

Tip Sheet

Addressing Workplace Ableism

Workplace culture is shaped by everyday behaviours, systems, decisions, and communication. By addressing ableism proactively and embedding inclusive principles into everyday practice, organisations can create environments where every person feels valued, respected, and empowered to contribute fully.

What is 'ableism'?

Ableism refers to discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities. It is often characterised by the belief that non-disabled forms of ability are superior, leading to attitudes, systems, and practices that disadvantage people with disabilities.

How ableism commonly shows up in everyday workplaces

Ableism in workplaces is often subtle and systemic. It usually sits within everyday expectations rather than overt behaviour. The examples below often go unnoticed because they are seen as normal workplace expectations rather than forms of exclusion.

Common examples include:

- Assuming everyone processes information, communicates, or socialises the same.
- Valuing productivity, presence, or “professionalism” based on narrow norms such as speed, eye contact, verbal confidence, or full-time availability.
- Designing roles, meetings, and systems around one way of working, then requiring individuals to request adjustments to participate.
- Treating adjustments as exceptional, inconvenient, or dependent on disclosure.
- Expecting people with disability to explain their needs, educate others, or represent all disabled people.
- Seeing disability through a deficit lens rather than recognising barriers created by environments, systems, and attitudes.

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Supporting a culture of inclusion to address ableism

Creating a culture of inclusion means shaping the everyday habits, systems, and expectations that enable everyone to participate and contribute at work. In this resource, inclusion is used intentionally as a way to challenge and reduce workplace ableism, by removing barriers and shifting responsibility from individuals to organisations and teams.

The approaches below respond directly to common forms of workplace ableism by shifting responsibility away from individuals towards inclusive systems, shared accountability, and everyday practices.

Design for everyone from the start:
This addresses ableism that assumes one default way of working and requires people to ask for access. Inclusive and universal design approaches can help make participation the default.

E.g. Meeting invitations include clear agendas, accessible documents and captions enabled by default, so staff do not need to request adjustments to participate fully.

Normalise adjustments for all staff:
This challenges the belief that adjustments are only needed by a few people or only after disclosure. Adjustments can be simple and stigma-free, supporting people to do their best work.

E.g. Flexible start times, quiet workspaces, or different communication methods are discussed as routine options during onboarding and performance conversations, rather than only raised when someone discloses a disability.

Build psychological safety:
This addresses the fear, stigma, and risk many people experience when raising access needs. Leaders play a key role in building trust, respect, and belonging in every team.

E.g. Team leaders encourage staff to raise concerns about workload, accessibility, or support needs without fear of negative consequences, and respond with practical problem solving rather than defensiveness.

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Make inclusion a shared responsibility with clear accountability:
This counters the idea that inclusion is an individual issue rather than an organisational one. The organisation can set the direction, leaders can model inclusive practice, and teams can contribute in meaningful ways.

E.g. Leaders model inclusive behaviours such as creating accessible presentations and using inclusive language. Teams are encouraged to identify barriers and contribute to solutions through regular feedback processes.

Prioritise lived experience when it is shared by choice:
This responds to ableism that expects people with disability to educate others or represent all disabled people. Sharing lived experience is voluntary and should be respected when it occurs.

E.g. When staff choose to share insights about accessibility or disability, this input is used to inform improvements, without placing responsibility on individuals to educate or advocate on behalf of others.

Tell practical stories that show what good looks like:
This highlights and reinforces what inclusive practice looks like in action. Sharing examples builds shared understanding.

E.g. Internal communications highlight how a team adjusted recruitment processes to remove barriers and improve candidate experience.

Build capability through ongoing learning:
This addresses outdated knowledge, stereotypes, and confidence gaps that reinforce ableist systems. Providing regular opportunities for learning can help staff build confidence in inclusive practice.

E.g. Short learning sessions on accessible communication or inclusive meetings are embedded into existing training schedules.

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Measure what matters and act on insights:
This responds to structural ableism by identifying patterns rather than treating issues as isolated cases. Data can help inform continuous improvement.

E.g. Employee feedback, complaints, and exit data are reviewed for patterns relating to accessibility or inclusion, with actions clearly communicated in response.

Embed inclusion across the employee journey:
This removes barriers that exclude capable people before they enter or progress within the organisation.

E.g. Recruitment, development, and progression processes can be reviewed to ensure they are accessible and do not rely on unnecessary requirements that could exclude capable candidates.

Sustain momentum through governance and transparency:
This ensures that addressing ableism is ongoing, monitored, and taken seriously at a systems level.

E.g. Progress on inclusion actions can be reported through existing governance channels, with updates shared openly so staff can see what has changed and what is still being worked on.

Key takeaways

- Identify and challenge workplace practices, assumptions and systems that may unintentionally create barriers for people with disability.
- Embed inclusion into everyday processes, decisions and behaviours so participation does not depend on adjustment requests or disclosure.
- Make inclusion a shared responsibility by building capability, listening to lived experience and taking action to remove barriers when they are identified.

Scan QR code for more resources from the Neurodiversity Works toolkit, designed to create inclusive workplaces.

Autism Queensland is here to help—get in touch to learn more:

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