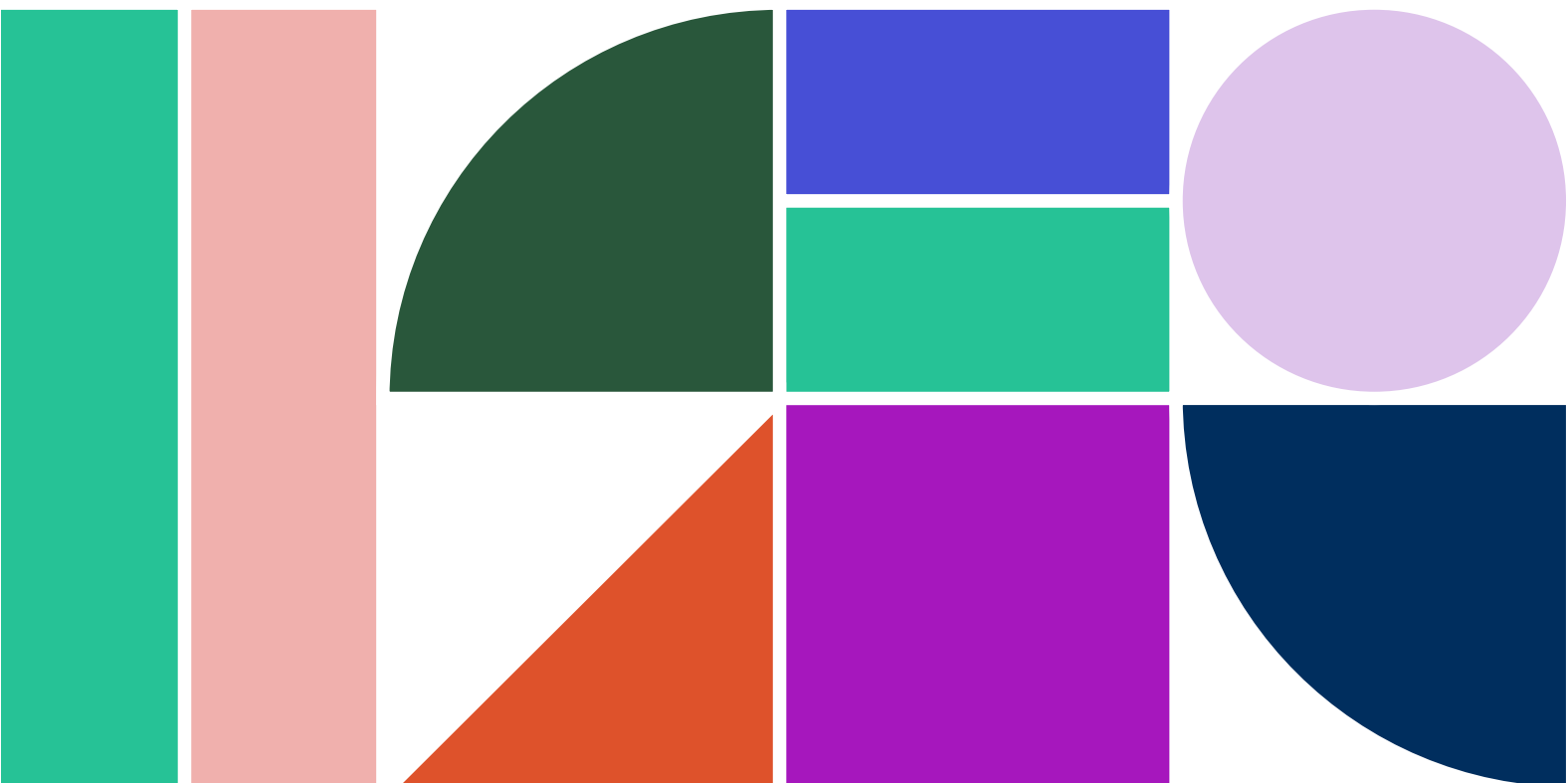




From Barriers to Bridges: uLaunch's Approach to Inclusive Employment in the Disability Sector

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Executive Summary

Background

Individuals with disabilities encounter multiple barriers to employment, including limited accessibility, discrimination, stigma, and inadequate workplace accommodations. These obstacles contribute to lower employment rates among people with disabilities, placing Australia behind other developed nations in terms of disability employment. Indeed, recent research by Mellifont et al. (2023) demonstrates that the Australian Disability Services sector itself exhibits severe underrepresentation of employees with lived experience, further highlighting the urgent need for systemic change. This paper briefly explores these ongoing issues and describes how uLaunch, an Australian Disability Employment Service (DES) provider, addresses these disparities.

uLaunch as a Case Study

uLaunch provides a compelling example of how strategic initiatives can effectively enhance inclusivity within the employment sector. These include:

- **Leadership:** uLaunch emphasises inclusive leadership with substantial representation of individuals with disabilities in its decision-making roles. This approach challenges societal prejudices and enhances organisational culture and policy.
- **Recruitment:** uLaunch adopts accessible and inclusive recruitment practices, using platforms like theField.Jobs to reach a diverse audience, as well as communicating its commitment to inclusivity through clear, visible policies on its website.
- **Training:** The Employment Consultant Traineeship Program at uLaunch leverages the lived experiences of its participants, improving skills and integration into employment, with a high success rate of participants gaining and retaining employment.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This paper recommends that other organisations in the Disability Services Sector adopt inclusive strategies similar to those implemented by uLaunch. By doing so, they can contribute to a more equitable society where individuals with disabilities can achieve professional and personal growth. However, while uLaunch has made significant strides, we acknowledge that we do not have all the answers. Collaboration across the sector is essential, and we welcome partnerships to further refine and enhance our approaches. Together, we can achieve a more inclusive future.



Introduction

Despite significant strides in societal empowerment for people with disabilities, the Australian Disability Services sector continues to grapple with substantial challenges in employment inclusivity. This paper provides an overview of these persistent issues and showcases how uLaunch, an Australian Disability Employment Service (DES) provider, confronts these challenges. In doing so, uLaunch both addresses critical gaps in the employment landscape and establishes new benchmarks for success, demonstrating the profound impact of strategic inclusivity initiatives.

Background

The employment services industry in Australia plays a crucial role in facilitating job opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds, including those with disabilities. However, despite progress made in disability empowerment and inclusion in mainstream society, jobseekers with disabilities are vastly underrepresented in the Australian workforce. As evidenced by the labour force participation rates, around only 53% of people with disabilities are employed, compared to 84% for those without disabilities (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2020). This gap (31%) as highlighted by Mellifont et al. (2023) situates Australia well behind other first-world nations such as Sweden, France, Finland, and Italy, where the unemployment gap between people with a disability and those without ranges from approximately 10% to 13% (Eurostat, 2014).

While research has pinpointed multiple factors that contribute to the employment gap for individuals with disabilities - including limited accessibility, discrimination, stigma, and a lack of adequate accommodations in workplaces (Devine et al., 2021; Gormley, 2015; Mahasneh et al., 2023; McKinney & Swartz, 2021; Ruhindwa et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2021) - there is less clarity on effective interventions to address the issue. One promising strategy, however, is the active recruitment and employment of individuals with lived experience into the disability service sector itself (Mellifont et al., 2023; Meltzer et al., 2021).



Indeed, such an approach encompasses several advantages. For the individual, employment can lead to benefits such as higher levels of health, wellbeing, and social and economic inclusion (Lindsay et al., 2018). Of course, organisations within the Disability Service Sector can also benefit greatly from hiring individuals with lived experience. As highlighted by Mellifont et al. (2023), these individuals bring specific skill sets and personal knowledge of disability, which can help steer policy to better reflect the real-life complexities faced by people with disabilities (Meltzer et al., 2021). Moreover, lessons from the mental health services industry show that inclusive hiring practices are fundamental in developing tailored strategies to support clients (Brophy et al., 2022; Byrne et al., 2019) and in building effective client-provider relationships (Schweizer et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, despite these significant advantages, recent research by Mellifont and colleagues (2023) has revealed an underwhelming uptake of individuals with lived experience in the Australian Disability Services sector. In analysing the results of the 2021 National Disability Service (NDS) Workforce Census which incorporated responses from Australian disability service providers, the researchers found that only 50 out of 288 (17%) providers employed seven or more people with a disability; while a staggering 143 out of 288 (50%) employed no individuals with a disability ($n = 69$) or simply did not know ($n = 74$) (Mellifont et al. 2023). Moreover, only 70 of 287 providers (24%) included board members with lived experience. This underrepresentation hinders the potential for greater empathy and understanding within the sector while limiting the capacity to truly address the unique challenges faced by jobseekers with disabilities.

Enhancing inclusive employment: a case study of uLaunch

In stark contrast to the sector-wide statistics detailed above, uLaunch demonstrates a proactive approach in fostering inclusivity within its operations. For instance, at uLaunch two of the five board members (40%) have lived experience of disability.¹ Furthermore, more than 62% of uLaunch's

¹ Referring to the review by Mellifont et al. (2023), this places uLaunch among the top 25% of providers who report the inclusion of board members with lived experience of disability.



employees are people with disabilities, showcasing the organisation's commitment to inclusive employment.² This composition enhances the empathy and understanding within the team and ensures that the services provided are closely aligned with the needs of our client base. Indeed, not only do these employees bring a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by our clients, but research also indicates that workplaces with a higher representation of individuals with disabilities experience increased productivity, improved morale, and better retention rates (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021; Lindsay et al., 2018), benefits keenly felt by uLaunch.

As such, the following section will use uLaunch as a case study to detail the specific strategies and practices that have enabled such high levels of inclusivity within our workforce and explores the benefits that have resulted from this approach.

Leadership

Effective inclusivity often begins with leaders who not only embrace diversity but embody it through their own lived experiences, as leadership at the highest levels (such as the Board) sets the tone for an organisation's culture and operational ethos. Specifically, having leaders with disabilities serves as a powerful testament to the organisation's commitment to inclusivity, directly challenging societal prejudices and stereotypes. This visibility is crucial as it demonstrates that individuals with disabilities are equally capable of achieving and excelling in high-level positions (Evans, 2022). Such representation can inspire employees within the organisation, empower individuals with disabilities in the community, and positively influence broader societal perceptions.

Moreover, leaders with lived experience of disability bring essential perspectives that can transform an organisational culture into one that is inherently inclusive and supportive. This firsthand understanding equips them to implement practical accommodations and foster a work environment that truly addresses

² Further to these figures:

- 66.3% of uLaunch staff members have an immediate family member and/or person with their care with a disability.
- 17.6% of uLaunch staff speak a second language.



the diverse needs of all employees (Ryan, 2023). Indeed, such leadership directly influenced the choice of the lowercase 'u' at the beginning of uLaunch to accommodate people with vision impairments. For many reading devices used by visually impaired individuals, a lowercase 'u' is pronounced distinctly, ensuring clarity, whereas an uppercase 'U' is not as easily distinguishable (making more of an 'uh' sound). This revelation was only made possible by ensuring a co-designed approach to the naming of uLaunch with our employees with lived experience of vision impairment.

Recruitment: enhancing Accessibility and Inclusivity through strategic web presence

At uLaunch, we do not employ quotas for hiring. Instead, we focus on creating an accessible and inclusive recruitment process. By prioritising accessible web design and inclusive language, informed by best practices such as those outlined by Couture and Johnson (2017), we ensure that our digital platforms are navigable and understandable for all users, particularly those with disabilities. This approach fosters a welcoming environment for potential applicants while meeting compliance standards. Understanding the impact of website design on job seekers' perceptions, as discussed by Couture and Johnson (2017), uLaunch designs its digital resources to convey our organisational values clearly. We recognise that the way we present information about our culture, values, and commitments can influence perceptions of person-organisation fit, which in turn affects our attractiveness to prospective employees. As such, our website is carefully crafted to signal our dedication to diversity and inclusion, ensuring that these values are immediately apparent to visitors. In line with recommendations from existing studies (Ball et al., 2005; Couture & Johnson, 2017), uLaunch also ensures that all accommodation statements and diversity policies are easily locatable and clearly worded to avoid inconsistencies that might deter job seekers. By maintaining consistency in our messages about the value of disability and inclusiveness, we strengthen our organisational image as a truly inclusive employer.

Moreover, we ensure that our job advertisements are placed on disability-focused employment websites, thereby reaching a broader audience of skilled individuals who might be looking for inclusive workplaces.



One key innovative platform we use is theField.jobs³, a dedicated employment website that focuses on inclusivity and accessibility in the job market. This targeted approach increases our visibility among job seekers with disabilities and also aligns with our organisational commitment to diversity and inclusion as theField.Jobs is specifically designed to connect employers committed to inclusive hiring practices with job seekers who have disabilities, enhancing our ability to attract talented candidates from diverse backgrounds.

Training

To further support and expand our inclusive recruitment practices, uLaunch initiated an 'Employment Consultant Traineeship Program,' a pivotal component of our strategic approach to professional development and inclusivity which is now in its second iteration. This comprehensive twelve-month training initiative is designed to empower a new generation of employment consultants by leveraging the invaluable lived experiences of our participants. Obtaining a Certificate IV in Employment Services, trainees gain not only hands-on experience but also the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively implement the uLaunch Service Delivery Model. The participants, typically new to employment services yet bound by a common drive to support others, benefit immensely from this blend of formal education and practical training. Indeed, evidence from the first iteration of our training program demonstrated that 77% of our trainees both completed their qualification and secured fulltime employment with us; compared to the national average of only 48% and 68% respectively (NCVER, 2022). Through studies, mentoring, and peer interactions, the program fosters their professional growth, enabling them to use their unique perspectives and lived experiences to enhance the support provided to individuals with disabilities, facilitating their successful integration into sustainable employment. A full report of this training initiative is forthcoming. However, to illustrate the real-world impact of this program, consider the journey of one of our trainees, who progressed from job seeker to award-nominated employment

³ For more details about the platform and its features, you can visit <https://www.thefield.jobs/Job/Home>



consultant. This case study highlights the personal growth and professional development of our participants and also underscores the effectiveness of our tailored training programs.⁴

Building on this foundation of professional development and inclusivity, our all-staff meetings feature sessions led by team members with specific disabilities. These informational sessions provide insights into the unique challenges and experiences related to their disabilities, enhancing understanding and empathy across our entire workforce. Such initiatives are vital for creating an environment where all staff can contribute to and benefit from our inclusive culture, further ensuring that our services are thoughtfully designed to meet the diverse needs of the community we serve. These educational moments help to solidify the principles learned in our training programs, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical understanding.

Using uLaunch as an example, this section discussed just some of the ways in which organisations can enhance disability inclusion. At uLaunch, we have found that these strategies not only improve our service delivery and client satisfaction but also ensures we are a workplace that leads by example.

Conclusion

This paper examined the enduring employment disparities that individuals with disabilities encounter, which not only restrict personal and professional advancement but also hinder societal progress.

Through the case study of uLaunch, it is evident that strategic, inclusive initiatives have the potential to transform the employment landscape for individuals with disabilities, delivering both organisational and societal benefits.

uLaunch's comprehensive approach, which incorporates lived experience at all organisational levels — from governance to employee — serves as an exemplar for success and underscores the importance of inclusivity within the Australian Disability Services sector. Despite these advances, the challenge of achieving true inclusivity remains ongoing. uLaunch recognises that it does not have all the answers,

⁴ Click here to read more about this inspiring story: [**Brendan: From uLaunch Star Trainee to State Award Nominee**](#).



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and achieving widespread change requires a collaborative effort. We invite other organisations, policymakers, and stakeholders within the disability services sector to engage with us in this endeavour. By collaborating and sharing insights, we can overcome barriers and create a more inclusive workforce for people with disabilities, thus ensuring that inclusivity forms the foundation of our sector's values, rather than a mere aspiration.

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