

# Policy that works:

A fair go for disability  
employment post-COVID-19



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# Introduction

This policy paper on improving the employment of disabled people is prepared by Workbridge Inc. It is intended to contribute to the public discussion about how we can get more disabled people working during an era where bold public policy thinking is urgently needed and being encouraged.

In her pre-budget address, the Prime Minister stated, “we believe when times are hard, you don’t cut, you invest”. We agree. We welcome the additional investment in the employment of disabled people announced in Budget 2020 in recognition that COVID-19 will impact the employment outcomes of disabled people disproportionately.

This difficult situation has created a once in a generation opportunity to significantly reform public policy on the employment of disabled people for the better. It is the responsibility of all of us not to squander that opportunity.

This paper will be of interest to members of Parliament, candidates for Parliament, the public service, the business sector, the media, and of course disabled people ourselves.

Workbridge has been at the forefront of thought leadership on the employment of disabled people since our founding in 1931. Over time, we have led advocacy for changes in public policy to reflect evolving attitudes towards the self-determination of disabled people.

Our mandate to offer policy advice on disability employment services stems from our track record of working effectively with people who have a wide range of impairments and health conditions, and from being disability driven. Our Constitution ensures that Workbridge is governed by a Council whose majority are disabled persons’ organisation (DPO) representatives. Given that jobs rely on a contractual relationship between an employer and an employee, other sectors’ interests including employers and service providers are also represented on our Council.

We walk our talk. For the last 11 years, Workbridge has been led by disabled chief executives. Currently, Workbridge’s Council President, Board Chair and Chief Executive all have lived experience of disability. They, along with our Manager Stakeholder Relations who also has lived experience, are the key architects of this document.

In the spirit of “nothing about us without us”, in keeping with New Zealand’s commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and in the same way that Government rightly gives credence to “by Māori, for Māori” organisations when seeking independent policy advice on Tangata Whenua issues, our strong disability-driven kaupapa makes us the ideal partner to work with Government in a spirit of self-determination and co-design.

That said, there are many new initiatives in this document we intend pursuing with or without Government assistance.

We have prepared this policy paper following discussions with a range of sector interests, including the business sector and DPOs, but the views expressed here are ours and we speak only for Workbridge. While the recommendations we make are often linked to services Workbridge wishes to provide, we believe consumer choice makes the sector stronger and hope that others providing similar services will contribute to the kōrero.



# Executive Summary

## We recommend that:

1. Government provides financial and practical support to Workbridge in its desire to offer disability-centric career counselling, mentoring and transition services for disabled high school students.
2. Unambiguous guidelines be created regarding the responsibility of all tertiary institutions to provide an inclusive environment in every respect for disabled learners.
3. The Fees Free scheme be extended to fund any disabled student who wishes to complete a course of tertiary study.
4. Government acts to address the widespread community concerns about the impact of the benefit abatement rate and stand-down period acting as a disincentive for some disabled people to accept some employment opportunities.
5. Government consults widely on implementing a payment that compensates for the costs of disability that is not income-tested, thus ensuring that a disabled person's discretionary income is not depleted due to their disability.
6. Government eliminates the disparity between assistance available to those with congenital impairments or health conditions and those eligible for funding from ACC.
7. During this period of high unemployment and fewer paid opportunities, contracts between Government and supported employment providers recognise the value of volunteering for jobseekers, the organisations who benefit, and the country.
8. For those parts of New Zealand where individualised funding is not available, a universal funding mechanism be created with the primary objective of promoting the participation of disabled people of any age in society, including employment. The new funding entity should be mindful that digital poverty is a significant contributor to prolonged unemployment and implement programmes accordingly. It should take into account the importance of access to assistive technology as part of the job preparation process, as well as the fact that funding of some computer hardware is appropriate when it costs more than the hardware purchased for nondisabled employees.
9. Government provides practical and financial support to Workbridge in its endeavours to promote and train disabled people pursuing self-employment options. Initiatives should include mentoring from successful businesspeople, particularly those who are disabled.
10. Government acknowledge the underemployment of disabled people by ending all limitations on the degree to which supported employment providers can work with those already in work and who feel they are underemployed.
11. The fee-for-service contract model be replaced with a holistic framework focussing on careers rather than individual jobs, co-designed by disabled people.
12. Government and NGOs increase cooperation to better serve those who experience multiple labour market disadvantages.
13. Government, the business sector, DPOs and Workbridge work closely on the specifics of a public education campaign that promotes the benefits of employing disabled people and dispels common myths. Once agreed, this should be fully funded to include print and electronic media advertising as well as workshops.
14. We have a korero as a country about whether there is any value during these extraordinary times in nudging the employment market by way of financial incentives for employers to hire disabled workers.
15. Government entities and providers of services to disabled people be required to publish annually statistics on the percentage of disabled people in their workforce. Separate data should be provided for management positions.
16. Government encourage the hiring of disabled people by preferring to do business with disability service providers who employ disabled people in leadership roles.

Our rationale for these recommendations is explained in the remainder of this document.

# Setting the scene

As New Zealand prepares to restart our economy as best we can, it is clear that there can be no immediate return to the way things were before lockdown.

In the 2020 Budget, Treasury has predicted a serious and immediate spike in unemployment. Despite the Government's comprehensive intervention, we face a period of uncertainty and high unemployment for some time to come.

Even during a time of economic buoyancy and low unemployment prior to COVID-19, disabled people were identified as one of the segments of the labour market requiring targeted policy intervention.

In their 2018 Tracking Equality report, the Human Rights Commission found that disabled people, and disabled women in particular, are the most marginalised in New Zealand's labour market.

Statistics New Zealand report that in the June 2019 quarter, the employment rate for disabled people was 23.4 percent, compared with 69.9 percent for non-disabled people.

However, over a quarter of disabled people aged 15–64 years who were either not actively looking for work or not available to work reported that they would like to be employed.

This paper looks at issues confronting disabled people at various stages of their life journey, from high school to trying to get ahead and advance their career. Disabled people need support as they proceed through their career journey, but the current funding environment is not set up to provide it.

Workbridge currently contracts with the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) on a fee-for-service outcomes-based model which makes long-term relationships with a disabled person as they journey through their career difficult at best.

The contract is predicated on a buoyant employment environment where employers are hiring and access to labour is scarce. Scarcity of labour offsets the risks employers may perceive

because of low disability knowledge and confidence.

The contracting economy results in both increasing unemployment and reduction of employment opportunities. This makes employing disabled people unattractive to employers as their employment needs are overserved by others. Without new initiatives from Workbridge in partnership with Government, this is likely to be the case for many disabled people until the market expands again.

Increasingly, disabled jobseekers face barriers to the labour market borne of digital poverty where they can get neither the tools nor the training to upskill. Yet many disabled people are well-equipped with many of the soft skills employers seek such as critical thinking, problem solving and the ability to listen.

We are concerned by the challenging economic times ahead and what they may mean for disabled jobseekers, yet we're ready to meet those challenges head-on and are cautiously optimistic. With every challenge comes opportunity. If Workbridge, our stakeholders and Government work together to rebuild supported employment in a manner optimal for the times, opportunities for disabled people can increase, making New Zealand world leaders in the employment of disabled people.

The nature of work is changing as businesses adapt, and we see cause for optimism about some of that change. Many more employers now realise that remote working is not only feasible, but actually has benefits to productivity and the bottom line as businesses become less dependent on physical space. This is a positive outcome for many disabled people who benefit from more flexible working arrangements.

The proposals we put forward in this paper are motivated by this sense of opportunity and optimism, coupled with a strong desire for self-determination and social justice. Employment is the key to mana and independence, both economic and

social. New Zealand must decide that we will not ignore or underutilise some of our most important resources, our people.

Apart from the moral argument, underinvestment in the employment capacity of a large number of New Zealanders has negative implications for our GDP. It is estimated that assuming a median income of \$40,000, if the unemployment rate of disabled

people was the same as the unemployment rate for nondisabled people, New Zealand would potentially be collecting half a billion dollars in extra tax revenue. There is a double economic benefit to the economy every time a disabled person finds work, since benefit payments reduce while extra tax revenue is generated.

# Tearing down the silos

New Zealand must be an accessible, inclusive society. Every Government department is funded by and responsible to all New Zealanders and must ensure that the services they provide and the decisions they make take the needs of disabled people into account. Those needs should not all be shunted to one Government department who is perceived to be responsible for disabled people.

We are heartened by recent discussions with several Government departments indicating that there is a desire to work together for the good of disabled people. The lack of cross-organisational cooperation has cost disabled people jobs.

Workbridge initiatives that have proven to be successful when piloted remain unfunded due to them crossing departmental boundaries.

Workbridge was pleased that last year changes were proposed to the State Sector Act which would promote cross-departmental cooperation to tackle important policy questions. As we begin to consider reform, it is vital that such a cross-organisational approach drive the process.

It must also be accepted that the best people to determine the future of employment initiatives affecting disabled people are disabled people ourselves.



# High school, high expectations

Workbridge is delighted to see funding allocated in Budget 2020 to cover students in the last two years of high school, something we have been seeking for many years. Now it will be important to ensure the funding is used effectively.

An employment journey is a continuum that usually begins in high school when students start considering their futures. Without decisive intervention, many disabled teens may conclude that their futures look bleak.

Teenage years are a time of tumult for many, but they can be particularly difficult for teenagers with impairments. Fitting in with one's peers is important to teenagers and disabled people are often made to feel different. This can lead to exclusion from social activities and low self-esteem.

When most teenagers are learning to drive, some impairments preclude this.

Dating may be more difficult.

When high school students start to consult with career counsellors, the counsellor may have insufficient knowledge of what others with similar impairments have achieved. They may not know about available programmes and assistive technology. These factors can lead to low expectations being re-enforced by an "expert".

Mentoring from other disabled people during these formative teenage years is critical. Teenagers will be encouraged if they can meet adults with the same or similar impairment to them who are succeeding in the career that interests them.

Initiatives must therefore be introduced that tackle one of the biggest threats facing disabled jobseekers, low expectations. Getting this right is the foundation upon which all other public policy on the employment of disabled people must be built. As Henry Ford famously said, "whether you

think you can, or you think you can't, you're right".

As a disability-driven, pan-disability provider of employment services, Workbridge is the ideal organisation to operate a career counselling and mentoring programme for disabled high school students. Ideally, those who visit schools should be disabled themselves, as the potential positive impact of adult mentors cannot be overstated. The programme would facilitate informational interviews with employers, so disabled students learn about the qualities and qualifications an employer is looking for in each vocation.

With appropriate vetting measures in place, disabled students would be mentored by adult role models who can offer advice about how they succeeded in roles that are of interest to the jobseeker.

For those with vocational goals that do not include tertiary study, we wish to facilitate periods of outplacement, similar to the Gateway programme, with a view to establishing relationships between a jobseeker and an employer that may result in a permanent role.

We have successfully piloted a programme, Workbridge In Schools, which placed some disabled people who may otherwise have spent their working life on the Supported Living Payment into meaningful work. To the detriment of disabled people, we have been unsuccessful in obtaining funding for this programme. Ideally, the programme would result in a seamless transition from high school to the employment opportunity, promote a work ethic during a formative period, and therefore have a profound impact on a person's quality of life and ability to contribute to the economy.

It is critical that targeted intervention be available to assist those disabled people who seek them into apprenticeships.

## We recommend that:

1. Government provides financial and practical support to Workbridge in its desire to offer disability-centric career counselling, mentoring and transition services for disabled high school students.





# Tertiary study

We thank the Tertiary Education Commission for their constructive engagement with us, and their willingness to help us connect with other Government departments. Their level of positive consultation and recognition of our value as a disability-driven provider of employment services is in our view a model for others in the State Sector to emulate.

Disabled people need every possible advantage we can get so we can maximise our chance of vocational success. A tertiary qualification can assist, but the participation of disabled people in tertiary study is significantly lower than the nondisabled population. 25% of nondisabled people have a university education, but only 12% of disabled people do.

Attaining a tertiary qualification should be an inclusive, accessible experience.

Students, and indeed Workbridge itself, have been caught in the crossfire over debates about who is responsible for the funding of accommodations such as assistive technology and support people. The most important thing is that the accommodations are provided in as timely and comprehensive a manner as possible. However, as a point of principle, Workbridge believes that disabled people benefit from tertiary institutions being required to take responsibility for their legal obligation to accommodate disabled students. Too often throughout society, disabled people are considered someone else's problem, some sort of special case that can be fobbed off somewhere else.

As participation in tertiary study and the workforce by disabled people remains low, we believe the Fees Free scheme should be extended to cover a disabled person's entire course of study. Training Support funds cannot presently be used to fund course fees. Many disabled people are not optimistic about their chances of employment even if they do gain a tertiary qualification, so the course fees are a significant disincentive. This is a short-term investment in the long-term independence of disabled people.

There are many factors that facilitate the full participation of disabled people in tertiary education that should be non-negotiable and monitored closely.

- The built environment must be fully accessible.
- Public computers, such as those in libraries, should be equipped with a wide range of assistive technologies that best set up disabled students for success. Usually the free options now built into computer operating systems are not sufficient.
- Human assistance for reading, note taking or other tasks must be readily available.
- Personal assistive technology must be funded fully and promptly.
- Disabled people must have access to informed advisors who can understand the unique needs of the individual and recommend the best technology for their situation.
- Quality training in the use of assistive technology is critical. Too often, students are being given powerful tools without training and support for them.

Workbridge has forged close partnerships with most tertiary institutions. Where these partnerships really come into their own is when we can combine them with the deep networks we have with employers around the country. As tertiary students' career objectives start to crystallise, we will continue to seek internships for disabled students. Internships give them practical experience and expand their networks. And we know they work. In 2018, the Australian Network on Disability conducted surveys to measure the success of their well-established internship programme. They found that 80% of those who participated in the programme were employed within four months of graduation. This outcome makes sense. Disabled people gain experience in their field and employers gain disability confidence. Everyone wins.

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## We recommend that:

2. Unambiguous guidelines be created regarding the responsibility of all tertiary institutions to provide an inclusive environment in every respect for disabled learners.
3. The Fees Free scheme be extended to fund any disabled student who wishes to complete a course of tertiary study.

# The Benefit trap

Taking that first step on the career ladder can be difficult for any young person. It is the classic catch 22. Employers want someone with experience, but it is tough to get that experience when an employer won't give you your first job. This is exacerbated for all jobseekers during a period of high unemployment. Add disability into the mix and the problem gets markedly worse.

Current fee-for-service employment contracts, such as the one Workbridge has with MSD, appear to be motivated in the main by reducing the number of people on benefits, undervalue the contribution volunteering can make to society, and are based on a view that benefits and full-time employment are mutually exclusive.

The benefit abatement rate and stand-down period are controversial beyond the disability sector, but they raise some important philosophical questions in a disability context. Being disabled often comes at a calculable financial cost.

- Houses close to public transport, shops and cafes tend to be more expensive because of their proximity to amenities. Without such proximity, there is less opportunity for participation in the labour market or social activities.
- Assistive equipment may take extra space, necessitating a larger living space than would otherwise be required.
- Accessible appliances and other technology in the home tend to cost more than their inaccessible equivalents.
- Not only is unemployment prevalent among disabled people, but so too is underemployment (the disability equivalent of the glass ceiling) There is a financial cost to that.

Someone who acquires an impairment during their working years may face tremendous challenges becoming work-ready again. Yet the assistance they can access depends on how the impairment was acquired. Those disabled due to accident are as a rule treated more generously. This was an issue the architects of accident compensation recommended should be addressed over time.

There is a compelling public policy argument to be made that not compensating for the extra costs of being disabled is punitive and inequitable. A universal allowance to compensate for the costs of disability would be appropriate.

In any event, abatement rates and stand-down periods for current benefits act as a disincentive for disabled people to accept part-time opportunities that could provide the all-important foot in the door.

Benefit abatement rates may also act as a disincentive for disabled people to consider establishing microenterprises. These can be particularly well-suited to disabled people who require flexible hours and/or may not be able to contribute to the workforce full-time. Nevertheless, microenterprises do generate meaningful employment opportunities.

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## We recommend that:

4. **Government acts to address the widespread community concerns about the impact of the benefit abatement rate and stand-down period acting as a disincentive for some disabled people to accept some employment opportunities.**
5. **Government consults widely on implementing a payment that compensates for the costs of disability that is not income-tested, thus ensuring that a disabled person's discretionary income is not depleted due to their disability.**
6. **Government eliminates the disparity between assistance available to those with congenital impairments or health conditions and those eligible for funding from ACC.**





## Valuing volunteers

There has been a steep decline in the number of people volunteering since 2004 according to Volunteering New Zealand. We acknowledge that we must guard against exploitation which would see disabled people doing work that would normally be paid. However, volunteering is an important part of New Zealand culture. It can help establish networks which increase the likelihood of paid employment.

Volunteering can also add to a person's skillset. For example, an Internet-based hobby project can still provide experience of working in a team, creating an opportunity for the acquisition of skills that can lead to a paid employment opportunity.

It is important that during this difficult economic time, Government acknowledges the value of volunteering and that it is considered when evaluating contractual performance by supported employment providers like Workbridge.

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### We recommend that:

7. During this period of high unemployment and fewer paid opportunities, contracts between Government and supported employment providers recognise the value of volunteering for jobseekers, the organisations who benefit, and the country.



# The technology trap

Many jobs now require technological literacy. Today's assistive technology has the potential to open up employment opportunities that were previously impossible. But assistive technology adds another layer on top of the hardware, software and skills normally required. That creates complexity, cost, and an increased need for training.

For many disabled people, technology can make the difference between being able to perform a task and not. For example, a disabled person with limited hand function could not effectively use a keyboard, but with access to dictation software such as Dragon Naturally Speaking, they can use a computer with at least the same, possibly even greater, productivity than the average keyboard user. But there is a significant learning curve to using Dragon effectively. Hardware must be selected carefully and configured correctly. Once that is done, many commands must be committed to memory for optimal use.

The COVID-19 lockdown has demonstrated the damaging digital divide among disabled people. Those with access to assistive technology to mitigate their impairment and who were proficient in its use coped much better than those who did not have such access. From shopping to social contact, disabled people without access to technology were isolated and vulnerable.

Now that the lockdown is over, we must not be lulled back into complacency. Digital poverty has dire consequences for disabled people every day, many of them employment related.

For many, the cost of a computer, an Internet connection, the assistive technology, and subscription software such as Office 365 are impossible to meet. Unless we live in areas where individualised funding has been rolled out, disabled people are deprived of independence and opportunity due to rigid policy parameters on technology. We are trapped by not being eligible for Support Funds until we get a job, but we can't get a job because we haven't been able to afford technology so we can learn how to use

the software and systems common in today's workplaces.

If disabled people are lucky enough to land a job, we are sometimes impeded by inflexible limitations relating to what Support Funds can be used for. Support funds will purchase assistive technology, but they will not purchase hardware such as laptops and cell phones. The rationale is that employers would be required to purchase computer hardware for any employee, so it is not the Government's responsibility to purchase them for a disabled person. This appears to be fair and reasonable, but the issues are significantly more nuanced, particularly in 2020 when accessibility tools are built into certain hardware.

Example one. A blind person lands a job at a company whose staff use low-cost Chromebook computers. These work very well for most staff. However, the screen reading technology in Chromebooks is rudimentary and does not allow them to do the job. Purchasing a MacBook, far more expensive than the computers the other staff have, would produce the ideal outcome, and has screen reading software suitable for the task which is built-in to the computer. But Support Funds declines to fund it. This puts a financial premium on hiring them and that creates a disincentive. In a difficult economic time such as the one we're now in, this could result in the loss of a rare employment opportunity for a disabled person.

Example two. A person who wears hearing aids is offered a sales job. This involves regular telephone contact with clients and prospects. Sales staff are issued low-cost Android smartphones, but there are compatibility issues between these phones and their hearing aids. The aids are compatible with the MFI (Made for iPhone) standard. An iPhone is three times the price of the phones other employees are using, but without one, the disabled potential employee will struggle to do the job. Support Funds will not provide funding, due to a policy that it does not cover phones.

In both these examples, it might be argued that a

good employer who is getting a great employee should stump up the cash for these more expensive devices. One would like to hope that would happen. However, in an environment where there is a significant surplus of labour, these Government restrictions create roadblocks to disabled people succeeding in the job market.

While MSD may exercise its discretion, the fact that such stringent guidelines are the default is not in the interests of promoting employment.

In areas where individualised funding is not available, disabled people often find ourselves slowed down and frustrated by confusing, delaying demarcation disputes over which bucket of money a particular item of equipment should come from. For example, an employee needs an assistive listening device, without which they cannot participate in meetings. The device sits on the table and amplifies the speakers in the room. The audio is sent to their hearing aids. On the face of it, this is clearly an essential tool for the employee to do their work, but because it has the potential to be used in other contexts, Support Funds will decline

the application and require the applicant to go to other funders under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health. This is all about Governmental patches, not about supporting a disabled person to succeed.

A disabled student may be using modern equipment which they're familiar with and has been configured precisely to meet their requirements, only to have to return it when they exit the education system and apply all over again, possibly for exactly the same equipment. This causes delay and disruption for the former student and is inefficient public policy.

In the end, it is all Government money. Silos are simply standing in the way of the success of disabled people.

There must be an immediate move to simpler, more generous vehicles for the funding of equipment that views a disabled person is a full person who has the right to both work and play. Greater participation in society should be the objective, not fixation with what the equipment will be used for.

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## We recommend that:

8. **For those parts of New Zealand where individualised funding is not available, a universal funding mechanism be created with the primary objective of promoting the participation of disabled people of any age in society, including employment. The new funding entity should be mindful that digital poverty is a significant contributor to prolonged unemployment and implement programmes accordingly. It should take into account the importance of access to assistive technology as part of the job preparation process, as well as the fact that funding of some computer hardware is appropriate when it costs more than the hardware purchased for nondisabled employees.**



# Self-employment

These buckets of funding and arbitrary decisions also impede disabled people pursuing self-employment opportunities. Self-employment is an attractive option for many disabled people at any time because it bypasses the significant problem of a lack of public education resulting in attitudinal barriers. Additionally, flexible working hours are often easier when one is self-employed, and these suit people with a range of impairments. In these times when the economy is contracting, it is even more attractive.

Additionally, more people have become used to online meetings. New Zealand's world-class fibre infrastructure can unlock global markets from home.

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## We recommend that:

9. Government provides practical and financial support to Workbridge in its endeavours to promote and train disabled people pursuing self-employment options. Initiatives should include mentoring from successful businesspeople, particularly those who are disabled.

Assistive technology continues to become more capable and tools such as captioning are finding their way into conferencing products. So, working from home has many benefits.

There are plenty of people with great ideas who do not know how to get started. Mentoring and business advice, particularly from other disabled people, can make all the difference. Thanks to the Internet, that advice may come from half a world away. We also recommend that once someone has submitted a viable business plan, generous Government assistance for start-up costs is available.





# Underemployment

Given the attitudinal barriers faced by disabled people who want a job, many in desperation settle for a job that does not make full use of their talents.

For Workbridge, our ideal relationship with disabled people would be as valued lifelong partners, available at any time throughout a disabled person's career journey for advice, support with networking and CV preparation. We believe this is the only way that we will truly address the systemic issues disabled New Zealanders face, including underemployment. But currently, our contract is prescriptive. We are funded to deliver a very specific set of outcomes.

Workbridge would dearly love to work extensively with disabled people who are in work but are underemployed. Unfortunately, ad-Hoc payments available under our present contract only fund a few hours of service, which are barely enough for updating a CV and providing some basic advice. Given the more commercial way in which we must now operate, we find ourselves conflicted between our natural desire to assist someone into better employment and the lack of funding that exist for us to do our job well. The Government contractually requires Workbridge to deliver a mediocre service, which naturally leaves the customer dissatisfied and creates reputational risk for us.

We have been told by MSD that we should provide these customers with more hours than we are

funded for, wearing the loss in the hope we will recoup it by positive word of mouth testimonials from the person we are assisting. In a fee-for-service environment, we simply cannot run our business this way.

Operating in such a manner creates an opportunity cost. If we are working at a financial loss with customers who currently have work, we are not working with customers who have no work and have the potential to bring in more revenue for our business.

This forces people into a trap of either sticking with a job that is not ideal, going it alone and getting minimal assistance from us, or resigning their unsatisfactory job with no certainty about prospects.

Like everyone else, disabled people should be encouraged to maximise their potential, building on what they have achieved and climbing the career ladder. We will not change the dire employment situation for the better until more disabled people are in positions of responsibility that are meaningful and visible.

We do not believe an employed disabled person would approach Workbridge unless they had a clear career goal in mind with which we can help or are seeking guidance about identifying a more suitable career. If we can confirm the validity of that goal, there should be no limitation to the extent of our ability to assist.

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## We recommend that:

10. Government acknowledge the underemployment of disabled people by ending all limitations on the degree to which supported employment providers can work with those already in work and who feel they are underemployed.
11. The fee-for-service contract model be replaced with a holistic framework focussing on careers rather than individual jobs, co-designed by disabled people.

# Multiple marginalisation

There is widespread acceptance that Māori, women, Pacifica people and disabled people experience higher unemployment and discrimination than others. If one belongs to more than one of those categories, the degree of disadvantage is even worse.

Just as we identified silos between Government departments that prevent transformational programmes from being funded, it is also true that opportunities are limited for some people because certain programmes are targeted at one particular disadvantage. In this regard, we at Workbridge concede that we must do better. First, we will

be taking steps to ensure that our services are delivered in a culturally inclusive manner. We also intend reaching out to Government programmes and NGOs providing services to other labour-disadvantaged groups in New Zealand and fostering partnerships to ensure that we work together to support disabled people accessing such programmes.

We believe Government has a conduit role to play in connecting providers who cater for different sectors of the market experience labour disadvantages.

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## We recommend that:

12. Government and NGOs increase cooperation to better serve those who experience multiple labour market disadvantages.



# Employer education and incentives

We wish to acknowledge the close, cooperative relationship we enjoy with Business New Zealand. New Zealand is fortunate to have a key lobby group for the business sector that promotes the benefits of diversity to their members.

Businesses value certainty and the experience of disability is often unfamiliar to many employers. While we know that employing a disabled person is smart business, some equate unfamiliarity with risk. Workbridge takes employers on that journey of education and possibilities every day, and we wish to be in a position to do more of this vital work.

Once we have been successful in encouraging an employer to hire a disabled person, many seek more staff from us in future.

We have recently spent what money we can on a radio advertising campaign which generated considerable interest. Due to funding limitations, we were only able to run the campaign in a few regions of New Zealand.

Much more could be achieved if we were offered specific funding for public education, and there is widespread acknowledgement that more must be done in this area. The Human Rights Commission's Tracking Equality 2018 report recommended that the Government resource a nationwide antidiscrimination campaign to change attitudes regarding the recruitment and retention of disabled workers.

Lack of public education means that employers do not realise the support and technology that is available for disabled workers, and that funding for such support is available. Little wonder then that they wrongly perceive employing disabled people as costly and risky.

Others are concerned about the consequence of hiring a disabled person with respect to their obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act. Lack of education means employers often

imagine doing a job with a specific impairment, conclude through genuine ignorance that it would be difficult or dangerous and decline to make the hire. Public education, which should include clarifying messaging from Worksafe, can clarify these misconceptions.

We believe that Workbridge, as an expert in the area of employing disabled people that is driven by disabled people is well-positioned to front and manage a campaign that seeks to change perceptions of employing disabled people.

Workbridge has given thought to what other incentives might be provided to employ a disabled person, without sending a message that disabled people have less value. Once again, we note that the Human Rights Commission recommended that incentives be provided that encourage employers to hire disabled people. We are not going as far as recommending a widespread subsidy programme as we appreciate it is a controversial topic worthy of more kōrero in the sector, but we do believe the kōrero should take place. We are mindful that times are very tough for many employers. The COVID-19 wage subsidy has demonstrated that subsidies can be offered to employers with clear provisos and monitoring mechanisms attached. Offering a part or full wage subsidy if an employer chooses to hire a disabled person could make a dramatic difference to the number of employed disabled people. Often, disabled people are desperate for someone to just give us a go. When that happens, the rest usually takes care of itself. Studies show that disabled people tend to take less sick leave, perform well, and bring diversity to the workplace that adds value.

The subsidy would of course have to be for a defined period. As that period nears an end, an independent assessor could be called in to form a view about whether the placement was successful from a disability perspective, and whether any more

assistance might be required. If the match is clearly working well, there would be an expectation that the employer would continue to keep the disabled person employed for at least double the duration of the subsidy period.

A concern about subsidies is that employers tend to cherry pick the most capable disabled people.

This may not necessarily be a bad thing. The more disabled people in employment, and seen to be in employment, the more it normalises the practice of employing disabled people. A subsidy scheme may be what is needed to move the needle in these tough times.

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## We recommend that:

13. **Government, the business sector, DPOs and Workbridge work closely on the specifics of a public education campaign that promotes the benefits of employing disabled people and dispels common myths. Once agreed, this should be fully funded to include print and electronic media advertising as well as workshops.**
14. **We have a korero as a country about whether there is any value during these extraordinary times in nudging the employment market by way of financial incentives for employers to hire disabled workers.**





# Leading by example

We believe that Māoridom provides a shining example of what taking control of one's own services looks like. There was once a time when Māori were all too often uninvolved in the design and delivery of services intended for them. Disabled people have made a little progress, but nowhere near enough.

Workbridge has been led by Chief Executives with lived experience of disability for the last 11 years. For the third time in our history, the three most senior leadership positions in our organisation are occupied by people with lived experience. Fundamental control of the organisation by disabled people is guaranteed constitutionally.

Unfortunately, this is very rare in New Zealand. We are disappointed by the low number of disabled people in leadership positions in New Zealand.

Yet self-determination and full participation are fundamental principles of the UNCRPD.

We urge disability providers and the public service to lead by example. Further, we urge funders to give preference to provider organisations that are genuinely disability driven.

We believe there should be a requirement for disability service providers to report publicly on how many disabled people work within each organisation, and at what levels of the organisation they work.

We can hardly expect others to embrace the employment of disabled people if our own sector is not prepared to do so ourselves.

- We currently have only one member of Parliament, Golriz Ghahraman, who has disclosed that they are disabled. Her multiple sclerosis was diagnosed after her election.
- There are few disabled senior public servants of any kind, let alone involved in making decisions that affect our future.
- Few disabled people are to be found on boards.
- Disabled people on the leadership teams of provider organisations are the exception, not the norm.

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## We recommend that:

15. Government entities and providers of services to disabled people be required to publish annually statistics on the percentage of disabled people in their workforce. Separate data should be provided for management positions.
16. Government encourage the hiring of disabled people by preferring to do business with disability service providers who employ disabled people in leadership roles.



# Conclusion

Occasionally, an opportunity comes along for us to take a look at ourselves as a country and ask, “what kind of country do we want to be?” This is one such moment.

Most of us take pride in elements of our history where we have led the world, from giving women the right to vote to being nuclear free. Now is the time to create new such moments, this time for a group in society that is far too frequently overlooked. It is time for bold, innovative thinking.

The most precious resource any country has it is people. Not doing all we can to ensure all of our people can contribute to society and the economy is an economic and moral failing.

The time is right to create a disability employment framework that is based on a whole of Government approach, that puts disabled people ahead of the silos. To end as we began, with a quote from the Prime Minister, “let’s do this”.

