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Getting on at Work: Progression and Promotion of Women with Disability in the Victorian Public Service.

QUT Centre for Decent Work & Industry, Brisbane, Qld.

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Centre for
Decent Work
and Industry

Getting on at Work: Progression and Promotion of Women with Disability in the Victorian Public Service.

Final Report



COMMISSION FOR
GENDER EQUALITY
IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

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OFFICIAL

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Executive Summary

Overview of the Project

Gender inclusivity and equal employment opportunities are key priorities for the Victorian Government. The *Gender Equality Act 2020* (the Act) commenced in March 2021 and laid the foundation to improve workplace gender equality in the Victorian public sector. The legislation requires Victorian public sector entities to explicitly address intersecting forms of inequality and disadvantage.

The research project aimed to centre the voices of women with disability to provide evidence-based insights into the enablers, barriers and inclusive practices shaping their career progression and promotion in the Victorian Public Service. The research team reviewed scholarly literature, analysed data extracts from the People Matter Survey (2021) and interviewed 49 women with disability from across the Victorian Public Service.

Summary of Key Findings

People Matter Survey Data 2021

Analysis of the People Matter Survey 2021 data extracts identified statistically significant insights. People who identified as having a disability analysed by gender identity indicated that:

- women and people who identified as non-binary and 'other' reported having a disability more often than men.
- women were more likely to use one or more flexible work arrangements.
- more requests for workplace adjustments were made by women, non-binary or 'other' gender identities and disability was often identified as a reason for requesting workplace adjustments.
- women and men reported low perceptions of workplace culture related to disability. This was significantly lower for respondents who identified as non-binary, 'other' or who preferred not to state their gender.

Research Interviews with Women with Disability

Interviews with women with disability identified three career patterns. Firstly, broadly inclusive, and positive career experiences. Secondly, broadly non-inclusive career experiences which led participants to feel unsure they had a future career in the VPS. Thirdly, most participants experienced a range of inclusive and non-inclusive career experiences which varied depending on the VPS employer or team in which they were employed.

Overall, participants highlighted a desire for:

- the VPS to move forward with more consistency in how it enables the careers of women with disability across all roles and levels of seniority.
- the VPS to move away from putting women with disability in the ‘too hard basket’ towards developing a culture where disability inclusion is characterised by relationships and interactions that reflect ‘respect’ and ‘trust’.

Eight themes draw together insights from the interviews with women with disability and identify experiences of the VPS workplace that can enable or create barriers to career progression:

- Sharing Disability Information
- Requesting Workplace Adjustments
- Disability Advocacy
- Team Relations
- Impact of Managers and Supervisors
- Mentorship
- Disability Leadership
- Policy Context and Application

To build on the enabling aspects of women with disabilities experiences and remove barriers, the VPS should focus on fostering VPS workplaces where respect and trust are embedded throughout the broader culture. There may be value in identifying one or a small group of VPS employers to lead on developing the inclusive practices identified by participants.

The inclusive practices identified by participants were drawn together into three key areas: *VPS Managers and Supervisors*; *Psychological Safety*; and *VPS Policies and Practices*.

Respecting the agency of women with disability, their capability and capacity to navigate their career contexts, the report suggests three key areas women with disability may want to focus their energy and sources of support: seeking out mentoring opportunities, considering how they can advocate for their inclusion requirements, and exploring opportunities to share their career experiences with other women with disability.

OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

Research Context

Gender inclusivity and equal employment opportunities are key priorities for the Victorian Government. The *Gender Equality Act 2020* (the Act) commenced in March 2021 and laid the foundation to improve workplace gender equality in the Victorian public sector. Research grants are one of the mechanisms used by the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector (the Commission) to fulfil the promise of the Act to investigate and report on gender equality in the workplace, specifically incorporating intersectionality with other social identities and characteristics. The Queensland University of Technology (QUT) was awarded one of these grants to support research on the ways disability and gender shape the career experiences of people who identify as women with disability (hereafter, women with disability).

The overarching aim of the research is to contribute evidence-based insights to support the creation of inclusive workplaces in the Victorian Public Service (VPS). The seven workplace gender indicators included in the Act are central to achieving inclusive workplaces (spanning all defined entities in the Victorian public sector). This research addresses indicator five 'recruitment and promotion', through an investigation of the experiences of career progression and promotion for women with disability.

The research was positioned within the VPS policy context, which includes the Getting to Work Disability Employment Action Plan (2018), as outlined in the Victorian Public Sector *Getting to Work* report¹. The Getting to Work Disability Employment Action Plan (2018) aims to develop the capacity of the VPS to support people with disability to realise their full potential and provide a safe and inclusive environment for employees with disability.

Research Team

The project team comprised of researchers from the Centre for Decent Work and Industry (CDWI), QUT, with expertise in gender, disability, and workplace inclusion. The QUT team worked in collaboration with the Victorian Public Sector Enablers Network (Enablers Network) and the Disability Leadership Institute (DLI) to develop and undertake this research.

¹ Getting to Work: Victorian Public Sector Disability Employment Action Plan 2018-2025, Retrieved from <https://vpssc.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Getting-to-work.pdf>

Research Purpose and Approach

The purpose of this research project was to investigate the lived experience of women with disability to understand barriers and enablers to career progression and promotion opportunities. The project centred the voices of research participants, to understand how VPS employers can create environments that enable women with lived experience of disability to achieve the professional success they desire.

This research is informed by a collaborative co-design approach underpinned by an ongoing collaborative relationship with Duncan Chew (Enablers Network President) and Maria-Grace Capito (Enablers Network Senior Advisor). The Enablers Network met fortnightly with the Lead Chief Investigator (CI) to maintain this collaboration.

Research Methodology

This research encompasses quantitative and qualitative empirical data. The Commission provided workforce data and quantitative employee experience survey data (i.e., extracts from the People Matter Survey undertaken in 2021 (PMS 2021)). The project team carried out 49 qualitative in-depth interviews with women with disability employed in the VPS. The QUT University Human Research Ethics Committee granted ethics approval for this project (approval number 6073).

Quantitative Data - People Matter Survey 2021

Under the Gender Equality Act 2020, the Commission requires defined entities to undertake a workplace gender audit² as part of the Gender Equality Action Plan every four years. Defined entities are also expected to complete an audit every two years as part of progress reporting. The workplace gender audit is comprised of two different types of data³: workforce data, which is drawn from organisations' internal systems, such as payroll and human resources systems; and employee experience data, which is collected via an anonymous survey.

While the Act encourages organisations to collect and submit data that is disaggregated not only by gender, but by other attributes including Indigenous status,

² Selected data points from the workplace gender audit are published by the Commission on its Insights Portal

³ Data from both sources are aligned to the seven workplace gender equality indicators under the Act and support defined entities to understand the state and nature of gender inequality in their organisations.

race, ability and sexual orientation, it is not a requirement. Data that speaks to the opportunities and challenges faced by employees experiencing intersecting forms of disadvantage in public sector workplaces remains scant⁴. The Commission is working to improve its data collection and analysis, as well as to better support defined entities to improve theirs when it comes to this sensitive data.

Research teams funded in the 2022 grants round received a combination of workforce and employee experience data, but were able to independently decide what data points they incorporated into their research and how they did so. In this project, we utilised an analysis of relevant extracts from the Victorian public sector independent employee opinion survey (PMS 2021), the PMS data set available at the time of analysis. The total sample included responses from 106,069 people from across the Victorian public sector as well as participating local councils, drawn from responses from 271 organisations (90% of defined entities) and included headcounts and aggregated percentages where possible. PMS quantitative extracts included responses to Likert scale-based questions. Python coding was used to extract data and enter it into the statistical software platform, SPSS as individual cases. In SPSS data was analysed via a combination of Cross Tabulations, T-Tests and ANOVA (Analysis of variance). This focus enabled the research team to explore the intersections of gender and disability, and to provide insights into the perceptions of employees with disability on workplace adjustments and workplace culture.

Qualitative Data - Research Interviews

Women with disability employed in the VPS were invited to register interest in participating in the research via an email circulated by the Enablers Network and through the inclusion of recruitment flyers in departmental digital bulletin boards and newsletters. Potential participants registered an expression of interest and were provided detailed information describing the scope of the project, inviting them to provide further employment related information and confirmation that they would like to proceed with an interview. 49 women with disability participated in a lightly structured in-depth online interview. Participants reported multiple disability types and health issues, and shared experiences that spanned a period of time during which

⁴ The first workplace gender audit took place in 2021. Through its reporting platform, the Commission collected 67 million data points in this inaugural audit, which represents the most comprehensive gender-disaggregated dataset on public sector organisations in Australia. However, the inaugural workplace gender audit revealed several areas of limited data availability and poor data quality (particularly in relation to data about people who experience intersecting forms of disadvantage and discrimination).

there have been changes in the policy and practices of inclusion across the VPS. Aggregate level findings and patterns only are presented in this report. De-identified quotations from interviews are used to illustrate participants' experiences.

Centring Participants' Voices

The method of analysis extended the focus on centring participants' voices, using a disability focused approach to the Voice Centred Relational Method (VCRM) (Williams and Mavin, 2015). Drawing on the relational ontology of VCRM and a social interpretation of disability developed by the Lead CI (Williams and Mavin, 2012; 2015), This analytical approach produced a holistic understanding of the context shaping women with disabilities experiences of progression and promotion. This mode of analysis identifies common experiences, or resonances, across participant accounts to categorise themes from the specifics of individual accounts. The voices and experiences of participants are brought together in the themes to highlight how the issues identified were experienced as a career enabler or a barrier to progression.

The preliminary findings from the analysis were presented to research participants in two closed feedback sessions in February 2023 and as a pre-recorded voice-over presentation for participants unable to attend the closed sessions. Of the 49 participants interviewed, 33 (67%) took the opportunity to participate in the feedback sessions. During these sessions, and in written feedback, participants confirmed the findings, identifying where the themes resonated with their experiences and made further suggestions on the presentation of themes.

Report Structure

This report commences with a brief overview of the research context and objectives. The research approach is outlined, followed by a multi-disciplinary literature review to contextualise the research findings. Findings from the quantitative and qualitative data are then outlined. The report concludes with an outline of next steps.

CONTEXTUAL LITERATURE

This contextual literature review presents evidence from research investigating career progression and promotion opportunities for women with disability. Literature specifically focused on the career experiences of women with disability is limited. Therefore, insights from multidisciplinary gender and/or disability research are drawn upon to provide the context through which key barriers and enablers for the careers of women with disability can be understood.

This research is based on a social interpretation of disability which recognises that experience of disability is shaped through a dynamic interaction between a person and environmental factors (World Health Organization, 2001⁵). This reflects the Victorian Public Sector Commission (VPSC) perspective which, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006⁶), identifies disability as ‘an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with, impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’.

Gender is understood to refer to the socially defined attributes, norms, behaviours, and roles that are culturally ascribed to people (Acker, 1992). Whilst historically gender has been used as a binary to refer to women and men, gender is now understood to incorporate multiple identities and be self-described (Jule, 2014). As such this research recognises gender is self-defined and uses the gender categories deployed by the VPSC when asking employees to identify their gender identity in employee survey tools such as the PMS.

Intersectionality as an approach has informed gender research which recognises the ways in which organisational structural factors, cultural values, and social interactions shape workplaces for women (Acker, 2006) and extends this focus to consider how gender interacts with other social identities to create patterns of dis/advantage (Williams and Patterson, 2019). Whilst there is a growing understanding of how either gender or disability shapes workplace experiences, there is a gap in understanding how experiences at the *intersection* of gender and disability lead to inequality and disadvantage or inclusion in the

⁵ World Health Organization, (2001) [ICF], International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, Geneva: World Health Organization. Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/international-classification-of-functioning-disability-and-health>

⁶ United Nations. (2006). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Treaty Series, 2515, 3. Retrieved from: https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?chapter=4&clang=_en&mtmsg_no=IV-15&src=IND

workplace. This is particularly so for women with disability and their opportunities for professional success as research has tended to explore gender or disability as a primary identity, or as an aggregate category rather than how gender and disability intersect through the lived experiences of women with disability. Therefore, the review that follows draws insights from research which provides insights into broad patterns of experience for people with disability and of women with disability.

Overall, people with disability are underemployed despite legislative frameworks to protect people with disability from discrimination and disadvantage in employment (Vornholt et al., 2018). It is recognised that within broader patterns of employment, women with disability face a number of barriers to access and progress employment and careers contexts. Women with disability are less likely to be in the labour force (AIHW, 2022), are recognised to experience inequality through recruitment and promotion processes and are less likely to participate in economic decision making (O'Reilly, 2003).

Despite the disadvantages experienced, people with disability are agentic in using a range of strategies to negotiate career contexts. This includes seeking feedback, advocating for inclusion, engaging in staff disability networks, and expecting employers to recognise the legitimacy of organising work to include their disability related requirements (Kulkarni and Gopakumar, 2014; Williams and Mavin, 2015). People with disability may look for career opportunities which allow them to avoid commuting, or that provide non-standard office equipment and may also have less typical work schedule patterns, different career development or career progression patterns to established norms. Such different patterns may reflect people with disability choosing more inclusive career choices when typical career pathways are not inclusive of their disability needs (Williams and Mavin, 2015). This can be understood as a response to ableism, the assumption of non-disability in the ways in which work is designed and organised and which excludes the requirements of people with disability (Williams and Mavin, 2012).

Further, women with disability experience particular challenges. For example, more complex relationships between work, caring responsibilities, and disability requirements, and use, for example, part-time and flexible work arrangements as a mechanism to resolve conflict between work and life spheres (Jammaers and Williams, 2021). In addition, studies of neurodiversity have identified that women tend to be diagnosed later in life. Women with late diagnosis may not have had the support they need to develop neurodiverse positive ways of working, and experience a lack of awareness, education or understanding of neurodiversity in the workplace. Strategies to overcome workplace challenges include developing a

strengths-based understanding of capabilities to identify suitable career opportunities and developing masking strategies to minimise negative responses from supervisors (Roberson et al., 2021; Schreuer and Dorot, 2017; Seers and Hogg, 2022).

Employers have a legislative responsibility to consider requests for workplace adjustments to accommodate people with disabilities inclusion needs. This is a mechanism through which people with disability can negotiate work contexts and request arrangements that are more inclusive of their requirements (Foster, 2007). Securing workplace adjustments requires people with disability to share information about their disability. Willingness to share information about disability requirements may be impacted by the extent to which the employment context recognises the legitimacy of incorporating the requirements of people with disability or if there is a risk of negative responses such as stigma or discrimination (Lindsay et al., 2018). These factors may impact people with disabilities promotion or progression decisions (Marshall et al., 2020).

The potential for negative responses highlights the important role of managers, supervisors and colleagues play in creating inclusive work practices. This includes offering informal and formal support, accepting difference, demonstrating a willingness to adjust work practices and balancing support with respect for the lived experience and agency of people with disability (Kulkarni and Gopakumar, 2014; Roulstone et al., 2003). However, there is evidence that people with disability may experience hesitation, a lack of response or action from managers and supervisors to requests for workplace adjustments (Sanderson, 2011) and a lack formal and informal support from colleagues (Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008). Difficult relationships and responses from managers and colleagues or non-inclusive team environments may impact the psychological safety of women with disability to feel able to be themselves or speak up for inclusion if it feels risky. Psychological safety refers to believing you can be yourself at work and share your ideas without fear of negative consequences from co-workers (Edmondson, 1999).

Access to mentorship is an important mechanism to support career progression. Leveraging a mentor's knowledge, experience and organisational knowledge can facilitate a person's career path. Key support includes helping to develop career goals, increasing a person's visibility in the organisation, and signalling the mentor's support for their mentee to key stakeholders (Gentry, 2015). Mentoring is important to women with disability as a mechanism to receive support, help survive less inclusive career contexts and contributes positively to career progression (Noonan et al., 2004). However, people with disability are

less likely to have access to mentoring or similar sources of support (Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008).

There is also a recognition of the need to increase diversity in leadership by increasing leadership from people with lived experience of disability (Byrne et al. 2018). People with disability are significantly under-represented in senior positions, which is problematic for organisations seeking to evidence their commitment to inclusion through increased diversity. It is also potentially problematic as it is argued the visibility of people with disability in senior positions signals career pathways for other people with disability across the organisation (Özbilgin et al., 2023). Therefore, a lack of disability leadership may negatively impact on the career aspirations of employees with disability who do not see a career pathway to leadership in their organisation. There may also be limited acceptance of women with disability in leadership. Boucher's (2017) study identified that women managers and leaders with disability actively managed their identity and information about their disability to mitigate perceptions of their capability. For some women managers and leaders with disability this meant passing or masking their identity and inclusion requirements to minimise the risk of stigma, or over-emphasising that disability does not impact their capability. Roulstone and Williams (2014) similarly found managers faced horizontal and vertical career barriers which were shaped by the potential of negative responses to their inclusion requirements, particularly when this may be perceived to risk "upsetting the 'natural order' of the workplace" (p.7).

Incorporating lived experience of people with disability into policymaking is similarly recognised to contribute to improved inclusion outcomes as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Löve et al., 2017; Stein and Lord, 2010). The emphasis upon lived experience informing decision making and policy development is also reflected in the Australian Disability Strategy 2021-2031⁷ alongside disability advocacy as a mechanism to increase equality and reduce barriers to participation across a range of contexts (Dept. of Social Services, 2021).

In the academic literature advocacy is recognised to be important for people with disability as a pathway to having one's voice heard and developing a positive identity as a person with disability (Caldwell, 2011). In employment contexts disability advocacy is noted to be

⁷ Department of Social Services (2021) Australia's Disability Strategy 2021 – 2031, Retrieved from: <https://www.disabilitygateway.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021-11/1786-australias-disability.pdf> Commonwealth of Australia, 2021.

important to disabled women's career progression as a mechanism to integrate disability activism into their work lives and 'give back' to communities that had provided support (Noonan et al., 2004). However, care is needed as self-advocacy does not guarantee a positive outcome. In women's negotiations for pay and progression Wade (2001) argues that women that advocate for themselves face gender stereotyping and less positive outcomes than women that advocate for other women.

The literature reviewed above provides an indication of factors important to the career experiences of people and women with disability. Covid-19 is a further factor impacting employment opportunities; however, evidence of the impact is mixed. Internationally the Covid-19 pandemic has increased health and economic risks, social isolation, and high levels of exposure to changes in employment for people with disability (Ne'eman and Maestas, 2023; Wong et al., 2022). The Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (2022) draws together data on the everyday experiences of people with disability up to mid-2021. The report noted that whilst people with disability were less likely to have a job, the rates of those already in employment remained stable and there were equalising outcomes such as more comparable rates of people with and without disability working from home. Recommendations from studies of Covid-19 and inclusion suggest that whilst evidence of experiences vary, what remains important is to identify and embed the inclusive practices developed during Covid-19 as 'new normal' ways of working (Conrad et al., 2022).

This contextual literature review informs the interpretation of participants' accounts of barriers, enablers and inclusive practices which impact on the career progression of women with disability in the VPS. The review identifies that people with disability face a number of barriers, including the assumption of non-disability as an organising norm. It is also important to recognise people with disability's agency in advocating for inclusion and identifying ways in which less inclusive career contexts can be navigated. Sharing disability information can be fraught with risk, yet it is important to access the right to request workplace adjustments. Requesting workplace adjustments is important tool to create inclusive practices, and colleagues, managers and supervisors play an important role in the extent to which requests for adjustments are impactful. Mentoring and other sources of support can facilitate career progression and incorporating lived experience in leadership and policy development contribute to creating more inclusive workplaces.

FINDINGS FROM THE ANALYSIS OF PMS 2021 AND RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

This section presents key findings derived from analyses of the PMS and interview data with attention to the intersections of gender and disability to understand the context for, and experiences of, career progression and promotion.

Analysis of the People Matter Survey Data

This section presents pertinent analytical insights from PMS 2021 data using a disability and gender lens. Sample demographics are provided followed by statistically significant insights into workplace adjustments requested and perceptions of work culture.

Sample Demographics and Prevalence of Disability

Of the PMS 2021 sample (n= 106,069) 4.9% of the respondents identified as having a disability⁸. People who identified as having a disability (n=5,210) analysed by gender identity indicated that more women (62.8%) reported having a disability than men (27.9%), followed by respondents identifying as non-binary and 'other'. A further analysis of reported disability status compared by each gender identity indicated that respondents who identified as non-binary and 'other' gender identities were more likely to report having a disability than either women or men.

In comparison to people without a disability the distribution of age ranges between people reporting with disability and without disability was relatively homogenous, whereas a difference was identified in relation to salary. People who reported having a disability tended to be paid lower salaries than those without. This is consistent with the findings in the *Getting to Work* report⁹, indicating a pooling of employees with disability at VPS 2 and VPS 3 levels. The results also indicated that people without disability tended to report being in higher salary brackets.

⁸ All subsequent percentages reported are proportionate to the total number of respondents within a given disability status group (that is, 'without disability,' 'with disability,' and 'prefer not to say')

⁹ *Getting to Work: Victorian Public Sector Disability Employment Action Plan 2018-2025*. Retrieved from <https://vpssc.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Getting-to-work.pdf>

Flexible Work Arrangements and Workplace Adjustments

The data points to a disparity in the number of flexible work arrangements used by those ‘with disability’ than those ‘without disability’. People who identified as having a disability indicated greater use of flexible work arrangements on average than those who did not identify as having a disability¹⁰. Further analysis indicated a gender disparity in the number of flexible work arrangements used by people identified as having a disability, with more women (74%), reported using *one or more* flexible work arrangements compared to men (63.2%). At the same time, 66.6 % of those reporting gender as ‘other’, 67.5% of those identifying as non-binary and 61.8% of those who preferred not to specify their gender reported using one or more flexible work arrangements. This suggests that women are more likely to use flexible work arrangements than men or other gender identities.

Similarly, people who identified as having a disability on average requested more workplace adjustments (including flexible work arrangements)¹¹ than people without disability. Of the people who identified as having a disability, there was a statistically significant¹² disparity in the number of workplace adjustments requested between gender identity categories. One or more adjustments were requested by respondents who self-described as ‘other’ (60%), as ‘non-binary’ (48.7%) and as ‘women’ (48.6%) compared to those who identified as ‘men’ (9.4%). Overall, more requests for workplace adjustments were made by women¹³, non-binary¹⁴ or ‘other’¹⁵, as compared to respondents who identified as men¹⁶ or those who preferred not to state¹⁷ their gender. The analysis indicated that across all gender identity categories, more workplace adjustments were requested where disability was identified as a reason for requesting the workplace adjustment¹⁸. Across all gender identity

10 An independent samples t-test confirmed this, finding that this difference was statistically significant (i.e., likely not due to chance), $t(96,386) = 11.23, p < .001, d = .16$, with this difference constituting a small effect size

11 The workplace adjustment categories included Accessible communications including technology solutions (e.g. screen reader, vertical mouse, live captions, Auslan interpreter; Career development support strategies; Flexible working arrangements e.g. adjustments to working hours, work location, regular breaks; Job redesign or role sharing; Physical modifications or improvements to the workplace e.g. non-standard equipment such as standing desk, accessible lift, lighting, ramps, dedicated office space).

12 $\chi^2(8) = 53.21, p < .001$. An independent groups ANOVA ($F(4,5205) = 12.68, p < .001$) with Tukey’s post hoc analysis

13 ($M = .67, SD = .82$)

14 ($M = .74, SD = .95$)

15 ($M = 1.02, SD = 1.19$)

16 ($M = .51, SD = .73$)

17 ($M = .57, SD = .84$)

18 ($F(1, 2370) = 21.34, p < .001$)

categories, more than half of the respondents indicated that disability was the reason for requesting workplace adjustments.

Perceptions of Workplace Culture

Perceptions of work culture reported in the PMS 2021 included *general* perceptions of work culture, including responses to items such as “my organisation takes steps to eliminate bullying, harassment and discrimination” and “my organisation uses inclusive and respectful images and language” along with *disability specific* perceptions of work culture including responses to items “disability is not a barrier to success in my organisation” and “there is a positive culture within my organisation in relation to employees with disability”. The analysis indicated that people with disability reported a less positive perception of general workplace culture as compared to people without a disability. Moreover, perceptions of workplace culture related to disability were lower irrespective of whether or not the respondent had a disability.

However, there was a statistically significant difference for people who identified as having a disability: this cohort reported substantially less positive perceptions of workplace culture¹⁹ related to disability. This strongly indicates that people with disability felt that their workplace was not accommodating enough to their specific needs.

For those who reported having a disability, there was also a significant gender effect²⁰, where respondents identifying as men²¹, and as women²² rated workplace culture higher than those identifying as non-binary²³, ‘other’²⁴ or those who preferred not to state²⁵ their gender. Moreover, a significant interaction was found between gender and perceptions of general workplace culture versus workplace culture related to disability. The interaction effect pattern is illustrated in Figure 1.

19 a significant difference between perception types was observed for those without disability, $M_{\text{diff}} = .07$, $t(96,386) = 18.63$, $p < .001$, $d = .09$, the effect size of this difference was substantially larger for those with disability, $M_{\text{diff}} = .22$, $t(96,386) = 11.65$, $p < .001$, $d = .23$

20 Gender, $F(4, 5205) = 30.99$, $p < .001$

21 (M = .57)

22 (M = .52)

23 (M = .12)

24 (M = .02)

25 (M = .07)

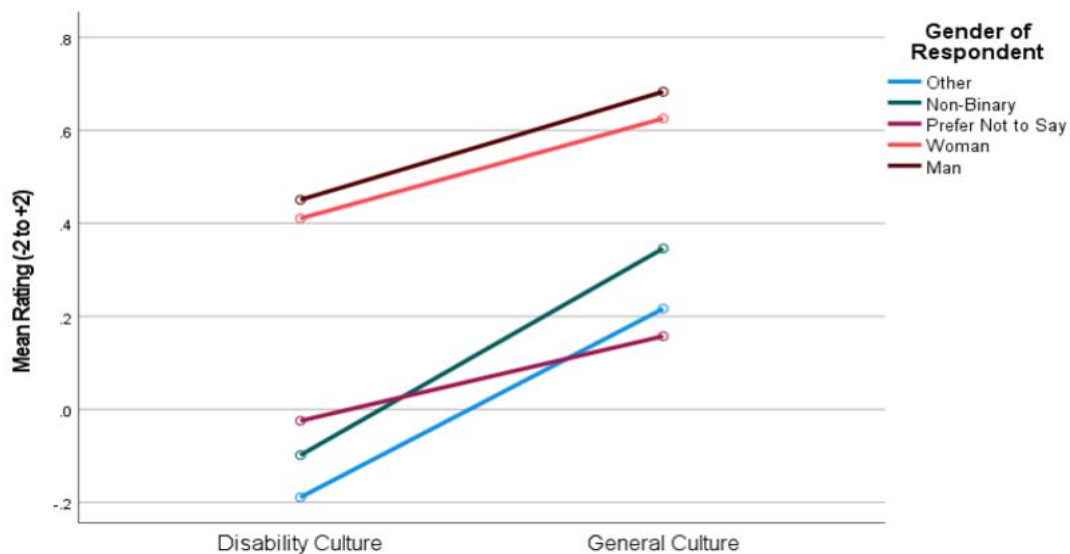


Figure 1. Mean agreement in each gender identity category or perception of positive disability and general workplace cultures by respondents with disability.

The analysis indicates that respondents who identified as men and women had a similar perception of workplace culture related to disability, while men perceived general workplace culture as better than women. Similarly, respondents who identified as non-binary, 'other' or who preferred not to state their gender, perceived general workplace culture lower than men and women, but indicated significantly lower perceptions of workplace culture related to disability. This analysis indicates a need for further investigation to better understand the experiences of gender diverse people.

Summary

The findings from the analysis of the PMS 2021 revealed that women and people who identified as non-binary or 'other' gender identities reported statistically significant differences in experiences of using flexible work arrangements, requesting workplace adjustments and their perceptions of workplace culture, generally, and in relation to disability in comparison to men with disability and people without disability. These findings help contextualise the patterns of experience identified in interviews with women with disability in the VPS reported below.

Analysis of Participant Interviews

Career Experiences

From the interviews with women with disability, three broad patterns of inclusive and non-inclusive career experiences were identified (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Patterns of participants' career experiences

That is, some participants had negative or non-inclusive career experiences and saw no opportunities for progression or growth in the VPS, whereas others had very positive career experiences, including some participants whose expressed motivation to participate was centred on sharing those positive experiences. Most participants had a range of inclusive and non-inclusive career experiences which varied depending on the VPS employer or team in which they were employed. Such participants explained that they do see a future at the VPS, but that they see this future as somewhat conditional.

Overall, participants highlighted a desire for:

- the VPS to move forward with more consistency in how it enables the careers of women with disability across all roles and levels of seniority.
- the VPS to move away from putting women with disability in the 'too hard basket' towards developing a culture where disability inclusion is characterised by relationships and interactions that reflect 'respect' and 'trust'²⁶.

²⁶ 'Too hard basket' and 'respect' and 'trust' were terms used by participants when talking about their experiences.

The following themes draw together insights from across the interviews with women with disability. In each theme a short overview is provided, followed by quotations from participants which centre their voices and provide insights into how experiences of the VPS workplace can enable or create barriers to career progression.

Theme 1: Sharing Disability Information

Participants felt that sharing disability information could be an enabler of career progression when it facilitated workplace adjustments and created opportunities. However, there were also accounts of sharing disability information that led to barriers to career progression, resulted in stigma and the reinforcement of ableist assumptions of non-disability (Jans et al., 2012; Ameri et al., 2018). Ableism refers to the assumption of non-disability in the ways in which work is designed and organised (Williams and Mavin, 2012).

Enabler: Facilitate Adjustments and Opportunities

Participants believed that sharing disability information should create opportunities for the development of work practices that incorporate women with disabilities requirements. As a career enabler, sharing disability information can facilitate the provision of reasonable adjustments (von Schrader et al., 2014).

I remember being quite impressed with how well I was accommodated during the recruitment process. It was all very smooth, and I felt quite well supported and I felt that I could participate and contribute on an equitable basis

Sharing disability information can build individual self-confidence and can broaden organisational understandings of disability inclusion and knowledge of the diversity of experiences had by women with disability. However, confidence to share information about disability and share experiences may take time to develop.

For the first time, I had some sense of how people see me which I thought might make me feel more self-conscious. But I think over time, less self-conscious and I think I realised I had more control over how I present myself

It's only sort of been a recent thing that I'm confident to talk about having a disability... And I guess it's important, like, there's so many people in the world who have disabilities and I think a lot of people

don't realise that. So I think it's important to share everybody's experience, because, you know, I'm only an expert, in my own experience. Talking about it helps me

Sharing information about disability meant participants could apply for disability identified and prioritised positions which were noted as being inclusive through practices such as providing interview questions in advance and offering scheduling flexibility for interviews.

It made me feel like the government was going to be a welcoming space and I guess that there will be flexibility and understanding

Participants who were successful in securing a disability identified position noted that the inclusivity they experienced in recruitment and selection flowed into work practices. This suggests that disability identified positions can foster increased understanding and more inclusive work practices that go beyond providing disability related adjustments focused on an individual employee.

Barrier: Stigma and Ableism

Receiving a new or revised disability or health diagnosis is a point at which decisions about sharing disability information may be revisited. For some participants, sharing a new diagnosis within their team was enabling, but they were cautious about sharing information when applying for new roles out of a concern about being stigmatised. Decisions to share information are often impacted by individual perceptions of the workplace policies and culture in relation to the potential for stigma and discrimination (Lindsay et al., 2018).

So I got my diagnosis a couple of months ago...I have shared that with people within my team so that we have a better way of working...When I applied for a new VPS role, I saw the box, 'how do you identify?'. I didn't tick it because I didn't want that to be a like a stigma

Similarly, another participant talked about their manager's knowledge of a disability on her employee records, but not the details due to a lack of confidence that the disability would be understood or responded to positively.

I've been apprehensive to disclose particulars. Because I don't have the impression that the language and education is there for particularly

my disability. So, I do feel it's a supportive environment. But if I were to open up, I don't know if it would be

Other triggers for partially sharing disability information were changes in policy, for example in relation to return to work, government hubs and hybrid work arrangements. Partial sharing of disability information has been used by employees with disability as a strategy to reduce stigma (Lyubykh et al., 2021). When participants talked of new diagnoses and concerns about sharing information this often related to an invisible disability such as neurodiversity or health condition (Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Macdonald & Cosgrove, 2019).

Concern over possible responses to sharing disability information can also impact on willingness to request an adjustment.

I didn't ask for reasonable adjustment because I wasn't sure if it was safe to disclose

These concerns about sharing information about a new diagnosis and partially sharing disability information suggest there are parts of the VPS where women with disability do not feel safe or confident to bring their whole self to work. It is recognised that workplace reactions to the sharing of disability information can influence employees' future decisions to apply for promotions or pursue progression opportunities (Marshall et al., 2020).

Participants identified ideal candidate norms as problematic. They noted assumptions about how roles could or should be performed reflected ways of working which would exclude women with particular disabilities. This was interpreted as a risk to their potential progression if their disability information were known.

You get typecast as, she can't do that, or they may not involve you in opportunities or they just don't understand

Expectations around hours and workload (particularly for senior roles), for example, or stereotypical assumptions about certain disabilities and how these may impact role performance, enacted ableism. As one participant argued,

There needs to be a culture shift in the way people think about disability, because ableism is absolutely rife

So if you're not neurotypical, it's going to be very difficult for you to meet the kind of stereotype of what people think an executive should be

This impacts not only on women with disability in senior positions, but also on the career aspirations of women with disability across VPS grades, who perceived senior roles as unachievable because of ideal candidate ableist norms.

Theme 2: Requests for Workplace Adjustments

Participants highlighted access to workplace adjustments as an important factor influencing their career progression. Reasonable adjustments and accommodations in the workplace are often easily implemented and can facilitate job performance for employees with disability (Richards et al., 2019).

However, for research participants accessing workplace adjustments interplayed with concerns around sharing disability information (see theme 1) and policies and practices within the VPS (theme 8) in ways that were not always easy to achieve. The importance of workplace adjustments, as evidenced in the qualitative interviews, is reflected in the PMS 2021 findings which indicated that across the public sector, people with disability on average used more flexible work arrangements and requested more workplace adjustments than people without disability.

Enabler: Demonstrate Capabilities and Talent

Workplace adjustments operated as an enabler to career progression when requests led to positive responses from managers and supervisors and the adjustments were provided without fuss or hindrance. Participants discussed how workplace adjustments enabled them to carry out their work with ease and demonstrate their capabilities and talent rather than worrying about how to fit in to their work environment. This was described by many participants as creating a sense of comfort within their work environment and teams.

Throughout the process [the manager] did try and make me feel comfortable and accommodate my needs

Workplace adjustments varied, including modifications to job design or the physical environment for access or sensory sensitivities, to the provision of assistive technologies or flexible work practices such as working from home (Jammaers and Williams, 2021). As indicated in the PMS 2021 results for the Victorian public sector,

women were more likely to request one or more workplace adjustments often made for disability related reasons. This was also reflected in the experiences of research participants in this research project.

Working from home is a massive adjustment that lets you be more effective at work

It's good because there's a policy for everything. So, like, if I need to adjust my hours or I need to have some flexible conditions, there's a policy for that

Participants' positive accounts of accessing a number of workplace adjustments were evident in situations where they were offered choices or approached to discuss their needs without feeling singled out. Some participants described it as an opportunity to be more effective and on equal footing with others, thereby enabling improved performance at work. As indicated in the PMS survey results that of the people who identified as having a disability, women, and people from non-binary and 'other' gender identity categories requested one or more workplace adjustments in comparison to men or those who preferred not to state their gender.

I had been asked, do you need any more adjustments as in workspace, you know, so they're always asking me those questions, and so that's good. In terms of reasonable adjustments

I didn't have any trouble getting any sort of adjustments that I needed. They were volunteered to me rather than me having to seek them out

Barrier: Struggle and a Burden

As noted above, women with disability were more likely to request workplace adjustments. This suggests workplace adjustments are an important mechanism for the inclusion of women with disability. However, requests to access reasonable workplace adjustments were a struggle for some participants, who described it as demoralising and frustrating with a flow on effect of operating as a barrier to career progression. This often stemmed from a lack of clarity in how to access adjustments.

Workplace adjustments, when I started looking into that...there are a lot of the procedures that they had in place that either no longer existed or there was just no clarity about what procedure you should follow

I tried to reach out to the [support service] and see if I can make some adjustments. It got so complicated. I didn't even pursue it any further. Because I was like, how can I even explain what I need?

Participants explained that they were reluctant to request workplace adjustments because they were unclear about how they would be perceived in the workplace including potentially lower perceptions of their capability (Boucher, 2017). The PMS 2021 results indicate a similar pattern across the public sector, where perception of workplace culture in relation to disability was rated low by all respondents, irrespective of whether or not they identified as a person with disability.

I didn't ask for reasonable adjustments, for a couple of reasons. There wasn't really much material available about what reasonable adjustments were available. I wasn't sure about what to ask for, but also how that would be received

In addition, awareness of the risks associated with sharing disability information were highlighted during the recruitment process.

I didn't feel like I had a whole lot of choice. I had to disclose that I was disabled... otherwise, I wasn't going to be able to come into this space...it would have been pretty easy to just put it in the too hard basket

Participants identified solutions when they talked of difficulties anticipated or experienced. Managers could be supportive and facilitate the adjustment process by being proactive and checking in to ensure work arrangements were enabling or by asking if further adjustments were required. Participants identified this should be done in a way that facilitated inclusion rather than creating a sense of differential treatment or avoid being limited by bureaucratic requirements. The process for organising workplace adjustments which required multiple managers authorisations was problematic and for some participants meant they avoided asking for adjustments that would have been supportive.

I don't want to be treated special or differently... but it would be nice to be asked every now and then, is there any adjustment that you need in order for you to participate?

It was very much like, no...if you don't have a... [document] that sort of explains why you would need a different arrangement then we can't offer you a different arrangement

Everything had to be emailed and I had to fill in so many forms. Then I had to get verification from my manager. Everything had to be double or triple checked. It's not that I object to that, but it was quite traumatising

Situations where team members, managers and senior managers made incorrect assumptions about disability related requirements further amplified negative experiences.

Theme 3: Disability Advocacy

The need to advocate for oneself to achieve inclusion was a recurring phenomenon. Participants explained how advocating for oneself can be an enabler when it leads to broader disability awareness and can create opportunities to explain what was needed to support career progression, including opportunities for networking and access to senior people or skill development. Participants noted that disability advocacy can also contribute to increased inclusion for other employees with disability, and potentially for employees without disability who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

Enabler: Increased Inclusion

Participants talked of having a passion to create awareness and a desire to have their voices heard. Participants identified that disability advocacy can lead to a positive impact in a number of ways. For example, advocacy entailed encouraging managers to understand how to support other employees with disability or as a mechanism to offer hope to other employees with disability.

It's more awareness, more understanding, whether it's, if you're neurodiverse, or if you've got a physical disability, or whatever it might be

it's important for people to know because you're a representation...even if I make that small impact of saying that there is somebody, then that gives you, you know, hope

Disability self-advocacy can facilitate the creation of a career pathway by identifying and securing the resources needed for disability adjustments, although this is a process that takes time to learn.

It's still a learning process for me about what I can ask for and what I need...a safe working environment where I can go, actually, if you want me to do this job, well, I need xyz

Advocating for oneself or other employees with disability can also create opportunities and break down barriers.

I'm recognising that I have to not only advocate for myself, but have to advocate for all disabilities

I'm trying to break down the barriers and highlight it for my personal growth but also others at the same time

Being involved in advocating for others can offer exposure to skill development opportunities beyond current role expectations.

I did get that experience of presenting things at a higher level, but not just in my everyday work

Barrier: Advocacy Burden

However, disability advocacy can become a burden. This is especially so when it is not a choice but rather is necessitated by a failure to meet the inclusion needs of women with disability.

The actual organisation I work for should be a front runner in terms of getting appropriate equipment for, you know, not just leaving me on my own to struggle around and find my own [adjustments]

Disability advocacy can have negative career and well-being implications.

I overcommit because I don't want people to think that I can't do something. And so then I physically kill myself to do it

Participants highlighted the fatigue of having to renegotiate disability workplace adjustments and less inclusive perceptions of disability each time they moved to a new role. This takes an emotional as well as a physical toll. It can also demoralise

women with disability and/or demotivate them from seeking career progression opportunities.

Every time I move, I have to renegotiate with people what I can and cannot do. And that's tiring. It is just tiring

I feel like there's this pressure and culture where I don't feel supported. I feel like a burden. Yeah. And I feel like the onus is on me to raise things constantly

Participants highlighted how disability advocacy impacted disproportionately on women with disability who also have caring responsibilities.

I've always had to make a case...advocated for the flexibility that I get...that it should be office wide and even for women... it's very unfair. We end up doing the care role more so than the male colleagues

Wade (2001) suggests women can effectively advocate for others yet incur gender related stereotyping if advocating for themselves. Participants in this study highlight the disability related health and career costs of disability advocacy. These costs are high particularly when disability advocacy does not lead to longer term inclusive work practices and requires persistent and ongoing effort. Reducing disability advocacy barriers can enhance women with disabilities career progression. Developing disability advocacy opportunities can enable progression through increased opportunities to develop a positive self-identity, participate in career development activities, and contribute lived experience insights which support the creation of inclusive policies and practices (Dept. of Social Services, 2021; Löve, et al., 2017; Ryan and Griffiths, 2015).

Theme 4: Team Relations

Team relations are important to creating an environment that facilitates opportunities for progression and promotion (Kulkarni and Gopakumar, 2014; Roulstone et al., 2003). Participants talked about teams where they could be their whole selves and offered a safe space in which they could thrive and flourish. However, this could operate as a double-edged sword, dis-inclining participants from moving between VPS employers or to other teams where they were not sure they would find a similarly supportive and safe environment. This can contribute to limiting

opportunities for progression or promotion. Participants talked of team contexts where they did not feel safe to be themselves, had difficult experiences and which were characterised by participants as lacking psychological safety.

Enabler: Thrive and Flourish

Being able to bring one's whole self to work in an environment where it was possible to thrive and flourish and not be concerned about how disability would be perceived was an important consideration for participants. Participants shared examples of how colleagues contributed to creating such environments, for example, colleagues taking their time to build trust which contributed to participants' self-confidence, and examples where the team culture was supportive and respectful.

I think that's the most significant because if I'm in a workplace, where I can bring my whole self to work, how I need to feel supported, and connected to other people

I just happened to be lucky that I think I've found a great group of people

Participants talked of positive team relations where their team adapted work practices to include them, where they felt supported and enabled to perform and achieve their career goals.

I have people that I work with every day, who I'm able to communicate with, talk through problems with and who I'm able to get support from, as well, which I think makes such a big difference

That has such a profound impact on my well-being... I feel like, I can do anything if I'm in that environment...being surrounded by people who understand, are inclusive and supportive, that is the biggest thing that's like, had impact on my career, and will probably continue to have an impact

Such positive team relations were extended beyond the immediate workplace to encompass participation in activities with the Enablers Network or other informal networking opportunities. This had the flow-on effect of identifying VPS employers or teams that would offer future opportunities to progress (explored further in theme 6).

I've found the enablers network has been really good. They're about the only one that actually works.... I think I could move between different jobs now more comfortably than I think I could have before. But that's not the case for everyone

Barrier: Lack of Psychological Safety

For some participants teams were unsafe spaces where it was not possible to bring one's whole self to work (Edmondson, 1999). Participants spoke of a reluctance to be open to share disability information because they felt it would be psychologically unsafe for them to do so. This emerged across a number of interviews where participants had either experienced or heard of adverse incidents, experienced difficult interactions, or discriminatory behaviour. This was also reflected in the PMS 2021 findings which identified negative perceptions of workplace culture in relation to disability across the Victorian public sector, particularly by respondents who identified as having a disability.

Part of that is about me being honest and open about what I need. And I find it difficult to communicate that and not necessarily have gotten the impression that it's completely safe to [do so]

Participants talked about working in the VPS as comparable to an abusive relationship, and spoke of feeling devalued in role after role, but finding it difficult to leave.

I feel like I've been in an abusive relationship with my job

Participants highlighted a concern that the psychological safety they currently experienced may not be available in other parts of the VPS. Being unsure about how authentically inclusive other team environments in the VPS would be, may restrict career mobility and in turn limit opportunities for progression.

Where I'm now... everything's been so supportive and I'm just really happy...search[ing] through the job listings or roles...I feel like it's out of my comfort zone. Then I don't really want to apply

I can't say that I would get that same support in a unit that wasn't familiar

Participants identified difficult interactions and disability related negative responses from colleagues, with significant implications for their careers. One participant recounted a disparaging conversation with a colleague before another colleague stepped in to assist.

[They said] 'The only reason I'm helping you is because I feel sorry for you'...I was just so overwhelmed with having to manage all of those different things... [Another colleague] stepped in at that point and...it was just such a nice moment of just having that person in your corner that even though it was a horrible situation to have been in

When particular team contexts were not career enhancing it remained difficult for some participants to consider moving on to other teams in the VPS when their disability related support needs were not predictable (Williams and Mavin, 2015).

It's very hard to feel confident about leaving, especially when you have certain privileges, and an organisation that understands your medical history...and has shown to be in the widest sense, supportive view. So it's really hard to when you're not confident of your bodily autonomy

Participants who had experienced adverse incidents, who had seen or heard of toxic cultures in the VPS, or who were new to the VPS expressed a concern about psychological safety more often than other participants. Psychological safety is important in fast paced or uncertain contexts, develops through team relationships over time (Edmondson, 1999), and can be fostered by a disability inclusive culture (Kalargyrou, 2014). This is particularly important in the current Covid context (Conrad et al., 2022).

Theme 5: Impact of Managers and Supervisors

Managers and supervisors (managers) have an enabling impact on women with disabilities' career experiences. Particularly when they offer guidance, empower, and develop their direct reports, and craft pathways for progression, or otherwise create a positive environment conducive to participants' career development. Positive experiences with managers were pivotal to career progression and in facilitating career mobility. Participants' experiences suggest managers play a critical role in fostering an inclusive context by being receptive to women with disabilities' inclusion needs while also managing relations between team members (Sanderson, 2011).

However, where this was not the case, the impact was detrimental to women with disabilities' careers. Participants found it particularly difficult when managers were perceived as not being willing to offer support, or as disinterested, biased, or discriminatory.

Enabler: Managerial Support and Empowerment

Participants explained that career support from their managers built their confidence. Participants valued managers who responded positively when participants shared information about disability, who identified participants' potential, and who were encouraging and enabled participants to see their own potential.

I had spoken to her about my situation. And she was she was fantastic and incredibly supportive

I think when people have spotted something in me and encouraged me to go for them (job).... having someone else recognise my strengths

my manager encouraged me to cover for a colleague... because I had sort of lost my career, I'd lost a lot of my confidence and wasn't confident in putting my hand up for it, but because she sort of had faith in my ability to do it that actually allowed me to have faith in my own ability to do it as well

Managers who incorporated mentoring and proactively supported participants to craft career pathways were seen as critical to the creation of opportunities for progression.

She made an opportunity and opened that door for me

So that was a really good thing, to have a manager that actually had that foresight, and made a recommendation, rather than just, you know, putting up barriers

In the experience of some participants, senior managers fostered open and inclusive environments which in turn encouraged participants to feel that their contribution was valued.

[the senior manager was] engaging in conversation about the work we do, how we do it, what could we do better? What can we do differently? You know, he's talking with everybody, not just managers

As well as managing team relations and culture, managers can directly contribute to creating a psychologically safe workplace for women with disability to talk about their inclusion and career requirements. For example, open, transparent, and respectful conversations with managers were seen to lead to positive outcomes.

it's really important to be creating safe spaces for people to have open honest discussions with people that they trust, like their managers to talk about how they are feeling at work. Because that's something that I do have, which I'm very grateful for...making sure that people feel connected, and they feel valued

I think the thing that's been really important for me is that I have a manager who is really supportive and is very open

Barrier: Lack of Engagement and Bias

However, there were numerous examples of difficult relationships with managers and situations where managers created barriers or hindrances to progression. We heard from participants about difficult or hostile interactions which shaped their decision to seek opportunities elsewhere.

it was always stuff that was really passive aggressive, I could never put my finger on it

these red flags that make me feel like it's not like a situation where I can discuss this with [my manager]

A participant shared how the culture built around a manager's expectations had a detrimental impact on their career. Later, after being encouraged by colleagues elsewhere in the VPS to apply for a promotion, this participant found that a change of department and positive responses from new colleagues repaired the damage.

the biggest negative impact was that toxic environment and the bullying...I've overcome that negativity and that self-doubt that I had from the bad manager

Participants talked about being perceived negatively, overlooked, and disregarded as difficult or needy by managers.

I'm very angry that I've been left out that I've just been crushed or thrown in the too hard basket by my managers

They saw me as being a problem

I have found that if you don't follow up with your learning plan, that no one follows you up for your, with your professional development

Don't put me in the too hard basket where you don't want to work with me or talk to me. Sit down and get to know me. I've got a lot of skills I can offer you

The 'too hard basket' was mentioned a number of times: participants felt that they were put into the too hard basket when managers interpreted their needs differed to standard practices or when their inclusion needs were negatively received.

A lack of support or understanding was not uncommon. Participants highlighted how managers who were disinterested in their progression negatively impacted on their experiences of the VPS. A participant outlined how a series of managers interpreted managing them as a burden of additional work and demonstrated little interest in enabling their career.

They're not interested in what impact it might have, apart from giving them what they might consider to be extra work...There's been very, very little desire to be understanding

[my manager said] I haven't got time to be dealing one on one with you

For some participants there was a concern that bias may be informing managers decisions about their potential with consequences for career progression.

I haven't led that many projects, I've always supported projects. And it gets me thinking, maybe there's a reason for it. There might have been an unconscious bias at play

there are many people who make assumptions about what we can and can't do and have conscious and unconscious bias

It is recognised managers can have a negative impact from discriminatory attitudes, biases, or low expectations of employees with disability's ability to perform their work (Cavanagh et al., 2016; Jammaers et al., 2016). Interpreting women with disabilities inclusion requirements as a burden may also be a consequence of ableism where

workplace norms and expectations about how work is performed do not incorporate the requirements of diverse employees (Williams and Mavin, 2012). During a participant feedback session it was suggested that VPS managers may also lack the space or opportunity to support women with disability as they are overstretched. The solution to improving managerial support therefore goes beyond offering training to considering the impact of the work environment and pressures on a manager's ability to be proactive and support women with disabilities career aspirations or develop more inclusive workplace norms.

Theme 6: Mentorship

Mentorship describes a reciprocal relationship between two people focused on the development of a mentee's career, involving learning and knowledge acquisition over time (Gentry, 2015). The importance of mentorship to career progression resonates with both the Enablers Network's *Bringing our whole selves to work* research report (2020)²⁷ and the Victorian Public Sector Commission's *Getting to work* (2018) action point 18 - to support employees with disability to achieve their full potential²⁸. Participants identified mentorship (formal and informal) as a mechanism supporting the development of confidence and career progression. Where opportunities for mentoring are absent or limited participants found it difficult to craft their career progression.

Enabler: Facilitate Confidence and Progression

Mentorship resonated with many participants, a number of whom indicated seeking out formal mentoring schemes as a means to craft their career pathway within the VPS. The desire to receive formal mentorship intersected with opportunities for mentoring, for example when VPS women in mentoring programs have been available. The importance of informal mentoring was also valued by participants, who expressed a desire to see more of this taking place. Participants suggested it would be beneficial for formal and informal mentoring opportunities to cross VPS employers and expertise areas and be run alongside peer mentoring (i.e., not limiting mentoring to a more experienced/less experienced type of arrangement).

27 Thompson, C., Broadbent, E., Wood, M.A., Maltby, B., McKenzie, L., How, S., May, A., Dow, J., McPherson, S., Fong, H., & Kirkwood, P. (2020) *Bringing our whole selves to work: the Enablers Network research report into the experiences of employees with disability and carers of people with disability in the Victorian public sector*, Enablers Network, State of Victoria, Melbourne

28 *Getting to Work: Victorian Public Sector Disability Employment Action Plan 2018-2025*, Retrieved from <https://vpssc.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Getting-to-work.pdf>

We've got a lot of informal mentoring arrangements. And I've mentored a couple of people... connecting people outside of their own departments and areas of expertise

I want that mentor. I want that person who will work around my disabilities and what I'm capable or not capable of, and not see them as a disadvantage, and see them as an advantage

Having the opportunity to receive advice and observe the leadership of women in senior positions is impactful. This connects with theme 8, and the importance of ensuring a diversity of people in senior roles to support the career aspirations of women with disability.

working with more senior women who encouraged me...they bring their own way of doing it and demonstrate leadership in a way that I can really relate to

One participant talked about provisions within the Victorian Public Service Enterprise Agreement (2020)²⁹ (VPS EA), in particular career mobility, to suggest the importance of mentoring to facilitate career progression for women with disability and stated that this was currently under-utilised.

I think we need to get better at mentoring. I think activating the career mobility elements of the EBA³⁰ would be really good. And trying to find a more structured way to do that

Where mentoring was available it was noted to facilitate careers and more. There was evidence that mentoring can raise confidence in women with disability and awareness of supportive cultures across the VPS that would foster women with disabilities careers. Mentoring was identified as facilitating the development of professional networks and longer-term friendships. Participants noted that involvement in mentoring can also lead to self-organised peer-to-peer mentorship.

²⁹ Victorian Public Service Enterprise Agreement 2020, Retrieved from <https://www.dtf.vic.gov.au/funds-programs-and-policies/victorian-public-service-enterprise-agreement-2020>

³⁰ Victorian Public Service Enterprise Agreement 2020, sometimes referred to as the enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA).

It really gave me a lot of confidence, and sort of provided me with the ability to navigate what my future might look like

senior colleagues advising of good cultures elsewhere

I still have a great friendship with the person

We've talked and so we've had conversations about if I'm interested in this, where will it lead me? Or I'm interested in that? Where will it lead me?

Importantly, participants spoke about aspiring to mentor other women with similar disabilities, alongside a desire to share experiences and be a good sounding board for other VPS employees.

Related to the supportive dimensions of mentorship, participants talked about the importance of access to support when preparing for, or during, interactions with managers that may be difficult. One participant identified the need to have access to, and the support of, an adviser before approaching their manager about their next career steps. Other participants talked about wanting access to an adviser to discuss progression ambitions, or access to an advocate that could support them to overcome difficulties in communicating development aspirations.

a person who could say be in your performance meeting when you are talking about what you want in a development role who could, when you kind of stop talking and can't find the words they, they know your background so they might be able to say something and then you can say, oh yes that's right, that's what I wanted to say

like a careers adviser or something that someone who will sit and talk to you say, well, these are your strengths. And this is what might be good for you. And this is kind of how you do it

As noted above, the VPS EA 2020³¹ highlights the role of managers in developing employees' career mobility. However, the experiences of some women with disability suggest there are career impacting consequences when this function is not

³¹ Victorian Public Service Enterprise Agreement 2020, Retrieved from <https://www.dtf.vic.gov.au/funds-programs-and-policies/victorian-public-service-enterprise-agreement-2020>

performed by managers, or they identify other types of support they need to have career progression conversations with their manager.

Barrier: Challenges of Forging Own Path

Where mentorship was lacking, it was difficult for participants to work out how to craft their progression. Several participants talked about attempting to forge their own mentor relationships, sometimes unsuccessfully, and highlighted contextual factors which limited opportunities to establish mentor relationships.

One participant indicated that they unsuccessfully sought support and feedback from their manager; *'I'll send it to my boss...and she won't reply'*. After receiving no response, they forged their own path. Another participant described the importance of reaching out to influential people when they became aware of upcoming role vacancies as they didn't have a mentor advocating for them.

unless you have someone who wants you to get up into a management position or director role...you're not going to get there. ...you need that person advocating for you

At the same time, there can be context and timing barriers to engaging in mentoring through formal schemes. A participant explained how workload prevented them from effectively engaging with a formal mentoring scheme.

there was a woman in the mentoring program that I joined... the experience or the benefit was really lost because I just didn't have time to invest

Later, the participant directly approached a female senior manager in another part of the VPS as an informal mentor and that time it worked out.

Participants identified managers who integrate mentoring into their role as impactful. However, it was also recognised that not all managers have the capacity to do so. A participant explained how they arranged ongoing informal mentoring with a previous manager for ongoing informal mentoring to overcome this gap in their career support.

She's a very good mentor and manager. So she gets it. And I didn't have to say anything to her. But yeah, I guess it's an individual thing at this point. And my direct manager is so busy, she wouldn't even have time to think about it

Although participants recognised the importance of mentorship to their career progression, they also identified a lack of knowledge and information on how to find or formally engage an appropriate mentor. This included where participants were unsure of the possibility of securing a mentor with similar intersectional experiences. A participant noted that there was limited intersectionality among senior leaders which could be problematic in securing a suitable mentor, particularly when interactions with senior leaders had indicated a lack of understanding of the barriers experienced by women with disability and other intersectional identities.

which mentor will I have? A mentor who doesn't fit any of my intersectionality?

Whilst mentoring is recognised as supporting career progression (Noonan et al., 2014), participants' experiences suggest there are barriers to participating in schemes offered by the VPS and factors impacting managers' ability to integrate mentoring into their day-to-day interactions or managerial responsibilities.

Theme 7: Disability Leadership

The desire to see increased disability representation in leadership across the VPS was identified by a number of participants. The visibility of disability representation in leadership was important for participants (across grades and classifications) as an indicator of their own future career possibilities. Increased disability representation in leadership was also important to participants as a recognition of the value that people with disability bring to the VPS and to leadership roles. This reflects the recognition that is important to signal to employees with disability that there is a route to leadership (Özbilgin et al., 2023) and that lived experience of disability is valued in leadership (Byrne et al. 2018).

Overall, participants felt that disability leadership representation and visibility was lacking and attributed this to the ableist demands of the senior roles they had observed, or that were communicated in recruitment materials, with implications for how women with disabilities talent and capability were assessed.

Enabler: Representation Matters

Visibility of disability leadership operated as an enabler for participants who expressed a desire to see and connect with '*people like me*' in senior positions. This

reflects the importance of symbolic representation of gender in leadership (Rhode, 2017; Still, 2006) and lived experience of disability in leadership (Byrne et al., 2018).

I think that, for me, it's always been very important to have more people like myself where I am

I see people above me and at the top and I see people who are like me and have experiences like me and have a disability and have succeeded and thrived, and it feels to me like a place I want to stay

Participants wanted disability leadership representation to be reflective of different social characteristics and intersections (e.g., genders and ethnicity). Participants stated that representation mattered as an indicator of the extent to which the VPS was actually inclusive.

I feel like there needs to be more representation at those leadership roles of disabled people of different gender, people of different colours

Some participants in senior positions and roles reflected on the potential impact of being open about their disability, particularly when the disability was invisible. Some elements of this theme intersect with concerns around sharing disability information (theme 1) and disability advocacy (theme 3). Senior participants recognised and acknowledged their impact as a role model for other employees with disability in the VPS.

it is important to see it in others and to see it in leaders...to be apparent about who I am, and that's what I bring to that role

I probably am a role model...I should own it

The visibility of disability leadership was important to women with disability as an indication that there is a commitment to developing a more inclusive talent pipeline for aspiring leaders. However, participants also acknowledged that visibility alone was insufficient. Disability representation in senior positions was more impactful when women with disability believed that wherever they were in the VPS, they could be recognised as talent with the potential to develop and when they have access to career development opportunities and interventions to support them on their journey.

You need to create that pipeline...I want to know that the departments and the VPS are saying hey...we want you to be a deputy secretary in 10 years' time...here's this program that can help you do that

Barrier: Limited Visibility and Risk

A lack of disability leadership visibility had an adverse impact on participants motivations and aspirations. Participants talked of knowing only a '*handful*' of leaders or commented '*I can name 5 people*'. In participants' experiences this relative lack of disability leadership functioned as a barrier: that is, leaders with disability were perceived as an anomaly rather than the norm.

Simultaneously, participants acknowledged the individual cost that might be associated with holding a senior position and being open about lived experience of disability. This reflected the negative perceptions of workplace culture in relation to disability, as identified in the PMS (2021) data alongside the potential of a lack of psychological safety noted in theme 4 and theme 5.

I feel like there needs to be more representation

I hope that one day, people feel safer to be open

This suggests there are risks associated with being known to have lived experience of disability when holding a leadership role (Banks and Mona, 2007; Boucher, 2017).

Participants indicated that the role demands of senior positions were discouraging. The lack of visibility of inclusive work arrangements or examples of modified work remits³² in senior positions indicated to participants that senior roles are not designed around inclusive practices or able to accommodate disability adjusted work remits.

most of the directors that I've worked for probably easily do sixty-hour weeks. So, you know, they're big jobs with very high expectations on them

Linked to the excessive demands of leadership roles, participants also pointed to inflexibility in senior roles, and assumptions about the characteristics required to be recognised as leadership talent. These demands and characteristics reaffirmed

³² Work remit is used to refer to work patterns, work responsibilities and workloads (Williams and Mavin, 2015).

ableist expectations of senior roles and shaped assumptions of the characteristics of the ideal candidate. This was reflected in participants experiencing the additional burden of having to prove their capability as opposed to being identified as having the potential, and offered opportunities, to organically grow into leadership roles. As Boucher (2017) notes women managers and leaders with disability managed their identities carefully to ensure they were perceived to be capable and competent. This reflects the research literature on women in leadership where women remain at odds with dominant constructions of leadership, where women are required to prove competence and are not conferred with the assumption of capability and potential (Khan et al., 2022; Rhodes, 2017).

Senior roles can be 'hyper-ableist'

Managers need to be comfortable that that person can function in that role 110% before being given the role

Participants' experiences suggest that it is important to reconcile tensions between the importance of disability leadership representation and the potential risks of being perceived as out of place, and lacking capability against 'ideal worker' or 'ideal candidate' assumptions built into role expectations in leadership positions (Roberson et al., 2021).

Theme 8: Policy Context and Application

Overall participants described VPS policies and practices as heading in the right direction towards increased inclusion. As noted in the theme 2, participants viewed policies which specifically address disability inclusion (such as workplace adjustments) as enabling, speaking positively about the availability of funding for accommodations and adjustments, for example. Participants also discussed how policies can be enablers of progression, such as work from home and the right to request flexible work, disability identified roles, secondments, and rotations (across VPS employers).

Participants identified the need to continue to develop policies and practices to become more inclusive of their requirements by incorporating more diverse ways of working which could reduce the need to rely upon individualised negotiations. This included maintaining the inclusive practices developed during Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. As Conrad et al. (2022) note, identifying and embedding the inclusive

practices developed during Covid-19 can be an important contribution to increased inclusion.

In addition, to further developing the inclusivity of policies and practices, participants noted how managers and leaders interpret and apply policy had a significant, often limiting, impact on career progression and mobility, as noted in theme 5.

Enabler: Equalising and Inclusive

Participants identified that VPS policies have the potential for an inclusionary impact and for creating opportunities for career enhancement. Participants identified policies that could be extended to widen disability inclusion and lamented the loss of some of the equalising and enabling practices that had developed during initial responses to COVID-19.

The expression of interest process for 'acting up' through, for example, secondments was perceived positively by participants. Participants described deriving a sense of achievement and accomplishment from engaging with opportunities to extend their knowledge and skills with different VPS employers, new roles, or areas of activity. The availability of short term as well as long term opportunities were viewed as important for career mobility. Engaging in acting up and secondment opportunities assisted some participants to secure new roles and for some, this was at a higher grade than anticipated.

I'm lucky that I've earned enough of a reputation from the skill sets that I've, all of the secondments that I've had that I think I could move very easily between different business units now

I had put in an expression of interest, got interviewed and was successful in that position. And so, I acted quite successfully in that role for, you know...months. And then that actually opened up the door to allow me to step into the role that I'm in at the moment

Participants identified the potential for disability inclusion policies that could be extended to have further impact and demonstrate the VPS commitment to disability inclusion. For example, extending the disability pathway to the Victorian Government graduate program beyond the first year of employment.

I would like that pathway extended so... that graduates can kind of know a pathway and would want to stay. If you're investing all this

*money in graduates and you know, employees with a disability...
recognise their value and promote them to stay*

Whilst the VPS commitment to disability inclusion and representation were welcomed there was some concern that intersectionality was being overlooked, including in VPS employer gender targets and the disability targets outlined in the Getting to work Disability Employment Action Plan (2018)³³.

*We achieved a target of 50/50, but if you drill down and look at it you
know intersectionality, we're not doing too good*

*Targets are good. The VPS targets, for people with disability I think it's
12%... but...what level is that...what I want see...employees with a
disability, are predominantly, you know, in the VPs 1-5 roles and less
than none above...that's not great. Secondly, what happens to
departments when they don't meet it?*

Whilst it is important not to overlook the negative impact of COVID-19 on all VPS employees, some COVID-19 restriction-driven changes to policy and practice were highlighted in participants' accounts as creating positive outcomes when they led to the universal application of policies such as work from home and flexible work arrangements. For some participants this was important as it had an equalising impact on all workers and de-individualised what had previously been difficult conversations with managers to gain access to more flexible and inclusive ways of working. These changes enabled women with disability to not only organise their work in more inclusive ways, but also eased access to local health services or meet other disability or caring responsibilities. The shift to all employees working in this way supported some participants to share their disability related requirements in the workplace, and 'unmask' their requirements.

*I needed a little bit of flexibility because of medication or appointments
to do my job a bit better*

*I think that shift to working from home has given me the opportunity to
unmask at work, which I don't think I'd ever done before. And that*

³³ Getting to Work: Victorian Public Sector Disability Employment Action Plan 2018-2025, Retrieved from <https://vpssc.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Getting-to-work.pdf>

makes a huge difference to whether you feel that you're authentically yourself

The universal COVID-19 working from home requirement was appreciated for overcoming difficulties in convincing managers to allow working from home. There were other positive impacts from working from home including avoiding difficulties with commuting into or between offices, and enabling women with disability to have more opportunities to engage in family life. For one participant this meant being able to avoid the need to reduce from full-time to part-time hours or leave work due to the interacting impact of disability and pregnancy.

he was willing to listen and try it. But he has always been anti working from home because he was old school and had that kind of view that people might not be working if they're working from home

Earlier, I'd be in agony by the time I get home. So, working from home is a massive adjustment that helps you be more effective at work... it's been a real blessing. And I can contribute to domestic things. That makes a happier home as well

Covid, I think it was a blessing for me being able to work from home...I did struggle on the days I had to get into the office...we used to walk from office to office...pregnancy was really challenging with my condition. I couldn't have continued to work if I was still going into the office. So being able to do that is really amazing

Participants also talked about how universal work from home also impacted on self-confidence and bringing one's authentic self to work. This was evidenced for participants in their work performance and how it led to opening up career possibilities alongside a growing sense of potential and an ability to flourish.

seeing myself actually having a career within an organisation actually progressing. And looking at myself and going, I think I actually could be a leader, having that personal belief that it was possible, and looking at the organisation and believing it to be possible. That's a massive shift to come out of this change in ways of working

Barrier: Discretionary Application and Return to 'Old Normal'

Participants pointed to instances where interpretations of policies had an exclusionary effect and resulted in the creation of barriers and disadvantages which impacted upon career progression. This included established as well as more recent policy developments.

Participants discussed how the interpretation and application of disability related policies (or when they were lacking) created difficulties, financially and for wellbeing. For example, the VPS requirement for a medical certificate to gain approval for a range of workplace adjustments or to take time off for disability or other health issues. Participants talked of the burden and stress of the financial costs and process of obtaining a medical certificate. Participants expressed a desire for the VPS to reduce the number of instances it is necessary to produce a medical certificate and for greater consistency in how managers apply this policy. Access to carer's leave was acknowledged to be supportive, however the lack of disability leave is problematic in managing complex or fluctuating disabilities or health conditions, with participants using other forms of leave to gain respite.

*it was very variable in terms of how it was applied [medical certificate],
it was dependent on the individual manager*

*people with all these health needs have the same amount of sick leave
as someone that doesn't... It's not enough. If you purchase leave to
get a bit of relief but then you get paid less. I'm already pretty tight as I
have medication expenses. It's just not enough*

A number of women with disability that worked part time felt their managers excluded them from consideration for opportunities for progression.

*I was hoping that I could just [move up a grade] in the same role. I was
disappointed because I didn't want to leave yet. I'm looking at the
JSE³⁴ quite regularly but there are not many part-time roles*

³⁴ The Jobs and Skills Exchange (JSE) is a service supporting the career development of VPS employees. Services include internal advertising of vacancies, priority consideration of candidates, development activities, and tailored career development and coaching.

Participants interpreted a range of work practices as broadly conforming to the ableist, neurotypical and gendered assumptions underpinning ideal worker expectations. For example, participants identified that the inclusive impact of work from home and flexible work practices for women with disability only became apparent and accepted when applied to all employees in response to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Similarly, expectations about the characteristics or requirements of senior roles became a barrier for women with disability who excluded themselves from applying as they felt it would be difficult to manage workload expectations in balance with their health and wellbeing, highlighting the ableism inherent in expectations associated with seniority (Boucher, 2017; Williams and Mavin, 2015).

In a similar vein, participants highlighted a lack of communication about what progression would or could look like, impacted their decisions on how to pursue opportunities to progress. Longer term acting up into management roles where the expectations were unclear were not good for well-being, created stress and led to experiences of feeling undervalued.

I suspect that getting that kind of flexibility in more senior executive positions would be hard

Some roles are not sort of clear what skills and qualifications you need to work towards to build that career development

The expression of interest process enabled women with disability to identify opportunities to act up or secure secondments, an important contributor to career mobility. Nevertheless, participants noted variations in how departments use the expression of interest process. Variations between the interpretation and use of the expression of interest process, particularly when candidates required experience to be able to secure a longer-term position, resonates with negative perceptions of capability outlined in theme 1 and 2.

I think that for [department] you need to have a few years of experience doing expression of interest VPS [level] roles before you actually get offered a VPS [level] role

Mentoring or supportive managers notwithstanding, women with disability talked of finding it difficult to locate information about career progression, development opportunities or support. Women with disability became aware of a range of career

and inclusion support when they applied for jobs, however it was only after progressing through the recruitment process sufficiently to have conversations with recruiters, that this information was shared with them. One participant suggested the VPS should be more proactive in providing career progression information to women with disability.

it would be great... if there was a way that the VPS could identify, you know, people that have said, 'hey, I'm disabled', and like target them with information that's relevant to their career progression. [Tell them] 'there are specific disability recruitment things over here, there's training' [and] 'oh, apparently there's revenue streams that you can get for certain disabilities to allow your work to get learning and development'. I only found that out because I did research

Whilst participants noted some equalising policy outcomes from the impact of COVID-19 upon working practices, there were many examples of a negative impact. Women with disability talked about the impact of the early years of COVID-19 restrictions creating isolation, limiting networking opportunities and even leading to injury due to overworking and stress where conditions were likened to “*working for a wartime government*”.

Following the removal of Covid-19 lock-down restrictions, the implementation of new policies undermined the positive impact of the working from home and flexible work arrangements developed during the restrictions period.

While there were examples of positive experiences of hybrid working which incorporated a return to the office for anchor days, a number of participants were concerned over the implications of new working practices. Working in government hub offices was an issue for some as hot desking meant transporting equipment each day and being uncertain if the desk and chair allocated would be suitable. Requesting accessible equipment could inadvertently share disability information when women with disability preferred not to have their disability status known.

the offices are not very appealing, we no longer have our own desk. There's no individuality...you've got a haul everything in every day... that's sort of like you know, packing for a camping trip. It's ridiculous you've just got to hope that you've got, you've booked a desk with a chair that's not broken and that can adjust

If you do then say I need a desk at this particular height, then that desk gets reserved for you, and everybody notices sitting at that desk perhaps for a reason

Hybrid working created difficulties when a disability or health condition fluctuated, where there were concerns over being immunocompromised or instances where hybrid participation was not available. Some women with disability became aware that senior managers were keen to ensure there was a 100% return to the office, despite this not being a policy requirement.

our policies actually aren't very disability friendly; they assume that everyone is fine to come back to the office... I actually don't feel supported now. ...I used to get more support before... and now I feel like there's this pressure and culture where I don't feel supported. I feel like a burden

face to face wasn't necessarily going to work for me always. Sometimes it might, sometimes it might not. So, they needed to also provide a, a hybrid option of some kind

I wouldn't be able to do five days in the office anymore. I just wouldn't be able to... trying to get everyone back to the office sort of full time now even though they have said that we were going to continue hybrid

When women with disability talked about how to overcome the barriers created by policies and their implementation, they identified consulting employees with disability and universal design principles as key solutions to ensure the physical workplace, job design and interactions between colleagues were more inclusively designed.

Asking everyone what their access needs. I think that goes to like, just design, designing workplaces on the principles of like universal access

Asking people's experiences with being in the office and think about the lighting, think about the way that the office is designed... different ways we interact with the workplace

The success of inclusive policies and practices can be determined when they result in shared positive employee perceptions about the workplace culture across all intersectional identities (Mor Barak, 2015; Nishii, 2013). The analysis from the PMS 2021 data notes this is not currently the case across the Victorian public sector as

respondents rated disability culture significantly lower than general culture. The experiences shared by participants suggest that there is scope to better communicate existing policies which support career progression, impact assess current policies and improve consultation and involvement opportunities for women with disability to inform policy development. Incorporating the voices and experiences of people with lived experience can contribute to policies and practices achieving greater inclusion (Löve et al., 2017; Stein and Lord, 2010).

Summary

In sharing career experiences and reflecting on the themes presented above, participants also identified inclusive practices for career progression and promotion for women with disability, collated below. Integrating these inclusive practices will substantively contribute to the Victorian public sector vision outlined in the Getting to Work Disability Employment Action Plan (2018)³⁵, to support people with disability to realise their full potential and develop a safe and inclusive environment.

VPS Inclusive Practices

Participants suggested the development of inclusive practices should focus on fostering VPS workplaces where respect and trust are embedded into the broader culture and are the foundation of relationships with managers in the organisation of more inclusive work practices. The inclusive practices identified by participants are drawn together around three key areas: *VPS Managers and Supervisors*; *Psychological Safety*; and *VPS Policies and Practices*.

To support the development of the inclusive practices proposed below, there may be value in identifying one or a small group of VPS employers willing to lead in specific areas of inclusion. Insights gained can be shared across VPS employers to further embed inclusive practices across the VPS.

Managers and Supervisors

Women with disability identified managers and supervisors play a pivotal role in shaping their career experiences and opportunities to achieve the professional

³⁵ Getting to Work: Victorian Public Sector Disability Employment Action Plan 2018-2025, Retrieved from <https://vpssc.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Getting-to-work.pdf>

success they desired. Women with disability identified that managers and supervisors could achieve a positive impact on their career progression and promotion by:

- being proactive, reaching out and leading on inclusion to help create career pathways *with* women with disability.
- embedding respect and trust in conversations about disability related requirements and workplace adjustments.
- investing in developing awareness and understanding of how gender and disability intersect to shape the career progression and promotion experiences of women with disability.
- taking action to remove barriers and promote enabling practices (extending this focus to understand the ways in which the intersections of other social identities contribute to career experiences, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse women with disability).
- raising awareness of the sources of support for women with disability provided by the VPS, for example workforce programs, mentoring schemes, and leadership development programs.
- recognising and seeking support to address the impact of the work environment and role responsibilities on their ability to proactively support and mentor the careers of women with disability.

Culture and Psychological Safety

Feeling safe and comfortable enough to bring their whole authentic self to work emerged as a critical factor shaping women with disabilities experiences of career progression and promotion. The VPS can increase psychological safety by making it an explicit priority and by:

- developing managers and teams to understand how to foster a psychologically safe workplace and work practices.
- building open and respectful communications about disability inclusion where gender and disability lived experience is recognised as an asset to the work of the VPS.
- developing a disability inclusive and supportive culture where bringing one's whole self to work is welcomed, women with disability feel valued for what they can contribute and safe to speak up about their inclusion requirements.

- interrogating and removing ableist assumptions informing policy, job design and performance expectations to enable women with disability to craft an inclusive career progression journey across the VPS.
- fostering a consultative leadership approach across the VPS which incorporates the characteristics of perspective taking and inquiry to foster generative conversations which produce inclusive solutions that deliver the strategic priorities of the VPS and facilitate the career aspirations of women with disability.

Inclusive Design and Implementation of Policies and Practices

Inclusive policies and practices lay the foundation for career progression and promotion for women with disability in the VPS. In general, VPS policies were recognised as increasingly heading towards greater inclusivity. However, participants identified two key challenges. Firstly, there has not been consistent involvement of women with disability and lived experience in policy development (particularly since Covid-19). Secondly, the effectiveness of policies to deliver inclusion is weakened when it was interpreted and applied in ways that are not inclusive of the requirements of women with disability. Participants noted that the development and application of policies can better facilitate the career progression and promotion of women with disability by:

- consistently including the lived experiences of women with disability in policy development and review. This includes engaging with gender diverse people and other intersectional identities of employees with disability to ensure their career experiences and inclusion requirements are better understood and inform policy development.
- destigmatising disability by moving away from a reliance on individual workplace adjustments towards more inclusive job design, policies and practices that incorporate a broader range of ways of working available for all employees.
- redesigning job role requirements (including leadership roles) to be more inclusive and less reflective of ableist norms and expectations.
- standardising flexible working, part-time work and working from home opportunities across VPS employers to increase the range of roles accessible to women with disability.

- ensuring secondments and other career developmental opportunities are accessible and enable women with disability to gain exposure and experience in a range of job roles across VPS employers.
- increasing communications about disability related policies, practices, sources of support and how to access information.
- increasing visibility of the VPS commitment to disability inclusion by offering more disability focused activities across the year.

Respecting the agency of women with disability, we identify below some suggestions to support women with disability to continue to build their careers. This does not negate the responsibility of the VPS to build inclusion, but recognises change takes time and it is important to respect the capability and capacity of women with disability to navigate their career contexts as more inclusive practices are developed. We suggest:

- Women with disability can seek out opportunities for mentoring through the Enablers Network. Leveraging the potential of the Enablers Network to identify an informal mentoring relationship within their Chapter or across the network and other VPS employers.
- Women with disability may consider how they can advocate for their career aspirations and inclusion requirements. The Enablers Network offer self-advocacy workshops and many community-based people with disability organisations operate from an advocacy perspective and provide training or support.
- Women with disability can explore the potential to share their experiences of career progression with other women with disability to make connections, build relationships, and leverage the power of collaboration to learn from each other's experiences. The Enablers Network can facilitate career progression sessions based on peer support principles.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The findings presented in this report provide insights into the career experiences of women with disability, highlighting the enablers, barriers, and inclusive practices central to their career progression and promotion opportunities in the VPS. The report centres the voices of participants and encourages senior leaders and critical stakeholders in the VPS to consider how the experiences of women with disability can contribute to a review of current practices and the development of more inclusive career contexts. The research will enable the VPS to

achieve its vision to support people with disability to realise their full potential and provide a safe and inclusive environment for employees with disability.

To support the development of inclusive career progression and promotion opportunities the research team are working with the Enablers Network to develop a communication plan to ensure that the findings support a shift to more inclusive practices across the VPS. The Enablers Network identified potential additional dissemination opportunities to enable the research to have an impact on practice across the VPS. Dissemination activities delivered and planned include:

- Presentation to research participants in February 2023.
- Presentation of the research findings at the Annual General Meeting of the Enablers Network in March 2023.
- An Enablers Network Townhall to launch this report in May 2023.
- ‘Bringing your voice to senior leadership’ activities, including presenting the report to VPS Disability Employment Community of Practice Network and to the Deputy Secretary Disability Champion Roundtable mid 2023.
- The Enablers Network will also use the findings holistically to further inform the current VPS Mentoring Program and the Leadership Development Program pilots.

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