Blind Citizens Australia Policy Paper
Employment: the cornerstone of social inclusion for people who are blind or vision impaired

This publication has been prepared by Blind Citizens Australia Ltd. for the Australian Government, represented by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The views expressed in this publication are those of Blind Citizens Australia Ltd. and do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Government.

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This report is available in large print, audio, Braille and in electronic formats for access by people who are blind or vision impaired.
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About Blind Citizens Australia: Who we are and why we say what we say

Blind Citizens Australia is a unique organisation that is solely made up of and represents people who are blind or vision impaired. Our Constitution requires that all of our Board of Directors and our committees are people who are blind or vision impaired. Many of our staff are also vision impaired. We have over 3000 members around Australia who are all people who experience blindness. This is why we are best placed to comment on the necessary changes that are needed to improve employment opportunities and career pathways for people who are blind or vision impaired.

Blind Citizens Australia is funded by the Australian Government as the national secretariat to represent the consumer viewpoint of people who are blind or vision impaired and is not a service provider. In addition to our role as the national peak consumer body, Blind Citizens Australia provides information, support and assistance to people who are blind or vision impaired to successfully advocate for their needs. Our expertise lies in sharing the issues and barriers currently experienced by members who are blind or vision impaired and advocating for reform which will best meet their complex interests.

We are driven by our mission to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs.

Background

Blind Citizens Australia was established in 1975 by a group of dedicated individuals who were seeking to improve the quality of life of all Australians who experience blindness. A strong focus of their lobbying was employment, particularly to increase access to meaningful employment opportunities – opportunities other than low paid process roles, menial and tokenistic work offered to people with disability and work in sheltered workshops.

In 2013 people who are blind or vision impaired are still one of the most highly unemployed cohorts, even among people with disability.

Research undertaken in 2012 by Vision Australia, a blindness service provider, indicated that 58% of respondents to the research were unemployed ‘not by their own choice’, as compared to 14% of the wider Australian population at the time the research was undertaken. People who are blind or vision impaired who are seeking a job are therefore four times more likely to be unemployed compared to the general population. Underemployment also continues to be a significant issue for people who are blind or vision impaired, with one third of participants in the same research study wanting to work more hours.

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2 Refer to 1.
Looking more broadly at community attitudes, research has indicated that acquiring blindness is feared to the same extent as developing cancer\(^3\) – a fear that can place people who are blind or vision impaired in a position of pity as well as compromise perceptions of what a person who is blind can do successfully and independently. This has a flow on effect to the perception of the capacity of people who are blind or vision impaired in the world of work. Significant reform, over and above the reforms proposed to improve the employment of people with disability (particularly in the recent Australian government inquiry into improving the employment of people with disability), is needed for groups of people that face chronic, high and long term unemployment. People who are blind or vision impaired are a cohort who require targeted support and intervention.

The high level of disengagement from employment, in addition to the significant barriers which continue to exist which limit the employment of people who are blind, led our Board to identify employment as a priority area for policy development.

The creation of the Blind Citizens Australia Employment Policy Suite was extensively informed from the experiences of our membership, with expressions of interest sought from our membership to form an employment policy sub group of our National Policy and Development Council. The working group, tasked to progress the development of this policy, comprised people who are blind or vision impaired who are currently in the workforce, people who have been long term unemployed, job seekers and recent retirees. The role of the working group included research into employment best practice, input into the content of the policy and development of draft content.

An early draft of the policy was released in September 2011 for broader member engagement and discussion at a session at our National Convention in 2011. Members were also provided with the opportunity to provide feedback via other channels, with promotion of the policy via our publications and on our website.

In the development of our policy, Blind Citizens Australia also consulted extensively with external stakeholders including the Australian Human Rights Commission, Disability Employment Australia, blindness specific disability employment service (DES) providers, the Australian Blindness Forum, Australian Human Resource Institute, Jobs Australia and the Australian Public Service Commission.

Feedback from our internal and external stakeholders indicated that the development of a number of tailored resources targeted to key stakeholders, rather than a single policy document, would be more effective in communicating our recommendations. In 2012, Blind Citizens Australia commenced work on individual resources targeted to stakeholders who could influence employment decisions and implement meaningful action – recruiters, direct employers, DES providers and all levels of government as direct employers of people with disability who can set the benchmark for best practice recruitment. A policy document was also flagged and subsequently developed for the Australian Government to assist with the implementation of Policy

Action 3 ‘Economic Security’ as part of the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and to assist the Australian Government to meet its national and international. Our policy targeted to recruiters was submitted to FaHCSIA on 30 June 2012.

In December 2012, Blind Citizens Australia launched our complete Blind Citizens Australia Employment Policy suite, a series of five policies and six factsheets targeted to the above stakeholders. Our factsheets focus on challenging assumptions and breaking down common myths about what people who are blind or vision impaired can do, provide guidance on legal blindness and how people who are blind access information and provide useful links for recruiters, employers and DES providers to access more detailed information.

The full employment policy suite has been included in the body of this report, as these resources form the core elements of change and reform that is warranted to significantly address the unemployment and under-employment of people who are blind or vision impaired and provide the much needed step up in society.

In February 2013, Blind Citizens Australia also made a submission to the inquiry into improving the employment of people with disability released by Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, the Hon. Bill Shorten. The following report includes the core recommendations provided in our response to this inquiry which provides further guidance to address the significant barriers which impact on this cohort.

Our core driving principle is that people who are blind or vision impaired can and should be meaningfully employed and have the right to seek, work towards and gain rewarding employment. As noted at the beginning of each of our employment policies, work generates wages, less reliance on welfare, dignity, a sense of purpose and productivity. Work is the cornerstone of social inclusion. People who are blind or vision impaired should have the same right to this inclusion as does every other Australian.

**What are the main barriers faced by people with disability in employment?**

There are a number of barriers which our members have shared which have contributed to their inability to find long term, well paid and meaningful employment which are briefly summarised below. More detail of the barriers experienced and potential solutions are detailed in our employment policy suite included in this report.

**Barrier: Pre-conceived ideas about what people who are blind or vision impaired can and can’t do**

Pre-conceived ideas about the capacity of people who are blind or vision impaired is a major stumbling block for many of our members. Perceptions about increased workcover and occupational health and safety (OH&S) risks, how other staff members will ‘cope’ and communicate with a person who is blind and a lack of knowledge of the practicalities of how a person who is blind or vision impaired will conduct the role remain significant hurdles to gain employment.
‘I was told that unfortunately I wouldn’t be offered the job with the call centre. The lady told me that as the hours worked would be after hours, it would be difficult for me as a person with low vision. Also I had to negotiate stairs and she expressed that I wouldn’t be able to do that because of my low vision and that I could fall. Despite telling her that I could use stairs (and that people who are blind or vision impaired can use stairs safely) and that I would wait for my taxi under the building light – which other people would do too – I was told sorry, but no’.

**Barrier: Effort and perceived cost of hiring a person with disability**

The perceived cost of hiring a person who is blind or vision impaired, particularly the perceived cost of adaptive equipment, can act as a barrier even where an individual is able to communicate how they conduct work related tasks.

‘One of the main barriers to employment is the general ignorance around blindness and low vision in how we function as people and how we function as employees. A lot of employers seem to think that employing us will require too much change and be too big an imposition on other employees without even talking to us about how we would carry out the role. For some jobs I’ve interviewed for, someone with less experience than me has gotten the job over me as they didn’t have a disability so the employer didn’t need to rethink their workplace practices like using taxis and carpooling rather than using the work car. Some organisations are looking for someone that they can mould into their own image rather than someone who has already developed a sense of who they are and their working style’.

**Barrier: Accessibility of the worksite and processes**

Accessibility is more than a ramp. Accessibility barriers for people who are blind or vision impaired include

- databases and programs which are inaccessible with screen reading software
- inaccessible procurement such as phone systems, photocopiers and systems that are used in an office environment
- inaccessible procedures and information
- poor access considerations such as signage, lighting or glare and
- inflexibility to modify some components of a role, particularly where a role has some visual based tasks. Minor modifications to a process and/or trading of tasks between team members are simple adjustments which can increase efficiency, accessibility and in some instances, streamline processes.

Universal design and the development of accessible public procurement policy are critical to address the inherent barriers which indirectly discriminate against jobseekers who are blind or vision impaired and people with disability. This is discussed further in this report. Further information to assist employers is also available in the **Hello Employers** policy document.
Barrier: Inaccessible recruitment processes
Jobs advertised on websites which do not comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), online application systems which are inaccessible or hard to navigate using screen enlargement or screen reading software (which reads information presented on a computer screen audibly) and documents which are only available in PDF formats are all information barriers which can limit, or prohibit, access by job seekers who are blind or vision impaired. Some interview processes can also be inaccessible to applicants who are blind or vision impaired, such as in-house assessments which are not compatible with adaptive technology.

Our employment policy on recruitment, titled **Hello Recruiters**, provides guidance to recruiters about how to make the recruitment process accessible to people with varying levels of vision impairment.

Barrier: Positions descriptions which indirectly discriminate
A requirement which is increasingly appearing in position descriptions is the requirement for a driver’s licence – even for roles where extensive travel would not be ordinarily required to conduct the role. This requirement, simply through its inclusion in a position description as a mandatory or ‘essential’ criterion, automatically eliminates people who are legally blind (a person with 10% or less vision or a visual acuity of 10 degrees) and all people with a significant vision impairment who are unable to drive. This also excludes many people with disability who are unable to drive and people who choose not to have a driver’s licence who have the competitive skills to conduct the role advertised.

Barrier: The specialist knowledge of DES staff to promote the capacity of qualified jobseekers who are blind or vision impaired
Our members note that many DES providers are not currently meeting the needs of jobseekers who are blind or vision impaired and often have little understanding of how to best support a person who is blind or vision impaired to seek, gain and keep employment. If a DES provider does not understand how a person who is blind or vision impaired can complete work related tasks, they will not be the best advocate nor support resource to assist a person who is blind or vision impaired into a meaningful role which meets a person’s full access needs.

Blind Citizens Australia has created a policy directed to DES providers titled **Hello Disability Employment Service (DES) providers** to improve knowledge by DES of how to work and support a person who is blind or vision impaired. This policy provides extensive recommendations to resource DES providers with the tools to market and supports jobseekers who are blind or vision impaired.

Barrier: People losing their sight while employed
Age related vision loss is now one of the leading causes of vision impairment. Many of our members who are blind or vision impaired who have lost their sight later in life have noted that the decision to leave the workforce prematurely was made:

- Out of concern that an employer would not, or could not meet their needs;
Because the person was unaware that adjustments could be made to their role and were unaware of where to turn to for support;
Due to a fear to disclose;
Based on self determination that they would not be able to do the role that they used to do.

Many of our older members have noted that they would have stayed in employment had they not lost a significant level of sight. These experiences are consistent with research conducted with people who have acquired a significant hearing impairment later in life\(^4\).

As noted in our employment policy suite:

'It makes more sense to modify a role to retain a good worker than to replace them with someone who may not have the same skills, knowledge and experience and who will need to be trained from scratch. Losing your sight is one of the most difficult transitions and challenges a person can experience. A common experience among our members is difficulty holding on to employment during this very distressing time. Losing a job at the same time as losing your sight can trap people into poverty and social and financial exclusion that statistics and experience show is very hard to escape again. And this also leaves a gap for your business'.

**Barrier: Access to work experience**

A job seeker with well rounded skills and previous work experience has become the benchmark for many positions, including entry level positions. While students without disability may gain preliminary work experience through retail or hospitality experience during their teenage and post high school years, many students who are blind or vision impaired do not gain this experience. Once again, attitudinal barriers by employers can come into play.

In addition, career advisors in high school and post secondary institutions can arbitrarily restrict work experience opportunities for students based on their perception of the careers people who are blind or vision impaired can do. Blind Citizens Australia is aware of a number of students who are blind who have been discouraged from pursuing careers in certain fields because ‘blind people can’t do that job’ or have been encouraged to choose specific careers ‘because this is what other people who are blind do’. Work placements are often negotiated with the assistance of a career advisor, therefore it is vital that perceptions of blindness are not used to impose limitations on students who are blind or vision impaired in considering what might be suitable work placement options. Further, career advisors assisting to identify work experience options need to consider the skills and interest of the candidate, not just the placements that are available, easiest to organise or likely to be the most accommodating of a candidate who is blind or vision impaired. Not all people who are blind or vision impaired want to work in the blindness or disability service sector – it is imperative that placements have value and align with the goals and aspirations of candidates.

Likewise, work experience is also critical for people who are blind or vision impaired who have been out of the workforce for some time. As noted by two of our members:

‘Getting paid work experience is pretty hard and volunteer work experience doesn’t have the same value in the application process regardless of how hard you work in a volunteer role’.

‘I was recently interviewed (by a disability service provider) for a position and although the feedback I received from them was very positive, I didn’t get the job simply because the person who did get it had worked in areas I had never had the opportunity of working in. I think the limited opportunities we have to gain on-the-job experience that would allow us to either get a job in the first place, or to be able to progress up the career ladder is placing us at greater and greater disadvantage. Employers are pretty much ruthless these days in choosing candidates with the most experience and the candidate who will fit their agendas most closely. People don’t just walk into jobs anymore and get given a go. Those days seem to be gone, and for us, I think they need to return’.

 Barrier: Community barriers which compromise access to employment

The ability to socially and economically participate is dependent on factors greater than an individual – if people are unable to independently use or access public transport, navigate a building or environment independently and with dignity, or access the information they need in an accessible way, their ability to get to and from a job is compromised. Community barriers include

- Availability and accessibility of low cost public transport - poor public transport access further marginalises our constituents who, as noted, have one of the highest unemployment rates, even among people with disability
- Access to premises and the built environment which supports people with all levels of ability and is cognisant of a range of needs beyond the physical.
- Access to information which is timely and accessible
- Access to the supports to be able to socially and economically participate and which foster the skills to be able to compete as an equal contender for employment. While Blind Citizens Australia acknowledges the introduction of DisabilityCare Australia, we note that people who are not eligible for funded support and people over the age of 65 in the workforce may need additional assistance to break through the invisible barriers which are currently limiting the employment of this cohort.

How Australia can meet its national and international obligations

In order to meet our national and international obligations, Australia needs to invest in a new approach to address the long standing inequity outlined. Blind Citizens Australia has developed a policy titled *How the Australian government can meet its national and international obligations* which outlines a number of significant areas for reform.

In summary, these include:
• Supporting people with disability to explore flexible employment options, including financial incentives (such as the National Enterprise Incentive Scheme) and providing support to people with disability to start their own businesses. The implementation of DisabilityCare Australia could present opportunities for individuals with disability to form viable business practices where transferable skills and disability specific knowledge can be shared.

• Providing practical support to small and medium sized businesses to ensure that strategies are tailored to the needs of specific workplaces and to enable career advancement.

• Increasing employer wage subsidies to help people who are blind or vision impaired to get a foot in the door.

• More targeted promotion of DES and how DES can support a business to employ a person with disability.

• Ensuring that legislation backs up the talk about improving employment opportunities for people with disability, including the development of Disability Standards for Employment.

• Addressing the eligibility criteria of the Employment Assistance Fund (as part of the pending 2015 review of the effectiveness of the Employment Assistance Fund) to ensure that people who are blind or vision impaired can access the aids and equipment they need as a job seeker or volunteer to enable greater job readiness. If a person who is blind or vision impaired does not have the equipment they need in addition to the learned skills to use adaptive equipment to demonstrate their aptitude, it can make it much more difficult to compete for roles.

• Continued reform of DES requirements to ensure that DES are working to maximise outcomes for jobseekers rather than working to generate profit. Individuals should be placed in a job that best meets their skill set and interests, rather than the first job that is available.

More detail is provided in our policy ‘How the Australian Government can meet its national and international obligations’.

In addition, the centrepiece of government reform should focus on a demonstrated and legislative commitment to universal design and accessible public procurement.

Universal design and accessible public procurement

Public procurement refers to the way in which systems and services are purchased for use by government agencies. This can apply to technology that is used by staff internally, such as telephone and database systems, or to services that are used by members of the public, such as the touch screen systems that have been implemented in Medicare offices across Australia.

At present, information and communications technology (ICT) that is purchased by government departments is not required to incorporate universal design principles. This has led to indirect discrimination against people who are blind or vision impaired including those working in, or seeking employment in government agencies.
Inaccessible systems which compromise access for people who are blind or vision impaired are also evident in other parts of government including local council, where one of our members notes:

'I have been working at local council for five years and some of the programs I need are completely inaccessible with screen reading software. I have raised this repeatedly to my manager and have progressed this within Council. I have spoken about it, written about it and emailed about it. I am continually told that IT are looking into it but it only seems to progress after I chase it up. If I don't chase it up, nothing happens. It is no more accessible now than it was five years ago. We have a disability advisory committee and we work on improving disability access in the community but I am treated like my needs are irrelevant'.

Employees with disability are often required to rely on the Employment Assistance Fund to provide solutions to government systems that are largely inaccessible. In some cases, it can take several months for equipment that is provided under the Employment Assistance Fund to arrive. Maintaining employment in the meantime can be stressful and challenging as the individual’s ability to carry out their work role is limited without access to appropriate adaptive equipment.

More broadly, inaccessible ICT can also negatively impact on inclusion in other parts of life, such as the ability of children who are blind or vision impaired to equitably participate at school and develop the skills needed to become a competitive employee later in life. The Federal Government’s national curriculum is earmarked to include a core component on digital technology, requiring students to meet a number of competencies through the use of ICT. Access to this component of the curriculum can become difficult, and for some students, impossible if the technology that is present in public schools is not accessible to children who are blind or vision impaired.

Blind Citizens Australia recommends that the Federal Government, in cooperation with state and territory governments, work to develop legislation, and in the interim, accessibility guidelines which influence ICT public procurement policies to ensure that services and systems meet the needs of the wider community, as well as employees in the workplace. As government is one of the largest purchasers of ICT, it has the potential and influence to stimulate the market to provide people with disability with a greater choice of accessible products and services.

Overseas, a number of countries have already led the charge in this area. Guidelines for accessibility have been included in the United States Federal Acquisition Regulation since 2001, with the regulation requiring that ICT purchased by all federal government departments meet the needs of people with disability. In addition, in 2004 the European Union revised the general rules referenced under the EU Public Procurement Directive, encouraging procurers to meet accessibility criteria wherever possible. In 2011, the European Commission adopted proposals on a reform of public procurement, aimed at facilitating the use of public procurement by ensuring greater consideration of accessibility requirements for people with disability.
The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network has released an excellent resource titled ‘Government ICT purchasing: What differences do accessibility criteria make for people with disabilities’ which has been informed by the experiences of people who are blind or vision impaired.

Blind Citizens Australia also supports the recommendations for improving the employment of people with disability which have been made by the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO), of which Blind Citizens Australia is a member. Blind Citizens Australia provided significant input to the submission prepared by AFDO to Minister Shorten’s inquiry. Some of these recommendations include:

- The development of an employment council of people with disability, similar to the model utilised to increase the employment of people of indigenous heritage
- Events aimed at eliciting CEO buy in which are run by Government, the Business Council of Australia, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and disabled persons organisations.
- Work cover premiums to be struck at a lower rate for people with disability
- Government procurement to favour businesses that have achieved their disability employment targets. As recommended by AFDO:

  ‘Incentives should be provided to all employers via preference in the awarding of tenders, funding and procurement to workplaces that can demonstrate good employment practices. Government procurement policy should be adjusted to favour businesses that demonstrate their positive outcomes in employing people with disability. All government-funded contracts should only be entered into with organisations who have already achieved positive results in employing people with disability’.

What are the practical approaches which can make a real improvement to employment outcomes and workplace equality for people who are blind or vision impaired?

Australia is one part of a global economy – a country which must compete against other markets where labour is offered at a much lower rate of pay. This does not mean that we should devalue our workforce but it does mean that our workforce needs to be competitive and provide high quality outcomes in order for Australia to remain a viable, flourishing country.

The employment of people with disability, and of people who are blind or vision impaired, needs to be demonstrated to employers as a venture which is profitable – both in terms of time invested and money – not just as ‘the right thing to do’ or to give a person with disability a ‘fair go’. This requires a significant shift in how the employment of people with disability is marketed to businesses across Australia and is contingent on a number of elements in addition to the reforms outlined above and in our employment policy suite. These include:
1. A solid marketing campaign which outlines the facts

If employers do not understand how people who are blind or vision impaired ‘see’ a computer screen or are uncertain about their workcover obligations as they relate to a person with an existing disability, they may take the easy way out.

The facts which have been backed by research – greater longevity in a role, lower safety and insurance costs and better ratings on attendance, sick leave and recruitment – and the supports, such as the Employment Assistance Fund that are available to support employment of people with disability, are still largely unknown by small and medium sized businesses.

One way to address this is to showcase the cost benefit to a business as part of a marketing campaign. Removing or lessening the costs of recruiting and retraining new staff, paying lower workcover premiums long term and retaining corporate or job specific knowledge is an investment, particularly when considering that an individual with disability may only require some minor adjustments to complete the role.

Further, a targeted and sustained marketing campaign is necessary to dispel the perception of what people with disability can do and to showcase people with disability who are currently working in a range of professions. The Other Film Festival’s marketing campaign is a fantastic example which showcases the person first and places emphasis on their attributes as everyday people. The person’s disability is then shown as a second, almost after thought. This is effective in leading the community to place the person before the label.

It is critical that there are positive images of people who are blind or vision impaired and people with disability working in a variety of roles - as a storeman to an office professional to a farm hand to a financial advisor. We need to breakdown the perception of people with disability as one homogenous group with limited skills and to showcase that the vast majority of people with disability are highly competent individuals who can step into a role. This messaging needs to be targeted to the wider public (ie. television and social media) and provocative so that it is spoken about in the lunch rooms of companies and is at the front of mind of recruitment staff and company directors.

This is particularly crucial at this time with the increased focus of people with disability with the introduction of DisabilityCare Australia. Messaging of the necessity of this scheme has been based on highlighting the unmet need of people with disability and the chronic underfunding of disability services designed to enable people with disability to live a dignified life. It is now critical to ensure that the messaging used to promote DisabilityCare Australia, and in turn, the services that will be delivered by the scheme to people with disability focus on creating positive images of the capacity of people with disability, and people who are blind or vision impaired, as capable, employable individuals who can add considerable value to a business when they have access to the right supports.

2. Showcasing the best of the best and how they are doing it

Showcasing the best of the best – some of top 200 companies who are hiring a proportionate percentage of people with disability – can show other companies that it
is possible **and it is profitable**, both financially and in the value add to the company through the addition of a person’s rich life skills. Business leaders who have seen the commercial benefit for their business could be some of the strongest allies to the employment of people with disability. This could include talking about the benefits that this has had for their company but also talking about how their company made the transition and more importantly, how it can be sustained.

Importantly, organisations that are showcased need to be able to show the different roles that people with disability hold within the organisation. Showcase organisations are organisations where there are people with disability in senior leadership positions, people with disability in mid level roles and people in entry level positions. Showcase organisations are also organisations which have employees with a range of disabilities, not just disabilities that can most easily be accommodated. People who are blind or vision impaired can be software developers, lawyers, office professionals, administration assistants and more. This should be reflected in the diversity of the workforce.

3. Federal, State and Territory governments to lead by example

Blind Citizens Australia has developed a policy document titled **Government as an Employer: What can all sectors of the government do to improve the employment of people who are blind or vision impaired?** This policy outlines a number of strategies which can set government as a benchmark employer. Leading by example requires the following:

- Improving workplace accessibility which extends beyond simply improving the physical environment. Once again, this includes universal design and accessible procurement.
- Improving recruitment and retention, including at senior levels
- Targeting underperforming departments with low levels of employment of people with disability
- Ensuring that work experience programs are open and flexible to people of different ages and experience
- Developing tailored career advancement programs and implementing processes to enable current employees with disability to make their way up the career ladder. We are aware of anecdotal instances where people who are blind or vision impaired have been bypassed for career advancement because of the ‘trouble’ it would take to relocate an employee to another work section or to apply for new modifications, if required
- Requiring contracts with external recruitment agencies to clearly include the active recruitment of people with disability
- Investigating short internships for high school and post high school students to provide practical work experience which can lend itself to future employment opportunities
- Ensuring that interview panels include a person with disability, where possible, similar to the requirement to have balanced gender representation on recruitment panels. This not only serves as best practice to ensure that a panel has a range of experience, but also helps to build the capacity of recruitment staff to see beyond a person’s disability and to have a better understanding of the job skills that people who are blind or vision impaired
have. As one member put it:

‘I am certain that many very qualified people who are blind or vision impaired lose out during the interview process not because of anything they lack, but because of a limited understanding of interview panel members as to how people who are blind or vision impaired use access solutions to undertake a particular job’.

4. Building the capacity of people with disability as viable employees

Increasing employment opportunities and positions to people with disability should in turn lead to an increased demand for highly skilled, qualified individuals. It is therefore important that reforms in this space are not viewed purely as a one sided approach. While there are many skilled people who are blind or vision impaired who are ready to jump – or re-jump – into the workforce, there are others who need to learn the social mores of a workplace and the skills needed to make a productive contribution.

Building the capacity of people who are blind or vision impaired, particularly for people who have been long term unemployed, is part of the equation of increasing employability. This can include mentoring of jobseekers who are blind or vision impaired by people who are blind or vision impaired who have reached, or are successfully realising, their employment goals. Capacity building can help people to develop the necessary skills to move up through the ranks and in turn, be in a position to influence recruitment decisions and create opportunities to hire other people with disability and people who are blind or vision impaired.

Capacity building also requires access to peer support networks and programs which links successful people with disability with jobseekers with similar disabilities to learn transferable employable skills and the best way to approach disability specific challenges which can arise in a work setting.

Blind Citizens Australia recently prepared an article for our members in the July edition of Blind Citizens News on how to successful transition from education to employment and some of the skills needed to present as a competitive employee. This article was informed from the work of Dr Karen Wolffe, a renowned international presenter on the successful transition from education to employment for young adults who are blind or vision impaired. Dr Wolffe has had several articles published in journals including the ‘Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness’ and has previously held positions with the American Foundation for the Blind, the Hadley School for the Blind and the Department of Special Education at the University of Texas. She now manages a private practice as a career counsellor and consultant in Texas.

More information and blindness specific resources can be obtained at www.projectaspiro.com, a comprehensive employment and career planning website for people who are blind or vision impaired developed with the assistance of Dr Wolffe with the World Blind Union and the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.
Disability disclosure and disability employment reporting

Blind Citizens Australia is supportive of the proposal made in the discussion paper to the inquiry into improving the employment of people with disability released by Minister Bill Shorten to establish baseline data for disability employment as well as transparent methods of collection. Blind Citizens Australia also supports reporting by companies on the level of disability employment within their company. Blind Citizens Australia recommends that the development of any benchmark also include a requirement to provide disability specific data, particularly on the numbers of people who are blind and people who have disclosed a vision impairment.

The extent of disadvantage experienced by people who are blind or vision impaired in their access to employment is not well documented. It is therefore critical that work is undertaken to determine the extent of the problem impacting specific cohorts, including people who are blind or vision impaired, so that specific actions and programs can be developed to work with cohorts that are experiencing increased discrimination in the area of employment.

While increased reporting would provide a benchmark to measure improvement in the employment of people with disability, it is imperative that the option to disclose the presence of a disability remains at the sole discretion of the individual. This is particularly crucial for people who may not outwardly appear to have a disability, such as people with some vision impairments and people who may not feel comfortable disclosing their disability for personal reasons.

Privacy issues surrounding disclosure could be resolved by giving primacy to an individual’s right to dignity and privacy under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the view that the disclosure of disability is only relevant to matters which relate to the inherent requirements of the job at hand. It is important that the concept of inherent requirements should be interpreted expansively so as not to exclude people with disability.

Summation

Blind Citizens Australia welcomes the commitment of the Australian Government to explore how the employment of people with disability can be improved and to develop meaningful opportunities for the employment of people who are blind or vision impaired across the public and private sector.

As noted in this report, a multifaceted approach is needed to address the current barriers to employment experienced by people who are blind or vision impaired which targets recruiters, employers, disability employment service providers and government as a whole, which includes specific programs and interventions to address the disadvantage experienced by this cohort.

Below, in full, is Blind Citizens Australia’s Employment Policy Suite which contains specific resources for the above audiences. These documents are also available individually on the Blind Citizens Australia website in our section on public policies.
Hello Recruiters: How to successfully recruit a person who is blind or vision impaired

Work generates wages, less reliance on welfare, dignity, a sense of purpose and productivity. Work is the cornerstone of social inclusion.

People who are blind or vision impaired can and should be meaningfully employed and have the right to seek, work towards and gain rewarding employment. People who are blind or vision impaired can and have worked in a range of occupations ranging from a car detailer to an accountant to a chemical manufacturer to an administration assistant, to name just a few careers.

The strategies below are intended to support you as a recruiter to successfully hire a person who is blind or vision impaired and to get the best for your business or the business you are assisting.

Why recruit a person who is blind or vision impaired?

People who are blind or vision impaired can be an excellent recruitment choice. By being innovative in how everyday tasks are completed, people who are blind or vision impaired can be very adept at managing change and can be creative in finding solutions and problem solving. People who are blind or vision impaired also tend to be highly educated and committed to an employer - research undertaken in 2012 by Vision Australia, a blindness service provider, has shown that of those employed who took part in the research, 43% had been in the same job for more than five years. These characteristics are strong attributes which would benefit businesses across Australia. So here are some reasons why you should consider hiring a person who is blind or vision impaired.

Australian and International research shows that there are clear benefits and costs savings by hiring a person with disability

1. Australian and international research of the views of employers has shown that:
   - Australian employers view the financial effect of workplace modifications to be mostly cost neutral¹
   - There is clear performance benefit and advantage by providing workplace modifications - the benefit to cost ratio for making workplace adjustments might be as high as 40:1, according to the US Job Accommodation Network²

¹ Graffam, J. et al., 2002a, ‘Employer benefits and costs of employing a person with a disability’, Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation 17, pp.251-263.
Benefits of providing workplace accommodations include enabling retention or hiring of a qualified employee (56%), eliminated the cost of training a new employee (31%), saved workers’ compensation and other insurance costs (38%) and increases in the employee’s productivity (54%).

Australian employees with disability tend to be more reliable in their attendance, are more likely to stay in a position for longer (leading to savings in recruitment costs) and lead to cost savings in safety and insurance.

The economic benefits of hiring a person with disability exceed the costs.

Advertising a Job

Provide information, such as job ads, in accessible formats

2. All internally and externally advertised jobs (including the advertisement itself), position descriptions, guidelines and forms to apply for a job, must be accessible to a person who is blind or vision impaired, including through the use of adaptive technology, such as screen reading software which reads information displayed on a screen audibly. Requests for documents in alternative formats (such as large print or Braille) should be provided by the agency or organisation advertising the position in a timely manner. Just like you, people who are blind or vision impaired want to know what a job involves before they apply.

Provide documents in Word and RTF formats in addition to PDF

3. Documents provided in PDF format should also be available in a Microsoft Word/Rich Text Format (RTF) to ensure that they are accessible to people using screen reading software. A PDF document can be accessible if developed using accepted guidelines for web access for people with disability (W3C Web Accessibility Guidelines) (www.w3.org). Scanning a print document and saving it to a PDF is a no-go – while this may prevent people from altering the document, it also prevents people who use screen reading software from reading it, which can constitute indirect discrimination under the law if another format is not offered.

Position descriptions – outline what’s necessary and avoid ‘desirable’ criteria which might indirectly discriminate

4. Position descriptions must include the necessary requirements of the position and not include extra ‘desirable’ or ‘preferred’ criteria which could indirectly discriminate against people with disability.

A driver’s licence – is it really vital to the position?

5. The requirement for a driver’s licence is often mentioned in job advertisements. There are few positions where a driver’s licence is a necessary and a non-negotiable requirement of a job, such as in the case of a taxi or delivery driver. Other strategies for

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3 Refer to 2
4 Refer to 1.
5 Refer to 2
conducting work related travel should be considered by employers and include use of public transport, taxis, walking and car sharing which should be recognised as valid alternatives to using a fleet car. These alternate strategies for conducting work related travel are both economically and environmentally sound.

Using technology instead of travel to maximise efficiency
6. In positions that cover a broader geographic area, greater use should be made of technology such as Skype, videoconference, email and phone to maximise the amount of time spent on work and reduce the amount of time spent on travel.

Ensure your website is fully accessible to W3C web accessibility guidelines to ensure that you open your employment net far and wide
7. Website content, online application forms and information placed on external recruitment websites (such as Seek or MyCareer) must comply with W3C Web Accessibility Guidelines. A clear set of instructions which outline how to complete online forms, and confirmation that the application has been successfully lodged and received, should also be implemented. Alternative application methods should also be promoted for use by individuals who are unable to complete their application online.

Interviewing, assessing and providing feedback to candidates

Treat all applicants equitably
8. People who are blind or vision impaired should be treated equitably during recruitment, hiring and employment (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 27). Recruitment and interviews should be conducted in a non-prejudicial and transparent manner.

Ensure interview assessments are accessible
9. Assessments of an applicant’s skill such as written tests, competency tests or group based assessments which are undertaken during the interview process must be accessible to applicants who are blind or vision impaired. This might include the installation of adaptive software (such as a screen reader or text enlargement program), a comparable alternative test (if operating systems are not accessible), adjusting activities or the provision of extra time if this is required. All tests must be relevant to the position, be applied consistently to all applicants who are being considered for the position and not unfairly disadvantage an applicant who is blind.

If interviewees need adjustments, this should be negotiated
10. Applicants who are blind or vision impaired should advise the interviewer of any reasonable adjustments they need after accepting an interview, including advice of accessible formats for documentation provided prior to the interview or on the day, assistance needed (such as assistance to locate the building, floor or meeting room) and any other adjustments.

Ask the same interview questions of all of your candidates
11. Interview questions asked of an applicant who is blind should be the same in content as those asked of other applicants.
An interview is a good opportunity to find out how work related tasks will be conducted

12. A person who is blind might not be able to read standard print but will have developed other strategies to conduct work related tasks, such as scanning documents, using screen reading software which discreetly reads information via headphones or recording voice memos on a playback device. An interview is a good setting to seek clarity on how the applicant will undertake the core tasks of the advertised position and to discuss what adjustments may be required. The purpose of an interview is to find out more about the skills and experience of the applicant to determine if they are the right fit – questions about how tasks will be completed should not form the basis of the selection decision or the terms and conditions on which the job may be offered.

Provide timely and constructive feedback to unsuccessful applicants

13. Applicants who are blind or vision impaired who are unsuccessful for a position should be encouraged to request feedback from the prospective employer as to why they were unsuccessful and the areas that require improvement. This can ensure that the jobseeker is better prepared the next time round. It is important that there is a consistent approach to providing feedback to all applicants and that the feedback provided relates to the person’s fit to the role and/or their skill set and not to their disability.

Access to information in the workplace

Ensure all workplace information is accessible

14. Forms, staff materials, manuals and protocols (including information about how to resolve a complaint in the workplace), internal and external documents (as far as possible) as well as any other information that is relevant to the position should be available to the employee who is blind, in their preferred format, at the same time that it is available to other employees performing the same or similar roles.

Reasonable Adjustments – what recruiters need to know

15. Providing reasonable adjustments for a candidate or employee with disability is a legal requirement of the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992 so it is important that this forms part of recruiter’s thinking. The type of reasonable adjustment needed by a person who is blind or vision impaired may differ from person to person and may depend on the position. Also, a requirement for a reasonable adjustment may arise at any stage of the employment process, not just during recruitment. A recruitment agency acting on behalf of an employer will be acting unlawfully if it discriminates in a way that would be unlawful for the employer to discriminate! So what can you do?

Speak with the person seeking reasonable adjustments about their specific needs

16. People who are blind or vision impaired may require some reasonable adjustments to be able to perform the ‘inherent’ or key requirements of a position to their full
potential. The adjustments needed by an applicant or employee who is blind or vision impaired should be made in consultation with the person, with the involvement of an advocate and/or a professional who works with people who have vision impairments if required. The judgment of the individual should be respected – a person often knows their own needs best.

**Reasonable adjustments are not about doing less work – consider trading tasks between team members or modifying how a task is completed**

17. Reasonable adjustments are not about an employee doing less work or taking on fewer tasks. In the instance where some tasks are impossible or very difficult to complete accessibly, an employee seeking reasonable adjustments to a position should be actively considered for, and allocated, other comparable tasks which are suitable and accessible. This could include “trading” a task/s between team members, modifying how a task is completed, discussing alternate tasks with the employee to determine tasks that are achievable or tailoring the position to better fit the skill set of the employee rather than fit a “standard” role. This ensures that the workplace can work smarter and better utilises the skillset of the team.

**People who are blind or vision impaired can be highly productive employees**

18. Government schemes, such as the Employment Assistance Fund which funds workplace modifications, wage subsidies and tax incentives, are offered to incentivise employers to hire a person with disability and are not in place because people with disability are less productive. People who are blind or vision impaired, when equipped with the adjustments they require, can be highly productive, loyal employees who have a lot to offer an employer.

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**Case study: Hiring a person who is blind or vision impaired won’t necessarily be expensive – in fact it could lead to a cost saving**

**Geoff** applied and accepted a position as a Production Manager with a major Australian cleaning company. The company, during contract negotiations, advised that they were working to a tight budget and would be stretched to provide Geoff with a company car as part of his salary packaging. As Geoff has a vision impairment, he advised that a company car was not necessary and negotiated for taxi vouchers to be provided for work related travel. The company were extremely satisfied with this arrangement as it led to a significant cost saving and enabled Geoff to be hired. Geoff was pleased that he was able to commence a new position closer to home.

**Best practice dos:**

- Recruit a person who is blind or vision impaired on their merits, skills and work experience rather than placing them in a stereotypical job or making assumptions about what they can and can't do.
Don’t be afraid of losing a contract with an employer by putting forward a candidate with a disability - research has shown that staff retention is higher amongst people with disability, which presents a good business case for employment.

- Ensure that software programs, equipment and information are accessible for everyone, including job advertisements, recruitment processes and procedures. You may be missing out on a great candidate because of inaccessibility.

- Ask questions and discuss issues as early as possible with the person who is blind or vision impaired. This will allow time to work out ways to overcome these issues prior to the person commencing the role and can give you a better understanding about the person and what other skills they can bring to the role.

**Worst practice don’ts:**

- **Don’t** assume that if you can’t perform certain tasks with your eyes closed that a person who is blind or vision impaired can’t either. A person will likely have undertaken years of training to acquire those skills or may have enough sight to be able to manage a position very effectively, with or without low vision aids, such as use of a white cane or adaptive technology.

- **Don’t** assume that employing a person who is blind or vision impaired will be a huge financial cost to the organisation. Many modifications are minor or low cost and there are many government grants and subsidy programs, such as Job Access, which can assist. Talk with the candidate and/or a Disability Employment Service (DES) provider about how some of those costs, like specialised software programs, can be met.

- **Don’t** assume that a person who is blind is an increased Work Health and Safety risk. People who are blind or vision impaired take their personal safety seriously and may pick up on hazards that sighted peers may not immediately notice, such as leads and mats on the floor. This can encourage all employees to become more safety conscious.

**About Blind Citizens Australia: Who we are and why we say what we say**

Blind Citizens Australia is unique in that our organisation is solely made up of and represents people who are blind or vision impaired. All of our Board of Directors and our committees are required by our Constitution to be a person who is blind or vision impaired. Many of our staff are also vision impaired. We have over 3000 members around Australia who are all people who experience blindness – whether they be a
parent, highly successful professional, job seeker, volunteer or student. This is why we are best placed to comment on the very necessary changes needed to improve the employment of people who are blind or vision impaired. These policy statements present the views of people who are blind and vision impaired and draws on their experience as current and past employees, volunteers and job seekers. Our policies have also been informed by consultation with external stakeholders.

We are driven by our mission to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs.

Quick stats:
- The Centre for Eye Research Australia estimates that 480,000 Australians have a vision impairment. This number will only increase with our ageing population.
- Research undertaken by Vision Australia, one of the largest blindness service providers in Australia, in 2012 indicated that 58% of people who are blind or vision impaired of workforce age are unemployed as compared to 14% of the wider population (ABS ‘Persons not in the labour force, Sept 2011). This is a lot of skilled people who could potentially be in our workforce.
- ‘Stickability’ or loyalty of people who are blind or vision impaired is high – Vision Australia’s research has shown that of those who are employed, 43% have been in the same job for more than five years. This can lead to a significant cost saving to a business in terms of recruiting, hiring and retraining in the medium to long term.
- Adaptive technology can make a huge difference to effectiveness and employability – 94% of respondents to the Vision Australia survey who are in employment use this form of technology in their jobs.

Australia’s National and International Obligations

Our policy recognises the employment rights of people who are blind or vision impaired underpinned in Commonwealth and International instruments and aligns with the Australian Government’s commitment to improve the employment of people with disabilities. These policies include:

- Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992
- National Disability Strategy 2010-2020
- National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy 2009
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Our employment policy suite includes:

- Hello Recruiters: How to successfully recruit a person who is blind or vision impaired
- Hello Employers: How to successfully work with and integrate people who are blind or vision impaired in your team
- Hello DES: how Disability Employment Service (DES) providers can work with and support people who are blind or vision impaired
Government as an Employer: What can all sectors of government do to improve the employment of people who are blind or vision impaired?

The Australian Government: meeting its National and International obligations

We also have a number of short factsheets which challenge assumptions about blindness, dispel myths about what people who are blind can do, outline how people who are blind or vision impaired access information and use computers and a factsheet with some useful links to make hiring a person who is blind or vision impaired a reality. Ask for these by calling our National Office or checking out our website!!

**Want more information? Here’s how to contact us**

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Ross House, Level 3, 247-251 Flinders Lane  
Melbourne VIC 3000

Telephone: (03) 9654 1400  
Toll Free: 1800 033 660  
Facsimile: (03) 9650 3200  
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This publication has been prepared by Blind Citizens Australia Ltd. for the Australian Government, represented by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The views expressed in this publication are those of Blind Citizens Australia Ltd. and do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Government.

This policy is available in large print, audio, Braille and in electronic formats for access by people who are blind or vision impaired.
Hello Employers: How to successfully work with and integrate people who are blind or vision impaired in your team

Work generates wages, less reliance on welfare, dignity, a sense of purpose and productivity. Work is the cornerstone of social inclusion.

People who are blind or vision impaired can be excellent employees and often have the capacity to demonstrate strong leadership skills, in part because of the barriers they face everyday which equip them to be flexible, creative and resourceful. People who are blind or vision impaired can and have worked in a range of occupations ranging from a car detailer to an accountant to a chemical manufacturer to an administration assistant, to name just a few careers.

A workplace which takes into account accessibility as part of good business enables a person who is blind or vision impaired to meaningfully contribute and enrich a business or organisation. The strategies below are intended to support you as an employer to successfully employ a person who is blind or vision impaired while meeting the demands of your business/organisation.

Safety in the workplace

Blind Citizens Australia, through our years of advocacy, is aware that there are many employers who would not consider hiring a person who is blind or vision impaired for fear that the person will be an occupational health and safety risk and potentially, a workplace liability. The truth is that this belief is far from the case and unfounded.

People with disability are far less likely to have an accident at work than their work peers and do not have a higher risk of occupational injury, contrary to common perception

1. Australian research has clearly shown that:
   - the number of OHS incidents is six times lower than that of an “average employee”, with the number of workers compensation incidents also four times lower (Graffam et al. 2002)⁶

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⁶ Graffam, J. et al., 2002a, ‘Employer benefits and costs of employing a person with a disability’, Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation 17, pp.251-263.
• Accrued OHS costs are lower for employees with disability as compared to an average employee ($64 vs. $180)\textsuperscript{7}
• Accrued cost associated with workers compensation claims is much lower for persons with disability ($82) compared to employees without disability ($1564)\textsuperscript{8}
• the accrued cost of sickness absence in employees with disability is less than half of the cost for an average employee ($408 vs. $881)\textsuperscript{9}

Workplace, Health and Safety or OH&S is not a valid reason not to hire a person who is blind or vision impaired
2. Workplace, Health and Safety, or OH&S legislation as it has been formally known, should not be used as a barrier to the employment of a person who is blind or vision impaired. This should only be a consideration in roles where there would be a very significant risk of injury to the person who is blind or vision impaired and/or to other staff and where the issue cannot be resolved with an adjustment/s to the role. Workplace, Health and Safety responsibilities towards employees with disability are really no different to an employer’s responsibilities towards all other employees.

An obstacle free workplace means a safe workplace for all employees and visitors
3. A clear, obstacle free workplace provides a safe working environment for all employees and for visitors to a workplace. Overhead obstacles should be removed, with floor space kept free of clutter. Staff should be reminded to regularly check their workspace to ensure that obstacles are kept to a minimum (eg. chairs tucked behind desks), which is good workplace safety practice for all employees.

Signage should be accessible
4. Meeting rooms, floor numbers, lifts and toilets should be well signed and include large, well contrasted lettering and raised tactile letters and Braille. The use of signage in the workplace should comply with the Australian Standards 1428 Suite.

Evacuation procedures need to be clearly communicated and accessible
5. Employers should have accessible procedures to ensure the safety of all employees, including those who are blind, during renovations or when people need to evacuate in an emergency (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 9 Accessibility) and ensure that all staff are familiar with these procedures. This includes providing information to an employee who is blind or vision impaired about Workplace, Health and Safety procedures, including those to be used during an emergency, in a format which is accessible to them, such as large print or in electronic format. Evacuation drills should also involve people who are blind or vision impaired to ensure that the person is familiar with the evacuation point and the safest travel route to get there independently in the advent of an actual emergency.

\textsuperscript{7} Refer to 1
\textsuperscript{8} Refer to 1
\textsuperscript{9} Refer to 1.
Making sure systems are accessible

Do not introduce new technology until it is proven to be fully accessible

6. New computer technology, including but not limited to, databases, booking systems and electronic mail systems, must not be introduced in a work setting until the systems have been shown to work with adaptive technology, such as screen reading software, which reads visual information displayed on a computer screen audibly. Phone systems, copying and printing devices should also be tested for their accessibility prior to purchase to make sure they can be used by all employees and to minimise problems in the long run.

Reasonable Adjustments, including how to make them

A reasonable adjustment does not have to be expensive and there is help available

7. What one person who is blind or vision impaired may need can be quite different to another person with sight loss. Don’t make assumptions that the cost of making adjustments will be prohibitive – most adjustments are low in cost, with subsidies available from the Federal Government to make it a viable option for your business to consider. Government schemes like Job Access and utilising a DES provider can also help to navigate these options to make the path to hiring a person who is blind or vision impaired much smoother.

Speak with the person seeking reasonable adjustments about their specific needs

8. People who are blind or vision impaired may require some reasonable adjustments to be able to perform the ‘inherent’ or key requirements of a role to their full potential. Consult the employee (who may want to involve an advocate and/or professional who works with people with vision impairments to find out what is needed and involve them in decision making. Remember, reasonable adjustments are not about doing less work, but rather working effectively as part of a team by trading tasks between team members, being allocated other tasks that meet their specific skill set or discussing alternate tasks which could be allocated.

Take a proactive role to ensure that an employee has the adjustments they need, including training and technical support

9. Employers should take proactive steps and work with the employee and/or DES provider, where applicable, to apply for modifications from the Employment Assistance Fund (Workplace Modifications Scheme) and Job Access Schemes to access the adaptive equipment an employee needs to be work ready. These schemes are free, easy to use and offer great support to an employer and employee. Any equipment or software purchased through the program should belong to the person. Technical support and training for the equipment should be provided to employers and individuals.
Workplace assessments should be timely, independent and meet an employee’s specific needs

10. Workplace assessments required by an employee should be independent, follow clear guidelines and occur as soon as possible after an person who is blind or vision impaired has been offered a position of employment. Modifications should be approved in a timely manner. The best workplace options to meet the person’s needs, rather than the least expensive, should be chosen as this will ensure that the employee is most effective. Ideally, employees should have access to loaned equipment until the purchased equipment arrives to ensure that the employee is able to efficiently complete their role.

In the case of voluntary work/work experience, the accessibility of an organisation’s systems should be reviewed prior to the placement to determine what, if any, changes may need to be made.

Think outside of the square about how visual tasks are completed

11. Some tasks within a role can be very visual and can be very difficult for people who are blind or vision impaired to complete independently, no matter how skilled they are in other areas. This can include reading print mail, filling out printed forms, entry of data from a print copy into a database, accessing data from an inaccessible database, sorting of printing or photocopying or accessing printed research. Some administration or volunteer assistance, such as to read labels or handwriting, can aid an employee to complete a task efficiently and effectively in instances where technology cannot assist. Assistance can also be a very effective tool to enable employees who are blind to best do what they are employed to do. Job modification and the tailoring of a role to meet the strengths of the individual are an important alternative.

Employment is a partnership – it’s ok to discuss problems like you would with any other employee

12. Successful employment involves a working partnership between an employee who is able to perform the key requirements of a role (after adjustments have been made) and an employer whose expectations are being reasonably met. If an employee is unable to meet the inherent requirements of a role after adjustments and further investigations have been made, it is reasonable for a discussion to occur between the employee and employer to determine if the working partnership should continue. This should be no different to the process that would be used for any other employee within the workplace.

If you have concerns, document these as you would with any other employee

13. As with any employee, dissatisfaction with an employee’s work performance should be documented, include clear examples and be accessible to the employee. The employee should be entitled to seek the support of an advocate, disability employment consultant or other nominated representative to review these concerns and have the opportunity to respond.

Work experience programs
Think outside of the square whether you offer a work experience program or internship – a flexible program can lead to a great employee fit

14. Work experience programs, graduate programs, cadetships and internships, including those offered by government departments, can be a great way to see the work of a person who is blind or vision impaired in action. It is important that programs have some flexibility built in - some students who are blind or vision impaired may not be able to complete their studies in the same timeframe as students without disability. Programs should also be open to students who study part-time, students who are mature age and students who may have completed their studies greater than twelve months prior. Graduate programs developed specifically for people with disability should provide graduates with the skills and knowledge to prepare them for the world of work, including effective communication, presentation, behaviour and expectations in the workplace.

Mature age workers out of the workforce benefit from work experience too

15. Work experience is not just important for younger people. Most vision loss occurs as people age, with people becoming unemployed later in life as an indirect result of losing their sight. Structured work experience programs should be developed to enable people to learn new skills and to help them find their way back into employment. Work experience should not be used to justify unwaged work, but to build up skills, confidence and self esteem.

Volunteer programs

A brilliant volunteer can become a brilliant employee

16. Volunteering can provide valuable experience to people who are blind or vision impaired. Volunteering can lead to paid employment or provide the skills and confidence to gain paid employment in the future. All businesses or organisations which have a volunteer program, and volunteer co-ordinators in particular, must ensure that the process to register as a volunteer and the opportunities available to volunteers are accessible and take into account the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired. Agencies which provide volunteers to other businesses should become familiar with local government supports and small grants which can assist in providing adjustments.

Professional development, training and career advancement

Ensure that training delivered in your workplace, including by external organisations, caters for all participants

17. External training providers contracted to provide training and professional development should ensure that the training to be delivered is accessible to all attendees. This includes providing training materials in formats such as large print, audio or Braille and checking that learning activities can be undertaken by training participants.
who are blind. Adjustments to training delivery and content should be discussed with the individual receiving training to find out what could work best.

Introduce career advancement programs to build the skills of your employees
18. Large employers in the private and public sectors should introduce tailored career advancement programs to develop talented staff with disability. There is a strong business case for this investment as in the long-term it will assist businesses and organisations to become better placed to communicate with the broadest cross section of the community, better meet the needs of customers and clients with a disability and to have the developed skills to meet their needs. Existing programs designed to develop talented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff provide a useful model, such as the Prime Minister’s Indigenous Executive Leadership Fellowship.

Don’t use a one size fits all approach when assessing performance
19. Standard performance templates should be reviewed on a case by case basis to recognise that some employees who are blind or vision impaired may not be able to complete all tasks, particularly tasks that are visual. This ensures that people who are blind or vision impaired are not unfairly disadvantaged when competing for career promotion.

Disclosure of disability

Create an environment where employees feel safe to disclose their disability and have clear policies to back this up
20. People who are blind or vision impaired should be encouraged to talk with their employer about their disability related needs as soon as these needs have been identified, without fear that their job will be at risk. Clear policies should be developed by employers which outline: a step by step process of the actions that will be taken once a person has disclosed their disability, who within the workplace is required to know about the person’s disability in order to accommodate their needs and how this information will be communicated. Employers should consult with a DES or groups specialising in disability employment to determine what will work best in their business or organisation.

21. An employer should respect the right of a person who is blind or vision impaired to choose whether to disclose their disability to others in the workplace.

Supporting employees during vision loss

Don’t lose a good worker simply because there has been a change in their sight
22. It makes more sense to modify a role to retain a good worker than to replace them with someone who may not have the same skills, knowledge and experience and who will need to be trained from scratch. Losing your sight is one of the most difficult transitions and challenges a person can experience. A common experience among our members is difficulty holding on to employment during this very distressing time. Losing a job at the same time as losing your sight can trap people into poverty and social and
financial exclusion that statistics and experience show is very hard to escape again. And this also leaves a gap for your business.

Be a flexible and supportive employer

23. Governments, blindness agencies and DES providers can all play a part in more effectively helping people who are losing their sight to remain in employment or acquire new skills to move into other sectors of the labour market. Tap into these services to support your employee and get them ready to return to work.

24. Support services and blindness specific service providers can help people new to vision loss to obtain the blindness skills needed to do their work in a different way. This might include orientation and mobility, grief counselling, adaptive technology training and support accessing mainstream education and training opportunities.

25. An employee may need some flexibility and time to grieve their vision loss, re-train and acquire the new skills needed in the workplace. A supportive employer might consider the redesign of work roles to maximise the contribution someone new to vision loss can make or continue to make.

A loss of sight does not necessarily mean that the person has lost the ability to do their job

26. Empathy and looking beyond the immediate challenges is important. When a valued employee loses their sight it does not necessarily mean that he or she has lost the ability to do their job, but it does mean there will be a transition period and the need to start doing some things a little differently. This approach can lessen the cost of re-training and rehiring in the longer term.

Awareness of disability within the workplace

Implement workplace training which busts myths about what people with disability can do

27. Large, medium and community organisations should develop staff training resources and team building exercises which dispel myths about people with disability, including people who are blind or vision impaired. Training should be compulsory for all staff and occur during induction for new employees. Refresher training should also be implemented periodically.

Give your staff practical information about how to work with people with disability via your publications

28. To ensure that staff are aware of the needs of people with disability, staff publications might include articles on how to provide accessible information, how to communicate information effectively (both in writing and when speaking) and include information about workplace subsidies and schemes that can assist employees with disability to meet the duties of their role. An employee who is blind or vision impaired should not be identified as an example within training material without their consent.

Best practice dos:
Thinking of taking on a work placement? Give it a go! You will not only be providing valuable skills to a person who is blind or vision impaired but provide a great opportunity for your business or organisation to assess how it operates, review its accessibility and improve the knowledge and understanding of your staff of the abilities of people who are blind.

Every role requires some modifications for a new employee, irrespective of whether the employee has a disability. A new sighted employee may need a headset to work more efficiently and reduce neck strain, may prefer to handwrite case notes or need flexible arrangements to pick up children from school. Modifications for a person who is blind or vision impaired should not be viewed as an onerous burden but simply as enhancement to ensure the effectiveness of your new employee.

Speak with a person who is blind or vision impaired in the same way that you would speak with any other employee. Using the word ‘see’ and ‘look’ in sentences is ok – people who are blind or vision impaired use these words too. An added tip is to provide good verbal information, rather than pointing or nodding.

Worst practice don’ts

Don’t immediately assume that a person who has lost some or all of their sight can no longer complete their role. A significant loss of sight or the onset of a disability can happen to anyone. An employer should work alongside employees to determine what valuable knowledge and skills they have and how these qualities can still be utilised. Role modifications, or the development of new roles which will be of equal value to the business or organisation, should be discussed with the employee to find a workable solution.

Don’t forget about the needs of all employees when purchasing new office software, hardware and equipment. It’s important to consult with employees with disability to find out their specific needs to ensure that access is built in from the start.

Don’t assume that technology alone will solve all problems and make a role completely accessible. Whilst adaptive technology can be very effective, it may not always be a workable solution (eg. scanners do not always work well on handwriting). Allow for other strategies, such as periodic sighted assistance and team work, to cater for limitations in technology.

Case study: Work experience leading to a great employment outcome

In her final year of secondary education, Susie was given an opportunity to be involved in SWEAT (Supported Work Experience and Training) Program developed by EDGE Employment Solutions, a DES provider. The program is designed to assist students with
disability to secure a one-day per week supported work placement in industry over a 15 week period as a prelude to entering a school-based traineeship or apprenticeship.

Suzie chose a business administration placement; as Suzie is a student who is blind she needed appropriate adaptive solutions in place to assist her. Work stations set up for people who are blind or vision impaired are not common, and this scarcity is a real barrier in giving more students who are blind or vision impaired an opportunity to experience the environment of a workplace when looking at transitioning from school to work.

Fortunately, Greg, an administrator at the University of Western Australia (UWA), had developed a work station and office procedures with adaptive solutions such as a screen reader to voice computer output, text to speech scanning software to access printed material and Braille labelling to assist with hard copy filing and information distribution.

Suzie’s school, Edge Employment Solutions, Greg and the UWA designed a program to give Susie a 1 day per week work experience for the 15 weeks of the program.

Given that the work station was already set-up for someone who was blind and with Greg able to use his 10 years of business administration experience and the adapted processes he had developed to undertake the work, Greg was able to mentor Susie throughout her experience. Susie was soon comfortable undertaking the work tasks she was assigned. In fact, towards the end of the 15 week program Greg was able to take some leave and have Susie fill in for him.

The program was a great experience for Suzie, giving her invaluable exposure to work experience in an environment that catered for her needs. UWA was exposed to a bright potential employee and Edge Employment Solutions was able to gain further experience with placing someone with a vision impairment in a role which enhanced their program.

At the end of the 15 weeks, UWA offered Suzie a part time assistant administration position whilst completing her education. Susie has now finished her schooling, a Business Administration TAFE course and is now in full time employment at UWA.

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This is why we are best placed to comment on the very necessary changes needed to improve the employment of people who are blind or vision impaired. These factsheets present the views of people who are blind and vision impaired and draws on their experience as current and past employees, volunteers and job seekers. Our policies have also been informed by consultation with external stakeholders.
We are driven by our mission to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs.

**Quick stats:**
- The Centre for Eye Research Australia estimates that 480,000 Australians have a vision impairment. This number will only increase with our ageing population.
- Research undertaken by Vision Australia, one of the largest blindness service providers in Australia, in 2012 indicated that 58% of people who are blind or vision impaired of workforce age are unemployed as compared to 14% of the wider population (ABS ‘Persons not in the labour force, Sept 2011). This is a lot of skilled people who could potentially be in our workforce.
- ‘Stickability’ or loyalty of people who are blind or vision impaired is high – Vision Australia’s research has shown that of those who are employed, 43% have been in the same job for more than five years. This can lead to a significant cost saving to a business in terms of recruiting, hiring and retraining in the medium to long term.
- Adaptive technology can make a huge difference to effectiveness and employability – 94% of respondents to the Vision Australia survey who are in employment use this form of technology in their jobs.

**Australia’s National and International Obligations**

Our policy recognises the employment rights of people who are blind or vision impaired underpinned in Commonwealth and International instruments and aligns with the Australian Government’s commitment to improve the employment of people with disabilities. These policies include:

- **Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992**
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- Hello Recruiters: How to successfully recruit a person who is blind or vision impaired
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- The Australian Government: meeting its National and International obligations

We also have a number of short factsheets which challenge assumptions about blindness, dispel myths about what people who are blind can do, outline how people who are blind or vision impaired access information and use computers and a factsheet.
with some useful links to make hiring a person who is blind or vision impaired a reality. Ask for these by calling our National Office or checking out our website!!

**Want more information? Here’s how to contact us**

Blind Citizens Australia  
Ross House, Level 3, 247-251 Flinders Lane  
Melbourne VIC 3000  

Telephone: (03) 9654 1400  
Toll Free: 1800 033 660  
Facsimile: (03) 9650 3200  
Email: bca@bca.org.au  
Website: www.bca.org.au

This policy is available in large print, audio, Braille and in electronic formats for access by people who are blind or vision impaired.
Hello DES: how Disability Employment Service (DES) providers can work with and support people who are blind or vision impaired

Work generates wages, less reliance on welfare, dignity, a sense of purpose and productivity. Work is the cornerstone of social inclusion.

Disability Employment Service (DES) providers can play an important role in helping a would-be worker to get a foot in the door. Unfortunately, many DES providers are not currently meeting the needs of jobseekers who are blind or vision impaired and often have little understanding of how to best support a person who is blind or vision impaired to seek, gain and keep employment. Long term job seeking can be a very disheartening experience – it is important that a DES provides the support, skills and continued encouragement to assist a jobseeker to gain meaningful employment.

People who are blind or vision impaired can and have worked in a range of occupations ranging from a car detailer to an accountant to a chemical manufacturer to an administration assistant, to name just a few careers. Below are some strategies for the successful placement of a person who is blind or vision impaired.

Commitment and the ability to achieve effective outcomes for a job seeker is vital
1. Disability Employment Service (DES) providers should be committed, competent and be able to achieve effective employment outcomes for all people who are blind or vision impaired seeking employment.

Ensure DES staff are resourced and appropriately trained about blindness
2. DES staff should be resourced and appropriately trained to assist people who are blind or vision impaired to find and keep employment. Information and advice provided by DES staff needs to be accurate and informed from a broad knowledge base.

A jobseeker wants a job in line with their interests, goals and qualification
3. DES staff should assist a jobseeker to find a job that is in line with their interest, goals and qualifications. A successful placement is one where the jobseeker is placed in a role that ticks these criteria, rather than placed in the first placement offered.
Understand the specific needs of each job seeker, including how technology works and referral pathways
4. Assistance provided by a DES should meet the specific needs of each job seeker and include specialist technical understanding of the needs and capabilities of people who are blind or vision impaired, or ready access to this information. This should include when and how assistive technology can be used (including capacity to deliver or support training in this technology) and knowledge of relevant assessments, referrals, strategies, government subsidies and blindness specific resources which are available.

Job seeker funding should also be available for training and professional development to build necessary skills needed for work
5. Funding should be available to meet the identified training needs of job seekers to enable them to become work-ready. This might include training in how to use software packages with adaptive technology or undertaking a post secondary course to develop or build on existing skills or training.

Not everyone needs their resume written for them – be flexible in the support you provide and work to “skill up” the job seeker
6. Support offered by a DES should be flexible. Many people who are blind or vision impaired will not need assistance to prepare a resume, but may require assistance to attend interviews in new and unfamiliar locations.

7. Support provided by DES should include ‘skilling up’ of people who are blind or vision impaired for the world of work. This includes guidance and support to develop presentation, grooming and interview skills, communication skills and body language and assistance to gain relevant work experience and mentoring. In the longer term, the focus of DES should also include career counselling, knowledge of further education options and employment internships. Continued encouragement of job seekers is vital.

Work collaboratively with other service providers and peer support networks
8. DES providers should also work collaboratively with other service providers to assist job seekers to develop disability-specific skills, especially blindness agencies best placed to develop orientation and mobility and IT skills. Links with disability specific peer support networks should also be encouraged. Facilitated peer support between people who are blind or vision impaired (both those seeking employment and those currently employed) can lead to encouragement about how to meet challenges, complete tasks and achieve success.

Know what you are talking about and explain it well to potential employers
9. Clear communication between DES staff and potential employers is vital. DES staff assisting job seekers to find employment should be able to explain to potential employers, in a clear and easy to understand manner, how equipment is used (including allaying fears of how this might impact on other workers), what modifications are required to systems, how to make the role accessible and how tasks can be completed
differently. DES should also be able to inform employers of the potential costs, if any, of making modifications.
Include jobseekers in discussions with potential employers
10. Jobseekers should be included in discussions with potential employers from the outset, where this is possible.

Work with students to help them break into the labour market
11. DES providers should have the capacity to work with students, particularly to assist students to seek work experience to help them break into the labour market. In order to meet this very real need, appropriate funding from government and regulation systems should be facilitated and reward this collaboration.

A stable DES workforce is important for job seeker confidence and success
12. The high turnover and part time nature of DES staff can impact on a job seeker’s experience of a DES and the consistency of support that the person receives. This can act as a disincentive to continue to look for work for people who feel unsupported. Incentives should be investigated to support DES staff to remain in the industry and include education and training to keep staff informed and supported. People who are blind or vision impaired also need to be aware that changes in service provision can be part of the cycle until employment is gained.

Location should not be barrier to accessing the support of a DES
13. All job seekers with disability should be able to access a DES regardless of where they live and receive comparable support to people living in metropolitan areas. This can be achieved through the use of technology such as Skype, videoconference, email and phone to maintain contact with jobseekers, and visits with jobseekers in their region or at a central location.

Where a DES is unable to cover the town in which the jobseeker lives, the DES should aim to work in partnership with a local generalist employment service to assist the jobseeker to obtain work.

Seeking the support of a DES once in employment
14. Often work related issues don’t arise until after the person has commenced employment. An employee with disability should be able to seek the support of a DES to help address these issues, even where they may not have used a DES to get their job in the first place.

People who are currently in paid work due to the assistance of a DES may require the continued assistance of a DES to resolve work related issues. The availability of this support should not be linked to a timeframe such as the duration of a wage subsidy. Likewise, an employee with a disability who has exited a DES should be able to re-enter the same DES, and be assisted in a timely manner, to access the support they require.

Career planning is also important
15. For job seekers currently in work, a DES can be useful resource to assist with career planning or counselling to assist the jobseeker to determine what work they may want to
do other than the work they are currently doing and/or to determine positions that can be completed utilising their current level of sight and skill set.
Ensure job seekers know how to make a complaint
16. DES providers must have a transparent and accessible complaints mechanism.

Take the time to support and understand your job seeker – it may take a while to get a placement that’s right
17. DES providers need to have a longer term view and recognise that in some circumstances updating resumes and organising interviews is not the answer, particularly for people who have just lost their sight. Sometimes the road back to employment will be a longer one that requires people new to vision loss to go through a process of grieving, re-skilling and learning to do work differently.

Best practice dos:

- Provide your job seeker with access to the appropriate assessments, referrals and tools they need, such as an orthoptist assessment, to assist the applicant or employee to identify their work capabilities and preferences.

- Provide all written information including job advertisements (particularly newspaper advertisements), service information, complaints processes and agreements in the jobseeker's preferred format in a timely manner.

- Know your subject when it comes to specific disabilities and take the time to understand the specific needs of the job seeker you are working with. Assistance should be as flexible as possible – some people may need assistance to get to an interview and some may need assistance with tailoring the way they present themselves in an interview. A person’s access to public transport and the built environment are also important to consider when assisting a job seeker to find a job. A job which is very far away and difficult to access by public transport may not be a good choice.

Worst practice don’ts:

- Don’t push your job seeker into the first available vacant position. Just like any other job seeker, individuals may want to aspire for a role that is challenging, rewarding and in line with their skills, interests and specific career goals.

- Don’t make assumptions about the types of roles that people who are blind or vision impaired may be able to complete. Some people are unable to imagine how they would be able to complete a job without full sight, but this does not mean that job seekers who are blind or vision impaired are unable to successfully complete this role. Talk with your job seeker to find out what parts of the role are achievable and the types of adjustments that might be needed.

- Don’t lose faith or take what looks like an easy way out! Recommending a move to a capital city or asking jobseekers to lessen their aspirations can lead to discouragement and will not solve their employment problems. Persistence and
determination on the part of the jobseeker and a DES will eventually lead to an employment outcome that is rewarding.

Case Study: Perseverance and a collaborative effort can lead to a successful outcome

Living in regional Victoria, Ross was seeking paid work locally to enable him to purchase a place of his own. Ross approached a local DES and outlined his interest in working for a government department to get some additional dollars and build some employment experience. Ross met with Sharon*, who would become his employment officer. Sharon took the time to understand how Ross completed tasks and compensated for his vision loss and right side paralysis. After doing some research of local options, she made a formal approach to a local call centre for a Victorian government department and set up a meeting. Sharon focused on the benefits of hiring Ross, including his friendly personality and ‘can do’ attitude and also outlined how Ross would be able to undertake workplace tasks efficiently and effectively.

Ross was asked to attend a job interview which led to further discussions about what modifications would need to be made. A task list was developed of what the employer, DES and Ross would individually and collectively work on to make the partnership work. Sharon provided support throughout the process, which including managing applications for workplace modifications, creating a close relationship with the employer to work through teething problems with technology and providing ongoing feedback and support to Ross during this process. Ross has noted that this support was invaluable. This groundwork led to Ross being hired as a contractor with the Department locally. Shortly after commencing the role, Ross was able to place a down-payment towards his goal of a place of his own. Four years on, Ross is still working with the Department and is looking at building his skill base.

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Want more information? Here’s how to contact us

Blind Citizens Australia
Ross House, Level 3, 247-251 Flinders Lane
Melbourne VIC 3000

Telephone:  (03) 9654 1400
Toll Free:    1800 033 660
Facsimile:   (03) 9650 3200
Email:       bca@bca.org.au
Website:     www.bca.org.au

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Government as an Employer: What can all sectors of government do to improve the employment of people who are blind or vision impaired?

Work generates wages, less reliance on welfare, dignity, a sense of purpose and productivity. Work is the cornerstone of social inclusion.

People with disability remain significantly underrepresented in the Australian Public Service and in the workforces of State and Territory governments and Local Governments. People who are blind or vision impaired have one of the highest levels of unemployment and under-employment (58%), even when compared to other disability groups. Governments, at all levels, need to lead from the front. Direct action on the part of government in employing people who are blind or vision impaired will also help to change the mentality of businesses across the country that hiring people who are blind or vision impaired can be an asset, not a liability.

The strategies below are intended to support governments and its staff around Australia to successfully recruit, hire and include a person who is blind or vision impaired within the workplace.

The successful employment of people with disability, in particular people who are blind or vision impaired, is reliant on accessibility across the workplace – a lift or ramp is not enough

1. Commonwealth, state and territory and local governments should ensure that the leasing or purchase of office space, its fit-out and equipment (including software) are accessible to all employees. Accessibility considerations extend beyond just physical access – signage should be accessible to all employees, hardware used by staff such as photocopiers and phone systems must be able to be used by a person who is blind or vision impaired and internal software programs, such as databases, need to be compatible with screen reading software. Access to information in a range of accessible formats is also crucial.

Implement the National Disability Strategy, with a focus on improving recruitment and retention at all levels of government, including in senior management
2. The Australian Government should, as a priority, work to improve the employment, recruitment and retention of people with disability, in particular people who are blind or vision impaired, in all levels of public sector employment and in funded organisations, as outlined in the National Disability Strategy. The rollout of this Strategy should be accompanied by measurable outcomes and include a higher rate of employment of people who are blind or vision impaired at all levels, including senior management and in decision making positions, according to the person’s qualifications, training and work experience.

Create a dedicated program to increase the employment of people with disability, in particular people who are blind or vision impaired

3. As is the practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander jobseekers, governments should investigate the development of a centralised dedicated program to address the recruitment and employment of people with disability, in particular people who are blind or vision impaired. This program should include disability specific resources, including the development of a central register of jobseekers with disability. The Australian Public Service Commission’s ‘As One: Australian Public Service Disability Employment Strategy’ should be used as a model by State and Territory and Local Governments, with the Australian Government to implement the recommendations of this Strategy across the APS.

Create disability specific resources

4. Creating disability specific resources to help managers of a branch or team to understand what is involved. This might include an employment and capability strategy for job seekers with a disability, an employment strategy kit to assist agencies, specialised development programs and a liaison who can provide advice to agencies and job seekers with a disability on the framework and resources to support the employment of people with disability, in particular people who are blind or vision impaired.

Target under-performing departments

5. Departments which have low levels of employment of people with disability should be specifically targeted to increase employment participation and other opportunities for people who are blind or vision impaired which can lead to work.

Improve access to formal programs which provide job seekers with experience

6. Commonwealth, State and Territory and Local governments should lead by example in the development and availability of formal programs including vocation, traineeships, cadetships, work experience and graduate programs and in the development of mentoring programs.

…and have a clear communication strategy to ensure that staff are aware of these opportunities

7. These opportunities, and procedures for their implementation, should be well communicated within all levels of government to ensure that individual departments,
agencies and staff are aware of the programs on offer, particularly when approached by Disability Employment Service (DES) providers and individuals.
Ensure work experience programs are flexible and are open to people of different ages and experience
8. Work experience programs, graduate programs and internships offered by all levels of government need to be flexible - some students who are blind or vision impaired will not be able to complete their studies in the same timeframe as students without disabilities. Programs should also be open to students who study part time, students who are mature age and students who may have completed their studies more than twelve months prior. Graduate programs developed specifically for people with disability should provide graduates with the skills and knowledge to prepare them for the world of work, including effective communication, presentation, behaviour and expectations in the workplace.

9. Dedicated government employment initiatives should be expanded and open to applicants with disability of all ages, similar to the affirmative action approach adopted by the APS for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates.

Investigate the development of short internships for high school or post high school students
10. All levels of government should investigate the development of short internships for students who are blind in their final year of high school or post secondary studies. These programs can provide students with the networks and resumes to compete for graduate program places and provide the job search and advocacy skills to obtain and keep meaningful employment.

Investigate tailored career advancement programs
11. The APS, state and territory public services and local government should introduce tailored career advancement programs to develop talented staff with disability, in particular people who are blind or vision impaired. There is a strong business case for this investment as in the long term it will assist departments to become more disability literate and better meet the needs of the people they are working to serve, which include people with disability. Existing programs designed to develop talented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff provide a useful model, such as the Prime Minister’s Indigenous Executive Leadership Fellowship.

Contracts with external recruitment agencies need to clearly include the active recruitment of people with disability
12. Government agencies which outsource recruitment should ensure that contracts with procurement agencies explicitly require the active encouragement of expressions of interest and applications from people with disability. Targets for the participation of people with disability within the recruitment process should also be documented in contracts.

Government communications should promote the skills and aptitude of people who are blind or vision impaired
13. The Australian Government, through its communications, should actively demonstrate that people who are blind or vision impaired who have the right skills and access to adaptive technology and adjustments are capable, effective and efficient
employees whose achievements need not be restricted to only limited areas of employment.

Be transparent and accountable about the employment of people with disability, including people who are blind or vision impaired

14. All levels of government should be required to report the level of employment of people with disability, including people who are blind or vision impaired, in each department’s annual report and publications.

Best practice dos:

- Make a point of establishing a good rapport with the applicant or employee so that you can discuss any possible work related issues that may arise freely and frankly with each other. Issues are best dealt with sooner rather than later as a delay can often exacerbate problems that could have been easily solved.

- In the event that you have any concerns about an employee’s work performance, make sure you discuss these concerns with the employee at an early stage, like you would with any other employee. Discussion is likely to lead to workable solutions, which might include re-arranging the person’s work system or environment or providing necessary extra resources, such as a piece of adaptive equipment.

- Professional growth and career development is important for all employees. As a manager of a work group or team which includes a person who is blind or vision impaired, ensure that that the employee has full and timely access to information about internal and external training and upcoming job vacancies. One strategy is to ensure that the employee has access to copies of government Gazettes in a format they can access.

Worst practice don’ts:

- As a manager of an employee who is blind or vision impaired, it is important not to prejudge or make assumptions. For example, do not limit your view of the person’s work capabilities in terms of other types of job you have heard that people who are blind can do. Rather, see the person as an individual, who can and should be judged and evaluated entirely on their own merits. Take the time and trouble to explore these merits in the context of their actual work performance.

- Don’t treat an employee who is blind or vision impaired any more differently than his or her colleagues than is necessary. Just as it is important to ensure that the employee does not experience unfair discrimination, it is equally important that the employee is not given any sort of “arm-chair ride” or preferential treatment on account of their disability. Not only is this unfair to others but it may cause feelings of resentment in fellow workers. The point to remember is to treat all employees equally and fairly and to ensure that all employees, irrespective of
Case study: Using teamwork to deliver admin support to colleagues who are blind

Encouraging teamwork and flexibility in the workplace can be one way to provide employees who are blind with the administrative support we sometimes need. It can also deliver unexpected benefits.

Sean is a senior policy analyst with a government department in Canberra. He is also vision impaired to the extent he cannot see text or icons on a computer monitor. He uses a screen reader, which reads aloud text with a synthetic voice. Sean uses this technology to produce written advice on social policy issues for government Ministers.

Sean likes to ask his sighted colleagues to proofread his work before submission to make sure that the visual presentation is spot on. He never has any trouble getting this administrative assistance, in no small measure because his junior colleagues see it as an opportunity to learn about the sensitive and confidential work that is usually not shared with them.

Sean also recognises that asking his less experienced peers to give his work a visual once-over is a way he can develop their policy skills, confidence and knowledge about current priorities.

It is a win-win for all involved and a creative way to deliver staff development and staff succession planning.

Sean's senior managers noticed that his habit of asking colleagues to proofread all his work improved the quality of product coming up the line to them. They have asked all staff to follow his lead and share draft work with someone else before submitting it for clearance to Ministers. What started as a request for administrative support by an employee who is blind had the unintended outcome of becoming an opportunity for a team to find a better way of doing business.

Everyone in the workplace has strengths and weaknesses, and often weaknesses can be much more severe than the challenges employees who are blind encounter with visual presentation of written work. In smart workplaces people use teamwork to cover each other's areas of weakness, to their mutual benefit and the advantage of their employer.

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- Research undertaken by Vision Australia, one of the largest blindness service providers in Australia, in 2012 indicated that 58% of people who are blind or vision impaired of workforce age are unemployed as compared to 14% of the wider population (ABS ‘Persons not in the labour force, Sept 2011). This is a lot of skilled people who could potentially be in our workforce.
- ‘Stickability’ or loyalty of people who are blind or vision impaired is high – Vision Australia’s research has shown that of those who are employed, 43% have been in the same job for more than five years. This can lead to a significant cost saving to a business in terms of recruiting, hiring and retraining in the medium to long term.
- Adaptive technology can make a huge difference to effectiveness and employability – 94% of respondents to the Vision Australia survey who are in employment use this form of technology in their jobs.

Australia’s National and International Obligations

Our policy recognises the employment rights of people who are blind or vision impaired underpinned in Commonwealth and International instruments and aligns with the Australian Government’s commitment to improve the employment of people with disabilities. These policies include:

- Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992
- National Disability Strategy 2010-2020
- National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy 2009
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Our employment policy suite includes:

- Hello Recruiters: How to successfully recruit a person who is blind or vision impaired
- Hello Employers: How to successfully work with and integrate people who are blind or vision impaired in your team
Hello DES: how Disability Employment Service (DES) providers can work with and support people who are blind or vision impaired

Government as an Employer: What can all sectors of government do to improve the employment of people who are blind or vision impaired?

The Australian Government: meeting its National and International obligations

We also have a number of short factsheets which challenge assumptions about blindness, dispel myths about what people who are blind can do, outline how people who are blind or vision impaired access information and use computers and a factsheet with some useful links to make hiring a person who is blind or vision impaired a reality. Ask for these by calling our National Office or checking out our website!!

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Want more information? Here’s how to contact us

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Melbourne VIC 3000

Telephone: (03) 9654 1400
Toll Free: 1800 033 660
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Email: bca@bca.org.au
Website: www.bca.org.au
This policy is available in large print, audio, Braille and in electronic formats for access by people who are blind or vision impaired.

Blind Citizens Australia Employment Policy Suite

The Australian Government: meetings its National and International obligations

Work generates wages, less reliance on welfare, dignity, a sense of purpose and productivity. Work is the cornerstone of social inclusion.

The inclusion of people with disability in all areas of life, including employment, is a core focus of the National Disability Strategy, Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth), National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Despite these commitments and tenants, people who are blind or vision impaired have one of the highest rates of unemployment in Australia.

Addressing the disadvantage experienced by people who are blind or vision impaired in their opportunities to gain employment requires further targeted action. The strategies below focus on how the Australian Government can successfully meet their national and international obligations.

Supporting people who are blind or vision impaired to reach their potential

Support innovative approaches to enable people with disability to set up their own business
1. The Australian Government should encourage and support innovative approaches to employment such as social enterprises, small businesses or initiatives to assist people with disability to establish their own business, as outlined in the National Disability Strategy.

Providing practical support to small and medium size businesses

Businesses need to know what’s involved in hiring a person who is blind or vision impaired and how to go about making it work
2. Governments at all levels should provide assistance to private and small business to
develop practical and sector specific workplace strategies and disability action plans to enable the meaningful employment of people who are blind or vision impaired. This should be coupled with increased practical information to employers of the benefits of employing a person with disability (including statistics) and the promotion of supports and incentives available.

Support for businesses to enable career advancement is also important
3. Blind Citizens Australia also recommends that employers receive support from government in delivering professional development, training and career advancement to their employees with disability. For example, employers should be able to access workplace modifications funding to assist them to provide materials in alternative formats to print, such as Braille or audio.

Consider increasing employer wage subsidies to help people who are blind or vision impaired get a foot in the door
4. The Australian Government should investigate the increase of employer wage subsidies. Employer wage subsidies can make a significant difference for job seekers to get a “foot in the door” whilst easing employer concerns about the training phase. Whilst the cost of living and salaries have increased significantly, the current DES wage subsidy has remained relatively static since its introduction.

Increase the word to employer groups and other stakeholders about how a DES can help
5. The Australian Government should work to promote the availability and role of DES through employer groups, industry and professional bodies (such as the Chamber of Commerce and Business Council of Australia), unions and the public to lead to increased opportunities for jobseekers with a disability.

Ensuring that legislation enable people who are blind to get jobs and stay in jobs

Safeguard the protections afforded by the Disability Discrimination Act
6. Blind Citizens Australia supports the Commonwealth and state and territory governments maintaining legislative protection in the areas of employment, and specifically for the right of employees with disability to receive professional development, training and career advancement opportunities. These protections within the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) and within state and territory laws should be preserved in any move to consolidate all rights protection legislation into a single instrument.

Extend protection – develop Disability Standards for Employment
7. Discrimination in the area employment remains one of the greatest areas of complaint. The Australian Government should work to develop Federal Disability Standards for Employment which align and clarify disability discrimination in all areas.
relating to employment. This should be accompanied by parallel legislation which ensures that these Standards can be enforced.
Develop mandatory standards which apply to whole of government regarding accessible procurement
8. The compatibility of new computer systems with software and technology used by employees with disability should be resolved by the development of whole of government requirements which embed accessibility.
These requirements could be modelled on Section 508 of the US Rehabilitation Act.
This section requires that electronic and information technology used by US Federal agencies is accessible to people with disability.

Modify workplace laws to recognise disability related leave as a genuine need
9. Governments need to maintain rights protection and flexibility in workplace laws to facilitate temporary changes such as leave to grieve vision loss, time off to re-train and acquire the new skills people who are blind use in the workplace and redesign work roles to maximise the contribution someone new to vision loss can make.

Funding programs to bolster employment are critical into the future

Funding of employment assistance programs is vital
10. The Australian Government must continue to fund employment assistance programs, including the Employment Assistance Fund (Workplace Modifications Scheme) and Jobs in Jeopardy programs and endeavour to expand their guidelines to enable greater enforcement of the National Disability Strategy.

Address the eligibility criteria of the Employment Assistance Fund and Job Access
11. Job seekers, volunteers, casual employees (including those who work less than 13 weeks consecutively), part and full time employees, contractors, people who are self employed and individuals wanting to start their own business should be eligible for assistance under the Employment Assistance Fund (Workplace Modifications Scheme) and Job Access Schemes to access the assistive equipment they need to be work ready. Temporary work, volunteering and work experience can be useful for gaining experience within an organisation or for another role. Flexibility in program funding is needed to enable individuals to take up short term work opportunities and increase their skills. Access to funding and equipment should not be tied to a person’s residency status within Australia.

Once funded, programs, such as workplace modifications, need to be flexible to offer support where gaps are identified
12. Many positions, including entry level positions, now require an employee to multitask and perform administrative functions which may be impossible for a person who is blind or vision impaired to comply with. Guidelines for the Employment Assistance Fund need to be made more flexible to allow for a wider range of support to employees to perform non-accessible components of their role, particularly where technological modifications cannot assist. The provision of some administration assistance, information in
accessible formats and ongoing technological support for adaptive equipment are some examples of current gaps within funding guidelines.

Ensure that people who are blind or vision impaired can access the blindness support services they need
13. Support services assist people new to vision loss to obtain the blindness skills needed to do their work in a different way. Support is also necessary for clients already in the workforce who need to maintain their disability-specific capabilities, such as use of assistive technology, orientation and mobility and self-advocacy skills. These issues must be considered as part of the design of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and in any other future reforms to disability services.

Include self determination in reform thinking
14. The self-determination of employment needs as people who are blind, rather than the funding of services being paid to assist people into a limited range of employment options also requires further consideration in the development of the NDIS.

Reform of Disability Employment Service Providers

A jobseeker should be able to choose their own DES
15. Jobseekers should be provided with the opportunity to independently select and approach a DES of their own choosing. Whilst referrals by Centrelink to a DES are helpful for some individuals, the requirement to complete job capacity assessments and the limited range of DES providers offered by Centrelink can inadvertently increase hurdles to employment.

Age should not be a barrier to access a DES
16. The criteria to join a DES should not be arbitrarily restricted by age, with the removal of the requirement that jobseekers must be under 65 years of age. This age limit should be reviewed in light of the increase in pension age eligibility, increased financial pressures to continue working and the desire by older employees to continue to remain in the workforce. An older jobseeker can have a lot to offer a potential employer and should be able to access the support of a DES as necessary.

Support DES to support young people into work experience programs
17. Young people are the future of this country. Government has a role to play to ensure that people who are blind or vision impaired, especially young people, are provided with the educational and employment skills necessary to be able to contribute economically. One step is to ensure that DES providers are supported by government to assist students and job seekers to gain relevant work experience which translates to employment.

Encourage DES’ to focus on under-employment and transition pathways
18. DES providers can also play a vital role in improving the employment prospects of individuals who are underemployed. Individuals who are already in work but under-
employed (both in terms of the hours worked and the skills used) and employees working at an Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE) should be entitled to access a DES service to enable their transition to well paid and/or open employment.
Develop a DES performance framework to enable continuous improvement

19. The analysis of DES program performance should set out a DES’ performance in assisting jobseekers with the greatest need for assistance, particularly people with disability on income support payments, in seeking and maintaining employment. A performance framework should include key performance indicators which relate to average weekly wages and average weekly hours of work to ensure that people with disability are meaningfully employed.

Generic DES contracts should be based on evidence of past performance

20. Contracts for generic disability employment services should be based on evidence of past performance, including outcome rates for individual services, success of placements and provision of ongoing support. This information should be publicly available.

Consumers need to be front and centre of decisions to reform DES in the future

21. Consumer organisations, such as Blind Citizens Australia, should be consulted in the current and future re-designs of the DES system. The reform of DES should include a reference group made up of a representative sample of people with disability receiving services whose needs are not currently being met, to ensure that processes can be improved.

Other measures

Targeted research will enable government to see how it is tracking and what areas need further targeted work

22. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, as an independent and respected authority, should be commissioned to undertake research, and publish a regular report, which summarises the employment outcomes for people with a disability, with specific reference to people who are blind or vision impaired.

Best practice dos:

- Embed accessibility requirements in all IT procurement and design specifications and include testing in pre-release approval processes.
- Partner with blindness agencies to obtain expert technical advice on how to maximise accessibility and produce training materials specific for assistive technology users.
- Adopt flexible approaches to programs to allow gaps to be addressed and innovative approaches to be considered – this could make all the difference to the new or continued employment of a person who is blind or vision impaired
Worst practice don’ts:

- **Don't** try to retrofit IT applications for accessibility - it is very hard to do. Universal design should be incorporated into the development of all new systems to ensure maximum accessibility prior to its use.

- **Don't** ask staff who are blind or vision impaired to use IT training materials that assume use of a screen and mouse pointer. These materials will not be accessible to many people who are blind who use screen reading software using keyboard strokes.

- **Don't** think that accessibility is ‘optional’ because this will leave agencies vulnerable to litigation, adverse media coverage and trouble with their Minister. Accessible systems benefit all employees, not just those with a disability and demonstrate not only good practice but good business.

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**Case study: Inclusion is about more than a ramp**

In April 2007, the then Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, the Australian Government agency responsible for promoting increased workforce participation by people with disability, introduced a new electronic file management system called Document Manager without first checking its accessibility with the adaptive technology used by its blind employees. Document Manager turned out to be so inaccessible with screen readers that employees who were blind could not even open documents or save their work. Former agency head Dr Peter Boxall was so angry with his IT staff over this mistake that he ordered them to make personal apologies to affected colleagues who were blind and immediately made accessibility testing a mandatory part of future IT procurement.

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**About Blind Citizens Australia: Who we are and why we say what we say**

Blind Citizens Australia is unique in that our organisation is solely made up of and represents people who are blind or vision impaired. All of our Board of Directors and our committees are required by our Constitution to be a person who is blind or vision impaired. Many of our staff are also vision impaired. We have over 3000 members around Australia who are all people who experience blindness – whether they be a parent, highly successful professional, job seeker, volunteer or student. This is why we are best placed to comment on the very necessary changes needed to improve the employment of people who are blind or vision impaired. These policy statements present the views of people who are blind and vision impaired and draws on their experience as current and past employees, volunteers and job seekers. Our policies have also been informed by consultation with external stakeholders.

We are driven by our mission to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs.
Quick stats:

- The Centre for Eye Research Australia estimates that 480,000 Australians have a vision impairment. This number will only increase with our ageing population.
- Research undertaken by Vision Australia, one of the largest blindness service providers in Australia, in 2012 indicated that 58% of people who are blind or vision impaired of workforce age are unemployed as compared to 14% of the wider population (ABS ‘Persons not in the labour force, Sept 2011). This is a lot of skilled people who could potentially be in our workforce.
- ‘Stickability’ or loyalty of people who are blind or vision impaired is high – Vision Australia’s research has shown that of those who are employed, 43% have been in the same job for more than five years. This can lead to a significant cost saving to a business in terms of recruiting, hiring and retraining in the medium to long term.
- Adaptive technology can make a huge difference to effectiveness and employability – 94% of respondents to the Vision Australia survey who are in employment use this form of technology in their jobs.

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Want more information? Here's how to contact us

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Telephone:  (03) 9654 1400
Toll Free:  1800 033 660
Facsimile: (03) 9650 3200
Email:      bca@bca.org.au
Website:    www.bca.org.au

This policy is available in large print, audio, Braille and in electronic formats for access by people who are blind or vision impaired.
Factsheets: Have you checked your assumptions?

No amount of glossy brochures will attract or be useful to people who are blind and people with minimal usable vision. Think about other ways to produce your information such as information on a website (which meets web accessibility standards (W3C) of course!), large print information with good contrast and information over the phone.

Yes, people who are blind or vision impaired can use stairs and can use them safely! People might use a handrail, tactile ground surface indicators (which are bumpy domes in a rectangle strip mounted before and after stairs), a white cane or a dog guide, or a combination of these techniques, to safely use stairs. It’s important to think about the needs of all users – if stairs are poorly lit, they will be a tripping hazard for everyone, not just someone who is blind.

Contrary to the opinions of some, dog guides (the generic name for guide dogs and seeing eye dogs) cannot read signage. They are dogs. A person who is blind or vision impaired works in partnership with their dog guide and receives training as a team to learn to navigate regularly used environments and to develop a strong bond to effectively and safely work through less familiar environments using verbal commands.

Dog guides that are working and in harness are permitted in all public areas, with some very few exceptions, such as commercial kitchens and surgical theatres. Otherwise, where a person who is blind or vision impaired goes, their dog guide goes too. An owner of a dog guide is responsible for their own animal, which includes picking up litter after their dog guide.

Absolutely no patting of a dog guide in harness, unless you have the express permission of the owner.

It’s okay to use the word ‘see’ ie. ‘see you later’ and ‘look’ ie. ‘do you mind taking a look at this?’ People who are blind or vision impaired use these words too.

No matter how well you know a person who is blind or vision impaired, it is good practice to introduce yourself when you approach the person, particularly if you are both away from your usual environment. A simple ‘Hi Sarah, it’s John’ can help a person who is blind or vision impaired know who has approached.

Contrary to some myths, most people who are blind or vision impaired do not automatically have enhanced hearing or sense of smell! Most people lose their sight later in life and will not have developed these skills.

Not all people who are blind read Braille. Some people may use Braille for labelling or identifying items, to read signage, some for reading and some not at all.

How people read information can come down to personal choice, convenience and ease. Some people with usable functional vision might use standard print or large print (san serif font like ‘Arial’ in size 16 or greater), audio format, electronic formats,
Braille or a number of these formats depending on the task they are working on.

While you may be amazed at the capability of a person who is blind or vision impaired, please please please refrain from using the words 'courageous', 'brave' or 'inspirational' when speaking with or referring to a person who is blind or vision impaired. The person is simply getting on with their life in a way which is different to you, rather than climbing Mount Everest.

A person might use a white cane in the workplace and might use walls and furniture to navigate to where they would like to go. Don't be alarmed if the person appears to be 'banging' into things with their cane – people using a cane are taught to navigate an environment using the cues around them to identify where they are and where they need to go. While it may not look safe, it can be much safer than a person walking around in a space that is not completely familiar. A person in a familiar environment may not need to use a cane at all and that can be okay too.

Just because a person is blind does not necessarily mean that they are also deaf! Many of our members report that people speak much more slowly or much LOUDER because they detect that the person is blind. Speak exactly the way you would speak with anyone else.

People of workforce age who are blind often can use computers, use the internet, check their emails, use mobile phones including SMS, might use Facebook and Twitter and generally access most forms of technology. Just because you haven't seen it done does not mean that it's not possible. Don't be afraid to ask a question or multiple questions and take the time to speak with experts – the person who is blind or vision impaired directly, a disability employment service provider, a professional organisation with expertise in blindness or government resources like Job Access.

People who are blind have interests too – reading books, playing sports, music, theatre, dining and more. Just because a person is blind does not mean that they do not have a variety of interests.

Not all people who are blind know each other. They do not live in the same neighbourhood and did not all go to the same school. While some people will have friends who are blind or vision impaired, others may have little interaction with others who are blind or with blindness service providers.

Not everyone looks blind. Some people have visual conditions which are not automatically apparent and may not use a white cane or dog guide. Some people may have difficulty with seeing things directly ahead or to the side, managing depth, getting around when there is glare or travelling at night. While two people may have the same visual condition, their sight loss could be very different.

Not everyone will want to speak about their vision impairment or blindness. It's okay to ask but it's also important that you respect a person's wishes too – there are things that you may not want to speak about with a stranger or work colleague too.

This document is available in large print, audio, Braille and in electronic formats for access by people who are blind or vision impaired.
Myths about employment and people who are blind or vision impaired

Myth 1: Occupational Health and safety

“Occupational health and safety laws prevent employing people who are blind in some workplaces because they are more likely to be injured or place co-workers at risk”.

- There is no evidence that people who are blind are more likely to be injured at work than people without a disability. Many people who are blind learn strategies to get around safely and confidently and are more likely to take more care and notice of the environment around them. And yes, people who are blind can use stairs.
- Employer obligations to provide a safe workplace remain the same regardless of whether there is an employee who is blind. Work environments with good lighting, clear signage and a logical layout make it easier for everyone.
- Government data shows that people with a disability take fewer sick days than other employees. So hiring a person who is blind could be a good long term strategy for your business.

Myth 2: Additional costs on employers

“Taking on an employee who is blind costs employers more because of the need to purchase equipment and training that other people don't need”.

- Government schemes pay for the adaptive technology and other equipment people who are blind use in employment, rather than employers.
- There are also many costs that sighted people incur that people who are blind never need, such as parking and many office supplies. And because of the higher employer retention rate of people who are blind, the cost of filling new positions may be a lot less.

Myth 3: Mandatory drivers license requirements rule blind people out from some jobs

“A person who is blind cannot apply for this job because having a driver's license is a mandatory requirement”.

- People who are blind get around just fine without the need to drive a car. Other options include public transport, taxis, walking or using technology for virtual meetings.
- People who are blind don’t waste time undertaking unnecessary work travel for business that could be done just as well over the phone or through other technology. This can lead to time and cost savings for employers.

Myth 4: Lawyers, piano tuners and basket weavers

“Most people who are blind want to tune pianos or work in workshops run by the blind association, but a few exceptional ones have been trained as lawyers”.

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• There are people who are blind working in most occupations and professions, ranging from university professors through to social workers, farmers, chiropractors and butchers.
• This is partly because most people who are blind lose their sight later in life, well after they have completed their training and proven their skills in the workforce.
• People who become blind younger in life attend mainstream schools and share the same aspirations as their friends without a disability. Many people who are blind are actually more highly educated than their sighted peers.
• With the right mix of formal and informal supports in place, people who are blind with the right skills can make a significant contribution to any industry they choose.

This document is available in large print, audio, Braille and in electronic formats for access by people who are blind or vision impaired.
What does the term legal blindness mean?

You might have heard the term “legally blind” before. Legal blindness does not mean that a person is totally blind; in fact very few people have no sight at all.

The following information has been adapted from information provided by Retina Australia and is a useful guide to understanding what is meant by legal blindness.

The legal definition of blindness has two components:

Firstly, ‘normal’ vision is tested in two main ways. Visual acuity defines the ability to read and detect objects at a distance. It is measured using the vision chart, which everyone is familiar with. The chart has lines of letters in different sizes. The person is then asked to read the letters from top to bottom. The top line has a very large letter, which a person who has normal sight would be able to see at 60 metres. However a person with a severe vision impairment may only be able to see this at 6 metres. Similarly, for the subsequent lines, a person with normal sight would be able to see the letters at 36, 24, 18, 12, 9 and 6 metres respectively. Normal vision means that a person can read the "6 metre" line (usually the second bottom line) at the correct distance from the chart. This means this person sees at 6 metres what other people with normal vision would see at 6 metres (6/6 vision). This is also known as 20/20 vision (6 metres or 20 feet). People with less than normal vision would have their vision described as 6/12 or 6/24 etc. depending on which line they could see on the chart.

People who are legally blind are people whose visual acuity or sharpness (with glasses or contact lenses, if needed) is 6/60 or worse in the better eye. This means that a person who is legally blind can see an object at a 6 metre distance, as compared with a person with normal sight who could see the same object at 60 metres. This means that she/he can only read the top line on a vision chart.

Secondly, when people look straight ahead, they can normally detect objects to either side, or above or below the direction in which they are looking. This measurement is called the visual field. In people with normal sight, this is measured as 170 degrees. A person is "legally blind" if the combined visual field for both eyes is less than 10 degrees. Therefore a person who is "legally blind" may have a visual acuity of 6/60 or less, or a visual field of less than 10 degrees, or both. Some conditions, such as Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) affect mainly the visual fields, while Stargardt disease and Macular Degeneration (MD) affect mainly visual acuity or central vision. Although some people with RP and MD develop a complete loss of all sight, most retain at least limited vision. Depending on the degree of this limitation, the person may have legal blindness but will still have the capacity to get around and do things.


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How does a person who is blind or vision impaired read information?  
A quick guide to adaptive technology

Every person who is blind or vision impaired is different and not all people will access information in the same way. Many people who are blind or vision impaired of workforce age access information on a computer or laptop using screen reading software – this reads, line by line, the information presented on the screen audibly to the person using synthetic speech. This does mean that the whole office will hear it – a person may wear headphones to discreetly hear the information they need. People will use combinations of keyboard keystrokes, rather than a mouse, to navigate emails, computer programs and the internet.

Some people, who have some usable reading vision, might use text enlargement software – this is a program loaded on to a computer which enlarges the text on the computer screen. The level of magnification can be increased until the text is large enough to be read. A person may choose to use both text magnification and audible output to navigate their computer.

A small proportion of all people who are blind or vision impaired use Braille to read materials in the workplace. Braille is unparalleled when it comes to literacy. Many Braille devices, which are portable, can be connected to a computer. This means that an employee who is blind or vision impaired can take notes on a Braille device away from the workplace, connect this to a computer and transfer their notes to a document to circulate to sighted staff. Staff won’t need to know how to read Braille as the document will come up in text, just like you see here.

A person who is competent in any or all of these technologies can be extremely efficient in managing their tasks and getting the job done.

What about printed information?  
Some people who are legally blind (this means remaining vision ranging from 10% to no vision at all) may still be able to read standard print. Some people might use a magnifier, such as a closed circuit television (CCTV) to read their mail or printed documents. A CCTV is a device which has an inbuilt camera and a document tray where a document can be placed for reading. The camera then picks up the image of the document and displays it on a monitor at a much higher resolution and magnification, making a document with small print easier to read.

New technology is also making it easier to access printed information. There are some computer programs which allow a person to scan a document and convert it to an accessible Word document to be read with adaptive technology. Unfortunately, handwriting is very difficult to read for someone who is blind or vision impaired – no amount of scanning will make this accessible.

For more information about how to make reasonable adjustments for a person who is blind or vision impaired, call Job Access on 1800 464 800 or www.jobaccess.gov.au.

This document is available in large print, audio, Braille and in electronic formats for access by people who are blind or vision impaired.
What Australian and International law say about disability – the law and guidelines

Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992
The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) aims to eliminate, as far as possible, discrimination against people with a disability in a number of areas of life, including the provision of goods, services and facilities; education; access to premises; and work, amongst many others. Employment is covered in detail in section 15-21 of the Act.

The DDA mandates that it is unlawful for an employer or a person acting on behalf of the employer to discriminate against a person on the ground of the other person’s disability

- In the arrangements made for the purpose of determining who should be offered employment
- In determining who should be offered employment
- In the terms or conditions on which employment is offered
- in the terms or conditions of employment that the employer affords the employee
- by denying the employee access, or limiting the employee’s access, to opportunities for promotion, transfer or training, or to any other benefits associated with employment;
- by dismissing the employee; or
- by subjecting the employee to any other detriment..

Employment agencies are covered in Section 21. It is unlawful for an employment agency to discriminate against a person on the ground of the person’s disability by refusing to provide the person with any of its services; the terms or conditions on which it offers any of its services; or in the manner in which it provides the person with any of its services.

The Act does provide exceptions regarding inherent requirements (such as whether the person with disability is able to complete the full requirements of the role after adjustments have been made) and unjustifiable hardship (for example where the cost of making a reasonable adjustment to accommodate a person with disability is too cost prohibitive).

The Australian Human Rights Commission has developed some Q&As regarding employment as covered by the Disability Discrimination Act which may be helpful. The Q&As can be downloaded from the Australian Human Rights Commission website http://humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights/faq/employment/employment_faq_1.html


National Disability Strategy 2010-2020
The National Disability Strategy is a ten year plan aimed at improving life for Australians with disability, their families and carers. The Strategy, developed collaboratively between Commonwealth, State and Territory and Local Governments, sets out six priority areas for action. The actions include: building inclusive and accessible communities; rights protection, justice and legislation; economic security; personal and community support;
learning and skills and health and wellbeing.

The Action relating to economic security focuses on increasing access to employment opportunities. Future actions include improving employer awareness of the benefits of employing people with disability, reducing barriers and disincentives, looking at and developing innovative approaches to employment and improving recruitment and retention in all levels of public sector employment.


**National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy**

The National Disability Strategy sets out a number of priority actions to assist Australians with disability into work. The Strategy recognises the importance of education and training as a pathway to sustainable employment, and the role of employers in increasing employment opportunities for people with disability.

The Strategy has six actions which include: engaging people with disability; improving disability employment services; providing better access to education and training; supporting and encouraging employers; improving public sector employment of people with disability; and pursuing innovative strategies.


**United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**

In 2008, Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and its Optional Protocol. The UNCRPD is a powerful statement of what Australia and the world believe are the fundamental rights of people who have disabilities. Article 27 of the UNCRPD focuses exclusively on work and employment.


This document is available in large print, audio, Braille and in electronic formats for access by people who are blind or vision impaired.
And now to some useful links

Disability Employment Services
Disability Employment Services (DES) providers work to assist people with disability to secure and maintain employment in the open labour market. DES providers work one on one with a job seeker around their individual needs, offer employers additional support during the recruitment process as well as offer ongoing support to ensure success in the long term.

More information:

JobAccess
Job Access is an information and advice service that offers practical workplace solutions for people with disability and their employers. This free service offers comprehensive information, resources and awareness training to support employers and managers to work effectively with people with disability. Resources include how to recruit new staff, how to support and retrain staff, case studies and success stories, financial help and wage information as well as toolkits and checklists to help employers get going and stay on track.

Job Access also provides information on Government schemes such as the Employment Assistance Fund (EAF) (formally the Workplace Modification Scheme) which provides financial assistance to people with disability to purchase a range of work related modifications and services. The EAF is available to people who are about to start a job or who are currently working, as well as those who require assistance to find and prepare for work. The EAF can and does fund supports for people who are blind or vision impaired including screen reading software, Braille devices, text enlargement hardware and software and more. The application process is designed to be flexible, simple and quick.

More information: Freecall 1800 464 800 or www.jobaccess.gov.au

Employer Incentives
There are a number of employer incentives available to hire people with disability. As an example, the Building Australia’s Future Workforce package, which was announced by the Federal Government in the 2011–12 Budget, includes assistance to encourage employers to create jobs for the very long-term unemployed and for people with disability. This includes wage subsidies of $3,000 available through DES providers to help employers cover the costs of recruiting and training eligible job seekers. For more information, get in touch with Job Access or Disability Employment Australia.

How to make your website accessible
There are several resources to consider, such as accessibility information released by the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) and the Web Accessibility National Strategy. Both have extensive information related to accessibility, technologies to allow organisation to easily make PDFs accessible (remember that some people will still require Word documents depending on the technology and software they use) and video information about
how to meet AA compliance with the WCAG 2.0 guidelines.


More blindness based resources to tap into

**Blind Citizens Australia website**
Check out our website for a list of jobs that people who are blind have undertaken and view some of our employment profiles.

**Australian Blindness Forum**
The Australian Blindness Forum operates as the peak body representing the blindness sector for the benefit of people who are blind or vision impaired. All major blindness service providers are involved in the work of ABF, with Blind Citizens Australia holding two seats on the Board of ABF as the peak consumer body.

ABF has created a number of employment resources which includes additional tips for employers, disability employment service providers, parents, job seekers and teachers.
More information: www.australianblindnessforum.org.au

**Seeing people who are blind or vision impaired in action**
YouTube is an excellent resource to see how people who are blind or vision impaired effectively do things. Take a look at videos about how people who are blind or vision impaired use a computer, mobile phone, how to build an accessible website for users who are blind, how a person gets around safely and more.
More information: www.youtube.com

Vision Australia, an Australian blindness service provider, has also developed some video showcasing employment in professional, manual and administration roles.

**World Blind Union - Project Aspiro**
Project Aspiro is an excellent international career planning and employment resource for people who are blind or vision impaired, employers and service providers. The Employers section, for example, addresses how to work with a person who is blind or vision impaired, safety concerns, productivity concerns, accessing information, getting around as well as providing success stories. More information: http://projectaspiro.com/

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