

How governments and organisations can change strategies to hire more people with intellectual disability

People with intellectual and learning disabilities experience higher unemployment rates, despite the value they add to a workplace. Studies show this number is close to 35 per cent in Australia, and that the proportion of adults with an intellectual disability employed in the mainstream labour force has not increased since 1995.

When people with intellectual disability have jobs where they receive the right training and support, their job retention rate is higher than the national average. Hiring diverse employees improves customer engagement and broadens the range of experience in the workforce. On top of this, co-workers and managers also report positive changes in their own attitudes towards people with disability and have higher levels of social involvement with supported employees.

So why are the same people who are shown to be committed to their work and who improve engagement finding it so much harder to get jobs than the wider population?

Improving access to open employment for people with disability has been a priority in Australia for several decades. The NDIS Participant Employment Strategy for 2019 – 2022 states one of the major goals is to have 30 per cent of NDIS participants of working age to be in paid work by 30 June 2023.

Despite this, many adults with intellectual disability remain either unemployed or in supported employment programs, with growth in open employment limited.

[*Emerging trends affecting future employment opportunities for people with intellectual disability: The case of a large retail organisation*](#) by Katherine Moore, Paula McDonald, and Jennifer Bartlett shows this is due to several factors.

Why organisations aren't hiring people with intellectual disability

Organisations have moved towards streamlining their recruitment through web-based platforms, which is a big barrier for people with intellectual disability. Online processes limit opportunities for face-to-face negotiations between specialised disability employment services and store managers, which was found to be essential for successful employment outcomes. Shortlisting decisions are also more likely to be based on skill matching to the role rather than consideration for diversity management strategies.

Another crucial factor are the advances in technology to make more efficient work systems, which have resulted in prioritising productivity over workplace diversity. This means routine tasks that have previously been undertaken by people with intellectual disability have been replaced with automation. This also means there is greater opportunity for managers to legitimise not employing people with intellectual disability, as they may be perceived to be less efficient.

These findings are reflected in the New Zealand Government's Disability Employment Action Plan, which identifies many other barriers people with disability face gaining employment including:

- Poor customisation of jobs to match skills and abilities
- Disability support needs unable to be met at work
- Lower education attainment or access to inclusive education
- Limited opportunities for supported work experience and training.

How can these issues be addressed?

Addressing these issues isn't just a case of disability-inclusive recruitment practices and providing a target number of employment opportunities, as this would represent only a small step toward addressing the problem of the low employment rate for people with intellectual disability.

[*What constitutes effective support in obtaining and maintaining employment for individuals with intellectual disability? A scoping review*](#) by Cindy Cheng, Jodi Oakman, Christine Bigby, Ellie Fossey, Jillian Cavanagh, Hannah Meacham, and Timothy Bartram shows that both governments and organisations can implement strategies to improve open employment participation for adults with intellectual disability, including:

- Having more collaboration with specialised disability employment services and job coaches
- An increase not only in training for adults with intellectual disability, but also their co-workers
- A mix of both face-to-face and computer-based or video training for job tasks
- Teaching how to set work-related goals and creating action plans
- Self-regulating work behaviour using checklists of frequently used words to prompt job tasks
- Developing work activities that could be completed efficiently by employees with intellectual or learning disabilities.

Further reading:

[*Emerging trends affecting future employment opportunities for people with intellectual disability: The case of a large retail organisation*](#)

[*What constitutes effective support in obtaining and maintaining employment for individuals with intellectual disability? A scoping review*](#)

[*NDIS Participant Employment Strategy for 2019 – 2022*](#)

[*New Zealand Government's Disability Employment Action Plan*](#)

The Australasian Society for Intellectual Disability (ASID) is a peak body in intellectual disability which promotes research to inform and influence good practice and policy to achieve a society where people with intellectual disability are afforded the same rights and opportunities as everyone. Information and membership details can be found on the ASID website <https://www.asid.asn.au/>

ASID owns two international academic journals published through Taylor & Francis: *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability* (JIDD) and *Research and Practice in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* (RAPIDD). ASID members have access to these journals as part of their membership.

To increase the accessibility of research, this article synthesises the key messages from two articles published in 2018 in JIDD related to employment of people with intellectual disability.