



Blind Citizens Australia
Submission to the
House of Representatives Standing
Committee on Employment and
Workplace Relations
Inquiry into
Increasing Participation in Paid
Work

September 2003

1.0 Blind Citizens Australia

Blind Citizens Australia is the peak national organisation for people who are blind or vision impaired. We have fifteen branches across Australia in metropolitan, regional and rural locations. Our 3,600 (approximate) members come from all States and Territories and include people from various ethnic and linguistic groups.

Through their involvement in local branches and our state and national publications, our members gain opportunities for peer support and social interaction and access to blindness-specific information and advocacy support. Our national and Victorian offices provide individual and systemic advocacy support, and our NSW office a limited information service, to all people who are blind or vision impaired.

2.0 Background

This Inquiry is timely. The release of the **Intergenerational Report 2002-2003** and recent initiatives by employer groups such as the Business Council of Australia have focused attention on the need to expand the pool of eligible workers to include groups not traditionally employed if Australia is to meet its future workforce needs (Business Council of Australia 2003). Blind Citizens Australia has welcomed these discussions but has been dismayed that in the main they have focussed on the aged without explicitly referring to or considering workers and job seekers with disabilities. This oversight should be of concern to those attempting to identify policies to address Australia's future workforce.

The strong relationship between disability and ageing leads to an extensive overlap between the aged worker population and people with disabilities (ABS 1998: 5). This overlap is particularly pertinent when trends towards early retirement are considered. Overseas research indicates that people who lose their sight as adults are highly likely to lose their job as a result – between 70 to 90% of blind people who are unemployed were employed before they lost their sight and the majority left their employment involuntarily (Dryden 2001: 2). This compares unfavourably to Australian figures for the general population, which show that 67% of people who had been retrenched in the previous three years had found employment (ABS 2002: 1). The policy implications of this cannot be overlooked without subsequent reforms being fundamentally weakened.

3.0 Blind People and Employment

Employment is a long-standing key issue for our members. Over the past year we have supported workers across a broad range of occupations. We have provided advice and support to job applicants, people seeking promotion, people who have not been provided with reasonable adjustments in their workplaces and people who have been dismissed.

There are numerous inter-related barriers to participation for people who are blind or vision impaired, as the experiences of our members demonstrate.

“Course materials? Well, out of the four subjects I am doing this semester, one teacher has enlarged the print for me. The rest of them they say they forget, but, some of the print one of the teachers did enlarge it on A3 paper from A4, but when I got home and started to read it, some sections of the copy was missing from the original copy...”

- Andrea, student, vision impaired

“There is the issue of people who can't drive or take public transport, for example in rural areas.... We may have an enormous capacity to work, but if we can't physically get to work, we do not have any.”

- Francesco, employed, vision impaired

“Now with new equipment which is computerised but often not compatible with screen readers and that can make life very difficult because that takes you out of a lot of things straight away.... there is often a lot of use of noticeboards and things like that and if you don't have people who are going to tell you about things... then you just don't know what's going on.”

- Angela, student and part-time employee, blind

A person's capacity to look for work will depend on their ability to read the jobs vacant ads; their decision to accept a job will depend on whether or not they can safely use the relevant public transport; their ability to advance in the organisation will depend on training opportunities being accessible.

In addition to these structural barriers, people who are blind or vision impaired come up against discriminatory attitudes every day. This can have a profound impact.

Case Study 1

Neville worked for a local council as a gardener. When his sight began to deteriorate he did not want to tell his employer because of fear of harassment and discrimination. As it turned out, his fears were well founded – Neville was made redundant. Unfortunately, his experiences are familiar to many blind workers. “The plain truth is that if you had any problems, any physical disabilities at all - and there were other guys there, it wasn't only me - if you had any physical impairment at all, you just covered it up for dear life.”

Case Study 2

Cheryl was employed as a senior nursing manager when she lost her sight over four weeks. She left the workforce for a short period to adjust to her blindness, but soon began to seek work independently and through employment agencies. Her experience of the support offered from agencies is typical. “When I went there initially they said to me, ‘Why don't you be a medical secretary? Start there’. I thought, ‘I'm fifty one years old, I've done all these courses, I've always been in semi-senior management positions, why would I think of being a medical secretary?’ Some people say do this that and the other that are all computer based. I've never had a job before that would be just working on a computer, I don't want to do it.’ ”

Case Study 3

Jean was an experienced physiotherapist when her sight began to deteriorate. After a period of adjustment, she tried to re-enter the workforce. “I tried to enrol in a hospital refresher course because I thought there was a lot of valuable work I could do, but I was told by the hospital not to bother. That really set me back – I stayed at home for 2 years after that.”

As these case examples illustrate, discrimination is particularly devastating in the labour market. Surveys suggest that while people who are blind or vision impaired are eager to work (62% participation rate, which is high relative to other disability groups (ABS 1997), only 21% are able to find work (RBS 1996: 101). Employment discrimination is apparent in the low take up rate of the Workplace Modifications Program, which funds adaptations for employees with a disability. In 2002, it was reported that only 2 of the 196 Job Network Providers had utilised the Program (Pettit 2002).

Research also shows that people with disabilities are more likely to lose their jobs during periods of economic downturn (Cass, Gibson and Tito 1988: 10). This discrimination has a compounding negative effect; as most jobs are filled through word of mouth, those who are out of the employment loop are further disadvantaged (NSW Department of Women 2002).

And of course, people who are blind or vision impaired are not immune from the additional impacts of other forms of discrimination, including sexism and ageism (See Dryden 2001 and Smith 1999).

“I really want to [work] now. I’ve tried, but to be truthful, they’re not interested when they know you can’t see. Of course, I’m fifty, it makes it very difficult.”

- Joan, unemployed, blind

In addition to discrimination and structural barriers, people who are blind or vision impaired face broader labour-market changes which are having an adverse impact on the number of positions they can compete for, such as:

- the increasingly visual nature of work;
- a reduction in the number of entry level positions in organisations and an increased emphasis on multi-skilling;
- the growth in employment in the small business sector and decline in employment in the public sector (Kryger 2000);
- the concentration of employment in the retail trade sector (ABS 2002); and,
- the increased work-force participation of women and young people (ABS 2001).

4.0 Government Initiatives in Employment

4.1 Overview

Over the last 20 years there has been a dramatic shift from access for people with disabilities through charity to access as a right. Today, people with disabilities demand equal access to the full range of community resources, information, and opportunities, including employment.

This change has created challenges for all of society. To a very limited extent governments have met this challenge - the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation and disability service standards are examples - overall, however, they have failed to meet their obligations to people with disabilities.

Governments have approached disability access in a piece-meal and ad hoc fashion and consequently discriminatory community attitudes have continued barely checked.

The Commonwealth Disability Strategy could have been an exception to this. The Strategy was introduced in 1994 “as a planning framework to assist Commonwealth organisations to meet their obligations under the **Disability**

Discrimination Act 1992" (Department of Family and Community Services 2000). The Strategy was designed to guarantee to Commonwealth employees with disabilities accessible work environments and the same opportunities for promotion and training as other employees.

Unfortunately, the excellent principles and obligations embedded in the Strategy have not been universally acknowledged, absorbed and implemented. Blind Citizens Australia struggles as much as ever to make programs and services accessible to people who are blind or vision impaired, particularly in relation to access to information. Public sector employment of people with disabilities has declined and Blind Citizens Australia still represents blind and vision impaired employees experiencing personal and systemic discrimination.

4.2 Recent Reforms

In recent years the Federal Government has introduced an extensive range of reforms in the areas of employment assistance and income support, including reforms aimed specifically at improving the rate of employment for people with disabilities. The 2002 Department of Family and Community Services' Australians Working Together package, which incorporated the Better Assessment and Early Intervention program, sought to improve employment by increasing the availability of employment assistance providers and introducing holistic assessments of work-readiness. More controversially, in the 2002-2003 Federal Budget the Government sought to change the rules for eligibility for a disability support payment by reducing the number of hours a person had to be unable to work from 30 hours per week to 15 hours. This proposal was defeated. Most recently the Government commenced a review of the income support system via the Building a Simpler System to Help Jobless Families and Individuals consultation paper.

While Blind Citizens Australia has welcomed the Government's obvious commitment to addressing the discrimination people who are blind experience when trying to access opportunities for economic and social participation, we have been concerned that their policy initiatives have been based on flawed assumptions about the causes of unemployment, particularly in relation to people with disabilities. This has led to the reforms failing to address core problems and allowing discrimination to continue.

Primarily, the reforms have attributed continuing unemployment to the inadequate range of incentives for individuals to work. This is disingenuous in the face of ample evidence of systemic unemployment against people who are blind or vision impaired and the acknowledgment contained in the

Reference Group on Welfare Reform's report that people are unemployed primarily because there are too few jobs and the jobs that exist are poorly distributed (2000: 2).

Most problematic however is the concentration of policy on assisting people with disabilities to return to the workforce, rather than ensuring they are not forced to leave it in the first place.

4.2.1 Recommendation

The Committee's recommendations should reflect the fact that unemployment is a systemic problem, not the result of individual failings.

4.2.2 Recommendation

The Committee should prioritise policy reform which assists people who have or acquire a disability to remain in employment over that which assists them to return to work after redundancy.

5.0 Retaining employment

Research by Blind Citizens Australia has reinforced how difficult it is for people who have lost their sight to re-enter the work force. Systemic discrimination has a profound impact on an individual's self esteem as these quotes from members who have sought work demonstrate:

"I felt really very bad... I felt useless and hopeless and stayed home ... I thought well, I have no place in this world..."

"it leaves me with a really bad taste in my mouth... it was very crushing.."

"... no pension or redundancy or whatever can compensate for the fact that you don't do a day's work."

"When I was doing nursing, and I knew that my sight was going to deteriorate, I tried really hard to be retrained. I didn't want to become a burden on society. And I've worked really hard to make sure that that doesn't happen. But, I just kept hitting brick walls."

The gross underemployment of people who are blind or vision impaired represents a significant waste of human capital. People who are blind possess a wide range of knowledge, skills and experience - talents which

are lost to the community through discrimination. Clearly, urgent action to address the barriers in employment retention and job seeking is needed.

6.0 A Coordinated, Cooperative approach

As outlined above, the creation of an inclusive workplace cannot occur in isolation, but must be supported by a safe and accessible public transport system, the adoption of technologies which are compatible with the equipment blind people use and the introduction of income support policies which support people with disabilities working, among others. In the same way, the full capacity of people who are blind or vision impaired will not be realised until our education and training systems are accessible.

The introduction of the DDA Standards for Accessible Public Transport and the moves to introduce the DDA Standards for Education are excellent starts and the momentum should be sustained through additional efforts.

6.1.1 Recommendation

That there be a substantial increase in the provision of accessible public transport, communication and education and training infrastructure in regional and rural locations.

6.1.2 Recommendation

That all Government information, including Centrelink and Department of Workplace Relations and Training forms, be provided in accessible formats, as per the **Commonwealth Disability Strategy** and the **Disability Discrimination Act (Cth) 1992**.

7.0 Income support and Employment

Once systemic reform as outlined above has been achieved, the capacity of all people who are blind or vision impaired to participate in the community will be substantially improved. In the meantime however, government income support policies will be crucial to keeping people who are blind or vision impaired out of poverty and assisting them to overcome the remaining barriers to participation.

A system that supports and promotes the participation and inclusion of people who are blind or vision impaired will be based on principals of equity and

justice, which will be reflected through adequate income support payments, the provision of additional support to overcome disability related barriers, and realistic and sensitive participation requirements. These have been outlined in full in our submission to the **Building a Simpler System for Jobless Families and Individuals** Discussion Paper. For the purposes of this Inquiry we will address only the need for a Cost of Disability Allowance.

7.1 A Cost of Disability Allowance

The inaccessibility of infrastructure, services and resources has significant opportunity costs for both society and people with disabilities, most notably through lost employment, with its associated dramatic drop in income. However, this inaccessibility also has a direct financial impact through higher costs for essential goods and services. The failure of society to systematically adopt the principles of universal design has meant that most public resources are more expensive to use if you are blind or vision impaired. For instance, accessing education, public transport, shopping or literature is all more expensive for our members.

Clearly, a new and serious community commitment to public accessibility will, in the long term, reduce the financial impact of disability. However, until this progress is achieved, people who are blind or vision impaired will need access to an income support system which recognises that people who are blind need additional financial help if they are to be able to meet the considerable costs of participating in an inaccessible society.

A cost of disability allowance should be introduced for all people with disabilities which meets the following guidelines:

First, because the allowance is compensation for the additional costs that people with disabilities have and is not income support the allowance should not be means tested or capped.

Second, the wide variation in need and personal priorities means that the allowance should be a cash payment which is flexibly provided, for example, people might pool payments to pay for more expensive items.

Thirdly, as people cannot participate without first having access to resources, the allowance should be universal and paid to all people aged over 16 years.

Fourthly, payment levels should be tiered on the basis of the social barriers a person with an impairment faces, not on the severity of their condition. As

people who are eligible to receive the Disability Support Pension (Blind) face similar social barriers, they should receive the same rate of allowance.

Fifthly, the allowance should supplement other support which is currently provided, such as the Health Care Card, and services which are currently provided by charities or service agencies for free or at low cost.

Finally, the allowance should be both simple to apply for and receive.

The Disability Support Pension (Blind) which is not means tested and thus effectively acts as a cost of disability allowance for blind people who are employed or have another source of significant income, has had a significant positive impact on the capacity of people in this group to participate in the community. Extending the allowance to all people who are eligible to receive the Disability Support Pension (Blind) would lead to their greater participation and would have immense benefits for the broader community

7.1.1 Recommendation

All people who are blind or vision impaired aged over 16 years should be eligible to receive a disability allowance set at the current maximum rate of the Disability Support Pension. The allowance should be paid at the same rate irrespective of marital status. It should be indexed, non-means tested and non-taxable, and should not count as income for the purpose of assessing eligibility for social security benefits. It should carry with it pensioner fringe benefit entitlements and should supplement, not replace, support which is currently provided.

The allowance should be supplemented by additional forms of assistance to meet the high cost of accessible housing and some types of adaptive equipment.

8.0 Public Sector Employment

The Commonwealth public sector has a duty to act as a role model in relation to the employment of people with disabilities - a duty it has dramatically failed to meet in recent years. In 1992, 5.8% of the public sector were people with a disability. By 2001, this had declined to just 3.7%. People with a disability are over-represented in retrenchments from the public sector and remain concentrated in lower grade positions (Boling 2002).

In part, this is a reflection of the changing nature of employment within the public sector. In recent years the proportion of positions filled in a year that

are junior positions fell from 53% to just 15%. This reduction in the number of opportunities to enter the public sector at a junior level has impeded the employment of people with disabilities.

The fall also reflects the increased emphasis on multi-skilling within the workforce. Once public servants had access to secretarial and administrative support staff - now most public servants are expected to perform at least part of this work themselves. Multi-skilling has also meant that employees are expected to perform a range of different tasks within the same job, often in different locations. For example, in the one day a junior grade clerk may be expected to rotate between four duties: cashier, customer service, data entry and general administrative work, performing each duty at a different location and potentially using four different computers with four different customised computer programs.

These changes have made it significantly more difficult for people who are blind to gain and maintain employment. An employee who is blind may require secretarial support to ensure that documents are formatted correctly, they may need adaptive software to be loaded onto each computer they use, which may not be compatible with specialised computer programs, and they may use adaptive equipment which cannot easily be moved between work stations.

The Commonwealth Government has an important role to play in mitigating the impact of these changes. For example, in the United States, Section 508 of the US Rehabilitation Act requires that Federal agencies' electronic and information technology be accessible to people with disabilities (see <http://www.section508.gov/>).

A genuine commitment to improving the employment of people who are blind will require Government agencies to organise work differently. It will require a stringent reassessment of the core duties of positions – is a drivers licence really essential? It will require a reappraisal of the way that an employee's productivity is measured – is volume of work the best measure of productivity? It will require the employment of a greater number of administrative and secretarial support staff.

8.1.1 Recommendation

The Federal public sector should revitalise its role as a model employer of people with disabilities. This should commence with a review of the impact of multi-skilling on the employment of people with disabilities.

8.1.2 Recommendation

Federal Government departments and agencies should be required to consider the impact of new technology on the adaptive equipment used by employees with disabilities prior to any contracts being entered into and technology that is not compatible should not be purchased.

8.1.3 Recommendation

Government agencies should review their workforce practices to identify positions that can be made more accessible to people with disabilities. The review should include a critical reappraisal of the core duties of all positions and the level of administrative support provided to employees. Where the duties of a position require a person to work in different areas, a realistic assessment of the workplace modifications that will be required to employ a person with a disability in that position must be done.

8.2 Public Sector Recruitment

As the statistics provided above demonstrate, much more needs to be done to improve the recruitment of people with disabilities into the public sector. In particular, the outsourcing of recruitment by public sector agencies has made it more difficult to ensure that people with disabilities are encouraged to apply for positions and that reasonable accommodation is taken into account when applicants are short-listed.

Some innovative solutions which emerged from a 2002 National Disability Advisory Council Commonwealth Disability Strategy forum included better targeting of recruitment advertisements to media accessed by people with a disability and the strengthening of contracts with recruitment organisations to require them to actively encourage people with disabilities to apply for positions. These measures could be enhanced by setting targets for the recruitment of people with self-disclosed disabilities in contracts with recruitment organisations. These targets could apply to all stages of the recruitment process: the initial enquiry stage, submitting an application, short listing applicants and the offer of a position.

People who are blind face particular barriers applying for positions within the public sector as a consequence of the inaccessibility of recruitment materials. For example, people who are blind sitting the public sector entrance exam are unable to read and complete the exam in their preferred format. There are also issues over the accessibility of on line job application forms within the public sector.

8.2.1 Recommendation

Government agencies and the recruitment organisations they contract to should use non-traditional media to encourage people who have a disability to apply for the public sector. This should include using non-print based media, for example, the radio for the print handicapped network.

8.2.2 Recommendation

Government agencies that outsource recruitment should revise their contracts to make explicit the requirement that recruitment organisations actively encourage expressions of interest and applications from people with disabilities. Targets for the participation of people with disabilities in the recruitment process should be included in the contracts.

8.2.3 Recommendation

The Australian Public Service Commission should, in cooperation with Blind Citizens Australia, review the recruitment processes used by Government agencies and the organisations they contract, to ensure that they are accessible to people who are blind.

8.2.4 Recommendation

Government agencies should ensure that any on line job application processes are accessible to blind people.

8.3 Public Sector Employee Retention

Government agencies cannot improve their retention rate for employees who are blind if they do not know the reasons they are leaving. It is essential that the Commonwealth improve its understanding of the way that workforce practices impact on people who are blind.

8.3.1 Recommendation

Government agencies should offer all staff with self-identified disabilities who resign or accept redundancies the opportunity to take part in an exit interview. A summary of the findings of the interview, suitably de-identified, should be provided to the Australian Public Service Commission for analysis. The analysis should be published widely and provided to peak disability organisations.

9.0 Other Government Initiatives

In addition to its roles as the provider of income support and as an employer, there is much the Commonwealth Government can do to improve access to the labour market for people with disabilities, particularly in relation to job retention.

9.1 Research

There is a clear paucity of research in Australia examining the barriers faced by blind and vision impaired people in obtaining and maintaining employment; and solutions for improving employment participation, access and equity.

9.1.1 Recommendation

The Government should encourage and fund further research into the barriers to employment and solutions to overcoming those barriers for blind and vision impaired people.

9.2 Job Retention

The issues surrounding job retention for people with disabilities are highly complex; employees must be encouraged to identify their needs, employers must understand their obligations to employees with disabilities and the assistance provided must be effective.

Early recognition that support is required is vital. Too often a problem at work is not brought to the attention of support agencies until relations between the parties have deteriorated to the extent that continued employment is not a viable option. Delays in disclosure can occur for many interrelated reasons including the employee's unwillingness to acknowledge the deterioration in their condition, a work culture that does not support employees disclosing their needs, or a concern (too often justified) that if they do disclose they will be dismissed or marginalised. Employers who are unaware of or ignore their responsibility to assist employees with disabilities exacerbate this situation.

Such individualised circumstances require individualised solutions which will require Government support programs such as the Workplace Modifications program to be flexible and adaptive.

9.2.1 Recommendation

The Jobs in Jeopardy program should be expanded with an increased focus on equipment provision and retraining.

9.2.2 Recommendation

The Community Business Partnership should address as a high priority the need for employers to change work cultures that act to dissuade people from speaking up when they need assistance.

9.2.3 Recommendation

The guidelines for the Workplace Modifications Program need to be made more flexible to allow for a wider range of support to be provided to staff who are blind, for example, the employment of a personal reader or sighted assistant.

9.3 Employment Assistance

The complex nature of disability means even with the best programs for employment retention there will always be some people who are unable to remain in the workforce at the time they acquire their disability. For this group, becoming work ready again can be a long and resource intensive process.

9.3.1 Recommendation

Mature aged people who lose their vision should be eligible to receive support from both blindness agencies and Centrelink Personal Advisors, as appropriate to their circumstances.

9.3.2 Recommendation

In recognition that pre-employment training for people with disabilities can be time and resource intensive, all people with disabilities should qualify for a Training Credit up to a total amount of \$1,500.

9.3.3 Recommendation

The Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service should extend the range of its services to include independent living functions.

9.3.4 Recommendation

The Government should give consideration to expanding and promoting employment subsidy programs to a wider range of occupations and employers, including skilled occupations.

9.4 Mentoring

Blind Citizens Australia used to run an Employment Information Service – a national mentoring program that matched blind people with skills and work experience in particular areas with blind people who were seeking to gain skills or employment in that area. The program was highly successful but unfortunately it did not attract ongoing funding.

9.4.1 Recommendation

That the Government fund Blind Citizens Australia to re-establish its national Employment Information Service.

9.5 Braille Literacy and Numeracy

Braille is the primary form of literacy for people who are blind. People who have lost their sight and can no longer read are functionally illiterate. It is of great concern to Blind Citizens Australia that instruction in braille is not available to all children who need it and that the literacy needs of adults who have become blind are not recognised in Commonwealth literacy and numeracy programs.

9.5.1 Recommendation

Braille education providers should be assisted to develop adult braille literacy and numeracy courses that can be accredited by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, so that students are eligible for the Literacy and Numeracy Training Supplement.

9.5.2 Recommendation

Braille education providers should be assisted to develop accredited courses specifically targeted at people from non-English speaking backgrounds. A person studying these courses should qualify for the relevant educational allowances.

10.0 Business, Community and Non-Government

Australian business and industry are slowly recognising that people with disabilities are an untapped resource and market, but both can do much more to promote the participation of people who are blind or vision impaired – making venues guide dog friendly, providing product information in accessible alternative formats, installing accessibility features like audible signs and tactile ground surface indicators.

Unions can do much more to protect workers with disabilities and promote inclusive workplaces.

Not-for-profit service providers can make their services more responsive to people who are blind or vision impaired by providing correspondence in accessible formats and by reviewing practices to ensure they do not inadvertently exclude people without sight.

Every employer could do more to attract, promote and retain employees with disabilities.

10.1 Work Experience

It is clear that work experience greatly increases a person's likelihood of finding paid employment. Unfortunately, people who are blind are often excluded from these opportunities because work places do not have the capacity to support them. This is particularly evident in skilled industries.

People who are blind find it difficult to gain hands-on work experience or volunteer/ unpaid positions because the cost of workplace modifications is prohibitive. Young people who are blind are particularly disadvantaged in the labour market because traditional avenues of gaining work experience are not available to them, for example, working at a fast food outlet or a retail store. A scheme whereby commercial and not for profit organisations identify positions that can be filled by people who are blind on a short term basis is required. The scheme would provide the organisations and staff with technological and other support.

The issue of career progression is also important for people who are blind. Blind Citizens Australia used to run an Employment Information Service – a national mentoring program that matched blind people with skills and work experience in particular areas with blind people who were seeking to gain skills or employment in that area. The program was highly successful but unfortunately it did not attract ongoing funding.

A major barrier faced by blind and vision impaired secondary and tertiary students is their lack of work experience when seeking employment post qualification. There are a number of reasons that prevent blind and vision impaired students from obtaining valuable work experience:

- students with a disability generally spend considerably more time on studies than their peers;

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- the highly visual nature of the casual or part-time jobs typically held by students, such as in the retail or hospitality sector;
- the lack of a comprehensive program assisting employers with the costs of workplace modifications (casual workers do not have access to workplace modification grants);
- the lack of a comprehensive program to assist students with the purchase of adaptive technology and other equipment;
- the lack of awareness among many employers and employment service providers regarding the types of employment assistance and workplace modifications funding offered by the Government; and,
- negative assumptions or stereotypes about the capacities of people who are blind or vision-impaired.

Participation in course or career-related work experience can enable participants, whether they are blind or not, to achieve many of the benefits that accrue from part-time work undertaken during a course of study. These benefits include:

- proof for employers that the student is capable of managing the functional limitations of blindness in a work context. It is one thing to list one's skills on a resume, and quite another to describe them with reference to how other organisations have benefited from their application to real world situations;
- networking opportunities with employers - it is estimated that as many as seven out of ten jobs are never publicly advertised;
- the acquisition of new skills and confidence; and,
- a reference or referee that will be willing to speak for the capacity and ability of the student to other employers.

Many private businesses and public agencies have long standing and well developed work experience or internship programs. It should also be noted that graduate programs typically consist of short-term rotations through various parts of the organisation.

10.1.1 Recommendation

Both public and private organisations should be given more assistance and incentive to integrate students who are blind or vision-impaired into existing programs through government wage subsidies and additional assistance to provide adaptive technology.

10.1.2 Recommendation

That Government provide funding for work experience programmes specifically tailored for students who are blind or vision impaired.

10.1.3 Recommendation

The Workplace Modifications Program be expanded to cover people with a disability engaged in part-time and unpaid work. Any equipment or software purchased through the Program should remain with the person should they find full-time paid work. Technical support and training for the equipment should be provided to agencies and individuals.

10.1.4 Recommendation

Agencies and individuals should be encouraged to commit to long term volunteer placements to make the necessary investment viable from both sides.

11.0 Accountability

11.1 Monitoring of Employment

The Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission's submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Disability Discrimination Act indicated that a lack of employment equity reporting or other affirmative action provisions in the DDA was impacting on the rate of change. The Commission called for national employment discrimination legislation to be accompanied by reporting requirements comparable to those provided for under the **Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity for Women) Act 1986** (Ozdowski 2003). Such a reporting agency could provide public and private sector employers and service providers with ready access to information on practical solutions to access and inclusion issues for people who are blind and vision impaired, to supplement that provided by specialist employment providers.

11.1.1 Recommendation

The Government should reconsider the possibility of establishing an agency to oversee disability rights reporting requirements by both the public and private sector. This agency could also provide job accommodation advice.

12.0 Blind Employees and Job Seekers and Technology

As mentioned, improving access to and provision of technology will assist in improving the employment and productivity potential of people with disabilities. Adaptive technology can improve blind people's access to information and assist them in using workplace equipment. Conversely, new and emerging technology also has the ability to create new barriers in

employment. Often technological advancements are introduced without provision for ensuring equal access and use by blind people, thereby disadvantaging them in the workplace. For example, the increasing reliance on the internet as an information dissemination tool has significant repercussions for all people without the financial means to access this technology, but is more pronounced for people who are blind because of the greater amount of equipment and technology they require.

Employees who are blind may use adaptive computer hardware and software. Like other computer equipment, adaptive technology is not compatible with all computer systems. If an agency changes its computer system without considering this, employees who are blind can be left literally unable to work. Government agencies should implement procedures whereby the compatibility of new computer systems with the software and technology used by employees who have a disability is determined prior to its introduction. Government agencies should also establish internal support groups for users of adaptive technology.

Adaptive technology required by blind and vision impaired people can include:

- laptop computer
- scanner (with OCR software)
- synthetic voice recognition software
- screen enlargement software
- closed circuit TV
- braille embosser

This equipment is expensive and out of reach of many people who are blind or vision impaired.

12.1.1 Recommendation

The Government should investigate ways of providing people who are blind with ready, affordable access to necessary technology/equipment.

12.1.2 Recommendation

All Government agencies should implement procedures to ensure that new computer technology is not introduced until it has been demonstrated to be compatible with adaptive technology used by employees.

12.1.3 Recommendation

All Government agencies should establish internal support groups for staff who use adaptive technology or provide support to staff to access external groups.

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