

Submission to the ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Employment of people with disabilities

The JACS Inclusion Statement 2016-2019 (attached), released in May 2016, sets the foundation on which the Directorate progresses its efforts to build an inclusive workplace culture which values all employees at all points of their employment life cycle and recognises their unique qualities, ideas, voices and perspectives. It is an innovative approach to inclusion in JACS. The statement focuses on six priority areas (Aboriginal & Torres Strait Island people; people with disability; women; LGBTI; CALD; and Ageing workforce). There is an executive champion assigned to each one of these areas.

An Employment Action Plan for People with Disability (attached) was implemented in JACS in 2016. The plan's objectives relate to attraction, retention and capability building. The implementation, monitoring and review of the plan will continue and it will undergo a major review in early 2019 to ensure that it remains relevant and supports the aims of JACS.

The Executive Champion for People with Disability held a forum of people in JACS with disability or with an interest in disability at which it was decided to make this submission to the inquiry.

Please find below personal accounts from valued JACS employees about their experiences of

Julie Field	living	
Executive Champion for People	with a	
with Disability	disabil	David Pryce
	ity in	Respect, Equity and Diversity (RED)
	an	Executive Sponsor
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	yment context.	

Angharad Lodwick, LPP, Justice and Community Safety Directorate

An Invisible Disability

I was diagnosed with Auditory Processing Disorder (APD) when I was around five years old. My mother had noticed that I often “ignored” her when she called me or asked me to do tasks, and was concerned that there was a problem with my hearing.

APD is a cognitive sensory disorder which affects my ability to understand, interpret and concentrate on sound. Throughout my life I've struggled with things like following instructions in class, listening to long lectures, mishearing what people say, speaking too loudly and participating in noisy group activities.

However, I have also been very reluctant to tell people about my APD for fear that I would be treated differently or that people would think that I was less intelligent. Often I would just quietly make my own adjustments (sitting at the front of the class, listening to lectures over and over at home to get the meaning, avoiding certain social situations) without ever explaining why.

Furthermore, I have also been very reluctant to use the term "disability" to describe my experiences with APD. Partially because it is an "invisible" disability, and partly because of the stigma that still surrounds that word.

The ACT Government Graduate Program

After I graduated university with a number of qualifications, I set about applying for a variety of graduate jobs. It was highly competitive with thousands of people often applying for only a handful of roles. Although some of the roles provided a space to self-identify as having a disability, this was not something I had ever considered before. After being invited to participate in a number of interviews, despite meticulous preparation and practice, I did poorly and was not successful.

One of the things that I really struggled with was when the interview panel would ask me a complex question that was unrelated to the selection criteria or the written job description. I experienced a lot of stress, embarrassment and confusion and I distinctly remember the shame of once having to ask an interviewer multiple times in an interview to repeat the question because I didn't understand.

The job application process started to take a real toll on my self-esteem and I started to feel more and more anxious about the interview process.

Then, in 2015, I received a phone call from someone in the ACT Government Graduate team inviting me to attend the Assessment Centre which included an interview. The team member asked me over the phone whether I required any adjustments to participate in the Assessment Centre. This was the first time anyone had ever directly asked me this, and I will never forget the impact it had on me.

By creating that space for discussion, I was able to ask for a written copy of the questions that would be asked in the interview and on the day, they were a lifeline. When someone asked me a question, I had something to refer to so I could make sure I hadn't misunderstood.

This difference those written questions made are clear. I was offered a position in the 2016 Graduate Program and, after successful completion, I am now working as a policy officer in JACS.

That opportunity to talk about the adjustments I needed has also given me the confidence to tell my managers on the first day of each of my rotations (as well as my permanent role) that I struggle sometimes with my hearing and emailing instructions makes a big difference to my comprehension. In particular, having managers who have asked the question or given me an opportunity to speak about any questions or issues I have has given me the space to comfortably explain the adjustments that I need so I can do the best I can in my job.

Disability in JACS

Earlier this year I received a directorate-wide email from the Respect, Equity and Diversity (RED) Executive Sponsor which advised that people with disability are under-represented in JACS and that it was very likely that people with a disability are not identifying on the HR system.

These email contained some really pertinent and thought-provoking Q&As, including:

- Do I have a disability?
- What is the benefit to me to identify that I have a disability?
- Should I be concerned about identifying that I have a disability on HR21?

Critically, this email also contained the contact details of the JACS Senior Advisor Social Inclusion who is available to assist if we had any questions.

This email gave me the encouragement I needed to contact the JACS Senior Advisor Social Inclusion the very next day to share my story and ask for advice about whether I qualify as having a disability.

The JACS Senior Advisor Social Inclusion responded with some information about the Employment Action Plan for People with Disability 2016 – 2019 and said that I fit within that definition.

Some months later, the Executive Champion for People with Disability sent a directorate-wide email inviting JACS staff living with a disability to attend. After my email correspondence with the JACS Senior Advisor Social Inclusion, I was encouraged enough to RSVP and attend on the day.

Attending that forum has been a real turning point for me and helped me to understand that other people in JACS live with invisible disabilities as well. The discussion was frank and very inclusive, and I was encouraged enough to share my positive experiences with the ACT Government Graduate Program.

Conclusion

I would just like to reiterate the difference that ACT Government disability inclusion policies have made to me. From the job application stage, throughout my graduate year and now as a permanent staff member in JACS I have felt included, empowered and encouraged to discuss the adjustments that I need. As a result, I have felt more confident about asking for adjustments and contributing to discussion about disability.

I think that having dedicated space on employment application forms for adjustments that are separate to identification as having a disability are a great initiative that allow people who are uncomfortable with the label of disability to nevertheless request reasonable adjustments. I also think that providing opportunities to request adjustments on a personal, conversational level are also very important. Finally, having contact officers and executive champions are an excellent way to raise awareness about disability in the workplace and break down stigma.

Ms Susan Lane, Policy Officer, Legislation, Policy and Programs, Justice and Community Safety Directorate

What I relate in this submission is from my lived experience and perspective. My submission should not be seen as speaking for people living with a disability more generally.

Background

In 2001 I experienced a life-changing event which changed the way I related to the world. Losing 90% of my sight in two weeks impacted my life to such a degree that I withdrew from any activities outside my home, except for those I couldn't avoid, and I isolated myself for many years. Fortunately, my supportive family understood that I needed time to grieve and gather myself to begin the hard journey of returning to a happy and satisfying life.

I began studying at a tertiary level in 2009, and achieved an Honours law degree, and post graduate qualifications to practice law. I didn't realise at the time that the stressful and challenging years of study were the easy part of forging a new life and career.

It became clear to me that identifying as a person living with a disability is a double edged sword when applying for jobs. For two and a half years I applied for as many government graduate programs that I could find. In the beginning I didn't identify, but I realised that an employer would soon find out, as mine is a visible disability, and I need adjustments both in the application and interview process. On the other hand, identifying meant that employers who still hold negative stereotypical views of disability would not be receptive to me. I had to fight at every step of the application process to prove that I was worth an interview, at which time I hoped to be able to demonstrate that I was a great candidate. This was emotionally draining and physically exhausting.

Most graduate programs offer an opportunity to identify as living with a disability, and to take advantage of reasonable adjustments. This was offered by one commonwealth government department, and who, despite being told that I am vision impaired, insisted

that at an assessment centre I would be required to complete a paper based test. This would have been impossible for me to do, and I withdrew my application.

In 2015 I applied for 17 commonwealth and state government graduate programs, identifying in each application that I live with a disability (this brought my total applications over the two and half years to more than 170). It became the focus of my life, and each rejection without a proper explanation spurred me on to do better in the next application, at the next interview, at the next assessment centre. It was frustrating, as I could improve my responses to selection criteria and my interview techniques, but I couldn't change the fact that I live with a disability. When I applied for the 2016 ACT Government Graduate Program (the Graduate Program), I was hopeful but didn't expect to be successful.

The Graduate Program provided adjustments that allowed me to fully participate in the application process, and were responsive and helpful in answering my questions. This built my confidence in the ACT Public Service more broadly, and was the central factor in my decision to accept the offer of a place in the Graduate Program.

RecruitAbility

In recent years the commonwealth government has introduced the RecruitAbility Scheme (the Scheme) < <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/current-publications/recruitability-applicants-guide>>. Some positions are advertised with an option for people to opt-in to the Scheme, which progresses a person living with a disability further in the recruitment process; in my experience this was generally to interviews. This provides an opportunity to be in front of an interview panel, offering more chance to be a successful candidate.

The Graduate Program

Moving to Canberra and being a member of the Graduate Program has proved to be a good decision. After so many years of struggling to get to the point of interviews, picking myself up after yet another rejection, and putting my family through some stressful years, I felt that I had accomplished what I wanted to achieve. My life back, a career, and a sense of purpose. These to me are the fundamental requirements for me to feel satisfied. It is difficult to adequately describe the psychological shift I experienced when I began the Graduate Program. My confidence began to grow, I felt a part of the community again, and that I was able to contribute. I completed the Graduate Program and was made a permanent employee in December 2016.

This doesn't mean that there aren't challenges and barriers in the workplace related to my disability that I face every day.

Challenges and barriers

The blind woman

One of the challenges I face every day is being the 'blind woman'. I use that term because I am often described this way in conversations. I find that because of my disability I can become invisible, with some people forgetting I am there or just ignoring me. For example,

being left alone in a room after a meeting because no-one has told me the meeting is over. Or not being told who is in the room, or if some-one leaves the meeting early.

This caused me to sit very quietly and say very little, because that way I didn't risk feeling silly because I am talking to some-one who is no longer there. Speaking up about this is difficult for me, as sometimes this can be seen as demanding and I am concerned about getting a reputation for being too needy.

Also, some people speak to me very slowly and in a loud voice, or ask questions of the person I am with, rather than engaging with me directly. This reinforces that I am different, causing me to feel isolated.

What would be helpful is to have a mentor, or senior manager, who lives with a disability to discuss these issues with, and to find ways to overcome them.

Barriers

I have found that since I acquired a disability I am not as good at promoting myself, or putting myself out there. This concerns me in terms of my career progression, and presents a barrier to promotion.

One of the reasons for this is that often it's not my ability that is the focus, but my disability. Despite all I have achieved since 2001, my commitment, skills and abilities are still questioned at times. I have been told that the only reason I was offered a place in the Graduate Program is because I have a disability. I have also been told that I should not have taken the place of some-one without a disability who probably deserved it more than me.

Negative comments such as these reinforce my lack of confidence, and can overshadow any positive events that happen in the workplace. Following each negative comment it takes time and conversations with my family to put them into context and then put them aside.

A career development program designed for people living with a disability would be beneficial. The program could assist with self-confidence issues, application and interview processes and identifying training opportunities, and also present an opportunity to build a network of supportive colleagues.

Training for all staff and specifically managers that highlights how living with a disability can affect a person's view of themselves, how to inspire confidence, and how to promote the values of diversity in the workplace will enhance the opportunities to provide an inclusive environment. Focus on appropriate and inappropriate language and communications, and how this can impact the performance of a person living with a disability will improve outcomes for the person and the business unit. This behaviour when modelled will contribute to cultural change within the ACT Public Service.

ACT Public Service Disability Employment Strategy

Any plan or framework introduced or implemented to attract and retain employees living with a disability should at all time be people-centric. What I mean by this is that often people living with a disability become abstractions.

I am fortunate to be working in a directorate that is committed to working with people living with a disability to improve workplace culture and outcomes. This is not so for some of my colleagues living with a disability, whose experiences demonstrate that there is some way to go in creating inclusive workplaces in the ACT Public Service.