

Ability Employment Initiatives

How to make a difference in your workplace

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The case studies cited in this paper are real examples, however names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Introduction.

CRS Australia provides vocational rehabilitation programs to people with a disability with a focus on achieving job readiness and then matching participants to suitable employment vacancies. Strategies used by CRS include expert assessment of barriers and strengths, physical upgrading, counselling, workplace modification, on the job rehabilitation, work training and work experience, and finally job placement with support until the person is independent

During the past decade CRS Australia has worked with the Australian National University (ANU) to assist people with a disability to locate suitable work environments within and outside the university community. In late 2000, during a meeting with the ANU equity team, it was proposed that an employment consultant from CRS Australia be out posted to ANU. A proposal from CRS Australia was endorsed by the ANU and from January 2001 Ben Johnson has worked with the equity office and HR team one day per week, coordinating a recruitment service available to the whole community at the ANU. This service fulfils some of the ANU's recruitment needs, and provides employment opportunities for a number of CRS' clients.

People who match the job and value the opportunity

In August 2001, a similar agreement was forged between CRS Australia and the University of Canberra. Ben Johnson is now coordinating this service as a member of the University's HR team. At both universities this recruitment service matches workplace opportunities to people with a disability who are taking part in a vocational rehabilitation program with CRS Australia. It also provides access for people with a disability to a vast array of on-the-job learning situations, supportive work environments, good referees, work and personal networking opportunities, and short term and long term employment.

This paper draws on my experiences in working on these employment initiatives.

The key themes are:

1. A practical constructive approach will be suggested to influence your workplace.
2. How to identify, and do something about, perceptions and myths held about people with a disability in the workplace – an overview.
3. An acknowledgement of changing labor market trends and employer expectations today.
4. This paper provides seven case studies from the joint ANU/CRS Australia initiative, which illustrate how people with disabilities can contribute in a positive way to the workforce.
5. APPENDIX A – 2 independent client experiences

1. A practical constructive approach to influence your workplace.

Is there a central point, a disability aware person with the physical and personal resources, experience and political savvy can drive a like initiative; can forge change through formal and informal education of the workforce; or can build a network of support from within through the success of people with a disability on-the-job?

The Disability Employment Initiative at ANU commenced as a three-month pilot project.

The objectives for the ANU were:

- to raise staff awareness in the areas of equity and diversity specifically regarding people with a disability;
- to develop and meet an appropriate target in terms of the percentage of employees with a disability.

Objectives for CRS Australia were:

- to further develop and continually strengthen the good working relationship with key recruitment contacts across the ANU;
- to locate and negotiate suitable placements for appropriate clients at the ANU through the CRS Australia Work Training Scheme;
- to access vacancies for appropriate clients in different modes of employment;
- to locate options for people seeking employment as part of the supported wage scheme.

The key performance indicators for CRS were to locate two employment outcomes and six work training placements during the three-month pilot project.

This involved canvassing a cross-section of the ANU community, presentations and educational sessions for management, staff and students, a search to identify ANU champions for disability issues and the linking of policy with practical application and technology. At the completion of the three-month pilot project, ten employment outcomes and twelve work training placements had been achieved at the ANU. To date we have doubled these figures.

2. How to identify, and do something about, perceptions and myths held about people with a disability in the workplace.

A visit to meet with the employer and key members of the work team is advantageous as a first step. This provides the opportunity to listen and draw out any issues or beliefs held regarding disability. It is important to frame responses in the context of real life situations giving rise to a stronger case.

The citing of positive, enlightening and in some cases humorous examples of how people with a disability have overcome misconceptions and other barriers in the workplace is invaluable in assisting with culture change in the workplace. Another useful strategy is to match a case study from a like area (where perceptions and myths were dissolved through a positive process) resulting in an outcome where all parties assisted in developing an individual client focussed perspective.

Identifying and linking with referees from relative areas of the labour market to give examples of their experience of people with a disability in the workplace can be useful. In this way, mis-perceptions can be corrected; clients had the life-changing experience of feeling acceptance of the team, clients knew their work was valued and they were given the opportunity to further develop skills and to reach out.

3. Labour market trends and employer expectations today

The trend in the ACT appears to be towards part-time, casual positions with full-time positions that are available in many cases filled through initial casual workers proving themselves on the job. People are accessing jobs through both business and personal networks. Both in-house and external recruitment specialists are utilized to locate and screen suitable applicants.

Employer expectations are great given the need for high performance on the job. In many cases there is a need for highly developed interpersonal skills for the applicant to convince the selection committee that they are the right person for the job and to perform the job at a high level.

Applicants' attitudes are of the utmost importance to employers. People with a *can-do* attitude, good listening skills, a willingness to learn, an ability to take on constructive criticism and adjustment, and be a positive member of the work group, are highly sought.

Employers in many cases expect a certain level of support when employing people with a disability. Wage subsidies to employers are available in certain circumstances. Also, if needed, funds can be accessed from CRS Australia (for CRS clients) or the employer for the provision of workplace assessments and adaptive technology. Depending on the level of support required, the employee can be linked to a government funded agency that can provide an appropriate level of on or off the job support or a co-worker subsidy if this is more appropriate.

All people mentioned in the following case studies were participating in a vocational rehabilitation program through CRS Australia, which included vocational assessment

4. Case studies to illustrate how people with disabilities who as a result of a Vocational Rehabilitation Program through CRS Australia, have been able to make a positive contribution to the workforce.

Mark is an IT expert with 30 years experience at all levels of the industry - technical, management and programming - he lives and breathes IT. Mark was interested in returning to the industry in a hands-on capacity. Following vocational assessment, we set about locating a job match that provided an experienced supervisor, a small work team and the opportunity for Mark to draw on his vast IT knowledge. We negotiated a short period of placement through the CRS Australia *Work Training Scheme* in a help desk position and Mark submitted his application for a vacancy in a similar job. Mark had a secondary disability we were not aware of - a back injury. This became apparent while negotiating the work placement. It meant that Mark no longer matched well to the help desk job. However, soon after, an opportunity arose for Mark to apply his invaluable IT knowledge in assisting the ANU to further develop the campus adaptive technology program.

Mark's initial start was through the CRS *Work Training Scheme* and periods of part-time employment followed. This gave Mark the opportunity to work part-time within a supportive team, enabling him time off when needed, and provided the ANU with an enthusiastic IT expert with personal insight into disability to develop the adaptive technology program. Mark has multiple disabilities - so matching him to a flexible work arrangement where he could contribute his expertise whilst assisting him to regain confidence in himself was the goal we achieved. Mark was monitored regularly on the job by his CRS Rehabilitation Consultant in liaison with the work supervisor.

Pam has a background in careers development coupled with a strong administrative base. Due to multiple disabilities which included a neck injury, RSI and chronic pain and a long period out of the workforce, Pam thought she would probably never attain paid employment again. We looked carefully to match Pam's skills and availability to an opportunity located within International Education at ANU. Pam started a part-time placement initially through the CRS Australia *Work Training Scheme*, providing her with the opportunity to trial the job and to demonstrate her skills in the workplace. Pam made herself invaluable and following the work placement was offered paid employment.

Pam had not worked for ten years - had multiple disabilities and required part-time work to match her skills, interests and abilities. Due to her application to her work, her cheerful attitude, coupled with her ability to communicate with students, and her insight into disability issues, Pam reached her goal of employment.

In the main, most of the people working at the ANU through the Disability Employment Initiative are between 30 and 50 years of age. It is true to say that the

Universities in Canberra have an ageing workforce and are aware of the need to train new recruits from younger generations. This is not to the detriment of the more mature-aged workforce.

Ben is a 33 year-old male with social phobia and a learning disability who found himself out of the workforce after 12 years primarily spent working within payroll operations in the public service. Ben was participating in a vocational rehabilitation program with CRS Australia. Ben wanted to re-enter the workforce and required an area where he could apply his core skills, although not in a payroll team. After forming a good understanding of his interests and goals for work, the central finance office at the ANU was approached. After some negotiation, Ben commenced a placement through the CRS Australia work-training scheme. At completion, all parties took part in a full review of the placement. As a result Ben took up the offer of a 12-month employment contract and some adjustments were made to work behaviors by both Ben and the finance section to ensure a harmonious working relationship.

Dianne is a 47 year-old woman with a back injury and other physical disabilities who had been out of the workforce for ten years. Dianne was keen to work in an administrative/receptionist role and completed a number of computer training courses as part of her CRS Australia program. We then located some temporary employment in administration at the ANU. Dianne initially completed a short-term employment contract with the Law faculty. The need for further computer training was identified. Following this an opportunity became available within the student Administrative Services at the ANU. Dianne commenced a CRS Australia Work Training placement in this capacity and at completion, was offered on-going employment as a receptionist / administrative officer.

The following two case examples demonstrate the success stories for two disabled clients from different generations.

John had many years of experience at management levels in the public sector, is in his late 50s and has physical disabilities which impact on his ability to work full time. John would have considered a basic administrative position, however, due to his vast experience he was successful in gaining a number of contract jobs preparing the University Medals Program and providing secretariat services for high level committees.

Frank is in his 20s and has experience in various ANU temporary contracts in areas ranging from basic administrative positions to assisting with IT systems development. Frank has a mild learning disability. He is applying for internal and external vacancies at the ANU which match his skill base. Frank has reached interview stage on a number of occasions where he was rated second. In interpreting the feedback from the selection committees, the factor of further relative experience linked to time spent in the workforce was a consistent suggestion.

Frank has an infectious attitude, which has impressed on those he has worked with at the ANU. Indications are that he will reach his medium term work goal of locating on-going employment at the ANU and in doing so, he will become an invaluable member of the workgroup.

Another client with a bipolar condition (manic and depressed moods), who had completed a tertiary degree and worked in administration (completing different courses in order to become familiar with various software packages). The client was out of the workforce for a number of years and was interested in returning to work in an area relating to previous qualifications and experience. A number of departments in the University interviewed the client for a dual role - to provide some research support to academic staff as well as some administrative support. Following the interviews, the client commenced a CRS work training placement. This was reviewed at completion and the client was offered an employment contract of four days per week for three months. This was extended, then the job was advertised and the client applied for and won the position. Within this area at the ANU, there is flexibility in case the client requires time off due to illness, and due to this, other staff have had the opportunity to expand their knowledge by occasionally back filling for their new colleague. This has had a positive impact on the work area giving other members of staff further insight into the need for teamwork and diversity on the job.

Conclusion

As with all members of the community there is an inherent need for people with a disability to be treated as equals. We can all feel hopeful that this will eventuate because of the high standards set by institutions like the Australian National University and the University of Canberra.

Through these initiatives, we have demonstrated the great success achieved by people with a disability working at the Australian National University and the University of Canberra. Their achievements have highlighted the potential for other organizations to embrace the model discussed in this paper and create a truly diverse workforce where all have the opportunity to contribute and build a more equitable future.

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Two independent experiences:

Personal perspectives written by two people who achieved on-going employment at the ANU through Vocational Rehabilitation Programs with CRS Australia.

Client One

The most important thing that I learnt through dealing with my disabilities is that one learns as one goes of the different things that will, or will not, work.

It is always connected to the disability.

It is with this knowledge in mind that I decided to share some of the things I have learnt, and hope this may in turn help the policy-makers take this into account when introducing policies into workplaces that will have an affect on people with disabilities.

When I was faced with the prospect of having a disability for an unknown amount of years, it took me a while to become proactive in my own case. However, once I did, it was evident to me that I needed to re-train, for, in the marketplace to succeed I needed an edge: a profession or expertise that would have made it 'easier' for me to attain employment.

My choice was to study accountancy at the CIT which was affordable, money wise, and flexible in terms of contact hours/tutorials/lectures/assessment times. It was a positive outcome for me, as I attained the skills and expertise that made entry into employment more accessible.

Or so I thought.

Reality soon came to the understanding, that, although I had all the credentials – on paper – I needed work experience. Unfortunately, in the finance field there are no work experience opportunities available for an outsider. I had no connections that could 'introduce' me to a program that would accommodate my situation. Attaining a D in Internal/External Audit, I could sort of see the reasoning of some of the organisations, but refused to give up.

I have made many enquiries, and it was through the network with a migrant/refugee women lobby group AMWESL in the ACT, that I learnt about CRS Australia, and their requirements with Centrelink.

It was Jan Adami, my case worker at CRS Australia, who introduced me to her colleague Ben Johnson, who coordinates the disAbility employment initiative at the ANU.

Ben was able to negotiate:

1. Access to the PeopleSoft Financials Training course at the ANU;
2. A suitable work experience placement through the CRS Australia Work Training Scheme in a financials area at the ANU;
3. An interview and registration with the Casual Employment Office at the ANU.

I am now employed on a part-time basis, currently working in the Equity and Diversity Unit at the ANU, and it is through these three main steps that I was able to achieve my present employment with the assistance and support from CRS Australia and the disAbility Employment Initiative at ANU.

I would also like to acknowledge the great importance of The Australian National University as an employer who supports employment of people with disabilities.

Client Two

Ok, fell off scaffolding about 1 metre above roof level of single level house. Fell between the scaffolding & the house, dragging my leg through a bay window & landing on the support scaffolding 300mm above ground level. My head & feet were on the ground with me arched over the bar across lower back area. Spent overnight in hospital at Canberra Royal, then released home with a heap of painkillers.

Spent about three months at home getting over the bruising & walking around a lot to exercise & stretch my back as I found it hard to take a full size step, so I was getting around by only taking small steps at a time.

After about three months, went back to work on site starting off with light duties. After a month or so or that, in which time I continually hurt my back, I was asked to work in the yard at our main depot doing other type of work. As the light duties on site, still consisted of a lot of bending and climbing around scaffolding.

Worked in the yard doing maintenance work on equipment from the job sites, as it had to be checked & tested between sites. After about 8 months at work in the yard, I was sent to Sydney to North Shore Pain Clinic where I completed a 4 week long program, on managing my pain levels and different ways of leading a decent lifestyle. This was very good for me, as I was feeling pretty down about the state of my life and drinking a lot prior to this.

After the month at Sydney I returned to light duties at the depot, where I worked until the end of the contract when we were all laid off. After the contract finished I tried looking for work in the construction industry and went landscaping for a while. But after continuing to hurt my back all the time I decided that I could no longer do that sort of manual labour.

Did a computer-training program at Computer Power Training in Canberra, and started looking for work in the office environment. Found this to be very hard as I had little or no experience in office work. Also on the times that I did make the short list for jobs then have to fill in a detail form.

If I ticked have you had a previous compensation claim. Well that was the last I would hear of it.

After some time I heard about the work CRS Australia does assist people with a disability to return to the workforce. I asked Centrelink to help me with a referral to CRS in Canberra.

As part of my CRS Australia Vocational Rehabilitation Program, Carol Goodwin and I talked about what sort of work I would like to get into – Administrative work assisting project managers in the building industry.

After writing a list of half a dozen building companies in the ACT, we then proceeded to contact these companies to see if I could do a six to eight week work training placement with them in an office environment. None of these enquiries uncovered potential.

While this was going on Carol Goodwin contacted a colleague Ben Johnson who coordinates the disAbility Employment Initiative at The Australian National University. Ben was able to negotiate a six week placement for me through the CRS Australia Work Training Scheme at ANU in the Facilities and Services section. This was then extended to eight weeks at the request of the university architect, who I was working for. As part of this placement Carol completed a full workplace functional assessment and provided a suitable chair for my use. Both Ben and Carol were involved in monitoring my progress in liaison with my supervisor at Facilities and Services.

Near the end of the eight weeks I was asked by ANU if I was interested in employment, working with Facilities and Services on a part-time basis – 30 hours per week, in a similar job. I was very happy to have this opportunity presented to me and commenced my job on Monday of the following week. CRS continued to monitor my progress for a further 13 weeks after I was employed.

The management and staff of Facilities and Services Section at ANU have been very good to me since I started, they are aware that I have a back injury and do not ask or expect things of me that are going to cause me pain.