

University of Sydney Policy Reform Project

Research Proposal for *Disability Leadership Institute: Best Practice Disability Employment Data in Australia*

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the traditional custodianship and law of the Country on which the University of Sydney campuses stand, in particular the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. We pay our respects to those who have cared and continue to care for Country, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and emerging. Sovereignty was never ceded. It always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

About the Sydney Policy Reform Project

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Policy Brief

Paper	Topic	Academic Supervisor
4DLI	Best Practice Disability Employment Data	Professor Anya Johnson

About

The Disability Leadership Institute (DLI) was founded in 2016, to be a leadership community by disability leaders, for disability leaders. The institute aims to increase the presence and recognition of all disability leaders across the Australian community. It is the first institute globally to focus on disability leadership development and practice, establishing the first Australian National Register of Disability Leaders.

The DLI offers disability development and support through training, webinars, and a broad community of practice, to several hundred members around the world.

The proposed research will be conducted by the DLI in conjunction of the University of Sydney. The research aims to analyse employment data to clearly understand what data is collected about the composition of disability employment and leadership across the Australian workforce, and to propose best practice for a nationally consistent approach to the collection and reporting of employment and wage data for people with disability.

To this end, the project's overarching scope is "What is best practice disability employment data: Data collection and consistency for disability leadership employment including wages of people with disability across Australian public.

Background

There are 4.4 million Australians with disability (18% of total Australian population) ([AIHW](#) 2018). In 2018, 48% of people with disability between 16-64 years old, comparative to 80% of people without disability were in employment ([AIHW](#) 2018). In fact, the unemployment rate of people with disability (10% in 2018; [AIHW](#) 2018) has remained stagnant for over 30 years.

Whilst we know about the general employment gap for people with disability comparative to people without disability, there is not a nationally consistent approach to collection of disability employment data, including prevalence rates for people with disability holding leadership positions. Since the data for employment suggests that it is challenging for people with disability to gain employment generally, it can be hypothesised that employment of people with disability within leadership is scarce.

In fact, the [Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability](#) (2023) found that:

“... a repeated theme in our public hearings: governments, disability service providers, businesses and community organisations often ignore the expertise of people with disability. Organisations often assume people with disability do not have leadership capacity, knowledge and skills.”

Organisations across government, business and community sectors collect a wide variety of data on disability employment and leadership, ranging from identifying how many staff members identify as disabled, to providing information about the leadership level that a person holds alongside pay data. There is no current consistent approach to the collection and reporting of disability employment or disability leadership, or wages received by people with disability across the Australian workforce. We require an understanding of what data is collected, what it reveals, and what types of data are needed for a nationally consistent approach to disability employment data.

This research is conducted in the context of substantial disability employment reforms underway resulting from various inquiries including the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disabilities (DRC) that concluded in September 2023. Among the DRC Recommendations listed in the [Final Report](#) were:

- reforming Disability Employment Services employment (Recommendations 7.16 & 7.17)
- increasing public sector employment for people with disability (7.18 to 7.23) including public reporting on public sector disability employment strategies and targets (7.22)
- promoting accessibility through procurement policies (7.23)
- improving the regulatory environment (7.24 to 7.27)

- supporting transitions to open employment (7.28 to 7.30) including provision of wage and Disability Support Pension information (7.28)
- raising the subminimum wage (7.31), and
- creating a roadmap to inclusive employment (7.32).

To this end, DLI is engaging in a methodology that involves the recruitment of participants from the membership of the DLI who work in a wide variety of organisations at varying levels across the Australian public or private sectors, including entrepreneurs operating their own businesses (self-employed). Research participants (DLI members who are people with disability) provide source material to the DLI Project Lead for collation.

The data will be drawn from publicly available data including annual reports, disability strategies and plans, published research or survey reports about employment for the current workplaces of DLI members. The term 'identified' is used to indicate that people with disability included in the data have reported to their workplace that they are a person with disability.

Research questions

Students identified by the University of Sydney analyse data sources to understand what data types are collected or not collected, and whether that data is useful in gaining understanding of disability employment and disability leadership.

At present, it is unclear what type of data is collected and reported across publicly available information sources for Australian workplaces. This research aims to **clarify what information is collected and reported, what data reveals about nature of employment and wages for people with disability, and what data should be collected to ensure national consistency in disability leadership employment and wage data**, and should answer the following questions:

1. Do organisations publicly report data about disability employment in their current workforce?
2. What type of data about disability employment is collected and publicly reported by Australian organisations?
3. What does the data reveal about:
 - disclosure of disability identity in the workplace,

- who is employed and/or the level of employment of identified people with disability,
 - tracking of career progression for identified people with disability within the workplace,
 - the wage gap for identified people with disability and people without disability (consider data similarity to [national gender gap reporting](#))?
4. What data should be included to ensure nationally consistent collection and reporting to understand the nature of disability employment including wages in Australia?

Key Deliverables

This data should be analysed using the following research question parameters:

- How many people with disability work in the place of employment (disclosed/identified) and comparison across types of employment (public service, private and entrepreneurial)
- What level of employment that identified people with disability hold across a workforce including percent of total workforce in that level of employment. This may include but not limited to people with disability in paid employment roles for an organisation. Voluntary work and governance roles will be excluded. This will include comparison of data across types of employment (public service, private and entrepreneurial). For the Australian Public Service, this will [traditional APS classifications](#) or equivalent classifications for people outside public employment.
- If wage data is reported, what is the wage gap for identified people with, and without disabilities across a workplace. This will include comparison of data across types of employment (public service, private and entrepreneurial).

Research Parameters

- Recent literature – includes both academic and grey literature, from 2010 onwards.
- **NB:** researchers should outline their search strategy, reasons for inclusion/exclusion of sources, and any possible limitations of included sources. It is strongly encouraged to take advantage of the University's [library services](#) to develop a robust research

method. Please take care to ensure all information sources are referenced accurately and completely, according to the [Harvard Referencing Style](#).

Preliminary Resources

In addition to the information that is provided by the DLI, other possible information sources could include (but are not limited to):

- [Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031](#) including [Employment Targeted Action Plan](#)
- [Disability Employment Strategy](#) (national)
- [Disability Royal Commission Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing](#)
- [NDIA Participant Employment Strategy](#) including Employment Action Plan 2024-26.
- [Disability Employment Service Quality Framework](#)
- Department of Social Services information including new employment reforms - [Employment services for people with disability](#)
- [Workplace inclusion: Explore employer perceptions of hiring employees with disability \(Antonpoulous, Sugden & Saliba, 2024\)](#).

Executive Summary

This research proposal addresses the need for a deeper, more intersectional understanding of the employment experiences of people with disabilities in Australia. Despite years of advocacy, disabled people continue to face exclusion, both from the labour market and from mainstream employment research. Existing public data remains limited in scope and depth, making it difficult to understand the realities of work for disabled people and how those realities are further complicated through other marginalised identities (race, gender, class). This research proposes analysing publicly reported data from businesses and organisations, alongside a self-made survey distributed through the Disability Leadership Institute (DLI); this exploratory study aims to offer a deeper understanding of the gaps in data and collection on disability and work and offer policy directions to support more equitable outcomes in employment and leadership for disabled Australians.

This research draws from an intersectional approach to critical disability studies, understanding not just how social, political and structural elements marginalise disabled workers, but how that marginalisation is further compounded by other social groupings (gender, race, class, etc). This approach diverges from mainstream approaches to disability, the medical and biopsychosocial models, which pathologises disability as an individual issue to be cured, and minimises or ignores the social/cultural/political factors. Instead, this study applies the social and human rights models of disability, which are better suited to analyse how a range of vocational, non-vocational and structural barriers, such as ableist attitudes, inaccessible workplaces, and punitive welfare policies, combine to restrict opportunities for disabled people.

More data with these different approaches is needed to inform more effective policy procedures. While initiatives like the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) were intended to improve outcomes, the reality is that market-based approaches and weak regulation have not delivered meaningful improvements in employment. Increased investment in Disability Employment Services, for example, has not translated into better results. At the same time, key data sources, such as those from the AIHW and ABS, remain outdated, inconsistently disaggregated, or disconnected from lived experience, making it difficult to develop effective, targeted policy responses.

This study uses a blend of multiple-choice and short-answer questions to utilise a blended quantitative and qualitative approach, allowing for both a standardised data set to look for relationships between demographic data and experiences of disabled workers, while also allowing for descriptive responses on conditions and proposed solutions. Questions have been segmented into four sections: demographic information, employment information and conditions, disability identification and career progression, and policy considerations. This study draws from a community-led framework of research: the survey has been shaped alongside consultations with DLI, respondents will be clearly informed they are not obligated to answer any of the questions, and a summary of results will be shared with respondents who ask. All data will be anonymised for their safety.

We expect that there will be a large contrast between publicly reported data and the data collected by our survey, especially around areas of disaggregated data around disability and social sub-groups. We anticipate that there will be minimal disability data collected and published within organisations, in addition to low levels of disability career progression, and disabled workers in leadership positions; if this is the case, our study intends to highlight these gaps and offer clear recommendations for proactive solutions.

Introduction

People with disability make up approximately 18% of the Australian population (AIHW 2024). However, their participation in the labour force remains significantly lower than that of people without disability. In 2018, only 53% of people aged 15–64 with disability were in the labour force, compared to 84% of those without disability. Of these, 48% were employed, while the unemployment rate for this group (10%) was more than double that of people without disability (4.6%) (AIHW 2024). Underemployment is also a concern, with 10% of employed people with disability reporting that they wanted, and were able, to work more hours.

Employment is strongly associated with financial independence, mental and physical health, and broader social inclusion. Yet, structural barriers—such as inaccessible workplaces, discriminatory practices, complex welfare rules, and assumptions about the capability of disabled people—continue to limit their opportunities for meaningful and sustainable employment. Although most employed people with disability (88%) do not require additional employer support, and 30% of employers in 2022 reported increased readiness to hire someone with disability, a national framework for consistent reporting on employment outcomes and leadership remains lacking (AIHW 2024).

The 2023 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability highlighted the urgent need for inclusive employment reform, standardised data collection, and targeted strategies to address disadvantage in the workplace. However, current datasets often fail to account for leadership outcomes, wage equity, or how other aspects of a disabled person’s identity (gender, race or class) affect their experiences (Mellifont et al 2023; Carmichael & Clarke 2022).

This study, in partnership with the Disability Leadership Institute (DLI), aims to analyse existing public data on disability employment and leadership, and to collect new evidence through a survey of disabled professionals across sectors. Guided by an intersectional approach to critical disability studies, through utilising the social and human rights models, this research seeks to inform the development of a nationally consistent and inclusive framework for reporting disability employment conditions in Australia.

Literature Review

Understanding and better supporting the disabled community has and continues to be an important priority. Gignac et al (2021: 154) observes how the population of disabled people continues to grow 'due to an array of influences, including an aging population, the growing prevalence of chronic conditions like musculoskeletal and mental health disorders, cancer, and cardiovascular diseases, and a wide range of social and environmental factors that contribute to disability.' Meadway and Reed (2022: 10–11) note the increasing trend of people leaving their jobs, attributing 'activity-limiting long COVID', estimated to affect 643,000 people in the UK, as one factor. The harms associated with the disability communities' access to, and/or experiences with, work not only harm the individual but have spillover effects to their families, carers, and other communal networks, due to the 'relational interdependences in the lives of disabled people' (Carmichael & Clarke 2022: 781).

With these trends in mind, a more thorough approach to researching the conditions of disability employment is being advocated for (Mellifont, et al 2023:). Carmichael and Clarke (2022: 766) state that disabled people are a 'double marginalised group, marginalised from the labour market and in the diversity and work literature.' Of the limited research on disability and work, most takes place outside of Australia, with a focus on barriers or challenges; there is also limited available research on the lived experiences of disabled workers (Mellifont, et al 2023: 644–645).

While reports from government bodies such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) have advocated for more data collection on disability, there are further complications with the methodologies and methods deployed within these studies (AIHW 2025; ADS 2021). The approaches of these studies have implications for recommended policy implementations and frameworks for dealing with future research on disability (Mellifont, et al 2023, 644-645; Antonopoulos, et al 2024: 2; etc). For example, Mellifont, et al (2023: 649) critique the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and National Disability Insurance Agency for deploying market-based approaches to disability, specifically with a laissez-faire approach to regulation, which 'have a low uptake because of poor motivation and lack of awareness towards the benefits and possibilities of disability employment.' A more nuanced understanding of the

employment circumstances of disabled workers would help better implement programs with more exciting results. Antonopoulos, et al (2024: 2) note that an 'increase in spending on Disability Employment Services in Australia has not improved the employment rate'; they also note there was a 'decline in overall outcomes,' however, as addressed below, there has been a recent uptick in employment.

Disabled people's experiences with employment are multifaceted. Devine et al (2021: 2) categorise barriers to employment as 'vocational', relating to an individual's education, skills and work experience; 'non-vocational', 'factors that make it more difficult for an individual to gain or maintain employment', e.g. poor mental health, homelessness; and 'structural' are those 'barriers that collectively affect a group disproportionately and contribute to the persistent inequalities'—this can be reflected in inaccessible workplaces unable to facilitate disabled workers, or just disability stigma overall. One such non-vocational and structural barrier is welfare benefits, which, while offering a monetary reprieve, are structured in such a way that deters disabled people from work. Due to strict entitlement rules, disabled workers have to be strategic about whether to work, or how much, as they may lose their benefits, which may better support them than the potential income of wage labour (Carmichael & Clarke 2022: 777). Another such blended non-vocational/structural barrier is that of the 'minority stress framework' which 'acknowledges that marginalised groups are exposed to greater stress and tend to be resource-poor' (Brown & Ciciurkaite 2023: 169). Due to extenuating circumstances such as long-experienced ableism, defined as prejudice, discrimination, and the application of stigma toward people with disabilities, disabled workers are more susceptible to mental health stressors and employment disadvantages (Brown & Ciciurkaite 2023: 168). This creates what Myrdal (2017: 382) termed circular cumulative causation, or the snowballing effect felt by marginalised groups who find it difficult to maintain or find work, which creates stressors (poverty, hunger, depression), which demotivates/prevents them to find work, which creates stressors, and so on.

The situation for disabled workers currently is complicated and hard to understand due to the limited research—especially within the context of Australia. In the US, there was a disproportionate loss of jobs for disabled workers during the Covid 19 pandemic (Ne'eman & Maestas 2023: 1); however, there has been an unprecedented rise in disability employment within the US in the post pandemic period (Ne'eman & Maestas

2023: 2). While this trend can be understood for the broader group of disabled workers, there are positive and negative differentiation of this trend depending on the type of disability the worker possesses, their racial identity and industry (Ne'eman & Maestas 2023: 3). Ne'eman and Maestas (2023: 7), in the US context, speculate that this positive employment trend can be attributed to the increased availability of 'telework' (working from home), and the economic recovery seen within the US in the post-pandemic landscape. There have been negative consequences towards the disabled community as a result of the COVID pandemic, such as the reinforcement of disability-bias and the inequality widened from the precarity of work and discrimination felt during the pandemic (Brown & Ciciurkaite 2023: 179–180). As much of the grey literature on disability in Australia draws from the 2018 census data, it can be hard to reach conclusions on how this has manifested in the Australian context (AIHW 2024; Royal Commission 2023). We hope to gain a deeper understanding of the employment conditions of the disability community from this study and gain some insights on how the pandemic has altered the landscape.

Ontological and Methodological Framework

This study draws from a theoretical approach rooted in a post structural ontology, utilising an intersectional approach to critical disability studies. Intersectionality can best be understood as a form of analysis that takes into account the social divisions present within our society (race, gender, disability, age, etc), which do not operate separately but instead compound 'disadvantage in unpredictable ways' (Smith & Dowse 2018: 123). Through understanding these compounded disadvantages, we are better able to analyse how structures of power alter our daily lives. Critical disability studies, while focusing on the specific ways that social structures engage with disabled people, can serve as one lens under the broader intersectional approach. Critical disability studies scholars and activists critique the mainstream use of the 'medical' or 'biopsychosocial' models of disability as they are focused on biological and/or psychological factors, seeing disability as something that needs to be 'cured' while having a weak or non-existent acknowledgement of social, political and/or structural factors that construct disability (Carmichael & Clarke 2022: 767; Antonopoulos et al 2024: 10-11; Gignac, et al 2021:158-159). Disability scholars and activists, instead, refer to the 'social' model of disability, which believes that society limits a person, rather than the way their body functions. Therefore, an impairment in

itself is not disabling; it is the environment and society that fosters exclusion,' (Antonopoulos, et al 2024: 11).

The social model is not without critique, Antonopoulos (2024:11) notes that the social model's exclusion of impairment 'does not encapsulate a person's true lived experience', nor does the model consider 'different identities and forms of oppression (e.g., gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age) and how these identities intersect.' Bone (2017: 1305–1306) critiques the social model's emphasis on the 'cultural constructions rather than political marginalization' which contributes to outlining the boundaries felt by disabled people, but not informing meaningful action to reverse or abolish those boundaries; however, despite the critique the approach is still constructive as it fills the gap left by the sociological literature (Carmichael & Clarke 2022: 767–768). This study draws from the social model of disability, alongside the 'human rights' model, which fills some of the gaps in the social model, offering an intersectional approach while also taking into account how an individual's impairment "affects a person's experience".

This study utilises this methodology in response to the Disability Leadership Institute's (DLI) request, as it addresses a significant data gap identified in various grey literature regarding what data is published, what is omitted, and what is needed for national consistency in employment reporting on disability and leadership (AIHW 2024; Royal Commission 2023). The gap in intersectional understandings of Disability employment, and a commitment to intersectional approaches, was specifically highlighted (AIHW 2024:13; ADS 2021).

Method

This study proposes a blend of qualitative and quantitative methods to gain standardised data, with an opportunity to collect descriptive information on subjective experiences. This study will collect demographic information to understand how different disability sub-groups (intellectual, psychosocial, physical, etc.) and identity groups influence the experiences of disabled people. These limitations largely stem from issues with existing data, such as inconsistent definitions of disability, barriers to data sharing, and the absence of disability-related data collection. However, these gaps also provide a starting point for further discussion.

It is important to note that our survey respondents will be members of DLI, all of whom identify as disabled and are at least partially engaged in disability advocacy. This facilitates the data collection process, as participants are already invested in these issues. To encourage participation and promote meaningful change, this study will provide participants with a summary of the findings at the conclusion of the study. This not only incentivises involvement but also contributes to raising awareness and fostering education on the realities of disability employment.

Once survey responses are received and processed, this research aims to provide empirical insights into the employment disparities faced by individuals with disabilities. Through an intersectional approach, this study aims to analyse how gender, ethnicity, age, legal status, and disability type shape workplace experiences, career progression, and wage outcomes. Additionally, this study will evaluate the impact of voluntary disclosure and employer support mechanisms on workplace inclusion, identifying barriers that disproportionately affect marginalised disabled individuals. Ultimately, this research will propose policy recommendations for a standardised national framework on disability employment and wage reporting, promoting transparency, consistency, and equity in workforce data collection across industries in Australia.

Ethics Consideration

There is much literature on the harms of disclosure of disability to employers, family, and friends due to the stigma attached to disability (Ginac, et al 2021; Bierdz 2024); therefore this study requires we anonymise the results to prevent unnecessary harms to participants; in addition, given our partnership with DLI, we are mindful of the ethical obligations involved in working with their membership. This research is performed in the spirit of community-led research: that is, working alongside the community being researched to achieve outcomes that not only contribute to academic discourse, but to share resources, tools and results benefiting the researcher and the researched (Rawlings, et al 2021). As a result, the scope of our survey is shaped by agreed-upon boundaries regarding the types of questions we can ask. This ensures that the research respects participants lived experiences and aligns with the values and expectations of the DLI community. All survey participation is voluntary, and each question is designed to be inclusive, non-intrusive, and sensitive to diverse disability identities and experiences. Respondents are free to skip any question they prefer not to answer. Summarised results of the study can be shared with respondents who opt-in to receive them in accessible language. This ensures that not only can this research contribute to further studies, but that respondents will better understand the status of disability employment outside of their immediate context.

Data Sources

The main data sources for this study will be responses from members of the DLI from our self-designed Survey on Disability Employment and Workplace Inclusion, which gathers cross-sectional data across four key parts:

1. **Demographic Information:** This section collects details about survey respondents, including age, gender, cultural background, and disability identification.
2. **Employment Information and Conditions:** This part focuses on participants' job roles, contract types, working hours, and workplace accommodations.

3. **Disability Identification and Career Progression:** This section explores career trajectories, barriers to advancement, and employment experiences specific to people with disabilities.
4. **Policy Considerations:** The final section captures respondents' perspectives on workplace inclusion, employer support, and potential policy improvements.

The survey includes a mix of demographic questions, yes/no questions, ordinal scale rankings (1 to 5), and open-ended descriptive responses. The survey is structured to ensure a comprehensive understanding of employment experiences among disabled individuals, with a special emphasis on intersectionality and the diversity of disability sub-groups. Our survey can be distributed in two formats: one via the Qualtrics platform and another adapted into a Word document for compatibility with screen readers. The full survey can be found in appendix A.

In addition to survey responses, we can draw insights from publicly available organisational reports to identify trends in disability employment, leadership representation, and wage gap disclosures. This should help to better understand what data is currently published, what gaps exist, and what is needed to establish national consistency in employment reporting for disability and leadership. Additionally, where applicable, we hope to leverage national datasets from the ABS and AIHW for comparative analysis and external benchmarking, contextualising the findings within broader labour market trends.

Survey responses can be exported to R Studio, the programming language employed for analysis. Responses can then be cleaned and standardised to ensure consistency, including harmonising categorical variables such as disability identification, employment type, and industry classification. Missing data can be addressed using appropriate imputation methods or, where necessary, by excluding incomplete responses. Additionally, ordinal variables such as job satisfaction and inclusion perception, typically rated on a scale from 1 to 5, can be encoded into a numeric format to facilitate statistical modelling.

For descriptive statistics and exploratory analysis, we can calculate frequency distributions for categorical variables such as disability disclosure rates and leadership representation. We can summarise key statistics for numerical variables, including

salary, hours worked per week, and tenure. Where applicable, visualisation techniques such as histograms and bar charts can be employed to illustrate key trends and patterns within the data.

Moving to statistical analysis, an examination of key aspects of disability disclosure, employment levels, career progression, and wage disparities, applying an intersectional lens to understand how these factors vary across different identity groups will be needed. The analysis should integrate gender, ethnicity, age, legal status, occupation, and disability sub-groups to highlight inequalities and structural barriers in the workforce.

1. Disability Disclosure and Workplace Inclusion

We can analyse the proportion of respondents who voluntarily disclose their disability status by running a logistic regression to assess factors influencing disclosure, such as industry, contract type, gender, and ethnicity. Responses to questions 1 to 7 from our survey (demographic data) and question 23 (Have you declared your disability to your employer?) should be used. This can help identify whether certain identity groups face greater barriers to disclosure due to stigma, workplace culture, or policy gaps.

2. Employment Levels and Leadership Representation

To assess employment distribution and leadership representation, disability status can be cross tabulated with occupation levels and leadership roles, applying chi-square tests to examine the statistical significance of the relationship between disability status and employment type (for example, full-time vs. part-time). The null hypothesis (H_0) states that disability status and leadership role are independent, while the alternative hypothesis (H_1) asserts that they are dependent.

Data for disability status and leadership roles should be drawn from survey questions 6 (Which disability group(s) do you identify with?) and 30 (What APS level are you currently employed?). If the chi-square test yields a p-value less than 0.05, the null hypothesis needs to be rejected, and we can conclude a statistically significant relationship between disability status and leadership roles. If the p-value exceeds 0.05, we fail to reject the null hypothesis, indicating no significant relationship.

This analysis will help determine whether individuals with disabilities are underrepresented in leadership roles compared to non-disabled individuals, shedding light on potential barriers to advancement based on disability status.

3. Career Progression Tracking

Career progression should be assessed by tracking changes in APS levels for public sector employees over time through logistic regression, estimating promotion probabilities for employees with disabilities. The analysis should utilise demographic data from questions 1 to 7 and APS level data from questions 29 and 30. Additionally, an examination of whether career progression varies across intersectional identities should be conducted, including First Nations people with disabilities, culturally diverse individuals, different age groups, and LGBTIQ+ disabled individuals.

Further analysis should incorporate responses to question 23 (disability disclosure to the employer), 23b (impact of disclosure on career progression), 25 (whether the organisation tracks career progression of employees with disclosed disabilities), and 26 (whether the organisation publicly reports disability employment data). This regression will explore factors influencing national consistency in employment reporting on disability and leadership.

4. Wage Gap Analysis

Utilising an intersectional approach to investigate wage disparities, an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression can be conducted, examining how wage gaps vary by gender, ethnicity, and disability type. This approach will identify differing economic outcomes experienced by individuals at the intersection of multiple marginalised identities. Data for this analysis should be drawn from demographic questions 1 to 7 and question 27, which addresses perceived wage gaps between employees with and without disabilities.

5. Employment Satisfaction

We can extend the analysis by applying OLS regression to examine how employment satisfaction (from responses to questions 18 to 22) correlates with disabled individuals' demographic characteristics, such as ethnicity, age, gender, occupation, legal status,

and disability group. This approach will ensure a nuanced understanding of how multiple identity factors shape workplace experiences.

6. Intersectional Analysis

For the intersectional analysis, we can incorporate interaction terms in the regression models to assess how variables such as salary, gender, and disability intersect. The analysis should draw on demographic data from questions 1 to 7, employment data from questions 8 to 10 (number of jobs, occupation and industry), and salary and contract type data from questions 13 and 16, respectively. This approach will enable us to capture nuanced variations in employment data across intersecting identities.

Summary of Methods

In summary, this research aims to leverage R for statistical modelling within an intersectional approach to understand what data is published, what is not, and what is needed for national consistency in employment reporting about disability employment and leadership.

It will move beyond broad disability employment statistics and uncover hidden inequalities shaped by individuals' multifaceted identities. By analysing how factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, and disability type correlate with employment status, wages, career progression, and job satisfaction, this study further aims to provide a data-driven understanding of workforce disparities.

Expected Outcomes and Arguments

By auditing public data or any information that we are granted access to, our review of organisational and government disclosures (AIHW, ABS, NDIS) will demonstrate the likely trend that fewer than half of major employers publish any disability related employment metrics. Through literature reviews and background research, we predict that none of these metrics will disaggregate by disability subtype, gender, or cultural background. This patchwork of reporting from small to large, tiered firms, characterised by inconsistent definitions, possible irregular publication schedules, and minimal intersectional detail, significantly impacts data collection across industries, countries and firms. It also renders cross-sector comparison impossible and obscures the true scale of workplace inequities.

Our proposed survey of DLI members should reveal four core findings. This includes the elements of low disclosure rates, leadership under-representation, persistent wage gaps and an insight into reasons and motivations behind intersectional barriers. We estimate that only 28% of responders have voluntarily disclosed their disability to their employer, with disclosure rates dropping to 15% among women of colour and 12% among psychosocial disability holders. We expect outcomes to be like this as we understand and recognise that people of colour and women are adversely disadvantaged in today's working society due to persistent systemic issues.

We also expect an under-representation of leadership and governance within companies, firms and industries. Disabled employees occupy just 6% of senior leadership roles, despite comprising 15% of the overall workforce in our sample. As we know, gaining recognition is an additional hardship for employees who have a disability. **Persistent Wage Gaps:** After controlling for occupation and tenure, individuals with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities earn 12–18% less than their non-disabled peers. We understand that employees with certain disabilities, especially psychosocial or intellectual, may feel less empowered to negotiate salary or may lack access to mentorship that builds negotiation skills. Finally, intersectional barriers such as stigma and structural constraints may cross paths to significantly affect people, such as First Nations disabled respondents. We estimate that they will report both the lowest disclosure rates (10%) and the widest wage gaps (20%). Perhaps, this might

be due to standard disability-inclusion programs often assuming a “one-size-fits-all” model. This model then ignores cultural norms, language barriers, and identity-specific needs, making supports ineffective for diverse subgroups.

Together, these outcomes substantiate two central arguments of measurement gaps fuelling inequity and how their lived experiences diverge from published stereotypes or public perceptions. Without standardised, intersectional data, policymakers lack the evidence base to design targeted interventions, allowing systemic barriers to persist unchallenged. Similarly, publicly reported figures (often aggregated at “all disabilities”) obscure the steeper challenges faced by subgroups, demonstrating why a uniform reporting framework cannot capture real-world complexity.

Policy Implications

Despite this research proposal only idealising the reforms and changes made, we will also suggest some policy recommendations for directions in implementations and making the workforce a more inclusive environment. Mandating standardised reporting by enacting a national Disability Employment Reporting Act would require all employers with at least 50 staff to publish annual, machine-readable returns of data collected. These annual reports should cover de-identified factors of employees who have a certain disability, voluntary disclosure rates, accommodation uptake, leadership representation, and wage differentials by cohort. Similarly, across industries and companies, definitions and collection methodologies must be encouraged to harmonise and regulate to ensure that the same level of collection is achieved. This would include tasking the ABS (in coordination with AIHW) to develop a unified taxonomy of disability classifications, which also includes survey instruments and data-collection protocols, ensuring that every stakeholder “speaks the same data language” (Dykes 2018). Furthermore, funding and incentives must be established by the government, providing and supplying research grants, and wage-subsidy programs to the depth and accuracy of an organisation’s disability-employment disclosures. In doing so, this would create a financial incentive to improve both transparency and workplace inclusion. Moreover, more support should be given to invest in evidence-based services. This includes dedicating funding for accredited disability-inclusive workplace adjustments (e.g. assistive technologies, flexible scheduling) and compulsory manager training (Schneider 2025). These trainings would also include, but are not limited to, periodic and independent audits of effectiveness and employee satisfaction.

Future Research

If there is an opportunity to go beyond the scope of the Sydney Reform Policy Project, here are some ways, directions and fields future research can cover:

Future research can and should involve tracking a panel of disabled employees over a period of five to ten years to document how their decisions to disclose a disability, their career trajectories, and their use of workplace accommodations change in response to evolving reporting mandates. During this period, researchers ought to conduct semi-structured interviews and focus groups with under-researched subpopulations, such as LGBTIQ+ disabled individuals and migrant workers, in order to explore in depth how intersecting identities, stigma, and organisational culture shape experiences of inclusion. Furthermore, to make sure all cases are collected carefully and attentively, it would be valuable to pilot specific inclusion initiatives (for example, targeted mentorship programs or return-to-work schemes) using randomised controlled trial designs. Thereby, projects will then be rigorously measured when it comes to their effects on promotion rates, job satisfaction, and employee retention. It will be interesting for the team and further researchers to conduct comparative analyses of disability-employment reporting frameworks in countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand. We recognise that with this information; it can help identify best practices and policy levers that Australia might adapt to accelerate domestic reforms. Lastly, researchers should develop macroeconomic models to quantify the potential gains from closing disability-related wage and participation gaps. This can include projected increases in GDP and reductions in healthcare and welfare costs, to build a stronger fiscal argument for sustained policy investment.

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Appendix A: Survey

Experiences of Disability in the Workplace Survey

About this Study

There are significant gaps in disability research in Australia, with most studies relying on census data collected only every five years. This limited data makes it difficult to fully understand and analyse the employment experiences of disabled people. Data and insights into the employment issues experienced by the disability community are required to bolster policy and organisational change. This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of disabled individuals in the workplace and how these vary across different types of disability and other social categories (e.g. race, gender, age). This study asks respondents to volunteer further demographic information to separate and understand how these other factors influence employment experiences of disabled workers; however, this is non-compulsory. Through collecting information from DLI members about their employment experience, this study can begin to form a picture of what is and isn't being publicly reported, further deepening our understanding of the gaps in disability data and informing where future reporting and research is needed. This is all with the goal of building a nationally consistent framework for data collection and reporting about disability employment and disability leadership. The Disability Leadership Institute will use these insights to inform their future projects and research towards this goal. This research takes a community-led approach aiming to not only produce research insights but also contribute resources and tools to the broader disability community to improve conditions and advocate for change. The data will not be publicly available; however, if you would like to receive a summary of our findings, you will have the option to request it at the end of the study.

Demographic Data

Q1. Which racial group(s) do you identify with?

Please select one or more options.

- European
- Asian
- Pacific Islander
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples

- Black
- Hispanic/Latino/Latina
- Other (please specify) Click or tap here to enter text.
- Prefer Not to Say

Q2. Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

Please select one option.

- Aboriginal
- Torres Strait Islander
- No
- Other (please specify) Click or tap here to enter text.
- Prefer Not to Say

Q3. What is your age?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Q4. Which gender(s) do you identify as?

Please select one option.

- Male
- Female
- Intersex
- Gender Fluid
- Other (please specify) Click or tap here to enter text.

Q5. Do you identify as a member of the LGBTIQ+ community?

Please select one option.

- Yes

- No
- Prefer Not to Say

We preface this question with a disclaimer that while we are using medical terms for disability, we are not framing this research through a medical model of disability. We are committed to using the social and human rights model of disability for our research. These terms are being used for the purpose of data collection, analysis and reporting.

Q6. Which disability group(s) do you identify with?

Please select one or more options.

- Sensory and speech
- Psychosocial
- Intellectual
- Physical
- Head injury, stroke, or acquired brain injury
- Other (please specify) Click or tap here to enter text.
- Prefer Not to Say

Q7. What is your legal status?

Please select one option.

- Australian Citizen/ NZ Citizenship
- Australian Permanent Resident (PR)
- Temporary Visa Holder with Work Rights
- Bridging Visa Holder
- Employer-Sponsored Visa Holder
- Require Employer Sponsorship
- Other (please specify) Click or tap here to enter text.

- Prefer Not to Say

Employment Information

Q8. How many jobs do you have currently?

Please select one option.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- more than 4

Q9. What is your occupation?

Please select one option. If multiple, choose your primary occupation.

- Manager
- Professional
- Technician or Trade Worker
- Community or Personal Service Worker
- Clerical or Administrative Worker
- Sales Worker
- Machinery Operator or Driver
- Labourer
- Other (please specify) Click or tap here to enter text.
- Prefer Not to Say

Q10. In what industry do you work?

Please select one or more options. If multiple, choose your primary industry.

- Hospitality, Retail and Service
- Administration and Support Services
- Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing

- Art and Recreational Services
- Construction
- Education and Training
- Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services
- Financial and Insurance Services
- Healthcare and Social Assistance
- Media and Marketing
- Information Technology
- Manufacturing, Transport and Warehousing
- Public Service
- Entrepreneurial
- Other (please specify) Click or tap here to enter text.
- Prefer Not to Say

Q11. What is the size of the organisation you work in?

Please select one option.

- 1 – 4 employees
- 4 – 19 employees
- 20-199 employees
- 200-1000 employees
- More than 1000 employees

Q12. If you are comfortable, please state the name of your employer.

We are interested in reading annual reports of organisations and comparing their reporting of disability with the experiences of their employees.

Leave the name of your favourite animal if you are uncomfortable.

Click or tap here to enter text.

Q13. What is your salary?

Please select one option.

- Below \$47,626 per year
- \$47,626 - \$65,000 per year
- \$65,000 - \$80,000 per year
- \$80,000 - \$100,000 per year
- \$100,000 - \$200,000
- Above \$200,000 per year
- Prefer Not to Say

Q14. How many years have you been employed in your current employer?

Please enter a number or select 'Prefer Not to Say'.

- Click or tap here to enter text.
- Prefer Not to Say

Q15. How many hours on average do you work a week?

Please enter a number or select 'Prefer Not to Say'.

- Click or tap here to enter text.
- Prefer Not to Say

Q16. What is your contract type?

Please select one option. If multiple, choose your primary occupation.

- Casual
- Seasonal
- Part-time
- Full-time
- Self-employed

- Prefer Not to Say

Q17. Where is your predominant place of work?

Please select one option.


- In the workplace
- Working from home
- Hybrid
- Other (please specify) Click or tap here to enter text.
- Prefer Not to Say

Q18. Which face best describes how you feel about your work?

Please select one option.

- 
Very Happy

- 
Somewhat Happy

- 
Neutral

- 
Somewhat Sad

- 
Very Sad

- Prefer Not to Say

Q19. Which face best represents how valued I felt as a member of my work group?

Please select one option.



Prefer Not to Say

Q20. Which face best represents how much I felt I belonged to my work group?

Please select one option.




Neutral


Somewhat Sad


Very Sad


Prefer Not to Say

Q21. Which face best represents how I feel about people in my work group listening to me, even when my views were different?

Please select one option.


Very Happy


Somewhat Happy


Neutral


Somewhat Sad


Very Sad

Prefer Not to Say

Q22. Which face best represents how I feel about my ability to share perspectives on work issues that were different from my group members?

Please select one option.


Very Happy


Somewhat Happy


Neutral


Somewhat Sad


Very Sad

Prefer Not to Say

Disability Disclosure & Workplace Support

Q23. Have you declared your disability to your employer?

Please select one option.

Yes

No

Prefer Not to Say

Q23b.If yes, to what extent has this affected your employment progression?

Please select one option.

- Very Positively
- Somewhat Positively
- Neutral
- Somewhat Negatively
- Very Negatively
- Prefer Not to Say

Q24. Has your employer collected data about your or other co-workers' disabilities?

Please select one option.

- Yes
- No
- I Don't Know

Q25. Does your organisation track the career progression (promotions, opportunities, and/or role changes) of employees with disclosed disabilities?

Please select one option.

- Yes
- No
- I Don't Know

Q25b. If yes, how does your employee track career progression?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Q26. Does your organisation publicly report data about disability employment in the workforce?

Please select one option.

- Yes
- No
- I Don't Know

Q27. Based on your experience, do you believe there is a wage gap between employees with disabilities and those without?

Please select one option.

- Very Significant Gap
- Significant Gap
- Notable Gap
- Slight Gap
- No Difference

Q28. Does your employer offer additional support for employees with disabilities?

Please select one option.

- Yes
- No

Q28b. If yes, how does your employer offer support?

Click or tap here to enter text.

APS Levels

APS Level 1–2: Entry-level positions focusing on basic administrative or operational tasks, learning departmental procedures, and developing foundational skills.

APS Level 3–4: Roles with increased responsibility, requiring some experience. Tasks may include implementation of programs, data analysis, stakeholder communication, and supporting policy development.

APS Level 5–6: More advanced roles involving complex problem-solving, policy advice, project management, and potentially supervising junior staff. These positions require strong judgment, initiative, and subject matter knowledge.

EL 1 – EL 2 (Executive Level 1 and 2): Mid- to senior-level management roles involving leadership of teams, oversight of significant projects or policy areas, and strategic input into departmental priorities. These positions require strong analytical, communication, and leadership skills, as well as the ability to manage resources and deliver results in complex environments.

SES 1 – SES 3 (Senior Executive Service): Senior leadership positions responsible for shaping strategic direction, leading organisational change, and delivering whole-of-government outcomes. SES officers provide high-level policy advice, manage major programs or agencies, and work closely with ministers and other stakeholders to influence national priorities and reforms.

Q29. What APS level were you hired into?

Please select one option.

- Level 1
- Level 2
- Level 3
- Level 4
- Level 5
- Level 6
- EL 1

- EL 2
- SES 1
- SES 2
- SES 3
- Prefer Not to Say

Q30. What APS level are you currently employed?

Please select one option.

- Level 1
- Level 2
- Level 3
- Level 4
- Level 5
- Level 6
- EL 1
- EL 2
- SES 1
- SES 2
- SES 3
- Prefer Not to Say

Policy & Systemic Considerations

Q31. To what extent do you believe that a standardised national framework for disability employment and wage reporting would be beneficial?

Please select one option.

- Very Beneficial
- Somewhat Beneficial
- Neutral
- Not Very Beneficial

- Not Beneficial at All

Q32. What additional data points should be included to ensure nationally consistent reporting on disability employment and wages?

Please select one option.

- More detailed employment level breakdowns
- Standardised wage gap reporting (similar to gender pay gap reporting)
- Industry-specific employment trends for employees with disabilities
- Other (please specify) Click or tap here to enter text.

Open-ended Questions

Q33. What do you think are the key barriers preventing employees from disclosing their disability?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Q34. Does your employer have measures to support leadership progression like professional development and training?

Please select one option.

- Yes
- No

Q34b. If no, what would help you in seeking career progression?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Q35. If a wage gap exists between employees with disabilities and those without, what do you believe are the primary contributing factors?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Q36. What are the biggest challenges in collecting and reporting disability employment data in your sector?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Q37. Is there anything else you would like to share with this study?

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Q38. Would you like a summary of our results at the conclusion of the study?
(add email)**

Click or tap here to enter text.