

ADDE

Australians for Disability and Diversity Employment



NEWSLETTER

“Shaping the Future Together”

Now on the web at www.adde.org.au

JULY 2006

G'day members and welcome to the third edition of the ADDE Newsletter! Some exciting developments have taken place recently at ADDE. You might notice a change to our template above where it says “Now on the web at www.adde.org.au”. Thanks to our very own Asitha Gurusinghe our website is now up and running!! Yihah!! As editor and on behalf of ADDE I'd like to send a big thank you to Asitha on his dedicated work in setting up this new web site. To be honest, we had hoped to utilise assistance from outside organisations but due to the quoted costs someone internal was sought and our very own committee member Asitha came to the rescue. It's turned out to be the better option I'd have to say. You can read Asitha's profile on page three.

Our purpose quote. It is *“Creating employment opportunities for people with disabilities and disadvantages”*

We have decided to add another clause to our purposes “ To create employment opportunities for ourselves, and other people with disadvantages by using the principles of “Community Enterprise”.

I thought readers would be interested to know that in March I was involved in the Commonwealth Games as a volunteer. Prior to the Games commencing a list of roles was given out to prospective volunteers and the role of “News Desk Assistant” caught my eye as I thought I would be heavily involved in the media side of things. But, disappointingly it wasn't what I expected. I thought I would be writing press releases and attending interviews of athletes and things like that...but unfortunately it wasn't. For two weeks I worked at the Melbourne Exhibition Centre, opposite Crown Casino, kitted out in the Commonwealth Games uniform with my blue and orange hat, shirt and pants. I found myself keeping up to date with breaking Commonwealth Games stories and reporting them to any journalist that asked. Anyway, my involvement will look good on the resume I suppose.

Anyway, that's about all from me...Enjoy reading this edition of ADDE News and I'll speak to you next edition.
Anthony Bartl

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“Many persons have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose”

Helen Keller

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Our Vision/Mission is to increase employment opportunities in Australia for people with disabilities & from diverse backgrounds

“ADDE makes television debut!”

In May, ADDE members Peter Rickards, Amanda McNeill and David Sullivan were part of a panel discussion regarding opening up employment opportunities for people with disabilities and people from diverse backgrounds.

The discussion was based on the feature article titled “Diversity or Equal Opportunity, which is better” which appeared in our last newsletter. Importance of all levels of government, especially the federal government leading from the front by establishing measurable employment targets for people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups was one argument strongly put by the panel. It was also mentioned that disability employment support services and disability agencies should have conditions attached to their funding grants requiring them to adopt pro-active employment policies and practices.

We can only hope that prospective employers were watching and that they will take this message on board.

Feature Article

“Should disability agencies lead from the front when employing people”

By ADDE President, Peter Rickards

The role and purpose of a specialist disability agency is obviously to provide services and support to people with that disability or condition. However, more than that their role is to develop a level of expertise, information and innovation which puts them in a position to be seen as the “experts” in their field. This is what the rest of us would hope and expect from them. After all, if this does not happen one could argue there is no need for specialised disability agencies. This level of developed knowledge, skill and expertise enables other organisations and individuals to turn to that organisation for help, support, and advice. The organisation can come across this disability or condition through a family member, client or work place colleague, or new employee.

It is natural therefore that an employer who takes someone on that has a vision or hearing impairment, is developing MS, has a mental illness or is returning to work from a car accident that they will first contact the disability organisation/agency for help and advice. What credibility would that organisation have if they are not “leading from the front” in showing how to employ people with a disability or condition themselves. The best message the employer can hear is that there is optimism for the future for an employee to have a productive and worthwhile future in the work force. If the agency can proudly say “We have found this or that there will be the required steps taken in order for a successful work place rehabilitation”, the employer is more likely to take notice. Even better if the representative from the agency who visits the employer’s work place has that disability or condition themselves they can then speak from their own experience. Having someone with that specific disability or condition be able to relate to the new or existing employee is likely to also have a greater positive impact on the feeling of hope and optimism for the future.

Some people argue that as long as organisations adopt “Open and Accessible” work place policies and practices, barriers of disadvantage will disappear. This ideal will hopefully be attained one day in the future, however there is no doubt that some types of disability are more disadvantaged than others, and therefore harder to provide employment opportunities for. This again is where the agencies that specialise in these fields need to “show leadership from the front”. Sometimes there may be an extra cost in service provision to the agency, in having employees with disabilities or models of provision that enable people with disabilities to work on a roster or job share arrangement...or for that matter with extra help or support. This needs to be

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acknowledged by the government department or funding body as part of the Government commitment to developing models of best practice. This needs to be done so that these models can be applied across other sectors of the economy and so that they hopefully take the stance “Direct service provision to clients” is the only consideration in funding terms. This also needs to be done, so that a service to clients is carried out at the lowest cost. This view appears to take a narrow view of the holistic provision of services to people with disabilities, and does not acknowledge that providing paid employment opportunities for people with disabilities is the only real way to reduce social inequity and dependency on government and agency supports.

Are disability agencies here to “help the disabled, or to help people with disabilities help themselves”?

About Asitha Gurusinghe – ADDE Committee Member and Web Designer

Asitha Gurusinghe, our Web Maestro reflects on his more than eventful life so far...

I was born in Sri Lanka with a deteriorating muscle condition, which as I have gotten older has affected my mobility. Not long after being born my family moved to New Zealand and I grew up there before moving to Melbourne, where I now live.

At a young age science and the way things work through science fascinated me and I have always had a strong interest in educating myself on all things to do with science. When I finished high school I began studies at university in science as well as computers. I eventually graduated in both and started working as a medical research scientist. This job was hardworking and kept me pretty active having to go to several laboratories in Melbourne in order to carry out my research. I worked here for about ten years until my condition worsened, I was wheelchair dependent and was unable to work here any more.

Since this has happened I have begun to focus more of my attention on the computer side of things. I now operate a web design and multimedia business, which has included setting up the ADDE web site that has recently gone on line. I also currently do voluntary work for 'Action for Community Living', and participate as an activist and campaigner for various disability support groups such as ADDE. I have been motivated to join these after being through several work places and witnessing first hand their unsavoury practices in failing to provide support services to accommodate people with disabilities. Due to it being harder for people like me to find a job that is not only well paid but at a workplace that is inclusive, I receive the Disability Support Pension.

As I am still at an employable age, I feel strongly about campaigning for work place reforms to accommodate more people with disabilities.

“Normalising the Australian workforce for disability and diversity employment”

By ADDE committee member, Alan Bartlett

During our last meeting at ADDE we viewed a letter from The Department of Human Services that concluded “the Australian workforce needed to be normalised for people with disability and diversity employment.” This letter got me immediately thinking what is meant by normalisation of the workforce. I began to ask myself a few questions about it.

Is it a good idea to normalise the workplace?

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When I think about normalising the workplace I would assume this means that people who are working are seen as a normal everyday participant in an industry. They work alongside their co-workers and are accepted as normal. But is this an over simplification of the issues at stake for disability diverse employment.

What if I am a person seeking employment, who does not feel normal?

If I have never had open employment opportunities, how could I adjust to society? For various reasons relating to disability, I might find dealing or competing with others overwhelming or impossible. This may affect the way in which I can use my ability to work. It would also be wrong to assume that everybody feels confident, competent and comfortable with his or her disability. I might lack the confidence I need to tackle the world front on.

Is it normal for me as a person with a disability to compete for my position in society?

For some, it might be a workable proposition, whereas for myself I might be at a disadvantage before I have begun. A harsh message is that “I am valued for that part of myself that is competitive and unaffected by my disability.”

Does a normalised workforce mean a fair go in the workplace?

I remember a time when it was considered normal for blind people to work as switchboard operators. Very normal, but it did not get you ahead in the workplace. Once a switchboard operator was appointed, you would often be left there indefinitely. You probably think it doesn't happen today? Well...you have missed the guy at our local supermarket who has been mopping the floors and pushing the trolleys for years. The corporation has normalised this person with a disability into this job. What improvements do they make to that person's ongoing development. The trolley man is doing his job fantastically and is accepted by all. What efforts do these large corporations provide for ongoing development? Hopefully a standard practice would be for employers to make an effort to provide specialist development in the future.

Would a normalised Australian workplace for people with disabilities cause gravitation toward similar types of suitable employment?

I remember when I was younger that I had a few friends working in darkrooms. This was because it suited blind people to work there. They got paid well, but could not see anything they were producing. Normalisation of work might naturally cause this effect of suitable targeted employment. If this is considered a desirable outcome, then workplaces that are particularly suited to workers with disabilities should be compensated for associated costs. Funding could be made available to those industries that particularly suit people with disabilities. An example of a standard job type is a person with vision impairment working in a call centre. It would not be viable for these same workers to be driving the local bus.

Furthermore, the profile of organisations or companies that employ people with disabilities might become standard. It may appear easier to find jobs with large corporations that can logistically absorb the cost of disability employment and this might be better than expecting small business to employ people with disabilities. Not for profit organisations in the disability field might have a mandate to empower people with disabilities by giving them opportunities in their organisations.

If people are being normalised are they expected to be less diverse?

I think that diversity should be enhanced and respected by employers. The standards being that these jobs are offered while reflecting the true diversity of the community. This might encompass offering a job that is

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considered not standard. For example, it might mean irregular hours for someone with “MS”. I think normalisation of the workforce should mean that employers and employees should embrace diversity and make it a part of their workplace.

I feel that we should be lobbying and educating the workforce to let them know that being treated as normal isn't good enough. Some people need more than normal; some people may need extra support, effort and encouragement to partake in open employment.

Should it be normal for people who have a disability to compete for income?

For some it would be acceptable and for others, market justification would be inappropriate. Either way, access to open employment should be standard where people's disability affects their competitiveness. Hopefully if Australia's workforce became normalised, allowance would be made for people with a disability to bring whatever abilities they have to the community and an open work environment. Inclusion should promote access to all people that seek it and participation should come with adequate and generous rewards, especially for those people where their disability affects their competitiveness. Additionally, if people with disabilities were treated equally, then their incomes would be the same as their able-bodied counterparts. That would be a massive change in the employment marketplace with respect to disability and diversity in Australia.

Dean Clifford is a motivational speaker and an excellent example of a person's reaction to disability employment. At training programs he encourages people with disabilities to get back into the workforce. He was born with a skin disease, which causes constant skin tearing and bleeding. At the moment Dean works for Ken Mills Toyota in Queensland as a marketing and business developer.

Dean says with pride “When I was born, I was given a life expectancy of just 5 years. I'm now 26! I've blown everybody's expectations out of the water with my mental strength and my sheer determination to live a normal life!”. *From his web site – DeanClifford.com*. His employer has created an environment for him to be able to work and extend himself in his career. He has, however, a lot of what most of us don't have... confidence and grit determination. Check out his web site.

A normalised environment would allow disclosure of a disability in job applications with confidence. A positive approach to jobs would involve creating positions that meet specific needs. For workers that may mean specific modification and support, flexible hours and contingency management by the workplace.

The situation of people with a disability not being the norm in employment is symptomatic of social attitudes people have towards each other in society. Could it then be said that our level playing field approach being supported by the disability discrimination act is not always correctly able to function? I would dare to say that positive discrimination would facilitate participation in the workplace! It is true that some people with disabilities can function normally in a job, while other people may have specific requirements that need to be met, such an extra assistant being needed to facilitate a person's participation in a job. This support obviously comes at an extra cost to the employer and we should not ignore that.

People should have a fair chance to pursue whatever they wish to explore! Standard practice should not be to hide away people with disabilities into segregated employment and thus doing an insignificant job. People with disabilities have a right to work in a fulfilling and safe job.

Normalisation of the workplace is obviously a process which is ongoing and important. At our ADDE meetings we have agreed to add to this process by trying to change employer's attitudes rather than that of people with a disability.

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About Amanda McNeill – ADDE Vice-President

Amanda McNeill, our vice-president takes a step back from her role at ADDE to look at her more than active life so far...

I was born nine weeks premature in the late 1950's. As a result I was given too much oxygen while in an incubator and suffered permanent vision loss in both eyes. I have limited central vision, no peripheral vision and am legally blind.

I attended a regular girls school called Fintona Girls School as my parents could see I would end up in sheltered employment if I went to a school for blind children. I was teased mercilessly and forced to leave Fintona. I spent the next three years at Carronbank – a school for blind children. The teaching was shocking and so I was shifted to Campberwell Grammar where I finished Year 8, aged 16. The experience of discrimination at school, although I didn't know it at the time, gave me the conviction that I had to challenge unfair practices and decisions.

I went on to the Australian National University to attempt Law, but found the volume of reading without modern technology too difficult. However, I managed to complete an Arts Degree majoring in Politics in 1982. I then worked in the Public Service and was soon asked to read paperwork in triplicate. But unfortunately, I became ill and was forced to leave.

In 1990 I commenced a teaching Diploma while still living in Canberra and my husband was transferred to the Latrobe Valley for work. I attempted to complete the teaching at Monash University in Churchill. I completed the academic requirements but was refused the "ticket to teach" due to the impact of my vision impairment on the ability to see what 30 sighted students were doing at once! I challenged this to no avail.

In 1993 I again joined the Public Service in Morwell. I was promised Zoomtext large print software but it didn't work with Social Security's Computer system so was useless for the first 6 months! The Manager was determined to sack me for being inefficient. Nine months into my appointment they realised a large screen monitor would help and it was installed after the 11 month mark. A month later I was sacked! The Union took the case to the Human rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and it was the first case in Victoria to be heard under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992. I was compensated but did not get my job back.

In 1998 I joined Yooralla, working on a funding submission to get money for the Parent's with a Disability Community Project. We were successful and produced the Making it Easier Manual for parents with a disability in the Western Metropolitan area. By this time I had two children and was isolated in the Latrobe Valley. I faced too many challenges to mention! I am still involved with it as well as the Peer Support Program on a volunteer basis.

I worked with the Vision Australia Foundation, developing a telephone support program for ethnic communities. I thoroughly enjoyed it and achieved much success until my job was abolished in September 2002. I then worked in the Day Program but it was clear from day one that the worker in charge felt Day Centre was a job for sighted workers only. I think the logic was that sighted workers could drive the bus if volunteers were sick. I was encouraged to leave. I thought I had no real choice so I left in 2004 after three months in the Library. As an organisation servicing blind and vision impaired people I felt this was not fair but I didn't have a legal avenue to challenge them.

I am still looking for paid work and see ADDE as being a good vehicle for getting the issue on the agenda of government and the private sector. I'm proud to say I was part of NO Limits with Peter Rickards and David Sullivan recently.

I am married to Colin McNeill with three boys, Dugald 16, Gordon 14 and Ronnie 6.

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...If you would like to be on our e-mailing list contact or email Peter from the contacts below...

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