

by ROB GORDON  
CEO, WorkFocus Group



# Disability-friendly workforces drive productivity

**T**he federal budget has placed renewed emphasis on helping to meet Australia's skills shortages with programs and new funding to better tap the workforce of people with disability. This is a great initiative by the government and good news for business as well as people with disability and their carers. Making the workplace more disability-friendly will drive productivity.

Smarter ways of employing people with disability simply must be found. It is not just a good thing to do, it makes economic sense. People with disability make up one-in-five of the population, and two million employees, or 9 per cent of the workforce, combine unpaid caring responsibilities with their work. How much more efficient could those carers be if their dependents in turn were employed, or better employed?

The budget added funding to help employers find, and better utilise, workers with disability. We now need more employers to become aware of what is available and to use those services that are there for them.

Our company WorkFocus Group assists the long-established national disability employment services JobAccess and the National Disability Recruitment Coordinator (NDRC) to help connect employers with disabled workers at no cost. These programs also provide free assistance to help employers adapt their workplaces where necessary.

The budget acknowledged the success and importance of JobAccess with an announcement by DEEWR that the WorkFocus contract to provide the service would be extended until 30 June 2015. JobAccess provides free, practical advice to employers, employees with disability and their colleagues to adapt the workplace for disabled people.

The NDRC is targeted squarely at assisting major national employers. The service aims to increase the number of job vacancies for people with disability and link them with large employers. Eighteen major

Australian companies are current partners, including Australia Post, Telstra and Woolworths. Shortly before the budget, WorkFocus, Woolworths and the Minister for Employment Participation Kate Ellis announced that the government had provided innovation funding to examine and develop ways that Woolworths, and from there possibly other major employers, could most effectively employ more people with disability.

Mental health is a major issue throughout the entire community and WorkFocus is developing special expertise in managing mental health in the workplace. We welcome the government's action in this area. The budget allocated \$227 million to new programs to improve access to employment and inclusion, including services for people with disability accompanied by a heavy focus on mental health.

Minister Ellis said the budget will enable her department to "expand the JobAccess telephone service to include professionals in the mental health area to provide information and support relating to the employment of people with mental illness, and to promote these services to employers and the community."

*The budget allocated \$227 million to new programs to improve access to employment*

The minister said \$2.4 million will be provided for the mental health reform to increase the expertise of employment services and the Department of Human Services' front line staff in mental health awareness, and effective employment by preparation strategies and approaches for the recruitment of job seekers with mental illness.

In our experience, many employers are not aware of the resources that are freely available from the government to assist them in retaining an employee, or hiring someone with a mental health issue or learning disorder. With the right assistance these people can add value in the workplace.

Disability takes many forms including physical immobility, hearing and sight impairment, and rising mental illness.

At least 10 per cent of the Australian workforce has dyslexia; 62 per cent of all adult computer users would be more productive using existing accessible software. Two per cent of the working-age population becomes 'disabled' every year. Simple things like overuse of MP3 players are escalating serious, long-term hearing problems. Some people cannot see a screen properly, others might have trouble hearing on the phone, some have limited hand mobility. These problems are readily addressed with modern technology and workplace systems, and WorkFocus can help.

Our experience at WorkFocus is that making innovative adjustments for disabled employees will minimise the skills lost to early retirement, reduce health and safety costs, reduce accident costs, reduce lost working days and lower work-caused disability.

With Australia's unemployment rate projected to soon reach 4.5 per cent, employers need to be more creative and open-minded in the way they look at labour markets such as people with disability. Skills shortages and wage pressures will only increase. **HRm**

Tell us your opinion on an HR-related topic. Contact us on [hrmonthly@hardiegrant.com.au](mailto:hrmonthly@hardiegrant.com.au)