

Working with disability

Australia's track record for employing the disabled may not be stellar, but there are some shining examples.

by GABRIELLE POLLOCK

Australia shares the same problematic future as many of its developed neighbours. The largest generation to date is set to retire, leaving a shrinking workforce and a skills shortage in their wake. However, work is still not easy to find in Australia, if you happen to live with a disability.

According to the 2010 OECD report, *Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers*, Australia's employment rate of 40 per cent for people with health problems or a disability is low and still falling. Almost 45 per cent of people with a disability live in poverty in Australia compared to an OECD average of 22 per cent. On the whole, we are not doing well when it comes to creating a more representative workforce, but there are businesses, both big and small, that are showing the support is there for both employers and employees. It may just be a matter of utilising it.

Over the last year, Woolworths signed a memorandum of understanding with the government-funded, National Disability Recruitment Coordinator (NDRC), whose aim is to create at least 1000 new job opportunities each year for people with a disability. "By signing a memorandum of understanding with NDRC, this enables us consistency in recruitment," says Estelle Olstein, diversity manager for Woolworths.

WorkFocus Australia, which administers

the services of NDRC on behalf of the federal government, is also responsible for the JobAccess service, which provides practical workplace solutions for both people with a disability and their employers, including information on the Employment Assistance Fund, which provides funding to employers for workplace modifications.

The executive director of nursing staff at Northeast Health Wangaratta, Meryn Pease, says of the process involved in retaining one of her staff (see Diane Ward profile), whose disability had worsened, "It wasn't complicated at all. It worked quite well. Di's employment consultant was able to access what we needed."

At the front line of disability employment are the recruitment services, whose employment consultants specialise and support their clients through the recruitment process and in the workplace. Elizabeth Crowther, chief executive of the Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria, which offers the free My Recruitment service for people living with mental illness, says: "People will often go to an employment agency that doesn't specialise and they won't find a job. It's like a recipe. You really listen to a client's needs and pair the person with the job. You need to talk to the person about disclosure of mental illness in the workplace and you need to make sure you can support the person over time."

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ELIZABETH CROWTHER
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, MENTAL ILLNESS
FELLOWSHIP VICTORIA



recruitment coordinator for Delaware North Companies, employer of Frank Gallacher (see profile), who suffers from a mental illness.

Estelle Olstein from Woolworths says: “You get the best results where there is collaboration and support.” In providing national guidance to be initiated by local store managers who are sourcing workplace solutions for employees on an individual basis, Chloe Nash, who is profoundly deaf (see profile), has managed to find work in three different states for the Big W stores.

However, it’s not only the larger businesses that are proactive in employing people with a disability. Rosemary House, owner of Gold Coast Boarding Kennels and Cattery, has employed Jo-Anne Gray (see profile) via Centacare Employment Group. The ongoing communication between House, Centacare employment consultant Julie Sheridan and Gray, who has an intellectual disability, has been a success. “Jo has been working for me for six years now, so she knows her job really well. Sometimes people can act a little strangely around her but I always stand behind Jo with customers,” House says.

“It’s a great support to us to be able to go to the case managers who have the correct support for that staff.”



LIBBY HOWE
RECRUITMENT COORDINATOR,
DELAWARE NORTH COMPANIES

PROFILES

DIANE WARD
NORTHEAST HEALTH WANGARATTA



In her position as orientation coordinator, Diane Ward is responsible for the delivery of undergraduate nursing programs and running orientation programs

for new doctors, registrars and allied health workers at Wangaratta Base Hospital.

Twelve months ago Ward was classified as legally blind. Although she was diagnosed with Best’s disease, a form of congenital macular degeneration, when she was only six years old she did not experience any symptoms until 1990, when the vision in her left eye began to deteriorate. This did not stop her pursuing her nursing career.

“Specialists said to me, ‘do whatever you want, read whatever you want and don’t let this disease get in the way’.” At this point Ward had started nursing and,

with the help of corrective lenses continued to practise, gaining post graduate certification in paediatrics. It wasn't until 12 months ago that Ward suffered a bleed in her right eye where she lost her central vision.

"I was devastated. I had nursed for 20 years and now to have that ripped away from me ... with Best's disease, you don't usually end up this bad. It's more of a gradual deterioration."

She took sick leave for four months to seek treatment, which might restore some of her vision, but to no avail.

"During my sick leave, Gabrielle [Robertson, nurse manager in the medical ward and her boss] was constantly in contact asking me how it was going. It was Gabrielle, who was instrumental in realigning existing roles to enable a position for me as orientation coordinator." Ward was then placed on a temporary contract for 12 months to see how this new arrangement worked out.

Ward credits office manager Eva Mercier, whom she says is indispensable in helping her with paperwork. With the aid of

an Acrobat colour video magnifier and an LCD screen, as well as Zoom text software sourced via Vision Australia by her employment consultant, Ward has been able to continue to contribute in the health sector. Ward's contract has recently been reviewed and renewed.

FRANK GALLACHER

FOOD AND BEVERAGE ATTENDANT WITH DELAWARE NORTH COMPANIES (ETIHAD STADIUM AND ROD LAVER ARENA)



Frank Gallacher, who holds a degree in computer science, was working in IT when he was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder in 1998. He left his IT job in 2000 after being retired on medical grounds.

Gallacher had been looking for work for some time before he was recruited by Delaware North Companies via the Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria's My Recruitment service. "John from My Recruitment approached me with the job.

I turned up at Telstra Dome for an interview and a few months later I was working for them.

"It gives me something to do. It's good getting to know the people you work with and working with the general public. You get used to having responsibility again. They put me on the till sometimes and that's pretty full on, particularly at half-time at a footy match," he says.

JO-ANNE GRAY

KENNEL ATTENDANT, GOLD COAST BOARDING KENNELS AND CATTERY



Jo-Anne Gray's job requires her to clean out kennels, clean and fill water bowls, chop meat for dog food, exercise the dogs and sometimes she helps with grooming. At peak times over the Christmas break, there are more than 120 animals to care for.

Gray has an intellectual disability and has been working as a kennel attendant for six years. Coming from a cattle farm, she is

unfazed by working with even the larger breeds. “We get a few growly ones some-times. In the busy times, I worked two weeks straight from nine to five,” she says.

Program and performance analyst for Centacare Employment Group, Julie Sheridan, has stayed on as Gray’s employ-ment consultant to provide continuity despite her promotion. She provides ongo-ing support and liaises with Rosemary House, Jo’s employer, as the need arises.

Sheridan says: “Jo is an overachiever. She places a lot of expectations on herself and this can create anxiety for her at times. Jo and I text message each other once a week and Rosemary can call me anytime. We have created a partnership between the employer, employee and consultant over six years and it works.”

Gray doesn’t drive a car and has to catch two buses to go to and from work. In order to ensure that she was not travelling at night, her hours were adjusted accordingly. House says: “There is a lot of repetition in this job and Jo works best on repetitive tasks. With Jo, I can get my paperwork done

during the day, instead of having to do it at night. She’s very persistent. She doesn’t back down. I’ve learnt a lot from her.”

CHLOE NASH

BIG W



Chloe Nash works as a checkout operator at Big W. She has worked at three different Big W stores over the last three years in Wagga, Brisbane and now

Canberra for the past eight months.

As a checkout operator at Big W, in the Canberra suburb of Woden, Chloe Nash is one of many in the front line of customer service. Although profoundly deaf, Nash says that her favourite part of the job is “communicating with customers on check-out servicing although understanding what customers and staff are telling me can be a problem at times.” Nash can lip-read, but finds this difficult with people she doesn’t know very well. “I have signage that says, ‘Hi, my name is Chloe. I am deaf. Please

spek clearly and make eye contact. Look at the transaction for your price and thank you for your understanding’.”

However, despite her own concerns, Nash’s customer service has been recognised with a Best Checkout Operator award and positive customer feedback. Recently, a customer wrote a letter to Big W complimenting Nash on her customer service skills and ability to communicate so well with customers. “It makes me feel more confident to com-municate with customers and staff, letting them know that I am deaf and showing them what I can do to overcome communication barriers.

“I’ve had lots of support at Big W from staff and from my Advance Personnel employment consultant,” she says.

Nash has, during her three years employ-ment with Big W, in three different states, worked her way up from a supported wage scheme position to a permanent role. In her spare time, she is studying a business admin-istration course to develop her skills further and wishes to find administration work in the future. **HRm**