



Engaging employers to increase the employment of people with disability in Australia

Evidence synthesis summary

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Acknowledgement of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, who are the Traditional Owners of the land on which Centre for Inclusive Employment is located, in Melbourne's east and outer-east, and pay our respect to their Elders past and present. We are honoured to recognise our connection to Wurundjeri Country, history, culture, and spirituality through these locations, and strive to ensure that we operate in a manner that respects and honours the Elders and Ancestors of these lands. We also respectfully acknowledge Swinburne's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students, alumni, partners and visitors.

We also acknowledge and respect the Traditional Owners of lands across Australia, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures, and heritage, and recognise the continuing sovereignties of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

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Engaging employers to increase the employment of people with disability in Australia: Summary

Why this matters

Australians with disability want to work – and most can, with the right support. But despite years of reform, too many people with disability still struggle to find and keep meaningful, paid work. The employment rate for people with disability remains significantly lower than for the rest of the population, and the gap is not closing fast enough.

Most efforts to fix this have focused on the person looking for work – helping them with their resume, their interview skills, their readiness. Far less attention has been paid to the other side of the equation: the employer. Yet employers are the ones with the jobs. If they don't hire, adjust, and retain people with disability, nothing else matters.

This report looks at what actually works when employment services engage with employers – and what needs to change so that more people with disability can get into work, stay in work, and progress.

Key evidence: What improves employment outcomes

There is surprisingly little detailed, practical research on this topic. Most of what exists talks about the importance of employer engagement in general terms but stops short of explaining exactly what to do and how. This report pulls together the best available Australian and international evidence to fill that gap.

The findings are clear: the employment services that get the best outcomes for people with disability are not the ones that simply match people to job vacancies. They are the ones that build genuine, ongoing relationships with employers – understanding what employers need, helping them feel confident, and staying involved long after someone starts a job.

Specifically, the evidence shows that:

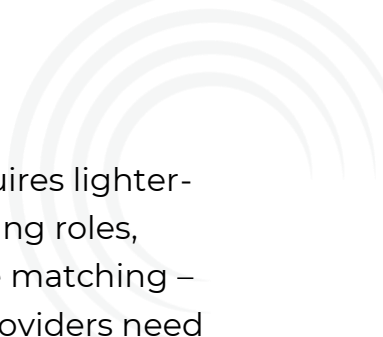
- **Relationships matter more than transactions.** Filling a vacancy is not employer engagement. What works is building trust over time, understanding how an organisation works, and becoming a genuine partner in helping them employ people well.

- **Staying involved after someone starts is critical.** Most problems that lead to someone leaving a job happen in the early weeks and months. Providers who check in regularly, coach supervisors, and solve problems quickly get far better retention outcomes.
- **One size does not fit all.** What works for an employer hiring someone with a physical disability is different from what works for someone with a mental health condition or an intellectual disability. Good providers tailor their approach to the person and the workplace.
- **Employers need support too.** Many employers want to do the right thing but don't know how. Reducing their uncertainty – through practical advice, clear information, and hands-on support – is one of the most effective things a provider can do.
- **How much support is needed varies.** Some employers need light-touch guidance. Others need intensive, hands-on involvement – particularly in the early stages of a new hire. Providers need the flexibility and resources to respond accordingly.

Implementation factors: How to make it work

Even when providers know what good employer engagement looks like, putting it into practice consistently is not straightforward. The evidence points to a set of conditions that shape whether effective practices actually work – and that help explain why similar approaches produce different results in different settings.

- **Dedicated roles and protected time.** Employer engagement works best when staff have clearly defined, employer-facing roles – not when it is one responsibility among many. Caseloads need to be manageable enough to allow for real relationship-building, proactive outreach, and intensive post-placement support. Where these conditions are not in place, even skilled staff will default to transactional, vacancy-filling activity.
- **Staff capability and credibility.** Employer-facing staff need to understand how businesses work – their pressures, their language, and how decisions get made. Providers who come across as credible business partners, rather than welfare service representatives, are significantly more effective at building the trust that leads to hiring and retention. This requires investment in targeted training, mentoring, and practical tools that build both confidence and sector knowledge over time.
- **Relationship maturity between provider and employer.** What is possible in an employer engagement conversation depends heavily on how



established the relationship is. Early engagement typically requires lighter-touch, trust-building activity. Deeper collaboration – co-designing roles, jointly planning adjustments, involving employers in candidate matching – only becomes possible once a foundation of trust is in place. Providers need to read where each employer is at and adjust their approach accordingly, rather than applying the same level of engagement intensity across all relationships.

- **Organisational systems and tools.** Good practice needs to be embedded in how an organisation operates – not left to the initiative of individual staff. This means having consistent tools such as adjustment profiles, supervisor briefing templates, and structured follow-up schedules, as well as shared systems for recording relationship history so that engagement survives staff turnover. Without these, quality becomes uneven and dependent on who happens to be in the role.
- **Funding and performance frameworks.** The structure of funding and how performance is measured has a significant effect on what providers actually do. Where frameworks reward job starts over job retention, providers face a direct disincentive to invest in the sustained, relationship-based engagement that the evidence supports. Aligning incentives with retention and progression outcomes – rather than placement volume – is a precondition for widespread improvement.
- **Local labour market conditions.** Effective employer engagement does not happen in a vacuum. Local industry cycles, workforce demand, unemployment rates, and the concentration of particular sectors all shape what is possible and how providers need to adapt their approach. Strategies that work well in a tight labour market with high employer demand may need significant adjustment in regions with fewer opportunities or less employer diversity.
- **Scaling and system coordination.** Individual providers working in isolation can only go so far. The evidence points to the value of coordination across providers, programs, and agencies – sharing labour market intelligence, avoiding duplication of employer contacts, and presenting a joined-up offer to employers who interact with multiple services. Where this coordination is absent, employers experience fragmented and sometimes contradictory engagement from different parts of the system, which erodes trust and confidence.

Practical guidance for providers, employers and policymakers

The report identifies a significant gap between what the evidence says works and what is actually happening consistently across the sector. Good practice exists – but it is patchy, hard to find, and rarely shared. The employment services sector operates in a competitive funding environment that gives providers little incentive to share what they know.

Closing this gap requires action at three levels.

What employment support providers can do

Providers need to move beyond simply placing people in jobs and toward sustained, relationship-based employer engagement across the whole employment journey. In practice this means:

- **Getting to know each employer** – their industry, their culture, and what they need – rather than approaching every employer the same way.
- **Being the bridge between the employer and the employee**, translating what disability means in practice into plain, useful business language.
- **Staying involved after someone starts** – checking in with supervisors, solving problems early, and adjusting the role where needed.
- **Building employer confidence over time** so they become not just willing to hire once, but committed to inclusive employment as part of how they operate.
- **Reaching out to employers before there is a vacancy** – building relationships in advance so that when opportunities arise, there is already trust in place.
- **Supporting inclusion from the very first step** – how a job is advertised, how interviews are designed, how someone's first week is structured – not just once someone is in the role.
- **Using consistent tools and processes** across the team so that the quality of support a jobseeker or employer receives doesn't depend on who happens to be working with them.

What employers can do

Employers have a central role to play – and the evidence suggests many are willing, but uncertain. The most effective employers:

- **Treat inclusive hiring as a strategic priority**, not a compliance exercise.
- **Invest in supervisor capability** so that the people managing day-to-day work know how to support someone well.
- **Make practical adjustments without waiting to be asked** – and review those adjustments regularly as the role and the person evolve.
- **Create pathways for people with disability** to grow, develop skills, and progress – not just enter at the lowest level and stay there.

What policymakers can do

The current policy and funding settings do not consistently reward the kind of sustained, relationship-based employer engagement the evidence supports. Changing this requires:

- **Reforming performance frameworks** so providers are incentivised to focus on retention and progression, not just job starts.
- **Setting minimum standards for employer servicing** so jobseekers with disability receive consistently high-quality support regardless of which provider they use.
- **Investing in an openly shareable national toolkit of resources** – practical guides, templates, and case examples – that the whole sector can draw on.
- **Funding a national campaign** on inclusive employment that builds employer awareness, confidence, and demand at scale.
- **Strengthening the role of bodies like the Centre for Inclusive Employment** as active convenors of knowledge-sharing and peer learning across the sector.

Conclusion: Making inclusive employment a reality

The foundations for better employment outcomes for people with disability are there. The knowledge exists. Good practice exists. What is missing is consistency – and the structures, incentives, and shared resources needed to make good practice the norm rather than the exception. This report sets out a clear path forward. The task now is to act on it.