EMPLOYABLE

Bringing Your Full Self to Work

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Exploring the experience of being LGBTI+ with disability in the workplace

EXPERIENCES OF LGBTI+ PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY AT WORK

People who are LGBTI+ who live with disability face multiple barriers to accessing secure, safe and rewarding employment. Feeling comfortable to turn up to work fully being yourself, is something that many people who are LGBTI+ with disability are yet to experience.

LGBTI+ communities have an increased understanding of what it means to be subject to stigma, discrimination and judgement. Yet, disability issues are often not prioritised within LGBTI+ organisations. Sometimes there are strong champions of disability inclusion in workplaces, but once these individuals move on, the work stops. In many cases, the work around inclusion is often left to people with lived experience of disability. This approach is not sustainable, nor is it fair to place the responsibility of this work on people who are most harmed when it is not implemented.

While we know that there is a culture of goodwill across LGBTI+ organisations, LGBTI+ people with disability are still faced with the choice of how much they can show up at work, weighing up what to ask for and what to endure. People at this intersection report feeling like a burden and liability to employers. In a highly competitive job market, there is an incentive for people to stay quiet and do their best to fit in to the existing system and for some, that simply is not even an option.

Disability as an experience is something which is incredibly diverse.

Feeling comfortable to turn up to work fully being yourself, is something that many people who are LGBTI+ with disability are yet to experience.

Often people with disability are categorised as one group and a one-size-fits-all approach is inaccurately applied. It is important that consideration is given to how different experiences exist. Layered on top of this is the diversity of experience of being LGBTI+. Again, while there are commonalities, there is a range of different experiences. The best default position is to never assume, to be open to listening and willing to do things in a new way.

Being able to think critically about access and inclusion is something that requires knowledge, understanding and a willingness to change the ways we have always done things.

WHAT IS ABLEISM?

When people with disability are subjected to prejudice and discrimination, we call this ableism.

Ableism is one of the very last 'isms' that, for the most part, remain socially acceptable. The tricky thing about ableism, is that it can be subtle. It might be something we are unaware that we are participating or being complicit in. Tackling ableism in the workplace often means changing the way things have been done until now.

Taking the COVID-19 pandemic as an example: within weeks, many workplaces were offering a great deal of support to their employees to work from home. These changes demonstrated that it is indeed possible to do things differently. Many of the relatively minor adjustments and considerations people with disability have been asking for, for many decades, have not been welcomed in this way. Now people are finding that being at work is, for the most part, a more inclusive experience.

"I'd like to see a move toward employment [that is] more flexible, so people with disability can work in ways and at times which suit them and which reduce barriers to employment, while still ensuring people remain connected to their colleagues. I think it's important to acknowledge that these past few months during COVID-19 have had some benefits for people with disability."

The first step towards addressing ableism relies on being able to identify it when we see it taking place.

SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

The social model of disability focuses on looking at the societal barriers that impact a person who have a disability, rather than seeing a person's disability as the problem that causes the barrier.

For example, many LGBTI+ events are not accessible for people with disability. For people who are Deaf, Auslan interpreters may be provided to interpret the main performances but they are not available throughout the event to support an individual to meet others and mingle. This is an example of a societal barrier which can result in a person not being able to fully participate and feeling isolated and separate - which can compound feelings of not belonging.

WHAT DOES ABLEISM LOOK LIKE AT WORK?

The first step towards addressing ableism relies on being able to identify it when we see it taking place. Some examples of ableism in the workplace may be obvious, while others are harder to notice unless you are directly impacted. It is also important to note that people who have an 'invisible disability', a disability that has no physical characteristics, may be encountering ableism in ways that are not easily identified by an employer.

"People can be invisible unless they have a wheelchair or white cane or something like that which is not to, you know, hierarchize, different disabilities but there's a whole lot of other areas of disability that don't are not quite as well understood."

ABLEIST LANGUAGE

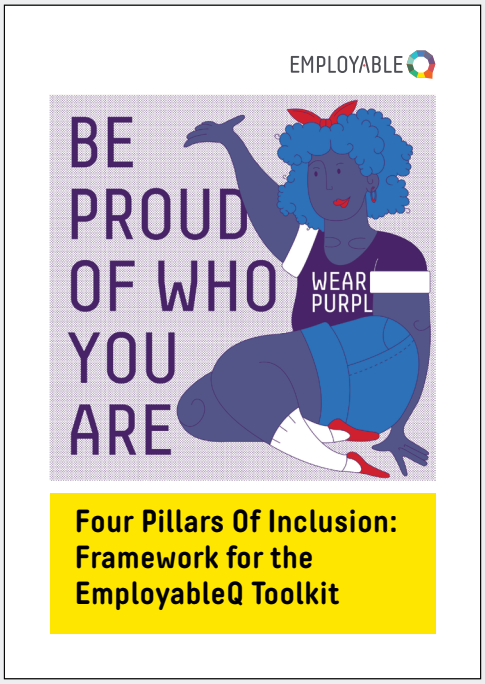
Ableism is often inherent in the way we talk to and about people who live with disability. This includes LGBTI+ with disability. When people experience both, the stress is compounded, and the impact is even more severe.

In most cases, there isn't ill intent behind ableist language, and many people don't mean to cause harm, however it is everyone's responsibility to make the effort to do better and apply that learning, especially as many of us from the LGBTI+ community already understand the impact that language can have on an individual's mental health and wellbeing.

To learn more about ableist language we recommend you read People with Disability Australia's **Language Guide.**

IDENTIFYING THE ISSUES

Throughout the process of developing the EmployableQ Toolkit we have spoken to 25 LGBTI+ individuals with disability about their experiences at work. The following issues have been highlighted as important areas for all LGBTI organisations to act on. Each of these areas are addressed by the **Four Pillars of Inclusion Framework.**



ACCESS REQUIREMENTS

People told us they had worked in workplaces which were inaccessible or did not adequately facilitate their access requirements.

Many participants felt uncomfortable to request access requirements from their employers, as they feared it would compromise their job security.

When access requirements were not met, people described difficulties maintaining productivity, experiencing trauma, and a reduced sense of self-worth. By contrast, when the work environment was accessible, they were able to maintain and exceed expected productivity, and had better state of well-being.

"They ended up putting out stuff that was really inaccessible, so I was the one who put my neck on the line constantly in all of my workplaces... partially because of my role and partially because I needed it"

"The times where it worked was when they were able to be flexible around hours and rescheduling, which would let me schedule my appointments in the morning when I was supposed to work and I could do notes in the afternoon. Or if I was too sore in the afternoon I could go home and do my notes the next time I was in."

BARRIERS TO PAID EMPLOYMENT

Traditional job application processes are exclusionary and inaccessible towards LGBTI+ people with disability.

Participants identified barriers when preparing resumes and cover letters, taking pre-employment tests, and attending job interviews. Specifically, job advertisements are presented in an inaccessible format, pre-employment tests are often inaccessible, and ableism frequently occurs during job interviews.

Participants also observed that employers often utilised people with disability on a volunteer basis rather than on an employment basis.

"I got interviewed by the organisation that I volunteered for and I didn't get the job, which made it really difficult for me. I asked for the questions in advance, but it didn't matter, because they forced me to go through an interview process and I knew that I wasn't going to be able to do it. It didn't matter how performative I was, because everybody knew me and the calibre of my work... but they didn't hire me. So, I'm just stuck knowing that this system doesn't really let me go in."

"When you volunteer in a particular space for a long period, because you're disabled it's kind of viewed as your contribution to society. And when they want a paid employee for that, basically doing exactly what you're already doing, to apply and then an able-bodied person gets it, it feels like it's expected that because you're disabled you should continue giving your time for free."

ABLEIST ATTITUDES

The ableist attitudes of employers and co-workers were identified as an issue for LGBTI+ people with disability who are trying to obtain and sustain suitable employment. All participants had encountered some form of ableism, either directly or indirectly, from employers or co-workers at some point of their working life.

People we spoke to often recounted incidents where employers and/or co-workers had made uninformed assumptions about their work capacity or capabilities based on ableist ideas about people with disability.

These included both situations where people with disability were assumed to be less capable than their able-bodied and neurotypical co-workers, and situations where participants were assumed to be not disabled or 'not disabled enough' to receive support based on their performance at work.

"A friend of mine had disability most of his life, and he can only ever get work doing data entry. Because I think workplaces just think he's in the 'too hard' basket. And you know, and at the end of my last Intersex Awareness Day address last year, I said we have to be taken out of the 'too hard' basket and put into the 'work hard' basket."

"I was also told in a meeting by Supervisor Number 1 that they could put all sort of supports in for me, however, that because I was young, I should struggle because it would be good for my career."

Participants reflected upon the intersectional experience of being a LGBTI+ person with disability within a workplace context.

INTERSECTIONAL EXPERIENCES

Participants reflected upon the intersectional experience of being a LGBTI+ person with disability within a workplace context. Some participants described having to hide the fact that they are a person with disability and/or that they are an LGBTI+ person from employers, in fear that it could compromise their employment opportunities or subject them to workplace bullying.

Trans and gender diverse participants described additional barriers to employment than cisgender participants, such as transphobic behaviours and attitudes from employers, restrictive dress codes, and forms which only referred to binary gender pronouns and titles. Intersex participants reported a lack of awareness about intersex people and intersex variations within their workplaces, such as employers mistakenly categorising intersex people as 'gender diverse' or workplaces not making adjustments for intersex employees with access requirements.

"There is this whole issue or this whole an emphasis of having to decide am I going to divulge or disclose my disability or my sexual orientation and or gender identity? And you have to kind of assess how everyone's going to respond."

“I always feel like a burden being like, “hey, can you please type an image description?” And people being like, “oh, but I have to type the whole thing,” and you feel bad about that. Or, like, “hi, can you audio describe things?” Or “can you send a different version of this to me so I can actually read it?” Like, you feel like a burden for doing that. And then you go, “oh, and by the way, I’m trans.” So, my colleagues need to be informed about trans inclusion and they need to be accepting. You’ll need to talk to them about what being trans means and how to make sure that they don’t discriminate against people.”

“You’re going to be dealing with mental illness as well because of what’s happened, the trauma of what you’ve been through. That can spill into the workplace as well. So, there needs to be understanding that intersex is multifaceted. It’s not related to gender but there’s tonnes of different medical related stuff that surrounds it, even though intersex is not a medical condition in of itself.”

SOLUTIONS FOR LGBTI ORGANISATIONS

Workplace Culture

Participants identified that there is a need for 'cultural safety' within the workplace. 'Cultural safety' within this context can be defined as:

"A workplace culture that promotes a work environment that is 'safe' for people with diverse identities and lived experiences, such as people with disability and/or LGBTI+ people, to be themselves"

FACTORS THAT LEAD TO INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

Policy and leadership

To achieve cultural safety within a workplace, a culture of inclusion must be embedded within the organisation's policies, procedures, strategic planning, and service provision. The organisation would consider issues relevant to disability access and LGBTI+ communities throughout its policy development, service provision, and strategic planning processes. The organisation would also ensure that it communicates in a way that is accessible to people with disability. Participants stressed that the staff in senior- management positions of an organisation must take the lead to champion diversity and accessibility within their workplace.

Toolkit Resources:

- Four Pillars of Inclusion Framework
- Four Pillars of Inclusion Survey
- Developing a Diversity Policy Guide
- Disability Inclusion Action Planning Guide for LGBTI organisations
- Disability Inclusion Action Planning Template
- Guide to Accessible Events

Four Pillars Of Inclusion: Framework for the EmployableQ Toolkit

Four Pillars Survey Questions

A guide to creating a disability inclusive diversity policy

Disability Inclusion and Access Planning Guide for LGBTI+ Organisations

Disability Inclusion Access Plan (Template)

Guide to Accessible Workplace Events

Training

For cultural safety to be established within a workplace, participants asserted that all staff members of an organisation must undertake awareness training, such as disability awareness training, trans and gender diverse awareness training, and intersex awareness training. Any awareness training should be delivered by people with lived experience. Participants also emphasised how important it is for senior management and human resources staff to be involved in any awareness training and learning. Without the involvement of senior management and human resources staff, participants felt that the learnings obtained from awareness training would not amount to organisational change.

Toolkit Resources:

- Training as a Tool for LGBTI+ and Disability Inclusion

Any awareness training should be delivered by people with lived experience.

Inclusive Job Application Process

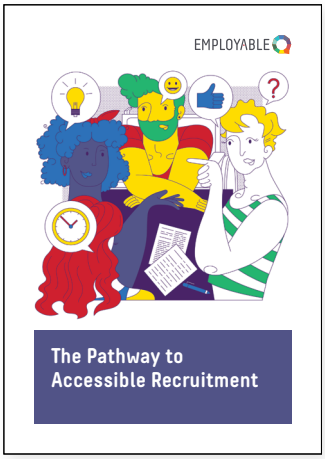
Culturally safe workplaces have an inclusive job application process which prioritises accessibility and values the diverse lived experiences of LGBTI+ people with disability. Job advertisements for the organisation would use accessible language and be formatted for accessibility. These advertisements would be shared across a range of avenues, including disability community groups and LGBTI+ community groups.

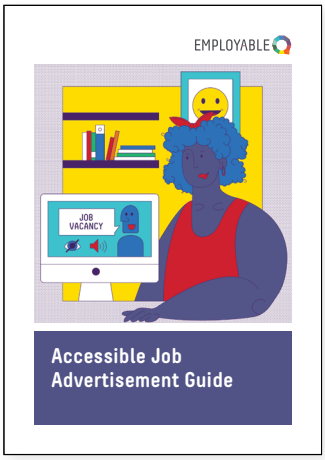
Recruitment strategies would be flexible and adaptive to suit the applicant's access requirements so that they are supported to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and expertise.

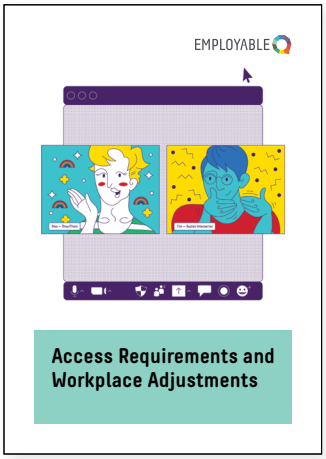
Additionally, there would be a channel for applicants to provide feedback about their experience with the job application process so that the organisation can be made aware of any inaccessible practices and discriminatory behaviour.

Toolkit Resources:

- Pathway to Accessible Recruitment
- Accessible Job Advertisement Template
- Index of Access Requirements







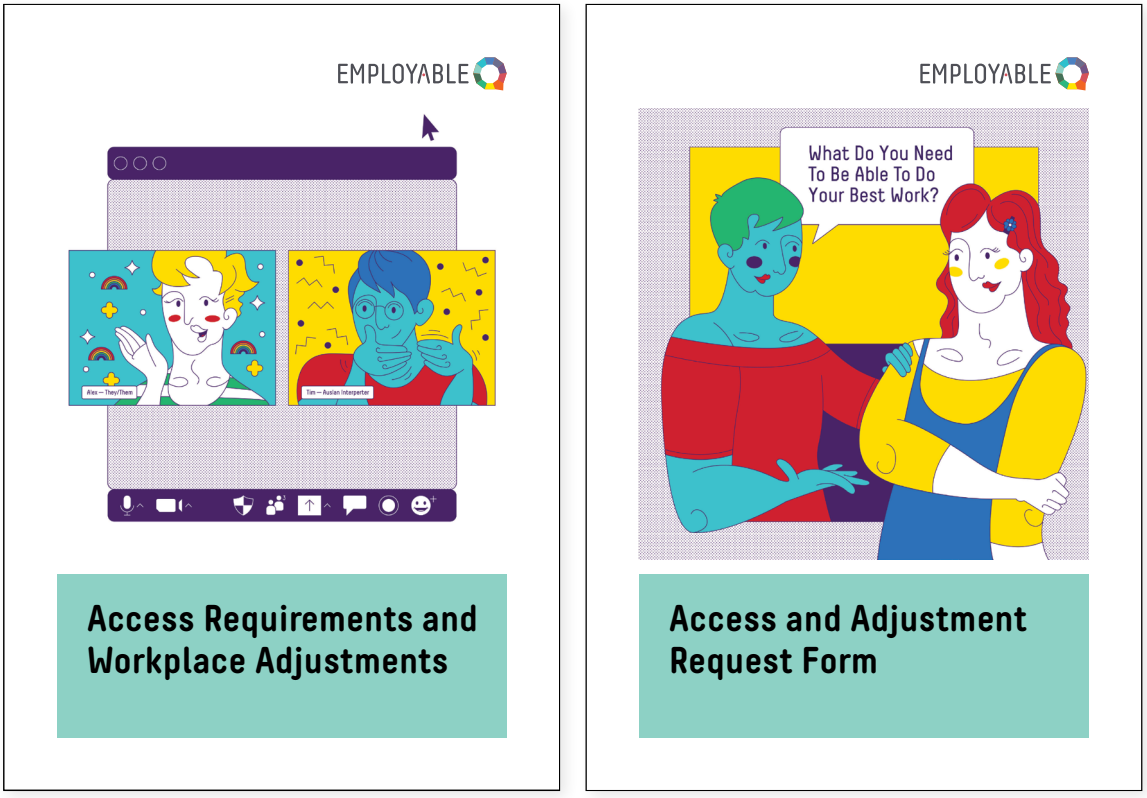
Job advertisements for the organisation would use accessible language and be formatted for accessibility.

Access and Adjustments

Culturally safe workplaces respect the needs of all their employees, including those with higher level access requirements which require specialised work equipment and/or some workplace modification. All staff members would be asked about what is required for them to be able to do their best work. These workplaces would also offer flexible working arrangements to all staff members as the default position of the organisation. Additionally, culturally safe workplaces would offer a safe and confidential channel for employees to express their grievances and complaints within their workplace.

Toolkit Resources:

- Index of Access Requirements
- Access and Adjustment Request Form



QUESTIONS WORTH THINKING ABOUT

The road towards greater access and inclusion takes time, consideration and personal enquiry. The following questions provide a starting point to begin these discussions. While some of these questions may not be new to you, it can be helpful to answer them in the context of what you have learnt to date. These questions can be used during organisational planning days, supervision sessions and to support your organisation to engaged in disability action planning.

1. What does access and inclusion mean to you?

2. What additional barriers might LGBTI+ people with disability face over their lifetime in the following areas:
   - Relationships
   - Schooling / study
   - Work
   - Healthcare
   - Social life

3. Why is it important for LGBTI+ organisations to examine ableism in the workplace?

4. Why might someone with disability be hesitant to ask for what they need at work?

5. How can we be allies for LGBTI+ people with disability at work?

6. How might considering the need of employees with disability positively impact the workplace for everyone?

7. What would an inclusive and accessible workplace look like for someone who is a LGBTI+ person with disability? (Brainstorm in small groups or pairs, create posters, or illustrate your thoughts on paper.)