

Twenty years ago,
a handful of people started
meeting in an ordinary office, in
an ordinary Sydney suburb. They'd
travel across town, after work, to
share a glass of wine, a few crackers,
maybe even some French onion dip...
but mainly, they were there to share
a burning idea. This idea had grown
over the months and now, it had taken
them over. There would be no going
back. It was time to take the leap...

AUSTRALIAN NETWORK
ON DISABILITY



...there was already a lot of leaping going on in Australia that year. Ian Thorpe was leaping from the starting blocks into the pool, Aussies were leaping to their feet to cheer for gold and courage and sportsmanship... fireworks exploded overhead, music played. It was the year of the Sydney Olympics and Paralympics with new records broken every day, new heroes emerging from nowhere and an absolute embrace of the values of generosity and fair play.

Could there ever be a better time to launch this plan for a new and fairer Australia?





- 2008 Membership grows by 33%
- 2010 100 Members
- 2010 First conference
- 2011 Deloittes Research

A tipping point?

- 2015 Melbourne office
- 2015 Disability Confident Recruiter
- 2016 Access & Inclusion Index
- 2016 DCR eLearn
- 2017 A&I Benchmark Report
- 2018 Jobs in Jeopardy
- 2020 We're here! 301 members

Work assist

2008-2013
New wings

2013-2020
300 members strong

Stella Blu Café

January 1999. Five people walk into a bar.

Well, actually it wasn't a bar. It was a Dee Why café called Stella Blu... but it's still a great start to this story.

Steven and John Bennett were multi-year winners of the prestigious Prime Minister's Employer of the Year Awards. They were determined that their trophies should do more than just collect dust. They wanted to use them to create new opportunities

in the workforce for people with disability.

When they sit down that day for a coffee and open sandwich with Suzanne Colbert, Susan Hughes and John Little, everyone knows, without doubt, that they are on this mission together. They've already started imagining how they can make it happen.

Each of them has their own reason for diving in.

Meet the Founding 5



John Bennett OAM and Steven Bennett OAM

They were small business owners on Sydney's Northern Beaches and had grown up watching their WW2 veteran dad living with disability. No surprise then that when they started their business, Benbro Electronics, they employed people with a disability as a matter of course. They now say they were turning their father's 'scars into stars'.

"I always thought people saw Dad the way I did and I remember the day his disability became a reality for me. I found him sobbing in the garden. He had applied for more than 200 jobs and he had all the attributes required... and more. But the employers had simply not liked the way he looked. Did he give up? No. He went on to become one of the most sought after barrister clerks in Sydney."

— Steven

"Our business was small but there is nothing wrong with small. We started by making the difference we could make. Our dad needed just one job and one job makes all the difference to the person who lands it."

— John



Suzanne Colbert AM

Suzanne was General Manager of Shore Personnel, a disability employment service. She'd become a fan of Benbro and the way the brothers did business. Shore nominated the brothers for their first Prime Minister's award and soon Suzanne was on a mission. What could they do together to help other businesses open their doors to people with disability?

"Some of my fire comes from when I was a kid. I was 8 or 9 and I had a skin disease called psoriasis and it covered all my arms and legs. My mother and I spent a lot of time on buses travelling to and from doctors. I remember two women who were sitting opposite us one day, looking at me and saying 'Oooh, look at that girl's legs! We'd better move!' School was very cruel too. I learnt what it felt like to be treated differently simply because of a characteristic."



Susan Hughes

Susan worked with Suzanne at Shore Personnel and was known to be absolutely tenacious in finding employment for Shore clients. Susan's a born connector – she connected Suzanne to the brothers Bennett and just for good measure, introduced her to John Little, her future husband too!

"I remember the first time I met the brothers. I was asking them about employing Andrew, one of our clients. I launched into my usual go-for-broke sales spiel with the whole business case scenario laid out and they were just so laid-back about it. They said, 'Yeah, we've done this before... sure, we're interested.' I couldn't believe it. That was a first for me. Incidentally, 23 years later Andrew still works at Benbro."



John Little

Marketing man, entrepreneur and wheelchair user, John Little

is Suzanne Colbert's husband and chief supporter. He was a member of AND's first Board.

"Suzanne invited me and a few other people to throw ideas around about how to pitch the business benefits of employing people with disability. Well, between Suzanne and the Bennett brothers, the idea just took off. It was an incredible trio – like watching the beginning of a love affair, right there."

The idea is born

Looking back, it's obvious that businesses had every reason to lead the changes needed to include people with disability. But at the time, it was a very new and surprising idea.

Great ideas *always* begin like that.



Have we got the employee for you

Week after week, I'd be tapping on doors, smiling big and saying, 'Have we got the employee for you!' The poor employers, often really good people, would look up and I could see they were just overwhelmed by the idea. 'What are our responsibilities? What are our rights? What do we do when the trainers go? How do we handle it?

— Susan Hughes

Michelle's story

I remember in my last days at Shore, I met Michelle who wanted to do a commercial



cookery course. It took us 180 phone calls before we found an employer who would meet her and even consider employing her. It made me realise that disability employment services were like selling tickets to a plane that was never going to take off. We needed a bigger and better plane!

— Suzanne Colbert

The Disability Employment Evangelists

Steven: *Agencies like Shore would wear out shoe leather trying to find the jobs for their clients with a disability. It was incredibly labour-intensive and we always thought it was a bit back-the-front.*



Left to right: Former senator Jocelyn Newman AO, Susie Bennett, Steven Bennett, Andrew Booth, Ina Bennett, Suzanne Colbert, Hon Warren Truss MP, John Bennett

John: ***They had plenty of supply but no demand. We needed to try and provide demand, didn't we Steve?***

Steven: ***The idea was that we should be talking to CEOs and convincing them of the benefits of employing people with a disability. If we could get them on board, we wouldn't have to bust through middle management. The decisions would be made from the top.***

John: ***And we had no trouble taking that on. We'd seen how successful it was in our own business and so we kind of became disability employment evangelists, I guess.***

— Steven and John Bennett

Just one problem

Once you realise that it's not people with the disability who are the problem, it only leaves you with one challenge to solve. And that challenge is how to get larger organisations to open their doors and consider skilled and talented people with disability? That's the driving force behind the idea. And then every day after that, you're asking 'Are they? Will they?' 'Will they offer an internship? Are they going to speak to their people? Will they do more? Are they going to tell others so that more organisations can see there's a better path?'

— Suzanne Colbert



September 2000 – 2002

Gathering the tribe

The Founding 5 are incorporated. They're called EMAD (Employers Making a Difference) and now it's all systems go. EMAD is lean and scrappy with its own CEO (working from her spare bedroom), a logo (the CEO's husband designing from the lounge) and energy to burn.

The brothers hit the skies. Soon their reputation is preceding them and their confidence grows. They're amazed to see leaders of massive organisations leaning into the message. EMAD is emboldened. They win the

first (and last) Government funding they will ever apply for.

Suzanne and John Little say farewell to their dream of a quiet romantic hideaway in the Blue Mountains. The 'make a difference' engine is running fast and so is Suzanne. Chatswood here they come. Just one small problem – finances (or lack of) are still the black cloud over their heads. And now it's looking a lot like rain! Could it all have been for nothing? A charismatic ad man has the answer...



The money tin

Suzanne put her job where her mouth was and decided to leave her day job behind to develop EMAD full time. None of us quite knew where the money was going to come from. I remember at one early meeting we just all reached into our wallets and threw what was in there, into a tin. I think it was still there a year later.

— John Little

The 5 minute logo

We had to do things fast and cheaply. I'm a bit of a creative soul so I created the company business cards, with comps slips (remember those?) ... and the logo. That took about 5 minutes on a Microsoft program called Paint. I only put it together so we had something for the next meeting but they said 'We love this. Let's keep it.' It stayed the logo, untouched, for the next 15 years. Not a bad result!



— John Little



Susan Scott-Parker, John Howard, Steven Bennett, Suzanne Colbert, John Bennett

Working the room

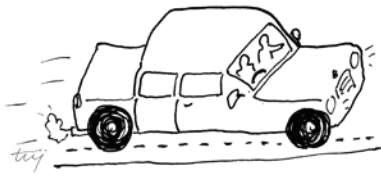
I was in Australia. I think it was at an Employer and Business Awards event and I remember just standing back and watching this woman (Suzanne) working that room. It was amazing to see. She told me that night that she wanted a business network in Australia like we had in the UK. She had this idea about bringing good companies together to celebrate their wonderfulness and inspire each other to do more. She was always just trying to find new ways to get businesses to pay attention. She knew where she was heading and away she went to get there!

— Susan Scott-Parker, Founder at Business Disability International

The story of the name

We called it EMAD (Employers Making a Difference) because the idea was always for businesses to collectively assist each other and share the knowledge. We never wanted to be an organisation that did it all – we were too small anyway. In those early days, we utilised our collective resources and it gave us great power. For example, if we'd needed to do a survey, McDonalds might say, 'We've got the best survey team in the world at Thornleigh. Use that!' Or IBM might put their hands up to help with finances...

— Steven and John Bennett



Ticket to ride

Steven B: *Essentially John and I used to go where we were told. Suzanne would use all our contacts and just wheel us out. It might have been to an Apex Club in Mullumbimby or a breakfast for a chamber of commerce or an information evening or an awards night...*

John B: *Of course we'd go to see Ministers too because we wanted EMAD's influence on government policy. It usually took many months to get an appointment. We'd finally meet and over time they'd understood what we were doing enough to generate policy support and then, just when we were getting somewhere, there'd be a portfolio switch and we'd have to start all over again.*



The plumber's question

I can remember in the early days, Steven and I would speak at business breakfasts to all different industries and trades. We were often countering objections. People would come up to you with reasons about why it wouldn't work for them. For example, a plumber might say, 'I know it works for you blokes but I do complex work, so it wouldn't work for me.' And we'd say, 'Well, look at this bloke of ours. He's assembling electronic equipment that goes into submarines for the Royal Australian Navy. What do you reckon? Is digging holes in the ground more complex than that?'

— John Bennett



Shefali and Goliath

I was working with the NSW government. It was after the wonders of the Paralympics and I was the most junior member of a tender panel to set up something – we didn't really know what – that would bring employers into being more committed to people with a disability. We were working with the Commonwealth but NSW put up the money and I had responsibility for it. There was lots of maneuverings.

There were two finalists: EMAD and a very large, conservative service. The big service had recently needed a big \$2 million bailout from us (which was a lot of money then) but two consultants on the panel were pushing for it as the obvious option. They were ex-senior public servants and were very confident. They said EMAD's size and lack of experience was too much of a risk. But I didn't think size mattered as much as a committed team who weren't afraid of trying something new.

I knew I wouldn't be able to swing the panel on my own and I was so frustrated. This was our chance to do something groundbreaking without even spending a lot of money. I knew it was possible. I'd been lucky enough to work with country services with very small resources and who had learnt the strength of working together.

I took all the facts to a very senior state manager who was the only person who could override the decision. And she got on the phone with Central Office. They started by rubbishing me for being too junior and then went on to say to her '...and if you knew anything about risk assessment, you'd go with the big organisation too.'

Well, that was exactly the wrong thing to say to this woman! It got on her goat and she just overwrote them on the spot. EMAD got the tender as Disability Recruitment Coordinator.*

I'm very pleased they had the courage to cut the apron strings of government after that project ended. They've gone on to do so many great things.

— Shefali Rovik

Shefali is one of AND's earliest (and feistiest) believers.

**It was through this project that EMAD learned how much support businesses really needed before they were ready to just 'pop someone into a job.'*

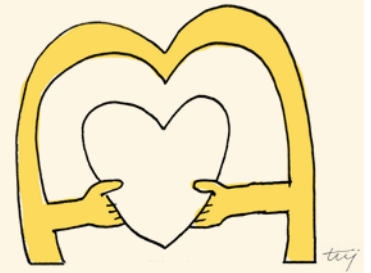
Guy Russo's chequebook

John B: *I remember the first time you spoke with Guy Russo, Steve. He came up to you and said he wanted to help. He pulled out his chequebook and you said...*

Steve B: *I said, 'I don't want your money. I want you, Guy. I want you! I want your contacts, I want your brains. I want you to be involved.' And he said that was the first time anybody had ever knocked back money from him!*

John B: *I think you actually said that you wanted his heart. That's what you said...*

John Little: *I remember that day too. It was at our first CEO breakfast. We had Susan Scott-Parker from the UK speaking and she filled the room. There were a lot of important people there, including Guy. He came up to Suzanne as well and he said, 'If there's anything I can do, please don't hesitate...' Well, if you know Suzanne, you know that's like saying to a starving man, 'Here's your meal!' Within days she'd contacted him and asked him to be on the Board.*

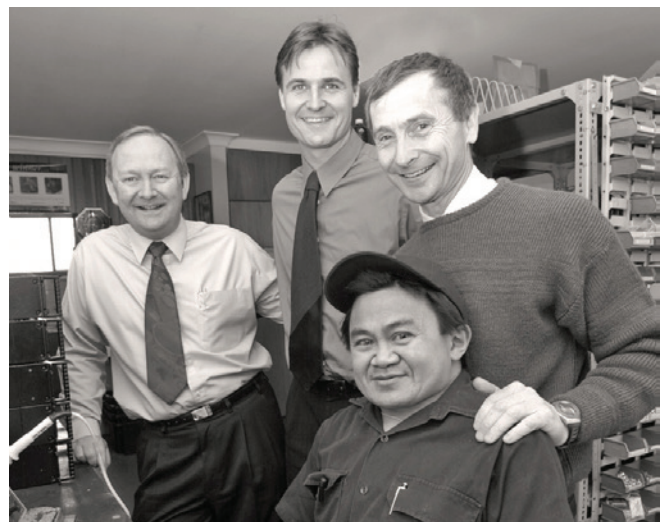


In the end, time was a problem for him so he asked Senior VP Frank McManus to take up the seat instead. It was one of Suzanne's key breakthroughs in getting the quality of the Board members she wanted. Frank was still on the Board 10 years later... even after he'd changed companies.

Not-so-grim reaper

Early on, we'd got to know an advertising executive named Siimon Reynolds. He was famous for those Grim Reaper ads. In 2002, he was on a TV program called 'Who Wants to be a Celebrity Millionaire.' It was one of those contests where your prize money goes to charity and Siimon nominated us. He said, 'You won't have heard much about this charity today but you will in the future. It's Employers Making a Difference.' That was a huge surprise but the bigger shock was when he went on to win \$64,000. It was the turning point for us. Things had been really touch and go. It's fair to say that without Siimon Reynolds AND would probably not exist today.

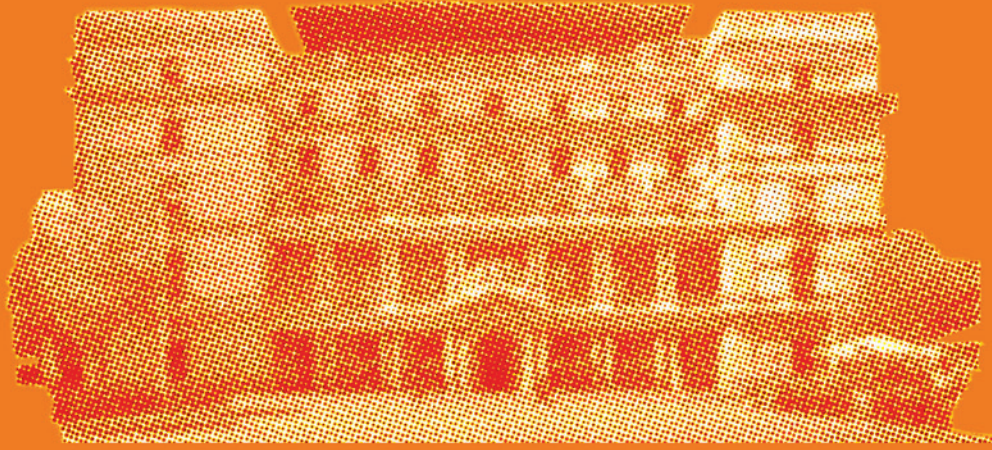
— John Little



Left to right: Steven Bennett, Siimon Reynolds, John Bennett, Arthur Szeto

I guess you'd call us 'naive enthusiasts', but it worked...

— Suzanne Colbert



2003 – 2007

July 10, 2003

Follow the leader

Inside historic Customs House on Sydney Harbour, nine Captains of Industry are gathered with pen in hand, and hand on heart – well, metaphorically anyway. They are signing a charter pledging their organisation's commitment to employment of people with a disability. It's taken two years of persuasion and planning to get it together, but it's a huge win for EMAD. Great organisations like Westpac, IBM and the ANU are setting the course for others to follow with a public commitment to a vision and 10 principles to get there.

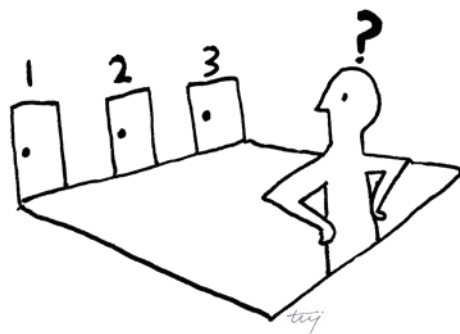
But hey, don't jump the gun... it's way too soon for a happy-ever-after.

Change takes time and EMAD is still new and fighting hard to be noticed. They're working on a shoestring. In 2003 they reach a crossroads and decide to take the road less travelled. Suzanne and the Board agree not to apply for more Government funds but to stay true to the vision of business leading the change. They launch a membership model instead. It's a brave move and it might just work...

The promise

Basically, we'd said to these employers, 'We want you to do these 10 things' but then the question was 'How? How do we do it?' I didn't know if we could afford the talent we needed to see it through but we shared and learnt from each other. It was exhausting, depleting but I had made these promises to these 9 leaders – and we'd made a public promise too.

— Suzanne Colbert



Saying 'no' to Govt funds

It was the end of 2003. They said, 'What are you going to do for money?' And I said, 'Well look, if the members aren't going to back us then we're wasting our time anyway. If they want it, then they're going to support us.' And they did.

— Steven Bennett

What about me?

It was about 2005. I'd invited leaders from some government agencies to come together. I asked them, 'Would you consider a traineeship for people with intellectual disability...?' One leader looked to the others and said 'Suzanne, don't you realise that could be a career limiting move for us?'

Moments like this were always frustrating and disheartening for me but they raised my awareness of the vulnerabilities. And the exposure. From their point of view the risk was too great. I learnt you have to build the trust. How can we get this done together? How can we share the risk?

— Suzanne Colbert

The mavericks in the basement

The first office was in this quirky basement of an apartment building in Chatswood, below where Suzanne and John lived. The rent was cheap but it was a nightmare to find your way to. You had to go in a certain door to get you to the right lift and then go to the third floor and then find another lift. There were so many times I had to call Suzanne to rescue me from somewhere in that building!

Once inside though, you were happy. It was just a simple room: a couple of people doing accounts in one corner and Board members sitting around catching up with cheese and Jatz at the kitchen table...

— Belinda Curtis

Belinda has been on the AND board since getting lost in the basement in 2003.



At the Charter signing event 2003. Philip Bullock (IBM), Michael O'Shaughnessy (McDonalds), Martin Bowles (NSW Department of Education and Training), Senator Amanda Vanstone, David Morgan (Westpac), Gary Flowers (Sparke Helmore), Steve Bennett (Benbro Electronics), Dug Russell (Compass Group), Professor Kim Oates (Westmead Children's Hospital), Suzanne Colbert (Employers Making a Difference), John Bennett (Benbro Electronics)



2008 – 2013

Spreading our wings

The GFC hits but 2008 brings a blast of more – more reach, more projects, 33% more members and a refreshed CEO returning from leave with many more ideas than she left with. (Who'd have guessed it?)

In 2010 there's a re-branding to AND and a longed for milestone – 100 members. The bigger number creates its own momentum and makes for lots of name tags at AND's first ever annual

conference. As usual, the members' questions reveal what's needed next – like the new Disability Confidence Training and more interns, advocacy and ways to get together.

In the early days, the Bennett brothers' awards set the stage for people to listen and now word of mouth is opening doors again. And those words are, 'It feels good to make a difference.'

I'll have what she's having

We'd just developed our first disability action plan at Westpac and Ann Sherry was telling us to go for it. She'd say, 'Take a risk, it doesn't matter, just do what you think is right.' That's when we found Suzanne and her team, and Graeme Innes too, and the combination of these legends made all the difference.

The core members were these like-minded people who were all passionate and wanted to push the boundaries to improve the outcome – whether for the employee or the customer. We'd come to these meetings with this long list of things: 'How would you approach this? What are you doing around that?' We all had our different nuanced challenges because of the industries we were in but there was this willingness to help each other and share.

Of course, in those days, we had the luxury of the long term view. We'd stay the course, measure the outcome and then celebrate! We'd celebrate a lot – we wanted people to be excited by the success and to stay with us.

— Niki Kesoglou (Niki was Westpac Head of Diversity during this story)

It's him again

I was reaching out to the top 15 or 20 legal firms to persuade them to take on law students with disability. I spent a lot of time talking to people and I'd go back to the companies, again and again – and remember, all this was just to get them to take summer clerks, not full time employment! It was very hard. I think for where we were in those times, we had reasonable

*success – we might have got 4 or 5 firms over the line...**

— Graeme Innes (former Disability Discrimination Commissioner)

*Summer 2020 and 67 organisations offer 186 internships

Blown away

I was in the very first Stepping Into Law cohort. I was an intern with Freehills and I was just blown away by it. I didn't have to hide my disability and I experienced, in a safe way, what it would be like to work in a corporate environment...

— Rania Saab, lawyer, AND Board member

They're leaving home, bye bye

In 2012, when I first started with AND, the office was in the swanky PwC building in Darling Park. I'd come from working at another NFP out at Homebush and it was like 'Holy cow, how is this possible?' Not long after, we moved into Clarence Street. It wasn't swanky but it was ours. I felt the move was a turning point for us – it was like we'd grown up.

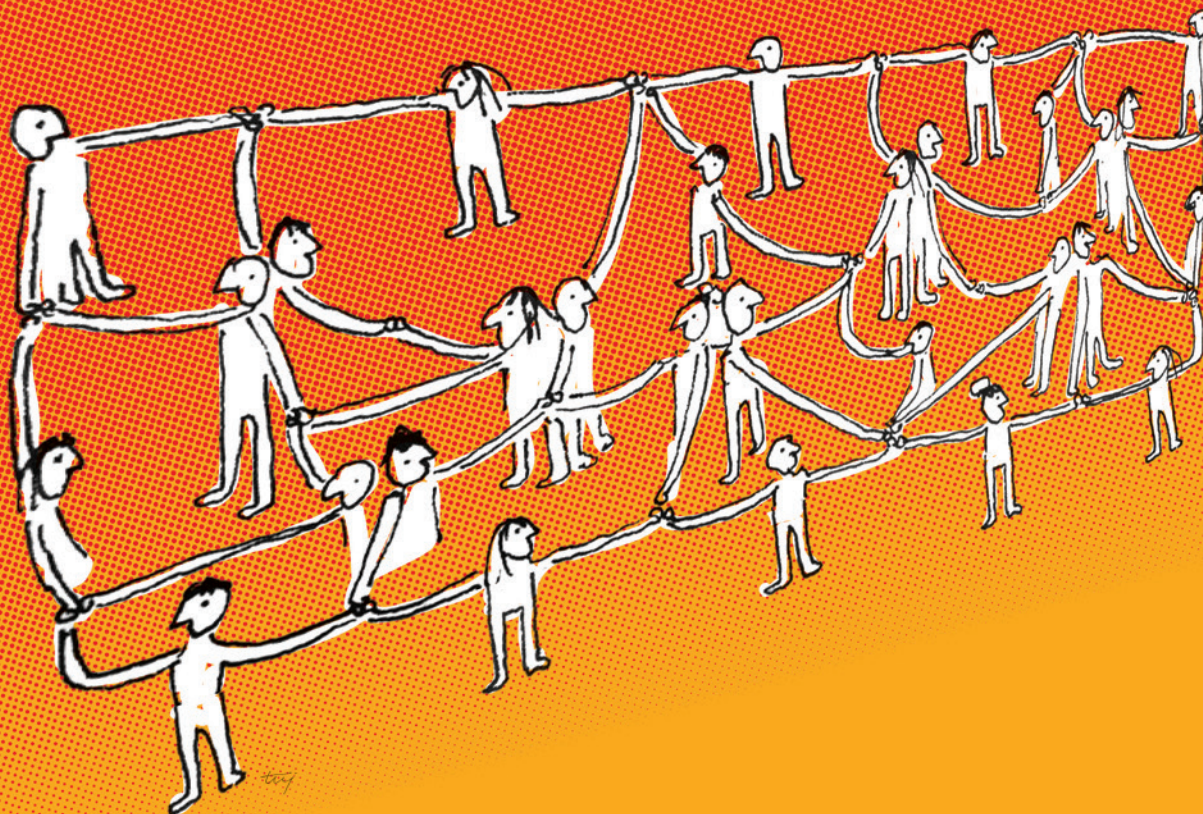
— Amy Whalley Deputy CEO

When you give someone something good to do, and they can do it, mostly they will.

— Suzanne Colbert



Some of the original Stepping Into cohort.



2013 – 2020

Beyond the Founding 5

So here we are at the end the story and at the beginning of another. The Founding 5 started with a very big idea. They didn't know how to make it happen but year by year, others joined them and they learnt together.

The essence of AND's beginnings – one small organisation sharing its know-how and belief – holds the key to what needs to happen next. All of AND's 301 members now need to share what they've learnt, every

snippet, with their network. That's how we'll scale. That's how we'll ensure nobody is left behind.

The stories in this collection prove that the real magic happens, human to human. It's where the joy and the satisfaction lies too. It might have all started with Tom, Dick and Henrietta but looking to the future, we'll need Peter and Melissa too. And Jane and Mike and Stella and... what's your name again?

We learned, we collaborated. We asked members what they need. We planned together, we did it together. We reviewed together. We listened and we learned from people with disability and we learned from our members. We built together.

From the horse's mouth

I get a call from our link in Tasmania who says that she's found someone in a senior police role who is very enthusiastic. I said 'Well, I do know an Assistant Commissioner who is a Champion for inclusion of people with disability. Why don't I ask if I can connect your person in police with him and he'll share their story about what they have done.' I know how impactful this connection will be. When that person in Tas takes the idea back to her colleagues, she'll be telling a story that's powered by the journey of another great organisation. And in the words of a respected leader.

When a person hears from someone who understands the work and understands what they're trying for, it makes all the difference. It makes them think to themselves: 'Well, they've done this and now I can too!' And therein lies the power of our network.

— Suzanne Colbert

The power of awe

In the early days of our PACE mentoring program, organisations mostly just ran their own completion events but once we had more members and the program developed further, ANZ in Melbourne offered to host the first all-in event.

Mentors and mentees from different organisations came together to celebrate. They left their offices or universities and travelled from outside the city or across town to be together. It was amazing. The room was filled with really motivated people and the experience was something bigger than just the work. It was open and human and it was focused on the shared experience – not separate organisations – of doing something that felt good.

The power of what we've created or the momentum that we have... those kind of feelings always come to me at our events.

— Amy Whalley

Perfect world

We have a joke... as many NFPs do.. we say that we hope we are so successful that we take ourselves out of existence. We hope that the world picks up the ideas of fairness and inclusion as part of the new normal and they don't need us cheering and connecting and coaching from the sidelines anymore.

But until then... I have a very optimistic view for the next few years and I want to be a part of it. I'd like as many people as possible to be a part of it.

— Peter Wilson AM, AND Chair

Then and now: 20 years at a glance

Then

We asked our associates to be our brains trust with disability.

NOW

People with disability are in everything we do:

as Board members, employees, alumni, resource groups, champions and members. In everything.

Then

5 believers, a money tin and a whole lot of scheming.

NOW

A strong and healthy balance sheet, a fantastic team of 21 people, including program coordinators, marketing, finance, IT and administration professionals plus a dynamic leadership. Incidentally, these are the roles that Suzanne once did all on her own.

SOON... In December 2020, Suzanne Colbert will step down as AND CEO and will go surfing with her grandkids instead.



Then

When we started in 2000 we knew of one 'employee network' – which was for deaf employees.

NOW

Since then, we have roused, encouraged, and nurtured 80 networks of employees with disability to raise their voices and be heard, included and celebrated.

Then

The program began with 7 interns across 4 law firms.

NOW

Stepping Into program celebrated its 15 years this year. 1500 skilled and talented students with disability have benefited from paid internships.

Then

In the first year of PACE, 12 students with disability learned from mentors.

NOW

Almost 1600 people with disability, and their mentors, have learned from each other.

Then

AND's first objective was to create 500 jobs for people with disabilities, which was considered a stretch.

Year 2000 – we had 2 members with 40 employees.

NOW

We have 301 members who collectively employ over **1.7 million people**

What AND has become – we just couldn't have imagined.

— John Bennett

Each time we moved we grew

Blackheath.

Romantic Blue Mountains hideaway becomes startup engine room.



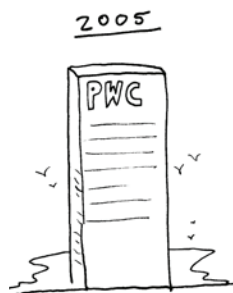
Chatswood.

Cheap and underground – the first Sydney hub.



Darling Park.

Encouragement comes with a view – thanks IBM



Clarence Street.

All grown up – a place of our own.



Melbourne.

Canberra.



Our storytellers

The Founding 5



Steven Bennett OAM and John Bennett OAM

The brothers are tireless champions for fair, inclusive business. Their company Benbro Electronics, inspired AND. (The boys are a little older now than this picture suggests.)



Susan Hughes

Connector and early board member. These days, Susan is a careers consultant and is Director of Dragon Claw Charity.



Suzanne Colbert AM and John Little

Suzanne, AND champion extraordinaire, steps down in December after 20+ years at the helm. Her husband, John Little, was an early board member, inspiration and co-developer of the Stepping Into internship program.



Rania Saab

Rania first joined us as a student in the first Stepping Into cohort. She is a solicitor with NSW Legal Aid and is on the AND Board.



Belinda Curtis

Belinda was working with AMP when she became the first Board member to be recruited after the 2003 Charter. She has served on the Board continuously since then.



Niki Kesoglou

Niki was one of AND's earliest supporters collaborating with AND from 2001 as Head of Diversity Westpac. During that collaboration, Westpac won Employer of the Year award.



Amy Whalley

Amy joined AND as a Relationship Manager in 2012 and is now Deputy CEO. She will take the helm as Acting CEO in January 2021.



Susan Scott-Parker OBE

Susan is a towering figure in Disability and Business in the UK. She met Suzanne way back in 2000 and has been a thoughtleader, 'fellow traveller' and friend to AND ever since.



Peter Wilson AM

Peter's AND stories probably begin when he was appointed Chair in May 2015. He's been telling them ever since.



Shefali Rovik

Shefali was working with the NSW Community Services when she became part of the AND story in 2000. She is now retired.



Graeme Innes AM

Graeme is a long time ally and promoter. His many public roles include Australian Disability Discrimination Commissioner. He's the Chairman of the Attitude Foundation and a non-executive Director.



AUSTRALIAN
NETWORK
ON DISABILITY

www.and.org.au