

ADDE

Australians for Disability and Diversity Employment



NEWSLETTER

“Shaping the Future Together”

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

DECEMBER 2006

Welcome to December issue of ADDE newsletter. The focus is on employment of people with disabilities in government, both Federal and Victorian State public service. Neither is a good look, and we would like to ask the question “isn’t it the role of government to lead from the front”? I am sure there are some good stories we just don’t know about them yet. Perhaps if someone would like to send us a story of this type it can appear in a future issue. Anthony has computer problems so I am putting this edition together. We would like to wish all our readers a safe and happy festive season, and to return in the new year determined to make a difference in the work place to greater employment access and equity.

Peter Rickards (ADDE President)

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“Wise men put their trust in ideas not in circumstance”

-Robin Waldo Emerson

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More than Words

written by Beth Johnston

People with disabilities (people first, disability second). DisAbility (focus on the ability). Inclusion (stop excluding).

Some people believe terminology is very important because it conveys an ideological message, creates a political norm, and contributes to a cultural shift. Others think it's just words, holding little influence, and that it's behaviour that effects change. I think both words and actions are important, in this context they show the relationship between policy, attitudes and behaviour. I use my personal experience to demonstrate the need to address policy makers' attitudes to disability, and the need to reshape the public service into an equitable employer.

I worked as a Community Building Project Officer in the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) for a year and a half. I have a Politics degree and have worked in Australian local government and the systemic advocacy sector for six years.

DHS was implementing a new initiative known as MetroAccess, to help local communities become inclusive of people with disabilities. It is clear that the number of Australians with disabilities is increasing and that government alone is not, and cannot, meet their needs. People with disabilities, like everyone else, want to live meaningful, contributing lives. MetroAccess is one way that people with disabilities' domestic, economic and social needs are met by the community, and not completely reliant on government.

This policy perspective interested me and, although I haven't longed to work in the disability field all my life, I was excited about my job. MetroAccess is implemented by local government in partnership with state government. Each council I worked with was at varying levels of development in their understanding of people with disabilities' needs, rights and contributions. I assumed that State government, having designed this social policy and its implementation through MetroAccess, would have already applied it to its own operations.

Unfortunately I found this wasn't the case. I am vision impaired. I use JAWS, screen reading software, to access computer software applications such as Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Internet Explorer and Outlook. DHS, along with the rest of the Victorian State Government, used Lotus Notes as its email and intranet software. I encountered difficulty when trying to read my emails and use the Intranet at work. The Lotus Notes version used at the time had limited accessibility for vision impaired people using adaptive software. There were also problems with how JAWS ran with Lotus Notes on the DHS network.

Without reliable access to my emails, I found my job increasingly difficult. Everyone would be lost without access to their email, but the consequences are even worse when you have a vision impairment and rely on receiving all reading material via email. It became necessary for people to send emails to my home email address so I could use Outlook to read them outside working hours.

I have always worked really hard to demonstrate my competence, to counter people's preconceived view of my limitations. This means being organised, remembering well and putting in the time. I was distressed that my professionalism and competence was being eroded by the Department's response to the I.T. problem we faced.

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From this point it became obvious to me that the State Government's policy agenda had not changed the attitude and behaviour of its beaurocracy. The nature and form of beaurocracy (staff movement around the public service, size and complexity of management structures, and an environment of not taking responsibility) prevented those I raised the problem with responding to me. Some people were trying to rectify the problem but didn't communicate with me about what they were doing. This resulted in a focus on an unachievable technical solution, not on my needs and getting me back to work. There were two components to the problems I experienced.

At a technical level, the State Government's choice of software was inaccessible to people with sight disabilities. At DHS no consideration had been given to software accessibility despite this department being responsible for disability initiatives such as MetroAccess. The problems I experienced should have prompted this consideration; especially as government departments were compiling their Disability Action Plans at the time. But Government still saw people with disabilities as service users, not public service employees. The climate in the Department was one of rigidity and containment, which discouraged initiative.

At the individual level, I recognised changing software applications across government was a medium to long term solution, the focus needed to be on how I could do my job in the meantime. A temporary solution was to use Outlook on a stand-alone computer unconnected to the DHS network. Policy restrictions, lack of consultation with me, and misunderstanding of my accessibility needs, meant this option was not explored.

As a result, I felt disempowered, as though I lost my rights as a person with a disability, but also as an employee. I thought I'd been employed to do a job, not as a token gesture. Therefore the focus should have been on problem solving how I could do my job and be most productive. People's preconceptions, ignorance or value systems about disability meant I wasn't seen as an employee but as a dispensable person with a disability. When my contract ended it was not renewed due to a restructure and I left DHS without the problems being resolved.

Six months later I used the Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) complaints process to convey my experience to DHS and suggest improvements. The process gave me the opportunity to be heard and discuss how things could be better in future. I.T. accessibility is a specific issue that can be overcome through flexibility, forward thinking and software development. What is more important is to not lose sight of the person as a colleague, a problem-solver, a friend, an equal.

It's ok to not know all the answers, everyone's needs are different. The most important thing to remember is everyone deserves respect, dignity and honesty. Disability awareness training should include role playing with a focus on problem solving, and humanising people with disabilities. Recognising commonalities: ambition, skill, joy, humour, will help people put aside their fear and get on with their job.

All State Government beaurocracies must work hard to harness the value and ability disabled people bring to all employment areas. A proactive approach of engaging with employees with disabilities will get the best out of them. Middle to top-level managers must take responsibility for ensuring problems are solved and people are doing their jobs. Taking responsibility doesn't equal playing musical chairs and not being out when the music stops. It's about recognising it's not about who will take the blame, but about doing everything you reasonably can to help people solve a problem. The culture must encourage flexibility and common sense when faced with policies and practices that exclude people

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with disabilities. This will make the public service more equitable. Senior beaurocrats and politicians must instigate this.

This should happen alongside educating people that the biggest barrier for people with disabilities is other people's attitudes and behaviour. Therefore we all have it in ourselves to make a difference. I hope the learnings from my experience are used to ensure such a good opportunity to live the language isn't missed in future.

My current job is Coordinator for the Network for CARERS of people with a mental illness. I've had this position almost a year, I find my job stimulating, meaningful and enjoyable. I hope other people with disabilities can have the same experience.

Employment of People with Disabilities in the Commonwealth Public Service

This speech was given at the Hyatt Hotel Canberra on the occasion of the launch of the Commonwealth's Management Advisory Council report on disability employment In the Commonwealth Public Service (which has declined markedly over the last decade).

SOME PERSONAL REMARKS ABOUT DISABILITY

By Roger Beale (AO)

Born in India in 1946 (British army family). Contracted polio in 1948. Affected both legs and left arm. Initially thought unlikely ever to walk - but did so with crutches and calipers. University of Qld (BA with majors in history and law), Commonwealth Public Service from 1967. Harkness Fellow at Cornell University 1973-75. Commissioner of Public Service Board 1984-87 (first legislation on EEO for the Commonwealth), Associate Secretary of Transport (87-93), Prime Minister and Cabinet (93-96) and then Portfolio Secretary of Environment and Heritage from 1996 - 2004 (approximately 20 years at department head level). Declined offer of another term and retired as Secretary in 2004 - in part because of late effects of polio. (From 2000 I was finding it increasingly difficult to walk and have been progressively spent more time in a wheelchair - but I also had some troubles with nerves in my arms due to over use and needed some surgery. I am still very active as a consultant and board member, but I try to work from home as much as possible, and I have reduced my previous very heavy overseas travel schedule which I had been finding increasingly difficult. I am fortunate in being able to adapt my work schedule and location without impacting on my ability to earn a good living. There are few who are in such a favorable position - which I readily acknowledge.)

I am talking to you today because of an interview I gave to the Canberra Times when I got my AO.

In that interview I said two things about disability:

- First that I was worried that as a public service we had dropped the ball – that I had a sense over my last years as a Departmental Secretary that the proportion of our disabled staff had dropped progressively over the decade, and particularly so among our new recruits

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- Second that I was particularly worried about people with an intellectual disability who had in the past often served long and worthwhile careers in the clerical assistant roles that have virtually disappeared. I was acutely aware that the very technological changes that have improved the lot of the mobility, hearing and sight disabled, had robbed them of the work that once they had done.

But I also said that I was proud, as a disabled person to have got to the top, or at least somewhere near it, of my chosen career.

It was that comment that got me this speaking gig.

One of my good friends who was on the MAC team looking at disability asked “Why did you say that? Why is the disability relevant? Surely your only problem was keeping up with some of our long legged mates in airport terminals? You can’t say it held you back.”

So why did it seem to me such an obvious thing to say – and why to my old mate such a strange comment?

I was asked to explain it to you all. Before I did so I checked my story with some of my disabled friends – and found an amazing resonance.

First of all let me say that I never felt discriminated against in the APS.

The only cases of "official" discrimination I brushed up against were very long ago.

Until they invented the Provident Account it wasn't possible for people assessed as "a health risk" (which I was assessed to be) to become permanent - because permanency required admission to the CSS. Without permanency you couldn't win promotion.

Fortunately for me the Provident Account had just been introduced – I was extremely grateful even though that came with a benefit classification certificate which limited my access to invalidity retirement.

But remember I entered the service at about the same time that the marriage bar was lifted for women – so there was plenty of discrimination to go around.

A lot has changed - and a lot of that change began in the 60's when Fred Wheeler was Chairman of the Board.

I entered as a (just) 20 year old admin trainee. I was told that my preferred choice of diplomatic trainee wasn't available because of my disability – my MENSA member PhD friend who also had polio got the same advice.

But almost from my entry my career took off.

I can remember at my 21st birthday drinks my AS saying that I was either the oldest 21 year old or the youngest 42 year old he had ever met. And basically from there to department head level which I reached at 38 my path was rapidly upward.

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So there is absolutely no sense in which I have ever felt discriminated against.

But did that mean that the disability had no effect on my official life?

No - it made things harder, just as it tends to make life in general a bit harder.

It meant various levels of pain throughout my 36 years in the service and increasingly so over the years. In the last 10 years I had three fractures without missing more than a day or so of work and damage to back, knees, wrists and shoulders.

For the first few years when lifts were not so prevalent I always seemed to win jobs on the top floor. And of course I got an SES car park before disabled parking was introduced.

At the end of the day, and increasingly so as I got older, I would end up physically exhausted.

It meant having to allow extra time to strap all my equipment on and then take it off every day - making things like a quick pre-work or lunch time trip to the pool or gym etc pretty well impossible - which has a cumulative impact on health and wellbeing more generally.

It made long flights, the all night negotiating sessions and the sort of pace we set on the major international visits progressively more difficult.

So, like for lots of people with a chronic problem (including I must emphasise those for whom their medical condition was not visible like mine) it just takes a little more effort than for those who have better health.

But the public service did me proud – I had the help I wanted when I needed it. But then again I was almost always in a position to make sure that I got it.

Nevertheless, without an enormous amount of help from Marg Hall (my long suffering EA who would stay until I left the office at 8pm so she could help with the bags) and my other colleagues at the office and at home from my wife Venetia and our boys I would have retired earlier.

So partly the pride I referred to in the interview was for them – the team – we did it.

I am pleased that my MAC colleagues never noticed how hard we were paddling under the surface at times. But I would ask you as you deal with disable colleagues to be aware that what you see is not always what you get.

Often there are mental scars as well as physical ones.

Disability can affect your own sense of self confidence.

Body image is a problem for all sorts of Australians.

We live in a world where symmetry is prized and beauty increasingly so. This we know from endless surveys of the impact of height, beauty and symmetry on aspects of life from academic performance to lifetime earnings and success in securing a mate.

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So I guess I thought my career was one up for the ugly buggers – which was worth celebrating.

So often your self image is formed when you are young – by experiences and by the reaction of those around you.

For many of us there were long periods of institutionalization – hospitals or for some of my friends, sanitariums or special schools. These can build real separation anxieties and responses to authority which can play out in various ways in the work place.

Fortunately I have always been blessed (?) with a very sturdy ego. It was tested most of course during school days when "difference" and restrictions on participation in sport and of course dancing could seriously affect social acceptance.

And of course it was a bit of a challenge in the leg over stakes at University (enough already).

This can leave those of more sensitive disposition than the author a bit scarred, wary of authority, looking for signs of rejection and diffident about risking it by putting themselves in new or prominent roles in later life.

And it inevitably means that some work social networks are denied you – peers and bosses played and talked cricket, football, golf, tennis or running. This lack of access to the “insider networks” would have been very familiar for many women in the male dominated SES.

But for many disabled this sense of social isolation - of being an outsider - is particularly strong. And of course if it is combined with other sources of "difference" such as ethnicity, social class etc. it can powerfully add to a sense of diffidence – of unwillingness to put yourself forward. Which of course can feedback into career progress.

The ways that others react to you is interesting.

I am so well known around Canberra, and so blessed to have worked in the sort of environment provided by the APS and people like you, that this hasn't been a real problem for me. But I am well aware when I travel overseas in countries where the disabled are treated differently that you are regarded with curiosity and sometimes as an embarrassment.

My MENSA member friend (also polio - a barrister with a PhD) finds people often ask his wife what he wants even though he might be in the wheelchair or on his crutches right next to her.

That has happened very rarely to me - but it has happened. And it has also happened to my friend John Smith.

My barrister friend discovered that the reason he was not getting cases from one of his chambers was that the clerk thought that clients would be embarrassed to have a lawyer who had to weave and stumble into court even before lunch.

God save us from the gatekeepers who protect others from being offended or embarrassed by having a disabled person serve them.

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So why did I say what I did to the Canberra Times? Why did I decide to mention disability at all?

First it was because I am very aware that lack of role models can lead many disabled people to under achieve – and clearly as you will hear from Lynelle Briggs many disabled people in the APS fear that identifying themselves as such will lead to discrimination.

My life suggests that is not necessarily so – so it seemed sensible to tell people that I was disabled which they otherwise would not have known from the story.

But mainly it was for the parents of young disabled people to give them hope. I remember my mother – her refusal to accept a pension for me, the swimming sessions every morning, the gym and physio in the afternoon, the best schools they could access for me, the fact that I cannot remember her and my father having a holiday for the entire decade of the 1950's. I know how she longed for me to have a career and how much she feared I wouldn't.

One of my disabled friends told me that he only discovered when his parents were very old that they had scraped together an endowment for him because they were convinced he would never marry or hold down a good job.

And above all I think how embarrassing but rewarding I find it to talk to the parents of the disabled and see their eyes brimming with tears when they talk about their hopes and fears for their children in the future.

Please think of them as you listen to Lynelle. But think about them even more when you go back to your departments and work out how we can reverse the trends of the last decade.

Edward Manuel

I came to Australia in 1972. In 1994 I was diagnosed with “Cerebella Degeneration” prior to this diagnosis I worked as an Accountant with a degree in Business Studies. I was employed in local government, before I ended up on DSP. I have two children; a boy and a girl. To keep myself busy since I've been on a pension, I have been involved in Disability Advocacy such as Headway Victoria, Vicnord, ACL, Darebin Disability Advisory Committee and Health issues Centre.

My experience with seek paid employment has very long, tedious, frustrating and unfruitful, there is a distinct perception that people with disability aren't worth the worry of being productively employed, I have tried working for myself but the professional indemnity insurance and membership fees were more than the work coming in. My last job was with Vicnet a branch of the State Library, this only lasted 6 months as the position was used as a stepping stone to encourage people with disabilities back to the workforce. Therefore I am now not employed but live in hope “something will come up”

Edward

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ADDE Mailing List

ADDE recently launched a mailing list to complement our web site (www.adde.org.au). The mailing list enables us to send global emails to all our members and supporters.

An email addressed to adde@vicnet.net.au will send a global message to all our members and supporters. These messages will get archived on the web and any web user can view these messages at: <http://lists.vicnet.net.au/mailman/listinfo/adde>

Subscribed members are able to view the message archives and access names and contact email addresses of all members. Other options include changing your password and unsubscribing from the mailing list.

It is not necessary to access the above mailing list functions under normal use; all members will receive email notification of all ADDE events and newsletter publications.

The mailing list is a subscription-based service provided by Vicnet, our web host. For further details and a list of other mailing lists maintained by Vicnet please visit: <http://lists.vicnet.net.au/mailman/listinfo>

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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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