



Workplace Adjustments Research Report

APPENDIX B

Interviews with people with
communication access needs about their
experiences of workplace adjustments

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Report about experiences of people with communication access needs and workplace adjustments

Introduction

This report provides greater detail about the experiences of people with communication access needs as an appendix to Australian Disability Network’s [Workplace Adjustments Research Report](#) which was released in May 2024.

Research Design and Methodology – re-cap

Australian Disability Network conducted two surveys in August 2023:

1. For people with disability, mental health condition or long-term health condition.
2. For organisations.

We received 388 responses to the first survey and 180 to the second.

We spoke with a total of 34 people in interviews and focus groups about workplace adjustments. Five of these interviewees were people who self-identified as having a disability. In addition, we intentionally recruited five people with communication access needs through Australian Disability Network’s and Australian Group Supporting Communication Inclusion’s (AGOSCI) networks, and conducted 1-1 interviews in September/October 2023.

All interviewees received information about the research in accessible formats, such as the consent form and questions before the interview. Amongst the five interviewees with communication access needs, one requested an Auslan interpreter; and two people used their own assistive technology – speech to text. Two interviewees did not specify any communication access needs or adjustments for the interview.

All research participants were de-identified by using a numbering system to differentiate interviewees. The five interviewees with communication access needs are numbered in this Appendix from Interviewee 6 to Interviewee 10, consistent with the main report.

The quantitative survey data presented below does not specifically refer to people with communication access needs but instead disability generally, and therefore may not fully represent their experiences of workplace adjustments.

On the other hand, the qualitative data from the interviews with people with communication access needs is valuable in representing their experiences; in addition, being included in the research was highly valued by the five interviewees, as these two interview quotes show:

“[I am] just happy to at least be able to share my thoughts with someone. I’ve not really done something like relating these kinds of issues with anyone before, so I feel so good talking about it so thank you. (Interviewee 6, person with communication access needs)

“Firstly, I will thank you for having me here to share my experience and what is really going well, what I’ve been passing through. I really sincerely appreciate it.” (Interviewee 9, person with communication access needs)

Findings

1 Surveys

1.1 Survey responses by people with disability

The workplace adjustments survey for people with disability indicated that accessible communication adjustments were the least requested adjustments – requested by less than 20 per cent of survey respondents at the recruitment stage of the employment life cycle and in the workplace:

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Adjustments requested by job seekers

(recruitment adjustments):

- 17 per cent of survey respondents said having the application form in alternate or accessible formats, for example hard copy documents, accessible format, including larger font sizes, plain English or Easy English.
- 13 per cent of survey respondents said getting extra support, for example a support person of their choice in the interview.
- 9 per cent of survey respondents with disability said assistive technology and software, such as speech to text software.
- 6 per cent said sign language interpreters, live captions.

Adjustments requested by employees

(workplace adjustments):

- 19 per cent of survey respondents with disability said information that is easy to read and understand, like using bigger fonts or providing printed copies.
- 17 per cent said technology and software helps with speaking by turning speech into text.
- 9 per cent said other specialist technology or software.
- 6 per cent said sign language interpreters, live captions.

1.2 Organisations' survey responses

The workplace adjustments survey for organisations indicated that only a small number (12 per cent or less) reported receiving requests and implementing accessible communication adjustments at the recruitment stage and in the workplace:

What organisations said about adjustments requested by job seekers

(recruitment adjustments):

- 12 per cent of organisations said jobseekers requested all information presented in an accessible format, including larger font sizes or hard copy documents.
- 11 per cent of organisations said jobseekers requested Auslan interpreters or live captions.
- 6 per cent of organisations said jobseekers requested assistive technology and software, such as speech to text software.

What organisations said about adjustments requested by employees (workplace adjustments):

- 8 per cent of organisations said employees requested specialist services for employees with specific learning disability and mental health conditions.
- 8 per cent of organisations said employees requested Auslan interpreters or live captions.
- 7 per cent of organisations said employees requested assistive technology and software, such as speech to text software.
- 5 per cent of organisations said employees requested all information presented in an accessible format, including larger font sizes or hard copies.

(Note: multiple answers could be selected to these survey questions).

At the other end of the scale, the most requested adjustments by employees with disability were working from home (87 per cent), flexible working hours (83 per cent) and time off for appointments or breaks to help manage a condition (78 per cent). Organisations reported the same top three adjustments (for further details, see pp. 21 – 22 in the Workplace Adjustments Research Report).¹

2 Interviews

The findings were thematically analysed and presented in the main report, [“Getting Workplace Adjustments out of the “too hard” basket”](#), in three interrelated themes: process, proactivity and attitudes. The insights of people with communication access needs that contributed to the thematic analysis are grouped here in greater detail than in the main report, under the following four headings:

1. Assistance (or lack of): from family and friends; and from managers and colleagues.
2. Discrimination during recruitment.
3. The importance of being listened to, trusted and believed.
4. Understanding individuals’ timing and schedules.

2.1 Assistance (or lack of): from family and friends; and from managers and colleagues.

Assistance from family and friends during the recruitment process – positive experiences

Several interviewees with communication access needs said they receive support in understanding policy and negotiating adjustments at the recruitment stage from their personal networks, such as family and friends. Some examples are:

“It (workplace adjustments policy) wasn’t really easy for me to read and they (employer) did not really give me a guideline, but I was able to find it out on my own. I had to seek help from my friends and family who actually helped me and guided me. I was able to see it through and was able to fill out everything and was able to get to where I am today.”

(Interviewee 6, person with communication access needs)

“I have a friend who has been working [at the same] kind of place I requested for the job. So it was my friend that really helped me out.”

(Interviewee 9, person with communication access needs)

Assistance from managers during the recruitment process – negative experiences

The survey statistics show that 13 per cent of people with disability ask, or would like to ask, for a support person of their choice at a job interview, and 10 per cent of employers said they acknowledge that type of request, yet when, during his job search, Interviewee 9 explained to the recruitment team **“I need to have someone by my side [who] will be talking and explaining everything to me”**, the manager’s response **“was so awful.”**

Interviewee 10 also had a negative experience when he was job seeking. Before the interview, he explained he used transcription applications on his phone to make a transcription

to help “me understand what [people] say. I had not realised [I] could request [an] interpreter, so I needed a transcript. But in the mind of my employer, I was gonna use it for, you know, maybe try to sort of [find] answers to questions and all that. I was asked not to make use of it.”

Interviewee 10’s needs were not recognised; no adjustments were offered, and his personal communication aid was not allowed: all barriers to participating in the recruitment process

Assistance from managers in the workplace – positive examples

Once employed, support was more forthcoming from employers. Interviewee 8 said she talked to her manager at their fortnightly supervisions when, for example, she could ask for an outline of the team meeting in advance. She also discussed with the manager her feeling of being excluded when colleagues – when she first started the job – spoke over her in meetings, and the manager resolved the issue. After being in the role for two years, she was promoted and received training for the new position. She said

“my boss is the mostly lovely lady, so I am pretty lucky to have her.”

Interviewee 9 identified that he needed **“some kind**

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of personal assistant in my office [but] not my friend. And when I got the job I need, I requested for an assistant that I can send on errands. [I explained it would be] very helpful. Because of what I requested, they did it for me.”

As a result, Interviewee 9 said his manager is a “good person” who “really did well with me” and “care[s] for me”. For example, they have a meeting every week and the manager asks “how is [the] adjustment working?” and calls Interviewee 9 if he is not at work to ask how he is feeling.

Interviewee 10 also reported the actions of his “very supportive” manager. For example, the manager recommended a transcription application which Interviewee 10 said was very helpful because

“since I have hearing loss, I may not hear you properly. Previously, if you talk to me, I’ll be asking you a series of questions like ‘I cannot hear you’ and ‘Can you say it again? Can you repeat yourself?’ But even with “repetition, whatever you say, I can’t really hear you. So [now I have the transcription app] I just read on screen whatever you say ... and I will understand.”

Assistance from managers in the workplace – negative examples

Interviewee 7 said he has regular fortnightly meetings with his manager and a representative from the employment agency to “check if there is anything wrong”. Interviewee 7 said it’s like “a bit of a triangle.” If something is wrong, he said the employment agency representative will discuss with the manager, “and hopefully give him (manager) some understanding.”

But even though they have these regular meetings, there are some practical issues that have never been addressed and make work “hard” for Interviewee 7. For example, mirrors that he needs so he doesn’t startle if someone approaches from behind were put into the storeroom when the office was moved around but have never been reinstated because all employees are expected to hot desk now.

Interviewee 7 does not have any autonomy or

decision-making opportunity over relatively simple – though important – issues like mirrors, and significantly he is stuck in the same job with no change in his work responsibilities after many years, even though he has requested that. He said

“I feel a bit sad because I’ve just been doing the same role and I’m not happy.”

2.2 Discrimination during recruitment

Interviewee 9 said he has “a lot of skills” and “know[s] how to do so many things.” However, he said that a prospective employer had emailed to say that because of his “hearing condition ... [he] cannot be employed.”

Interviewee 10 said when he

“explain[s] hearing loss, that alone does [put] people off. It’s a matter of some sort of personal opinion about who a person is who has hearing loss. So sometimes I feel afraid to tell people that I have hearing loss because that will make them have less value for me or see less [value] in me in carrying out my work. It does make me feel very bad. I am a human being like everybody. I’m talking about requesting an all-inclusive environment that understands [what I need] and an enabling environment and all the tools and an environment where people are willing to support [employees].... So I can do my work properly.”

Interviewee 10 said he is aware of rights and policies

“like the discrimination acts” that should “restrict such attitudes.... Some good people are fully aware of these, but they still discriminate against you in a very tricky way.”

He gave an example of “tricky discrimination”:

when “the employer discovers that perhaps you’re using a phone that helps you transcribe the sounds and ... so he starts looking for what to use to kick you off, like asking ‘how [old] are you?’ You tell

him, and ... he says they are looking for a younger person... but he already knew [my age] since when [I filled] the first form, so he’s just trying to kick [me] out because of [my hearing loss].”

There were instances of positive outcomes at recruitment, for example Interviewee 8 said she had been “unemployed for many years” before she got her current job. In the online interview she used text to read and got the job. And Interviewee 7 had an Auslan interpreter when he was interviewed for his current role over ten years ago.

However, as the main workplace adjustments report demonstrated, having policies in place to provide support must be accompanied by proactively offering support throughout the employees’ lifecycle, and by a “mindset shift” in attitudes towards disability and employment. For example, Interviewee 7 has been in the same position for over ten years, but his manager’s attitude is a barrier. He said

“I would like to get a promotion, I’d like to do something to get more money, but it’s difficult for me [because] I guess it’s not acceptable to the boss.”

2.3 Being listened to, believed and trusted

Being listened to in ways that empower and validate was a recurrent topic in the research data. It’s well known that many people with disability have historically been silenced and their opinions and needs not taken into account, and being heard is critically significant for people with communication access needs because they may lack appropriate support to enable them to speak out.² The data in this Appendix demonstrates that they feel “sad”, “bad”, “of less value”, and fearful of sharing information about their needs due to the risk of discrimination during recruitment and in the workplace when what they want and need is an “inclusive”, “enabling”, “supportive” and “welcoming” environment (Interviewee 10; Interviewee 6).

An Interviewee who received a workplace adjustment

and subsequently felt she was being “monitored” and judged by the manager, said

“I actually like my work. That’s why I’m still here. I’m hoping that everything will go away and I’ll be able to give my all.”

(Interviewee 6, person with communication access needs).

When prompted about what needs to happen for “everything [to]...go away”, Interviewee 6 said

“if some of the managers...[let] me know that I am actually welcomed and I am free...I believe that that way it would actually make me get settled in properly.”

2.4 Respect for individual timing and schedules

This was a recurrent theme in the research data. In the survey for people with disability, long-term health condition or mental health condition, 78 per cent said they need to spend time managing their health and well-being, and 95 per cent of organisations acknowledged the same. This may range from attending doctors’ appointments, exercise, or physiotherapy programs to assistance with personal care, all of which are essential to maintain health (Interviewee 9, person with communication access needs). Interviewee 9 said prioritising health – and getting a workplace adjustment of flexible time so he could do that – was more important to him than career progression. He said

“going for a medical check is an adjustment that is ...a basic thing we need to do.”

Interviewee 9 said he had declined the offer of full-time work because

“I consider my health being okay first.... Let me just stay as a [position title] so that can give me time to take care of me and my family.”

Interviewee 7 feels “very stressed” because travelling to work every day is tiring, and expensive.

It is also not good for his physical health, because as he said **“I don’t have [time for] breakfast sometimes”** so has to buy less healthy takeaway food.

And in contrast to the 87 per cent of employees who said working from home gave them flexibility that enabled them to fulfil the essential requirements of their role, Interviewee 7 said flexible work options were not available to him, although his coworkers regularly work from home. He has no ways to challenge this unfair treatment, other than the **“triangle”** relationship he has with the disability employment provider and his manager, which although he said **“it seems to be a good process”**, does not address his right to workplace adjustments.

Discussion

In addition to the discussion on pages 41 to 43 of the main workplace adjustments report, the interviews with people with communication access needs provoke additional commentary and discussion:

Support for people with communication access needs has traditionally been individualised therapy, but building the capacities of their entire eco-system ensures they are more likely to receive the support they require to fulfill the essential requirements of their role.³

Communication access needs tend to be ‘visible’, and so, unlike ‘non-visible’ disability, are less easily masked in order to avoid sharing information about disability and risking discrimination and stigma (see page 23 of the main report). Having a choice about what to share about their disability, when, how, and who with, may not be available to people with communication access needs, and has the potential to result in stigma and discrimination. In addition, having communication access needs means they rely on the workplace to request interpreters, provide accessible documents and other adjustments – which

as the data showed, does not always happen.

Recommendations – include, welcome, enable and support

Any employer looking to learn from these findings and improve their accessibility and inclusion of people with communication access needs could consider the following:

1. Build organisational capability and confidence to include, welcome, enable and support people with communication access needs as employees.
2. Increase visibility of strengths as well as needs of people with communication access needs.
3. Provide and communicate – in a variety of formats – opportunities for growth and a career pathway for people with communication access needs, with appropriate and adequate support.
4. Develop an inclusive, enabling and supportive recruitment process for people with communication access needs.
5. Listen and learn from people with communication access needs about how to make the workplace more accessible and inclusive.
6. Conduct surveys and focus groups internally dedicated to evaluating the experiences of workplace adjustments by people with communication access needs and take action as required to improve their practice
7. Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions in the workplace for people with communication access needs. Interventions may be adjustments, for example providing technology and strengthening digital accessibility, training for people with communication access needs, managers and colleagues, accessible communication and messaging, and use of third-party providers to monitor employees’ career pathways.



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