
ACKNOWLEDGING ABILITY

OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH DISABILITIES

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People who are living with a disability are vastly overrepresented in New Zealand's poverty figures, and 74 percent of those who are not in work want to be working. Our research shows a pressing need to break down the barriers to employment for these New Zealanders, to allow them to access this key pathway to belonging and participation in society.

A belief in the value and dignity of every person, whether they have a disability or not, cannot be passive—it **requires action.** Increasing the role of employment as a pathway out of poverty for people with disabilities will not only be beneficial to those people, but will also be beneficial for the employers that hire them, as well as our wider society.

There is a strong connection between disability and poverty. That is, there is an increased likelihood of people with disabilities having lower incomes than people without disabilities. This is largely due to the high living costs and low incomes of people with disabilities.

Our previous work in the *Heart of Poverty* series shows that **employment reduces poverty and increases participation.** Employment generates income, which contributes to lifting people with disabilities out of poverty by providing the material resources to meet their minimal needs. The benefits of work, however, are also profoundly social. It provides an important place and time for social interaction, as well as promoting a sense of value and purpose.

Employment of people with disabilities is beneficial to employers. They are loyal and committed employees, rate higher on attendance, and are less likely to take sick leave. Employees with disabilities improve wider organisational performance, increase understanding of customers with disabilities, and can raise standards and expectations of all employees. **It is also important to note that many of the costs involved in employing people with disabilities are one-off and often smaller than expected.** The US Department of Labour claims that 57 percent of accommodations for people with disabilities come without a cost, while any others typically cost around US\$500.

Employment of people with disabilities is beneficial to the wider society. Reducing the unemployment rate of people with disabilities and the resulting decrease in benefit support could save an estimated \$270 million each year, while increasing the accessibility of workplaces is also beneficial to an ageing population. Furthermore, greater employment of people with disabilities illustrates and reflects their value and contribution to society.

People with disabilities seeking work face significant barriers. These barriers exist for both employers and for people with disabilities.

For employers:

- One of the major barriers preventing employers from hiring people with disabilities is the **cost involved.** This could be a financial cost due to purchase of assistance equipment and technology, a productivity cost due to the generally lower productivity levels of people with disabilities, and an upskilling cost of people with disabilities who tend to have fewer qualifications.

- Many employers also have **incorrect perceptions** of the costs of disability, support available, different abilities of people with disabilities, and benefits of employing people with disabilities.

For people with disabilities:

- A key barrier is the **difficulty of employment** including; inaccessibility of the workplace, limited availability of in-work supports, and the fear of disclosing a disability to employers.
- There can be hidden **costs of employment**, whether it be increased mainstream costs, such as accessible transport and parking, which can negate the benefits of a wage, or fear of abatement rates and the resulting loss of support from the social security system.

The **current strategies** to overcoming the barriers to employment for people with disabilities are:

- **Supported employment**, or assisting people with disabilities within a traditional workplace;
- **Sheltered employment**, or workplaces with in-built supports and which solely employ people with disabilities;
- **Education campaigns** used to alter perceptions of the wider public; and,
- **Financial support** for altering workspaces, purchasing equipment, training staff, or transport.

We recommend beginning to break down the barriers by:

- *Introducing a cohesive strategy.* While there is a strong community of disability organisations and substantial interaction amongst providers, organisations and government, there is no agreement on a cohesive and comprehensive strategy to address the barriers. A cohesive strategy, led and coordinated by a government led forum with representatives from the disability community is necessary to make a lasting difference.
- *Upscaling wrap around support.* Support for people with disabilities needs to be long-term, wrap-around, and flexible. Support structures with these characteristics can minimise the difficulty and cost of employment for both people with disabilities and their employers.
- *Bridging the public and employer perception divide.* Many employers, as well as the wider public, continue to underestimate the barriers people with disabilities face, as well as their own ability to reduce those barriers. It is essential to share the success stories of employing people with disabilities.
- *Reworking the funding structure.* People with disabilities require a support system that is accessible, has provisional agreements of support for employers, ensures abatement rates are not a financial disincentive to employment, promotes cohesion rather than competition between support providers, and seeks to recognise the real costs of living for people with disabilities.
- *Harnessing the changing nature of work.* Working flexible hours from flexible locations is becoming increasingly common in the workplace. For people with limited mobility, or fluctuating energy levels the ability to work in the locations, hours, and times that are most effective for them will also be most effective for their employer.

Rather than presenting an opportunity to increase the income of people with disabilities through employment, this group face a series of significant barriers to employment. Most who can want to work, it's up to us to make that a reality. While there are strategies and initiatives in place working to reduce these barriers of cost, perception, and difficulty, more can be done. We see opportunities for employers, government bodies, and advocacy groups to work together to acknowledge the abilities of all New Zealanders, so that people with disabilities can participate in all areas of society. Our work on this project will continue with a policy paper outlining more specific and detailed recommendations of how each sector of society can make a tangible difference.