



ACCI POLICY STATEMENT

EMPLOYMENT FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES POLICY

PRINCIPLES OF DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT POLICY

ACCI advocates, through its general employment policy, for an employment system that enables all Australians to be competitive in the employment market. While the extent of disability for each person with a disability is unique in its nature, ACCI advocates for a diverse work force in which people with disabilities are encouraged to participate where they are able to do so. Those who are genuinely not able to work because of their disability deserve the support of the community and the opportunity to lead constructive lives as valued community members.

Over 670,000 Australians of working age now receive the Disability Support Pension - more than the number receiving unemployment benefits. The growth in numbers has been in excess of 60 per cent over the last 10 years. This trend indicates that an ageing Australian workforce, together with growing numbers of people with disabilities, has potential to seriously erode labour supply and add significantly to public outlays. In an era of improved health and longevity and declining lost time injuries in the workplace, growth in the incidence of disability should be seriously questioned and policies that encourage greater reliance on income support must be discarded in favour of better rehabilitation and employment policies.

A new focus on disability employment is required urgently due to the failure of past approaches that, while leading to an array of fragmented public policies and programs, have failed to achieve adequate employment and participation outcomes for people with disabilities who have significant work capacity.

ACCI, through its education and training policy, promotes equality of education opportunities and options for groups with special needs, including people with disabilities. This means providing access to and appropriate support for people with disabilities in education and training to ensure they have opportunities to develop marketable skills that meet the needs of business.

Through its economic policy, ACCI articulates long-term aims of full employment and an acceptable distribution of income and wealth across the community. A growing trend that sees more people with disabilities of work force age entirely reliant on income support for long periods of their lives undermines these objectives and without remedy, will contribute to unsupportable growth in public expenditure.

Workplace relations regulation must have the ultimate effect of encouraging rather than discouraging the employment of people with disabilities. ACCI workplace relations policy principles of simplicity, minimising regulation and determination by employer and employee at the workplace level are particularly relevant to the employment of people with disabilities. An overly protective, rights-based approach to employment regulation for people with disabilities will detract from rather than assist an increase in employment levels.

ACCI policy in regard to occupational health and safety and workers' compensation advocates improved health and safety performance and better rehabilitation and return to work outcomes. Population ageing has demonstrated potential to increase the incidence of disability in the community, particularly within the cohort of mature age employees. This trend will require higher priority to be given to the prevention of workplace injury and disease and to the reform of workers' compensation schemes to create greater incentives and supports for injured employees to return to work and to protect employers willing to recruit and retain employees with disabilities from unreasonable risk and cost.

POLICY OBJECTIVES

Participation and Support for People with Disabilities

ACCI supports participation policies and support systems for people with disabilities that:

- ensure people with disabilities are able to participate to the full extent of their abilities, in employment and in the community;
- recognise that disability does not automatically equate with an inability to work and require people with disabilities to take up employment where it is reasonable for them to do so;
- discourage reliance on income support by those who have a significant capacity to work;
- introduce appropriate mutual obligation requirements relative to those met by people without disabilities;
- provide most support to those most in need of assistance including supported employment options;
- ensure that people with disabilities who are able to work enjoy the rewards of employment and are always better off in work than when reliant on income support;
- redirect public funding away from passive income support to rehabilitation and employment assistance; and
- do not create abrupt changes in the composition of the labour force without adequate and well-planned support for employers.

Training and Education for People with Disabilities

Australia has disappointing rates of participation for people with disabilities in vocational education and training – less than 2.5 per cent compared with 11 per cent of all workforce-age Australians. Training retention rates and eventual employment outcomes are also well below average, as people with disabilities are less likely to complete their training and graduates with disabilities less likely to find employment.

ACCI promotes training and education policies that:

- develop and recognise marketable skills;
- improve transitions for young people with disabilities from school to further education and training;
- promote participation in vocational education and training through early intervention in schools;
- provide appropriate assistance for people with disabilities to undertake education and training;
- ensure that people with disabilities are acknowledged as potential participants in programs that address areas of skills shortages wherever reasonably practicable;
- provide for people with disabilities to upgrade their skills while in work and re-skilling where disability is a barrier to returning to a former occupation; and
- are effectively linked to employment and pre-employment programs so that people with disabilities have continuity in the assistance they require to move from training and education to work.

Employment for People with Disabilities

ACCI supports employment policies that:

- promote the employment of people with disabilities to employers and within the wider community;
- provide for a range of employment options that acknowledge fairly and realistically the circumstances and capacity of each individual and the level of support required;
- guarantee professional assistance in the recruitment and integration of employees with disabilities in the workplace that is well-coordinated and informed by employers' needs and that forms part of the community's obligation to people with disabilities;
- do not provide disincentives or unreasonable burdens for employers seeking to include people with disabilities in their work force;
- acknowledge that not all industries are able to accommodate people with disabilities to an equal degree due to the inherent nature of their key occupation types;
- reduce complexity and red tape across the range of employment and Vocational Education Training programs designed for people with disabilities;
- establish effective linkages between rehabilitation, training and return to work programs; and
- acknowledge and reward employers who make substantial effort to increase the numbers of people with disabilities in their work force.

Workplace Relations

Employers will be most likely to provide greater employment opportunities for people with disabilities if there is as simple and straightforward a process as possible for such employment.

ACCI actively pursues workplace relations policies that:

- provide for the employment of people whose productivity is limited by their disability under the Supported Wages Scheme;
- seek reform of inflexible workplace regulations that restrict employers' ability to accommodate people with disabilities; and
- ensure that people with disabilities have the same right to access flexible working arrangements under the workplace relations system as all other employees including individual agreement making and agreement making with or without the involvement of trade unions.

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) and Workers' Compensation

ACCI is committed to the achievement of an OHS outcome for Australian workplaces where every person in the workplace has a safe place of work and a safe method of working as far as is reasonably practicable, including:

- improved workplace OHS performance that continues to reduce work-related injury and disease;
- increasing the capacity of employers to achieve improved OHS performance;

- ensuring that OHS and workers' compensation systems encourage early intervention;
- promoting responsible participation by employees and encouraging their disclosure of conditions that may affect employers' ability to maintain adequate levels of safety in the workplace;
- ensuring that an awareness of OHS issues is incorporated into appropriate workplace induction and vocational education and training programs;
- the establishment of an OHS policy that clearly defines roles and responsibilities of everyone in the workplace;
- a joint approach that involves all employees in the workplace;
- the provision of appropriate information and training to meet the needs of the workplace and employee participation;
- risk minimalisation, including the identification, assessment and control of hazards, ongoing monitoring, evaluation and review; and
- reform of workers compensation schemes that contain disincentives to early rehabilitation and return to work.

Recent trends in the regulation of OHS and workers' compensation schemes are placing a higher duty of care on employers that may result in disincentives for the employment of people who present additional OHS risks. This does not assist in increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities in many industrial settings where there are significant, additional costs associated with advanced risk management processes. Employers who welcome people with disabilities into their workplaces should not be penalised for doing so.

While employers wish to promote the employment of people with disabilities in a non-discriminatory workplace, shifting public costs of support for people with disabilities to private cost or risk will not add to employers' capacity to offer employment.

Anti-Discrimination

ACCI accepts the general principle of equal opportunity that underpins anti-discrimination law. ACCI promotes the understanding that unlawful discrimination is not an acceptable human resource practice, does not constitute an appropriate basis for human resource decision-making and is contrary to the interests of business.

ACCI's policies on unlawful discrimination against people with disabilities are incorporated in its Blueprint for the Australian workplace relations system, *Modern Workplace: Modern Future*.

Employers already bear a considerable regulatory burden from a range of Federal and State anti-discrimination laws. Additional regulation that introduces far-reaching and unspecified obligations on employers or mandatory requirements such as employment quotas cannot be supported.

Future Directions

To make real progress in this area, a concerted and well-coordinated effort must be made on the part of governments and the community sector, working in partnership with employers to achieve the following key goals:

1. eliminating aspects of social and industrial policies that create disincentives for people with disabilities to take up employment;
2. examining the reasons for the growth in welfare reliance among people with disabilities and the factors that need to

- be addressed to stem unacceptable exit rates from the labour force;
3. providing for enhanced employment opportunities for people with disabilities through the provision of training, recognition of skill, support in the workplace and community education;
 4. providing consistency and ease of transition between programs that aim to assist people with disabilities in education, training, pre-employment, employment and return to work;
 5. improving community awareness of the benefits of increased employment for people with disabilities and recognising employers who make a commitment to doing so;
 6. providing adequate and well-communicated support and incentives for employers, together with a reduction in risks and red tape; and
 7. ensuring that employers are not liable for the costs of adjustment where welfare reform measures lead to significant change in the composition of labour markets.

THE POLICY FRAMEWORK

Sustained and sustainable economic growth underpins improvement in the standard of living of all Australians. Through participation in work, people with disabilities are able to make a valuable contribution and share in the benefits of employment.

At the same time, ACCI recognises that increasing the capacity of people with disabilities to participate in employment and in many other areas of community life will bring greater opportunities for improved markets in assistive and adaptive technologies that remove barriers.

ACCI plays an active part in the development, monitoring and evaluation of education and training policies and initiatives and labour market policies and programs to ensure they meet the needs of business and industry in a dynamic and competitive global economy. From this perspective, ACCI is ideally placed to perform a lead role in developing new approaches to improve the participation and competitiveness of people with disabilities in labour markets.

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