



ACT  
Mental Health  
Consumer Network

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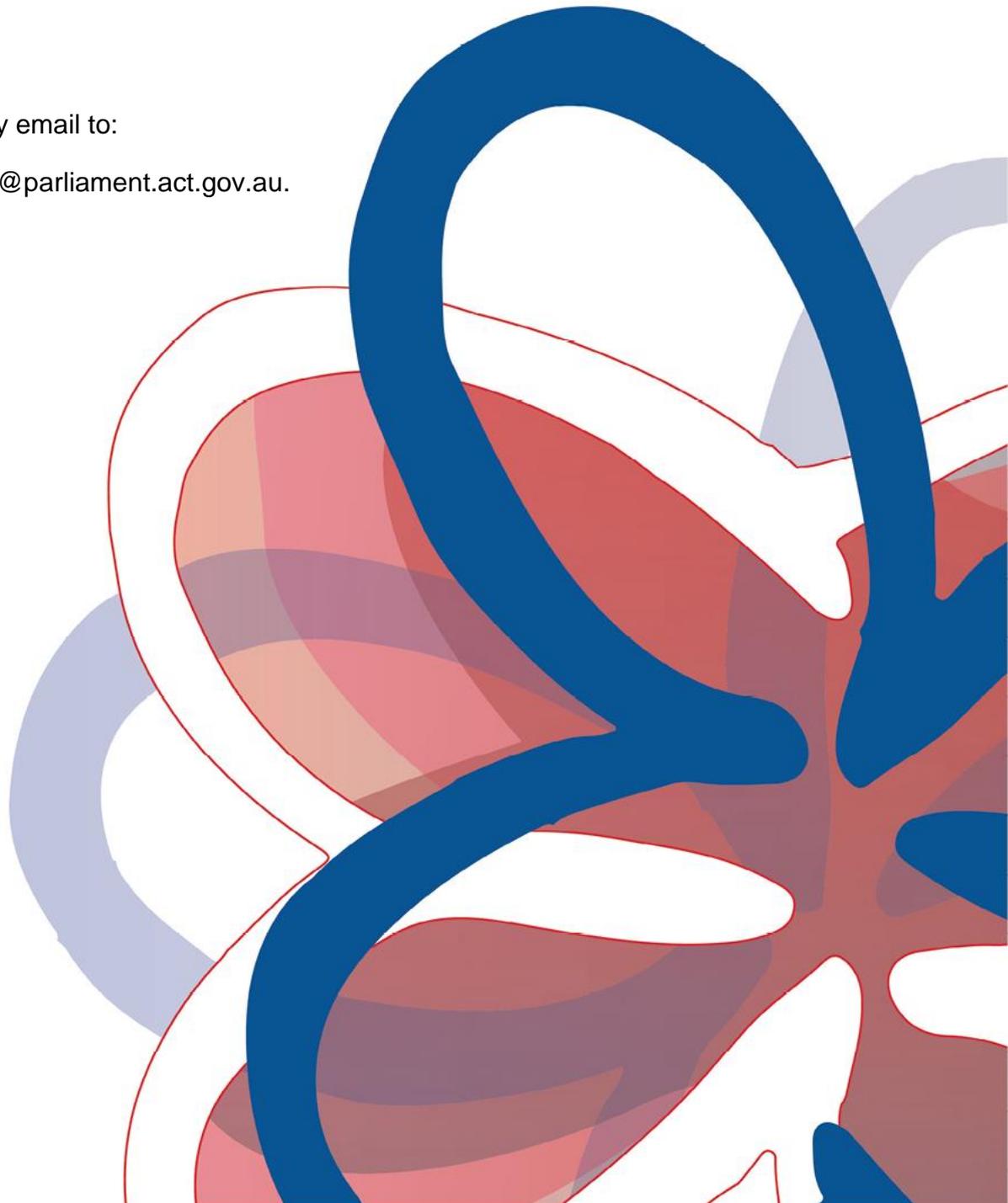
## Inquiry into the Employment of People with Disabilities

**Question on Notice:** *Do you have any examples in place at the moment of individualised support and the organisations providing that, any workplaces that are doing it well? Do you have any, I guess, examples of people doing it right now?*

Submitted by email to:

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2 June 2017



The ACT Mental Health Consumer Network would like to thank the Standing Committee on Health, Ageing, Community and Social Services for the opportunity to appear as a witness to the Inquiry into the Employment of People with Disabilities and for the opportunity to respond to our question on notice.

## Overall comments

At the hearing, the Network gave evidence that outlined examples of individualised supports for mental health consumers in the workplace. We spoke of how flexible working hours can be useful for some, we also emphasised that a supportive work culture is important for developing relationships to allow consumers to feel safe enough to disclose their mental illness and discuss what they might need from their employers to maintain their employment.

To further answer this question the Network sought responses from consumers and other organisations of key examples of individualised supports. Majority of the examples shared with us emphasised the importance of a positive work place culture.

## Workplace Culture

Below are experiences that highlight the importance of workplace culture and relationship building:

*I think workplaces that are effective are so because of the culture and attitudes of staff and managers more than about what is written on the page. It comes down to the respect with which everyone treats everyone else and the willingness to find flexible or creative solutions to issues that arise.*

Consumer 1

*This workplace definitely has supported my mental health. I have bipolar II and depression/anxiety. The [employer] has allowed me to work four days a week, and provides me with alternative avenues for taking leave when required (for example, allowing me to take a fortnights worth of 'time of in lieu so I don't have to use all my annual leave as I have had to do in all other workplaces). I feel nothing but support when I am unwell, which speeds up recovery. Work is not 'left' for when you come back, and that makes the world of difference.*

*In addition, the [employer] has allowed me to identify certain roles in my job description that I have difficulties with, and where available, other staff have taken on these responsibilities.*

Consumer 2

Flexibility with leave arrangements is a policy implemented by another organisation that provided the following feedback:

*...we have a clause where staff can apply for an extra 2 weeks (mental health) leave with pay (once all other leave is used), which is in recognition of the area we work in and also that some staff may have their own lived experience.*

A consumer wrote:

*Two of my roles when working in Hong Kong were Quality Assurance Manager and Risk Assessment Manager. This involved writing companywide Business Continuity Plans and Disaster Action Plans. Also, all major projects required a project specific Business Continuity Plan. These plans included actions to be taken in the event that key personnel became unavailable, for whatever reason (in Hong Kong this became particularly pertinent during the SARS outbreak when many of my colleagues had difficulty getting to work). This practice is basic and sound company policy. Anyone can get sick, in anyway, at anytime. It is poor management to make any individual irreplaceable. As a client, the ACT Government can make it a requirement of awarding contracts that consultants and contractors submit and maintain Business Continuity Plans for their projects (it was a requirement of the HK Government). This can help drive good business policy and ensures that in the event that someone does get sick, they can focus on recovery secure in the knowledge that procedures are in place to ensure project delivery will continue. Similarly, the employer does not need to place pressure on the employee to 'work through' the incident as a 'good team player'*

Consumer 3

The Network currently has in place administrative procedures for all roles to ensure work can continue should there be a need for another staff member to carry out the duties.

Another consumer wrote:

*Two examples spring to mind with this question.*

*The most notable is Rebus, a not-for-profit Theatre company who use Art for Social change. I am part of the team who run it, and as such have a lot of responsibility. My mental health has been up and down over the past few years and Rebus has actually been instrumental in my recovery - a large step up from not hindering it. We have several strategies in place to help manage things.*

- I have defined hours of work and am not allowed to go over them.*
- We have regular meetings to help prioritise my workload and ensure that it is manageable - and just to see how I am going.*
- My desk is situated so that I don't have anyone walking up behind me.*
- I have later work hours and we schedule meetings accordingly, where possible, as I have trouble with getting up in the morning.*
- We never work through lunch and always leave the office for at least 20 minutes. No work talk allowed.*

- *I have a bean bag in my office to provide a safe place for my attacks (I used to bruise myself against hard surfaces).*
- *In times of big projects and highly stressful times, we have a risk-management plan in place to ensure that if my mental health declines, the business will not suffer and I can focus on getting better without worrying about Rebus. This has had a fortunate side-effect that I am yet to decline to the point where I need to use the plan as I am no longer stressing about what will happen if I fall apart.*
- *The other people in the team also have support so they do not suffer weight of my illness. This is very important to me.*

*The other is Parks and Territory Services Executive Team (no longer exists): I worked there for a year on a job-share arrangement whilst the permanent employee was on part-time parental leave. I was employed through the inclusion office in Chief Minister's Department.*

- *They provided me with a desk that ensured I didn't have my back to anyone and access to a quite space where I could have some time if I needed it.*
- *They also allowed me to adjust my hours so that I came in later and left later.*
- *My immediate supervisor had regular check ins [sic] with me to make sure I was traveling ok and if I had an issue, he would discuss strategies with me to make things easier.*
- *We had an agreement that if I was running late or hadn't shown up, he would call me first, then if I didn't answer within 1 hour, would call my emergency contact, just to ensure that I was safe.*
- *Not once was I made to feel that I was a burden on anyone in the team and I was able to be productive and valuable.*

*I would like to say that the major thing these have in common, for me, is that they sit down and have open, honest and supportive conversations with me. They treat me as the expert in my illness instead of someone who needs things fixed for them and recognise and acknowledge that I am a highly competent and capable person. They are also very honest about their own needs and the needs of the business so we can sit down and work out strategies together, and then check back in later to see how things are progressing. It is a two way street.*

Consumer 4

Lastly, the Mental Health Community Coalition ACT wrote the following in answer to the question:

*Like other organisations MHCC ACT [Mental Health Community Coalition ACT] has policies which cover anti-discrimination and equal opportunity in recruitment and employment as well as a comprehensive approach to flexible working arrangements. However, these are standard, rather than exceptional, policies. The difference we believe MHCC ACT models in employment of people with lived experience of mental*

*health issues is rather due to management and HR practices.*

*Beginning with recruitment, MHCC ACT job advertisements always include encouragement for people with lived experience of mental health issues to apply. The selection process is based on merit, but where we have two otherwise equal candidates, we choose a person with lived experience over one without. We try to make the interview process the least intimidating we can and to be flexible where we can. In a recent recruitment process, we became aware beforehand that a particular candidate with lived experience found interview processes very stressful and would be very nervous, so we offered to conduct the interview in a café to provide a less intimidating atmosphere.*

*For employees who have lived experience MHCC ACT begins the employment relationship by communicating our commitment to supporting people to maintain their wellness and by offering flexible work practices as a practical way to provide support. Flexible work practices on offer include being able to start later (or earlier), to work shorter or longer days, and to make use of flex hours. Work from home can also be arranged from time to time when this is helpful. Employees have also negotiated access to additional leave without pay as part of their employment agreement.*

*We encourage the employee to be open about when they need more support or flexible work practices and encourage self-care. It is important to note that this flexibility is offered in the context of an expectation that flexibility will allow the employee to deliver one work outcomes as agreed and required by the relevant position.*

*More generally, but perhaps equally importantly, MHCC ACT's management approach is one which encourages employees to shape their role and agreed work outcomes within the scope of MHCC ACT contractual and strategic outputs, and aims to empower employees to have ownership of their work. In a busy environment, a level of control over one's work and work environment plays an important in managing stress. This approach also supports MHCC ACT to make best use of the skills employees bring to the team.*

*We don't believe there is anything exceptional about MHCC ACT's approach to employing people with vulnerabilities, such as lived experience of mental health issues. We rather believe that an individual and person-centred approach to employment and management is likely to deliver greater employee loyalty and commitment, ownership of the role and work, and ultimately high productivity and better outcomes.*

Mental Health Community Coalition ACT

We hope the examples provided are helpful to the committee in their deliberations.