties in accessing completing employment application forms	x		
Attitude/Prejudice	x	x	
Contagion fear (fear/unease of 'catching' the disability)	x		
Costs - perception of increased overall expense in employing disabled			x
Disclosure of disability in job application	x		
Driver's license (lack of)	x		
Experience - lack of work experience (mainly due to the prolonging studies as a result of disability)	x		
Industry - industry associated unstable work patterns deemed unsuitable	x		
Job/entry requirements versus (dis)ability/ies - perceived/real gap	x	x	
OH&S risk - perceived increased risk	x		
Physical requirements - disability perceived to be inconsistent with physical requirements of the job		x	
Productivity -perceived lack of/lower level of productivity	x		
Recruitment policies		x	
Recruitment practices	x	x	
Reoccurrence or increase in/of disability due to work	☐		
Resources - perceived increase in resources required & associated cost		x	
Risks - perception of overall increased risk in employing disabled		x	x
Stereotyping	x		
Supervision - perception of increased supervision & associated cost		x	
Training - perception of increased training required and associated cost		x	
Workplace modifications - perceived cost of	x		

Australian Employers' Disability Network. ASCC *Review of the Evidence* Business Council of Australia (BCA 2007)

Audit 1 Attributes Of Workplace Disability Awareness and Orientation 'Friendliness'

The following list of attributes is based on the Provider and Employer checklists contained in The Australian Employers' Disability Network Guide to Workplace Diversity.

You can use this audit to assess your organisation's diversity friendliness by rating your organisation in each factor using a 1 (very low) to 10 (very high) scale against each factor.

Title	Description	1-10
Accessibility reviews	We regularly review and update our premises, products and services and ensure they are accessible to people with disability	
Accessibility understanding	We have a good understanding of the accessibility features and barriers in our workplace	
Business Case Understood	We have a good understanding of the business case for including people with disability in our workforce	
Communication	We communicate the availability of our accessible products and services	
Customer Service Training	We provide training such as 'Disability Awareness' and 'Welcoming Customers with Disability to our customer service staff	
Customer Standards	We have an organisation-wide policy on our product and service standards in relation to customers with disability	
Disability #'s	Employees with disability are represented in our workforce	
Disability Action Plan	We have implemented a Disability Action Plan	
Disclosure procedure	Our employees know the procedure when an employee disclose a disability	
Employer of Choice	We have a reputation as being an employer of choice for people with disability	
Events Access	We use an accessibility checklist to ensure events are accessible to all	
Executive/ Senior Management	There is internal top level support for the inclusion of people with disability in our organisation	
Flexible work conditions	We offer flexible work conditions	
Human resources adjustments	Our human resources team knows how to make adjustments for candidates and employees with disability	
Information Formats	We provide information in a variety of formats	
Job Applications	People with disability routinely apply for positions	
Monitor Standards	We monitor the success of our customer service policies in relation to customers with disability at an executive level	
Premises	Where possible we have ensured our physical premises are accessible to people with a range of disabilities	

Attributes Of Workplace Disability Awareness And Orientation 'Friendliness' (continued)

Title	Description	1-10
Recruitment Processes	We have reviewed our recruitment processes to ensure they are barrier-free to people with disability	
Redundancy equity	When redundancies are made, we review the demographics and ensure that people with disability are not over-represented	
Stakeholder Response	We recognise and respond to people with disability as suppliers, shareholders, employees and members of the community	
Suppliers and Contractors	We encourage our suppliers and contractors to also become disability confident businesses	
Training and Development	Employees with disability participate in training and development as frequently as other staff	
Website Design	Our website is clear and uncluttered with high colour contrast, meetsW3C guidelines and is accessible to people with a range of disabilities	

There are 24 attributes in this list so scores of 120 or above would indicate your organisation is aware of and working towards a disability friendly work environment.

If you scored below 120 your organisation is probably not very disability friendly, you might also need to check that it complies with the new legislation for a fair workplace.

Audit 2: 8 Preconditions
Assessing Readiness for the Paradigm Shift to Learning and Effectiveness Paradigm

The following list of attributes is based on Thomas A.A & Ely, R.J. '*Making Difference Matter'* Harvard Business Review Sept-Oct 1996 Boston.

You can use this audit to assess your organisation's diversity friendliness by rating your organisation in each factor using a 1 (very low) to 10 (very high) scale against each factor.

8 Preconditions for the Learning & Effectiveness Paradigm

#	Title	Description	1 to 10
1	Understanding	Leadership understands that a diverse workforce will embody different perspectives and approaches to work and must truly value variety of opinion and insight.	
2	The Opportunity of Different Perspectives	Leadership recognises both the learning opportunities and challenges that the expression of different perspectives presents for an organisation.	
3	Organisational Culture	The organisational culture creates expectations of high standards of performance from everyone.	
4	Personal Development	The organisational culture stimulates personal development.	
5	Openness	The organisational culture encourages openness.	
6	Staff Valued	The organisational culture makes staff feel valued.	
7	Diversity Vision	The organisation has a well-articulated and widely understood diversity mission.	
8	Structure	The organisation has a relatively egalitarian, non-bureaucratic structure.	

There are 8 attributes in this list so a score of 40 or more would indicate a willingness to be a diversity friendly organisation. Scores below 40 may indicate problems in this area that could need attention to comply with ongoing legislation.

Conclusion

Anecdotal evidence would indicate that organisations generally in Australia are not employing disabled staff. Many organisations are not even aware of the changes to legislation nor the support government is giving to the issue yet, the skills crisis deepens despite the recent economic 'crisis' and, as the baby boomers retire, workplaces all around Australia will be working hard on strategies to develop and maintain their optimal workforce numbers. Perhaps now is the time for those savvy HR professionals to work on changing attitudes within their organisation to encourage and celebrate a more diverse employment approach!

About **Michael Meere**

Michael is a professional & academic in the field of human resources management (HRM). He is the Principal of *Human Resources Business Partners HRBP* a worldwide business and HRM consultancy focusing on global human resources challenges and solutions. Michael is also a part-time prac-ademic (as he likes to refer to think of himself) supporting post graduate HR Masters students in their studies and research projects.

He is known in the field as a speaker and writer on global HR trends and issues and more recently has developed a comprehensive set of HR metrics and measures designed for ease of use by busy HR practitioners. He is the author of over 50 articles and columns and has developed a large range of tools for HR professionals.

Michael is working in partnership with the College for Adult Learning to provide a range of consultancy services and specialised training development options for HRM Practitioners.

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Useful Australian Organisations

Diversity Council Australian http://www.dca.org.au/

Equal Employment Opportunity Network http://www.eeon.com.au/

The Australian Employers' Network on Disability http://www.employersnetworkondisability.com.au/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1&limit=4&limitstart=4