

## What do we mean when we talk about ‘disability’?

Disability is used quite broadly within Australia and it can be difficult to know what this means. Alongside visible physical differences, disability includes “intellectual, psychiatric, sensory, neurological and learning disabilities”<sup>1</sup>, that “ in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”<sup>2</sup>. Some disabilities may have been present at birth, acquired through incidents or illness, or may develop in the future (i.e. due to genetic predispositions to that disability).

Additionally, they may be visible or invisible, fluctuating or episodic, permanent or temporary. Some examples include mental health conditions, autism, arthritis, traumatic brain injury, post traumatic stress disorder, and autoimmune diseases.

## What are disability accommodations?

Disability accommodations are steps taken to ensure all individuals can fully participate in employment, providing equity and allowing all individuals to participate fully in the work environment, remain productive and feel supported.

Individuals are able to request reasonable workplace accommodations or adjustments to assist in completion of their job requirements. And this right is protected under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), written by the Australian Human Rights Commission. The definition of disability workplace accommodations is: “Modifications in the job, work environment, work process or conditions of work that reduce physical and social barriers so that people with disabilities experience equal opportunity in a competitive work environment.”<sup>4</sup>

## One size does not fit all

Accommodations are unique to each individual and can be requested at any stage during the employee lifecycle. Examples include:

- Accessibility: Do you offer an alternative access to stairs, automatic door openers, improved lighting, reserved parking and facilities for service animals?
- Flexible or modified work schedules: Do you offer flexible hours, frequent breaks and a self-paced workload?
- Modifying equipment or software: Do you offer screen readers or magnifiers and speech recognition aids?
- Reducing stimulus: Do you offer noise cancelling headphones, break out ‘quiet’ rooms and options to work from home?

Whilst individuals are able to request accommodations in the workplace, if they are able to perform the essential elements of their job description without an accommodation and are not posing any danger at work to themselves or others – there is no legal obligation for them to disclose their disability. Similarly, when requesting accommodations, the individual with a disability only need provide the relevant details and information to support their request.

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1 Australian Human Rights Commission (2012); Know your rights: Disability discrimination

2 Department of Premier and Cabinet, Australia (2021). Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2021- 2025

3 Australian Human Rights Commission (2014). Fact Sheet: Disability Discrimination

4 Colella, A., and Bruyere, S.M. (2011). Disability and employment: new directions for industrial and organisational psychology, in APA Handbook of Industrial and Organisational Psychology Vol.1. Building and Developing the Organisation. Ed. S Zedek (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.