

TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

APS DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY 2020-25: FROM INTENTION TO ACTION

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Secretary, Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources and Chair, APS Disability Champions Network

Aunty Violet Sheridan (Welcome to Country)

Senator the Hon Anne Ruston

Minister for Families and Social Services

The Hon Ben Morton MP

Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Peter Woolcott AO (Introduction to Keynote Speaker)

Commissioner, Australian Public Service Commission

Dr Ben Gauntlett (Keynote Address)

Disability Discrimination Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission

Daniel Savage (Panellist Chair)

Assistant Director, Diversity and Inclusion, Department of Social Services

Fiona Thornton (Panellist)

Director, People and Culture Division, Department of Home Affairs

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DAVID FREDERICKS PSM: Good afternoon everybody, and on this International Day of People with Disability, could I welcome you all to this very special event to mark the launch of the APS Disability Employment Strategy. Could I say my special welcome to my colleagues, Peter Woolcott and Kathryn Campbell, a very special welcome to our keynote speaker today, Dr Ben Gauntlett, who is the Australian Disability Discrimination Commissioner, and can I thank our panellists that will join us later. A very special welcome to Aunty Violet Sheridan who is very well known to me and a very, very well respected elder within the Ngunnawal Community and she will now welcome us to the land of her ancestors, Aunty.

AUNTY VIOLET SHERIDAN: Hello, what a pleasure to be here this morning to formal Welcome to Country for you. Every time a formal Welcome to Country is given, it continues a tradition that has always been a part of Aboriginal culture. It was always given by way of welcome when permission was granted to visit a different tribal area, the reason for this custom is to protect your spirit while you were there, and it also shows respect for the First Peoples of the land you are meeting on.

AUNTY VIOLET SHERIDAN: When we talk about traditional country, we mean something beyond the dictionary definition for the word Aboriginal Australian. It might mean homeland or tribal or clan area, it means more than just a place on the map. For us, country is a word for all values - all values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its domains. It is on this land that my ancestors lived, learned and raised their families, possibility right here where I'm standing today. I'd like to pay my respects to my Elders, past, present and emerging and extend that respect to other Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people present here this morning. I'd also like to acknowledge the distinguished guests, panel members, ladies and gentlemen.

AUNTY VIOLET SHERIDAN: In keeping the general spirit of friendship and reconciliation, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you all here this morning on behalf of my people who are the traditional owners of the land for Canberra and region, the Ngunnawal people, and on behalf of my families and the rest of the Ngunnawal families, God bless and thank you for having me along. Be safe, and if I don't see you before Christmas, a merry Christmas to your families and a safe New Year. God bless, thank you.

DAVID FREDERICKS PSM: Thanks Aunty.

DAVID FREDERICKS PSM: Thank you so much for that Aunty, it's always lovely to hear from you and I'd love to hear your lovely generosity of spirit, I thank you.

DAVID FREDERICKS PSM: So as the APS Disability Champion, I can't underscore enough how important the APS Disability Employment Strategy is. In 2018, there were 4.4 million Australians with disability or 17.7% of the population, and 2.1 million people with disability living in households were of working age, that's 15 to 64 years, yet, only 48% were employed, compared with 79% of people without disability. Now as you know, the Australian Government has committed to a new employment target for people with disability in the APS of 7% by 2025.

DAVID FREDERICKS PSM: Now through the Disability Employment Strategy, there are two key focus areas that together will support the achievement of this goal. Firstly, it includes a strong commitment to fostering a more inclusive culture and making working environments more accessible, and secondly, improving the attraction, recruitment and retention of people with disability through redefining and strengthening employment and career development pathways and processes. That commitment would require an additional 4,500 employees with disability to enter the Australian Public Service by 2025.

DAVID FREDERICKS PSM: However, we must not focus on recruitment alone, the APS Disability Champions Network exists to bring together senior advocates to focus on disability employment matters of strategic and APS wide importance. The network also works to empower employees to raise substantive and systemic issues for consideration and to pilot and contribute to solutions to provide employment equity for employees with disability. The APS Disability Champions Network also has a role to play in bringing together the APS leadership cohort and collaborating across portfolio agencies to ensure we are driving the strategy's objectives.

DAVID FEEDERICKS PSM: We must work together and we must work hard to ensure we have created environments and cultures that are inclusive. That our systems and processes are inclusive and they support all of our employees, and that we enable people with disability to apply for employment in the APS. That employment must generate meaningful, fulfilling and long-serving careers for people with disability.

DAVID FREDERICKS PSM: Disability can affect anyone at any stage of their lives. It is everyone's responsibility to work together because it is only when we work together that we will be able to make a real difference, see a significant impact and create lasting change. We know we can do better, we know if we work together we can achieve a diverse and inclusive APS.

DAVID FREDERICKS PSM: We will now hear from the Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator Anne Ruston, and the Assistant Minister for the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Ben Morton, and after that, my colleague, the Australian Public Service Commissioner Peter Woolcott, will follow. Thank you.

SENATOR THE HON ANNE RUSTON: As the minister with federal responsibility for disability, I'd like to recognise just how important the new Australian Public Service Disability Employment Strategy is. For people with disability and their families, increasing employment opportunities makes a huge contribution to improved economic security, independence and wellbeing. We know that employment gives people with disability more choice and opportunity to fulfil their other ambitions in life, as well as generating clear business benefits for employers. Drawing for a broader talent pool brings numerous advantages to the Australian Public Service, including building a workforce that better reflects the Australian community. Evidence shows that diverse workforces are more likely to be engaged, motivated and productive.

SENATOR THE HON ANNE RUSTON: Importantly, this strategy also focuses on career development and retention, which will be critical in Australia's COVID recovery. It's not enough to get people with disability in the door, we need to keep them in the APS. This strategy demonstrates the Commonwealth's commitment to the National Disability Strategy and its aims for more employment opportunities for people with disability. I encourage all Australian Public Service agencies to embed the objectives of this strategy within their organisation. If we approach recruitment differently, focus on each person's ability and provide appropriate supports, then together we can make a real difference.

HON BEN MORTON MP: I'm pleased to join you to launch the APS Disability Employment Strategy 2020-25. The Australian Public Service has the potential to be an employer of choice for people with disability. The new strategy sets out a pathway to achieve a workplace that is diverse and reflects the Australian community. This is a responsibility that we all share. The strategy is all about opportunity. It provides an opportunity for the APS to demonstrate strong leadership and champion best practise in relation to disability employment. It also drives outcomes that provide people with a disability a wider choice of employment opportunities. In turn, this leads to rewarding and meaningful careers with career development opportunities, greater economic independence, and importantly gives more Australians the chance to significantly contribute to delivering the government's priorities.

HON BEN MORTON MP: Having a public service that draws on a wider talent pool and abilities from the breadth of the Australian community drives better policy, better programs, better services and better decisions for the Australian population. When that happens Australia benefits. So I'm proud to launch today the APS Disability Employment Strategy 2020-25. The government is committed to delivering opportunities for all Australians and I'd like to impress upon all agencies the importance of implementing the measures identified in this Strategy. To not only benefit the APS, but all Australians. Thank you.

PETER WOOLCOTT AO:

Thank you ministers, thank you David, and thank you everyone for tuning in to today's launch. It gives me great pleasure to be speaking with you today as we launch a new Australian Public Service Disability Employment Strategy. In this five-year strategy, as you've heard, we've set ourselves an ambitious target, to increase the employment of people with a disability in the Australian Public Service to 7% by 2025. The APS needs to be seen as an employer of choice for all Australians, including those with a disability. If we're going to achieve this, we must ensure that our workplaces are inclusive and accessible, and we must continue to build partnerships with educational institutions and disability representative organisations, to leverage their knowledge and their expertise.

PETER WOOLCOTT AO:

A strong example of this collaboration is the Australian Public Service Commission's partnership with the Australian Human Rights Commission to identify, enhance and support best practise in employing and supporting people with a disability. The Disability Discrimination Commissioner, Dr Ben Gauntlett, is a renowned advocate for disability rights and has been a hugely valued advisor to the APS as we have developed this strategy. He brings not only great commitment to this issue but much pragmatism. Prior to commencing as Commissioner in May last year, Dr Gauntlett worked as a barrister in Western Australia and Victoria. As Disability Discrimination Commissioner, Dr Gauntlett has presented to the United Nations Committee in Geneva on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and was a witness before the Royal Commission into Aged Care, Quality and Safety. It is my very great pleasure to introduce Dr Gauntlett to you as our keynote speaker, thank you.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

Thank you very much for that kind introduction Commissioner Woolcott.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

Good disability policy benefits all Australians and perhaps nowhere is that statement more apt than considering the Australian Public Service's Disability Employment Strategy for 2020 to 2025. I wish to acknowledge and pay my deep respects to the Traditional Owners of the land, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. I pay respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging and acknowledge their continuing connection to this Country. I also acknowledge all other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and community members who are here today.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

It is always nice to be invited to talk about disability employment. I think of all the areas that I deal with in my capacity as Disability Discrimination Commissioner, employment of people with disability is the most strongly supported by all levels of government as a good idea. But at the same time, how to increase the employment of people with disability in Australia is a considerable challenge, especially following the impacts of COVID-19.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

This is not just an issue in Australia, for example, in the United States of America, President elect Joe Biden said on the 8th of November when accepting that he had won the US presidential election, "We must make the promise of the country real for everybody, no matter their race, their ethnicity, their faith, their identity or their disability." It was the first time a US president had made such a comment in an acceptance speech. Great fanfare resulted, but much still needs to be done, and in the United States, as here, disability employment is a critical issue.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

The critical point remains for Australia, as with many other parts of the world, how do we turn ideas that are laudable into practical outcomes? I'm aware there's an exciting panel today, so I do not want to take up too much of your time, However, I do wish to make three points. First, diversity and inclusion in employment is based upon the benefits of the individuals, organisations and society. But for the public service, that includes an authenticity of commitment to the population they serve which is difficult to replicate. Second, assumptions about disability are often unhelpful. A humble question will be greeted with perspective and a well-considered answer. But one definite consideration to ask is given the stigma that we know that is associated with disability, why would a person reveal it to others? What are the implications for this? And third, the employment of people with disability is only one aspect of a person's life. Try to understand the underlying needs or background of the person before making presumptions about that individual.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

Ladies and gentlemen, the public service is not a business, it exists to serve the population in a specific jurisdiction or location, it must reflect and understand the communities it serves. 4.4 million Australians live with disability and 2.7 million Australian's have caring responsibilities. What occurs in these people's lives cannot be learnt in a textbook, rather, it must be learnt from individuals themselves. But that's not to say that a colleague of a person with a disability does not learn from having them in the same workplace.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

It is important to understand that if we want to affect societal change, the Australian Public Service must reflect the communities which it serves. We know to effect change you have to have an effect upon a personal, organisational and societal level when developing policies. The Australian Public Service's Disability Strategy has that effect. This is not just about profit and loss, it is about good policy and ensuring we have the best policy for Australia.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

In terms of assumptions about disability, it is important to realise that approximately 80% of disability is unseen. We know that people with disabilities struggle to reveal they have a disability to others. Making people feel comfortable and supported is an integral aspect of any disability employment program. Disclosure of disability does not have to be all at once, conversations can occur incrementally. The comment, "You tell me what you are comfortable with and we can go from there," matters. "What do you think are the issues?" Open questions that allow a person to reveal their inner most concerns are helpful. Take the time to ask the next question when you're dealing with people with disability. Try and problem solve together. The Disability Employment Strategy should be implemented with people with disability and not for people with disability. For some reasonable adjustment, is a person really going to exaggerate their need? Making people comfortable by acting quickly and decisively sends a message of inclusion.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

Disability policy though and the assumptions surrounding it, have been an area of significant research across the world. In the paper, “The Participation of People with Disabilities in the Workplace Across the Employment Cycle: Employment Concerns and Research Evidence”, published in 2020 by Silvia Bonaccio and others who are Canadian academics, where they did a significant literature review on disability employment, stated a primary reason for the lower participation rates and underemployment in individuals with disability, was the views and perceptions of employers. Amongst 11 issues that they said that employers often take into account, which they should not, are the work-related abilities of people with disability, the cost of accommodation, the inability of people with disability to interact with colleagues, and occupational health safety issues. All these issues can be rebutted.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

One of the reasons for the development of the Australian Public Service's Disability Employment Strategy is to understand the importance of having a correct viewpoint on disability employment. As an employer, as a manager, as a person deciding on what programs to implement to increase disability employment, try to ask yourself, is there an unconscious bias here that we need to deal with? And if so, how can we openly and transparently deal with that issue?

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

But when dealing with disability, when dealing with people with disability, one of the reasons why we have a National Disability Strategy is the understanding that the totality of someone's life is made up of a lot of areas, housing, personal assistance, transport, access to healthcare. A person with a disability may or may not have issues relating to all these areas of service, but they are always people. They have a gender, a race, an ethnicity, a culturally diverse background, a sexual orientation, and they may come from a rural and remote area. Remembering that disability is one aspect of diversity is incredibly important when trying to develop a process that is fit for purpose and ensures that all people with disability are able to be employed on an equal basis to others.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

When having conversations with people with disability, when trying to communicate what the best way to undertake employment where they can benefit and their career can flourish, it is important that managers, executives and colleagues understand that sometimes issues that affect disability do not always occur in the workplace. For myself, as a quadriplegic from a spinal cord injury, age 16, one of the critical concerns is transport. That issue may be different for another person with a disability, but it is important to understand that it is absolutely imperative to look at the totality of the individual's life.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

In conclusion therefore, the justification for the Australian Public Service being world leaders in disability employment is strong. It is also respected. Last year when reviewing Australia's conduct under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Australian Public Service's disability employment target of 7% was specifically praised by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Such praise is hard won. As Disability Discrimination Commissioner, it has been a pleasure to be involved. The role of the Australian Human Rights Commission is apolitical.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

I find this burden easy to discharge, as ultimately disability policy is about people, not politicians, not political parties, not ideology. At times, we will be a respectful contradictor, but above all we are independent and we need to work with local, state, territory and Commonwealth Government to ensure we have good disability policy that benefits all Australians. At a time when there's a temptation to light bonfires in disability policy, it is important we build bridges. This employment policy is hopefully a significant bridge and an example to others which will enable people with disability to get a job. But not just a job, a good job, a meaningful job, a job that will lead to a career. A career that they can be proud of, a career that the Australian Public Service can be proud of.

DR BEN GAUNTLETT:

I look forward now to hearing from Daniel and the panel. Thank you.

DANIEL SAVAGE: Thank you Dr Gauntlett and thank you all for joining us today on what should be a very interesting panel discussion. Today we're going to be speaking about the Disability Employment Strategy, but what that means for APS employees who have a lived experience of disability. My name is Daniel Savage, I'm Assistant Director of Diversity and Inclusion at the Department of Social Services, and I'm a cis white male with a lived experience of disability.

DANIEL SAVAGE: Joining me today on the panel are going to be Fiona Thornton, Nathan Hannigan and Abby Meyer, and I think it's really great to have these people joining us today because, while it's always good to see that the ministers and some of our senior executive support this strategy so much, it's the employees who are at the coalface who are really going to be implementing it day-to-day, so I'll just jump across and get each of them to tell a little bit about themselves. So Fiona, why don't we start with you?

FIONA THORNTON: Thank you Daniel. Hi, my name's Fiona Thornton. I'm an EL2 with Home Affairs currently working in People and Culture Division. I'm vision impaired from an accident that I had when I was seven years old. And just for people watching today who may have a vision impairment and can't see me, I have probably a controlled look of panic on my face and that's because I'm quite nervous. I have for a long time been uncomfortable expressing my opinions in public, because I can't tell whether an audience is with me or whether they disagree or have completely switched off from what I'm saying, so I'm still working on managing those nerves but I agreed to do this today because I'm really passionate about supporting people with disability through their journey to employment and to meaningful employment. I wholeheartedly support the Disability Employment Strategy, 2020-25 and I'm very pleased to be here to discuss it today.

DANIEL SAVAGE: Great, thank you Fiona. Nathan?

NATHAN HANNIGAN: Thanks Fiona.

NATHAN HANNIGAN:

I'm Nathan Hannigan, General Manager of People at Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources. I have struggled with anxiety and depression from being a teenager, and it was only in the last couple of years that I've actually sought treatment and it's managed and life for me is a whole lot better. I also echo your comments regarding the strategy and fully support it and certainly over the last several months in engaging with staff, in particular, through COVID I've seen firsthand the impacts of COVID on mental health and the support that we provide staff is really important. A large part of my wanting to talk today as a senior leader in the Australian Public Service, is in doing so if one person goes and gets help, then I consider it's been for a very, very good cause. So very pleased to be here today.

DANIEL SAVAGE:

Thanks, great to have you Nathan. And finally, joining us via video conference we have Abby Meyer. Welcome, Abby.

ABBY MEYER:

Hello, thank you for having me. As you know, my name is Abby and I've been working for the ATO in Adelaide since 2008. Started as a casual and gained permanent position in 2010. I currently work within Service Delivery, Debt and Lodgement Assist as an APS3. And during my time within the ATO, I've been involved with disability network previously as a disability advisor and currently on the leadership team for the National Disability and Ally Network. As a person with a disability, I am passionate about inclusion and equality for all. Outside of work, I volunteer in helping to promote disability awareness and support and creating a more accessible and inclusive community. I am only reminded that I have a disability when there are barriers, either physical or attitudinal, that I need to break, that's why I continue to be involved in ensuring all ATO employees with a disability or impairment are supported per and fully included within the workplace as all employees should be, thank you.

DANIEL SAVAGE:

Thank you Abby. Now we're going to jump right into question number one. So some of these questions have come from various people around the APS and some of them have come from some of the own internal interesting things that we would like to find out.

DANIEL SAVAGE:

So first off, the Disability Employment Strategy that we've all been lucky enough to have a chance to really look at comes with two focus areas that were mentioned earlier. So we've got the focus on attract, recruit and retain employees, but I think what we would all agree more important is the focus on accessible inclusive workplaces, cultures and environments. It also includes that target of 7% employment by 2025 that the government is committed to. So what I want to say first is I might throw it first to you, Fiona, so what do you think is key to achieving the outcomes of this strategy, this inclusive culture environment, this employment target especially from the position of, kind of, a manager within the public service?

FIONA THORNTON:

Thanks Daniel. It's a great question, thank you to whomever it was that asked it.

FIONA THORNTON:

We've heard this morning about the 7% target and that it's quite ambitious and I really commend the stewards of the strategy for setting such a target. When I think about it as a manager, I was reflecting on this as I was reading through the strategy and I thought as a manager I'm really at the coalface of recruitment decisions very often in my agency and many agencies are the same, I don't work in recruitment, but I'm a manager and therefore I'm often involved either as a delegate for recruitment or recommending recruitment outcomes to my delegates, and what I think would be really useful, and it's in the strategy, is to really understand the value proposition for the agency, that is the benefits to the agency of employing a person with a disability.

FIONA THORNTON:

I was really pleased to see that the strategy talks about the benefits to an agency and in particular it calls out innovation and productivity. What manager isn't looking for innovation and productivity when they're seeking to employ and seeking to manage a team? So I think it's really important that we develop tools that support and educate the managers across the APSC to understand the benefits of employing people with disability.

FIONA THORNTON:

But of course, as we've heard about this morning, recruitment is just one way to get to the target and another really important issue is helping people who are already employed with a disability across the APSC to have the courage to remove any barriers that they may feel to identifying on their agency's HR systems. And I think there we need to look at what is the benefit for the employee to do that? And here I think we come to the cultural change that Daniel was just talking about. I think that when we have a top-down approach, as the strategy suggests, that really encourages and promotes the value and the importance of employing and having people with disability in the agency, because it reflects the community in which we live and that we serve, I think this will go a long way to really helping people feel that they're able to identify, and we'll probably talk about it later, but I also really liked the initiative in the strategy that is the Disability Liaison Officer. I think having somebody in the agency if you've identified as having a disability, that there's someone there you can talk to, raise issues with and work with, to address some of those systemic issues that we face will go a long way to helping people feel comfortable to identify.

DANIEL SAVAGE:

Thank you Fiona, that's a really great point and it's something that we've seen in the Department of Social Services that by implementing that role of a Disability Liaison Officer you've got a first port of call if maybe a staff member is not sure if they want to speak to their manager directly, they want to have a chat with someone about what it means to be within the department or within the APS and identifying, you've got that first port of call, somebody who has that background in that kind of space, and can ease people into what it means to identify within the APS.

DANIEL SAVAGE:

Nathan, I'm interested to hear what you've got to say on this subject after being more into the senior executive space, what this strategy looks like in your role?

NATHAN HANNIGAN:

Well I think it's really important just to add to the earlier point that we develop our middle managers who in my view, are the most influential in terms of being able to affect change and it's ensuring that we move from being disability aware to disability confident, and that's really important to make sure. And from, sort of, that strategic perspective, it's great to have a strategy but it's really important that agencies put concrete plans in place to underpin that work, and I think that's where the real change will come from.

DANIEL SAVAGE:

Right, thank you Nathan, and finally, Abby, I'm very keen to hear what you have say. Of course, APS level staff make up the majority of the government, and so, what do you see as both for yourself and for everyone across those levels, what an individual can do to help with this strategy and kind of its broader implementation across the government?

ABBY MEYER:

Well, I definitely do agree with everyone else in the fact that having a disability advisor or point of contact within each site office is really helpful. The ATO, we used to have that, that was taken away in 2017 and I had noticed, sort of, a bit of a disheartening feel among the employees about it because many people will still approach me thinking that I'm still a disability advisor, we do have a disability network, however, there's not a point of contact on site, and as someone stated previously, people aren't comfortable about going to other places, they feel more that they can relate to, that are understood and half the time, they just want to be heard without any judgement or anything, just listen and maybe be pointed in the right direction to where they can find the support that they need before seeking managers or people support or anything as such.

ABBY MEYER:

Also, I feel from the personal experience that back in the day when I started working, ATO, well, any public service job was sort of had a bit of a stigma to it, as in, well, I often got told, "Well, of course they're going to hire you. You've got a disability." It was sort of a token job. We were token employees, and it was kind of like there was no career aspects provided or anything like that.

ABBY MEYER: So, I believe that continuing full support, career development and having a disability advisor as someone that people can talk to onsite, will also help to achieve outcomes and hopefully, achieve retention as well. And make a disability confident workplace. Because everyone will, sort of, feel quite heard as well, if that makes sense.

DANIEL SAVAGE: Yeah, that was great, thank you, Abby and I think you brought up some good points there. I mean, it's always that balance between we want a Disability Liaison Officer where potentially people can go to and feel comfortable speaking, but at the same time, we want to make sure that our managers on the floor and throughout the departments feel confident enough and are inclusive enough that also their staff feel that they can approach them and speak to them, so it is a fine balancing act that I'm thinking hopefully, alongside this strategy with its kind of long-term perspective, it really, we might start to see some of those next steps along the way to a disability confident and inclusive work environment.

DANIEL SAVAGE: We're going to jump on to our next question, Nathan I wanted to throw this one to you first, but after that, anyone who feels confident can jump in. What are some of the most positive changes you've seen from employing people with disability in your workplace, whether that's your department as a whole, whether it's your team, whether it's been in the past in kind of a smaller area, what kind of changes have you seen when people have had the space to be able to bring in people with disability?

NATHAN HANNIGAN: Well I'm really proud to work for a department that looks for innovative ways to recruit people with disability and a division of our department, Questacon, in fact, recently undertook a process for a shop assistant and an individual applied and he had a physical disability that would have made that particular role really difficult for him to undertake, but what Questacon did was, they saw, I guess, there was a whole range of other traits in him and abilities, and I think the way they put it was, they threw out the job description and created a role for the individual.

NATHAN HANNIGAN:

And he now undertakes a range of work, a one shift a week for about four hours on the information desk providing support for visitors and doing some back office functions in the administration team and is really enjoying it, and for the first time in over a decade, has indicated that, you know, he finally feels that he is seen as a person, that job is giving him a real meaning and a bigger support network for him. So, I think if, where possible, scenarios like that are replicated across the APS, and granted it's not always possible to do away with the job description and create a role, but if we can do more of that or consider that more, then I think that'll go a long way to us achieving the targets as outlined in the strategy.

DANIEL SAVAGE:

That's great, thank you Nathan.

DANIEL SAVAGE:

Yes, Fiona.

FIONA THORNTON:

Sorry can I just say I really commend Questacon for that and when you were saying that, what came to mind for me was possibly the young child with a disability who goes to Questacon and who encounters that person and then has a role model and something to aspire to. So well done to Questacon for that.

DANIEL SAVAGE:

And I think it's similar when we were talking about the idea of identifying and feeling the confidence to identify, that similar experience of seeing somebody who is in an EL position, and executive level position or higher, coming out and declaring themselves as having a disability and showing, and talking about their experience within the public service, can really change how you as an individual feel, but even if it's not a person in the service with a disability, if they know somebody who has a disability and they can talk about, oh yes, like I mentioned, the public service has changed, this is no longer just tokenistic roles being put in place, it is actually being ingrained within the service itself.

DANIEL SAVAGE:

Abby, did you have anything you wanted to comment on there?

ABBY MEYER: I just think that at our work, we have also really shared disability stories, like we've had a whole collection of them, My Story and talking disability, and I think, and during that time when they were released, it was everyone was just asking questions, wanted to find out more, and I think that was really good effort within the ATO to really broaden that scope of information for people as well, but and we also had the, as I say, the disability network, which I think are good.

DANIEL SAVAGE: Right, thank you Abby.

DANIEL SAVAGE: And we'll jump onto the third question. Abby, I'm actually going to send this one to you to start off with, but I'm very interested to hear what everyone has to say on it. So, with so many kinds of preconceptions about disability, so many different disabilities that present themselves in various different ways, whether it's, you technically have the same disability but it presents very differently, whether you have an invisible disability, or one that is not necessarily permanent, it's fluctuating, you get all these misconceptions and it's around that how do we successfully support an inclusive and accessible environment in the APS when there are these preconceptions and occasional unconscious biases around disability?

ABBY MEYER: This is just a really in-depth question. I believe that the best way is to have, well, I'd say that managers in higher levels up, they should have maybe disability inclusion training, as well provide them with that to help them relate to people with disability within the workforce, create more information sessions for people to attend, but also really, but the main focus it's the support, is the adaptive technology support as well. Various support as required. Like me, myself, I've got a hearing impairment and I need phone equipment to have that working and it was never considered to be a factor when I first started working, I was deaf but I was still put on the phones and I find that it's that sort of understanding, I think at a level, not feel, not making employees feel like a bit inadequate because they haven't got the ability but they've got the skills to do the work but the adaptive technology is great.

ABBY MEYER: So, my personal experience, we need to support that because I am feeling a little isolated within my workplace at the moment because of the complications and I feel all the APS sites need to communicate with technology, share that as well. So, that is one of my main things at the moment to help everybody feel included and be able to perform at the best of their ability within the workplace, and yet I, once again, I do say create a local point for somebody to contact in regards to a disability advisor. I think that is really, I know as a personal experience, they are the main concerns that I think we all face.

DANIEL SAVAGE: Great. Thank you Abby.

DANIEL SAVAGE: Nathan, I might go to you quickly. Especially given the nature of having a mental health diagnosis, and firstly a lot of people not necessarily recognising that, that falls under the definition of a person with a disability and it being an invisible disability, how do you think we are to approach the nature of preconceptions around invisible disabilities?

NATHAN HANNIGAN: I think it's a good point because unless it's obvious to someone then it's not necessarily seen as a thing, but I think that it's really important that senior role models, both external and internal to our agencies, speak up and talk about their lived experience with disability and I would hope that in doing so, it, sort of, builds that inclusive culture and raises awareness of disability in the places we work and through that, provides support to everyone.

DANIEL SAVAGE: Great. Fiona, do you have anything you would like to add?

FIONA THORNTON: Yeah sure, I could give a manager's perspective and I think that the strategy is terrific. It comes in at the top-down and that's important, very important, I think, for managers, what, we, sorry.

DANIEL SAVAGE: That's all right.

FIONA THORNTON: I've lost my train of thought. I think it's really important to equip managers to support their staff no matter what their abilities. It's, I agree with you Abby, that disability can come in so many different ways, and there is, you know, different responses required depending on the circumstances. We can never hope to have one set of instructions, I guess, for managers as to how to cope in a situation, what we need to do is support them with guiding principles and policies with the liaison officer role that we spoke about earlier, we need to help them to feel empowered to order that workplace assessment that someone might need, to have that conversation about reasonable adjustment and to go out and seek the adaptive technology that their staff member is going to need to reduce those barriers and unlock the other skills and qualities that they have to offer to the public service.

DANIEL SAVAGE: Right, thank you Fiona.

DANIEL SAVAGE: In my experience when I've worked with managers, the smallest piece of advice I've always tried to give people, that I think does a big difference, is rather than asking a staff member, "What's the problem?" It's, "What can I do to help?" And that shift just to that little bit of a positive mindset, it's amazing the kind of difference it can make.

DANIEL SAVAGE: We have to wrap up very shortly, we've only got a couple of minutes left so this is going to be a quick fire question, and just what's, what do you think is either the greatest thing you've seen in your department throughout the public service or in private industry, that's been the most help to people with disability? So Nathan, we might start with you.

NATHAN HANNIGAN: I think the networks in our department are a great source of information and support for the employees and, our network is called the Disability and Wellness Network and they do a great job in, I guess, really bringing issues to the forefront. And they're our policy advisors so they've taken on that really strategic role in advising on, all, you know, related policies and support that we provide our staff. So I think the networks are really important.

DANIEL SAVAGE: Okay, thank you, Nathan. Fiona?

FIONA THORNTON: If you wouldn't mind coming back to me?

DANIEL SAVAGE: No worries, Abby? Have you got anything out there that's the number one thing you've seen?

ABBY MEYER: Oh, is that me?

DANIEL SAVAGE: Yes, Abby, sorry.

ABBY MEYER: I didn't hear.

ABBY MEYER: Well, I agree that the network's a major factor I think. We've got our disability network, the National Disability and Ally Network, and I find that a good collaboration with all stakeholders within the ATO, like within, like site leader, workplace services, workplace diversity and we all communicate with each other very well, and support each other, I think that's the key to have a good internal network as well to support the needs so, we can continue to help create that disability confident culture within the workplace, and like I said, we have many training videos and they were made by employees with disability, I think we have a total of six and then we have about a total of four stories, and they're taken from, the time when an employee is at home to how long it takes them to get ready to work and then to, when they go to work and then when they come home again. So, it really opens a lot of people's eyes as to, not just the struggles that we face within the workplace itself but to get to work. I have people coming up to me and saying, "I am never going to complain about going to work again after watching that video. I cannot believe it. I see it in a different light now." And it's just really great to hear that feedback, and we have also special interests meetings every quarter and they are nominated by the members of our network and quite often mental health and neurological impairments are quite often requested for, we invite a special speaker, a keynote speaker to come in and we put it to the members of the group and they ask questions and stuff like that, so they're really, really popular.

ABBY MEYER: And I think as I work in a scheduled environment, we have to account for our time constantly, which is understandable, but I do find that our other networks, other diversity groups, people are allowed to attend those sort of meetings, but with us within disability it always has to be within our time, and I think a couple of years ago we had a massive mental health week, two weeks, and there were many sessions, many things for people to attend, and a lot of people in our area were not able to attend, because it wouldn't, because they weren't allowed out of their schedule. So I think that's another thing and if employees want to attend these things and yet they're not allowed to, well what does that say in return?

ABBY MEYER: So, but anyway, I think the ATO, I've always felt supported within there, and there are little hiccups every now and again but no one learns unless you speak up and share as well so I'm willing to do that.

DANIEL SAVAGE: Thank you very much Abby. Unfortunately we're going to have to wrap it up there. Hopefully we all take this as a start of a conversation not the end. So, you could see there's much more to say on this strategy and we hope you join us all on the journey over the next five years. I'd like to thank again our panellists, Fiona, Nathan and Abby. My name again was Daniel Savage and I'll now throw to Secretary Campbell for some closing remarks, thank you.

KATHRYN CAMPBELL AO CSC: Thank you Daniel and thank you to Aunty Violet for your Welcome to Country earlier today. I too would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners on the land in which we meet today and pay my respects to Elders both past and present. I'd also like to thank today's speakers, Peter Woolcott, David Fredericks and Dr Ben Gauntlett. I would also particularly like to thank the chair and the panellists from today's panel event. Daniel Savage, Abby Meyer, Nathan Hannigan, Fiona Thornton, thank you for sharing your thoughts and importantly your tips, and I think we're all left with Daniel's tips about asking people, "How can I help?"

KATHRYN CAMPBELL AO CSC: Today's launch of the APS Disability Employment Strategy is an important milestone in the journey of inclusion and equality for the Australian Public Service. It marks a new era in how we empower people with disability.

KATHRYN CAMPBELL AO CSC:

We are moving our culture towards one which celebrates and welcomes diversity. We are shifting the conversation away from the barriers and challenges of engaging with people with disability to a conversation focused on benefits. There are 4.4 million Australians who identify as having a disability. For the individual, increasing employment opportunities unlocks and improves economic security, independence and wellbeing. For the public service, having a culture inclusive of all Australians increases our appeal and attraction to perspective employees. It helps us become an employer of choice and improves our workplaces through staff being welcomed, engaged and retained.

KATHRYN CAMPBELL AO CSC:

But there are also benefits in the work we do regardless of which agency we come from. Increasing the representation of people with disability is vital to reflecting the diversity of the Australian community which we serve. We need to look like the community we serve. The diversity helps our public service drive better policy, programs, services and outcomes for all Australians.

KATHRYN CAMPBELL AO CSC:

And finally, beyond the APS, having an inclusive workforce sets an example to other Australian employers, showing them the benefit of having a diverse talent pool and the value of employing people with disability. We all have a role to play in the success of this strategy and I'd like to thank everyone who's been watching today as the first step on this journey. I encourage you to take the next step and read the strategy and find out how you can build an inclusive and diverse Australian Public Service. Thank you very much.