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# CREATING OPPORTUNITY

OPENING DOORS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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People with disabilities are overlooked in the national conversation on poverty and overrepresented in New Zealand's poverty statistics. They face lower incomes, increased likelihood of reliance on government assistance, and a significant gap in the employment rate of people with disabilities in contrast to people without disabilities. Employment is, sadly, failing to provide the key pathway out of poverty for people with disabilities that it should.

Building on the work of our previous discussion paper *Acknowledging Ability: Overcoming the barriers to employment for people with disabilities*, this policy paper is a tool for those seeking to see more people with disabilities—the majority of whom want to work—in sustainable employment. There are significant benefits for employers, as people with disabilities often rate higher in job performance than employees without disabilities, and the costs involved are often much smaller than one might expect.

Employers and people with disabilities both face **barriers to improve employment outcomes** for people with disabilities. These include financial, productivity, and skills costs to employers, as well as a perceived cost to employers due to lack of experience and limited understanding. People with disabilities face raised everyday costs and the financial disincentive of the social security system, managing inaccessible workplaces, limited in-work supports, and fear of the consequences of disclosing their disability.

Despite the efforts of many conscientious New Zealanders using these strategies, barriers remain. Strengthening the promising aspects and addressing the weaknesses of these strategies is the key to making a difference. The **six key strategies** that attempt to overcome these barriers to employment and our responses are:

**Supported employment** provides different practical supports for people with disabilities to work within open employment. These supports need to be strengthened to better reach and support a wider group of people with disabilities and employers for longer periods of time.

**Education campaigns** hope to educate the public on the realities of employing people with disabilities. They need to increase in scale and effectiveness to reach a much wider audience.

**Financial support** aims to reduce the financial costs of having a disability. This funding must become much more flexible to meet the different needs of people with disabilities and their employers.

**Sheltered employment** describes workplaces where majority of employees have disabilities and supports are built into the structure of the workplace. These arrangements need to actively encourage transition into open employment for those who are able.

**Antidiscrimination legislation** hopes to protect people with disabilities from discrimination in the workplace. It is unlikely to reduce barriers to entering employment, however, and should not be a focus.

**Employment quotas** present employers with an obligation to employ a minimum number or proportion of people with disabilities. New Zealand doesn't have employment quotas and research suggests that neither employers nor people with disabilities strongly support their introduction.

We recommend that government and employers implement our **specific recommendations**. Some of the highest priority recommendations are:

### **For Government:**

- *Establish a thorough employment and disability strategy with targets, deadlines and an ability to measure progress.*  
A cohesive strategy focused on employment that goes beyond the 2016-2026 Disability Strategy with specific and realistic targets and deadlines holding Government to account is necessary for real change.
- *Consider implementing evaluation best practice to measure the effectiveness of policies in supporting people with disabilities into employment.*  
We need to understand and evaluate what works and what doesn't so that we can determine where we are effective and where we need to improve.
- *Create a one-stop-shop with easily accessible information on supports for employers looking to employ people with disabilities.*  
Employers need to know where and how to access good supports for potential employees with disabilities. This could include a comprehensive website, a telephone advice service, a tool for practical solutions to workplace modifications, and an online process for support claims.
- *Carry out a large-scale, long-term educational disability campaign to inform and change attitudes of the public and employers towards the employment of people with disabilities.*  
With perception proving to be a major barrier to increased employment of people with disabilities, we need large-scale education to correct misperceptions and encourage action.

### **For employers:**

- *Provide training, support, and information for Human Resources staff, employers and managers on what to expect, what supports are available, and how best to integrate people with disabilities into their team.*  
Training for staff to answer questions on the costs and benefits of employing people with disabilities and the supports available would serve to increase the confidence of employers and staff.
- *Increase collaboration between education and employment sectors in supporting people with disabilities into employment.*  
A successful transition between education and employment is a key determinant of later career success. Support for this needs to come from both the education and employment sectors working together.
- *Promote awareness amongst Human Resource staff about the accommodations available for employees with disabilities.*  
Human Resource staff need to know the supports available to both the organisation and any employees with disabilities. This could be achieved through human resource focused professional development and training.

Too many people with disabilities don't have the opportunity to participate in work. This needs to change. Employers around New Zealand are already trying to make this change but struggling to make progress, and many more are sympathetic but just don't know where to begin. We hope that this paper and its recommendations will assist employers make changes and encourage government to ensure that employers have the support they need. We have to move from simply acknowledging the abilities of New Zealanders living with disabilities to creating opportunities that open the doors to sustainable, valuable work.