



AUSTRALIAN CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

THE REWARDS OF EMPLOYING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

ADDRESS TO
'BUILDING AUSTRALIA'S
WORKFORCE' BUSINESS LUNCH

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The Hon Bill Shorten MP, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, employers and colleagues from peak employer bodies, representatives from Disability Employment Service Providers, ladies and gentlemen. It was 2.30pm on an overcast weekday afternoon in Melbourne's northern suburbs. I was on leave and was returning home from a bike ride. I needed to purchase a storage box for some files. I parked my car adjacent to the shop, an ordinary car park, the usual smattering of people, an ordinary day, a regular purchase. And then something extraordinary happened. I walked into the shop, through the automatic opening doors and the entry gateway.

The store greeter to my left mumbled a 'g'day' as my eyes were searching for the aisle with storage boxes. Something caught the corner of my eye. I hesitated, then paused in stride. I did a double take. An ordinary day was about to become extraordinary. 'Yes, it is' I said to myself, as I stared at the store greeter. That's no ordinary staff member. It was a severely disabled person; a bit like the young girl down the street who I knew of when I grew up, but to whom I never spoke. It wasn't her, but someone just like her, who had been employed in this store as the store greeter.

Absorbing the moment, I let my thoughts settle. Wow, this store, one of my members I suspect, was employing a disabled person. Tick. And not just in back office or behind the scenes but front of house. Big tick. Visible to all, yes. A bit confronting, yes. A disabled person welcoming the able bodied customer and keeping them honest, yes. Making a statement and challenging assumptions, definitely. I felt good even though it was different. Not tokenistic, but a real job providing assistance and to encourage customers to feel positive about the business and about shopping there. I wanted to tell friends and family about it, even though it mightn't be a big deal to them. Amidst these thoughts I momentarily forgot even why I was in the store. I simply knew that a bit of sunlight had shone on an overcast day in my ordinary life.

So, let me start by saying, well done Officeworks, Preston. You not only did much for the staff member, but set an example to the community. That example created awareness and improved attitude in my mind, and the mind of others.

I thank the Minister for launching the latest in our Employ Outside the Box initiative, Employ Outside the Box – the Business Case for Employing People with Disability. We welcome the ongoing discussions with government and service providers in tackling the task of finding valuable workers to meet the skills and labour needs of Australian businesses and how we can encourage more businesses, both large and small, to do what Officeworks at Preston has done, and employ outside the box.



The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and our member associations, are deeply committed to meeting the skills and labour needs of Australian businesses as well as providing solutions that address social disadvantage and providing opportunity to all members of the Australian community to participate in productive employment.

For ACCI, the best solution for social disadvantage is through real jobs.

I speak to you today from the vantage point of representing the nation's employers – our business community. Most of those I represent are small and medium businesses. They make up half of the nation's economy and more than 80% of my member network of more than 350,000 businesses.

So when you start thinking employers and workplaces, don't just think large profits or large corporate Australia. Think the butcher, the chemist, the mechanic, the café, the graphic designer, the laptop trouble-shooter, the dive instructor, the builder.

For those of you who are at the front line offering employment services to people with a disability, the perspective of another one of your customer groups, being employers, is highly relevant to those opportunities on offer. Two important cultural and policy shifts underpin these opportunities – the implementation of a national program of open employment in the 1980s, and the more recent, and very welcome emphasis on focusing on people's abilities, rather than their disabilities.

ACCI and our member network are hardly "Johnny come latelies" to the cause of disability employment. In the 1990's, we were the driving force in negotiations with the ACTU which created Australia's first legal framework for wages and conditions for employment of people with disabilities, the Supported Wages System. The industry award that was created from this work was ratified by the then Australian Industrial relations Commission and now Fair Work Australia and remains with us to this day.

A key objective of employers and indeed for the Australian economy generally, is the challenge of improving productivity. Throughout the 1990s productivity in Australia surged largely as a result of economic reforms. Although economists expected some easing of this productivity growth, the current sustained period of negative growth in productivity was not anticipated and is a source of great concern. Although productivity can be tackled in a range of ways, there are three important initiatives that are relevant to those seeking to increase employment of people with a disability:

Firstly, improving workforce skills, secondly, increasing employment participation across the economy, and thirdly, better utilising an unskilled and semi-skilled workforce in order to free-up time of the more highly skilled employees to enable them to make a stronger contribution.



Sustainable employment outcomes for those “outside the box” provides independence, confidence, hope and the ability to contribute to society and the economy more broadly. We know these things to be true. But it is not sufficient to focus on these “feel good factors” – as important as they are. The message to employers needs to equally focus on the business case for broadening their employment practices which will benefit the economy.

Earlier this year ACCI launched the foundation document *Employ outside the box, the rewards of a diverse workforce*, which umbrellas a series examining the potential of the Australian working age population to better meet the skills and labour needs of business and continue Australia's economic growth.

With many industries and regions still experiencing significant skills and labour shortages, especially those in regional areas, it is crucial that all sectors of the labour force be fully utilised to meet the skill needs of business and promote further growth.

In many industries skill and labour shortages are still with us and will become more apparent as the economy fully recovers. The wise employers will get ahead of the curve and attract and retain valued employees to meet the vital labour needs of their business now and for the future.

None of this can just be left to government, the business sector has a leadership role in providing sustainable employment opportunities for Australians and providing direction and leadership in education and training options.

There are of course challenges to overcome for business and government in boosting work opportunities for all Australians. Businesspeople need to be encouraged to rethink their engagement strategies, to appreciate the real benefits to hiring someone who may not be “the norm”. For government, it is getting the policies and support mechanisms right to assist both business and job seekers.

There is clear evidence that employees with disability make loyal and committed employees when the focus is on the person's ability rather than their disability. There is also a good level of government support for employers through workplace modifications, free and confidential advice from government agencies and Disability Employment Service Providers on correct hiring practices and financial incentives. Training is also available to help raise skill levels if necessary.

ACCI calls on businesses to employ outside the box when hiring new employees or contractors. Hiring someone from outside the traditional pool of workers isn't about taking a risk or an act of charity. It makes sense from an economic as well as a business perspective to embrace the opportunity to diversify the workforce, securing future skills and labour and boosting the nation's economic prosperity.





The publication that we have launched today, *The Business Case for Employing People with Disability* provides the pathway for employers on how to approach this important task.

I encourage all employers across the country to consider employing outside the box when they next seek to recruit new staff. ACCI is proud to be providing guidance and leadership to employers on how to take this next step, and look forward to working with our member organisations and the broader business community and the disability sector on this important initiative.

