 

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

Final report

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## About this document

This is a plain English version of a research report. The report is written by a team of researchers from the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The Victorian Public Sector Enablers Network and the Disability Leadership Institute helped write the report.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to say thank you to the original custodians of the land where the QUT was built. Thank you to the *Turrbal* and *Yugara* people for letting us share your land. These lands have always been places of research, learning and teaching. Your people play an important role in the QUT community. We pay respects to your Elders, lores, customs and creation spirits. We respect all First Nations Communities.

These organisations provided support for this research:

* the Victorian Public Service (VPS)
* the Victorian Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector (the Commission)
* the Victorian Public Sector Enablers Network (Enablers Network)
* the Disability Leadership Institute.

## Overview of the Project

The Victorian Government wants to make sure that everyone has the same opportunities to work for them. They don’t want people to miss out because of their gender identity or disability. This research is about:

* listening to woman with disability working in the VPS
* experiences that helped them with their careers, and ones that did not
* how the VPS can include women with disability better
* ideas for women with disability to help them with their careers.

This is valuable information to help the Victorian Government be an inclusive employer.

We used different sources of information for the research report, including:

* other research
* a survey of all staff of the Victorian Public Sector from 2021
* interviews and discussions with 49 women with disability working in the VPS.

## Women with disability in the workplace

A person experiences disability when there are barriers to them being a part of society. There are many kinds of barriers:

* Physical, for example, not having alternatives to stairs to get to a meeting place
* Sensory, for example, using loud alarms as signals when people may not hear them
* Attitudes of others, for example, other people assuming you don’t have skills.

People with disability are not all the same. It can be more difficult for them when they have other differences, for example, being from different backgrounds or cultures or having different gender identities.

Laws protect the rights of people with disability. There should not be barriers to stop them working. However, people with disability:

* are less likely to have work
* are more likely to work in jobs with lower pay
* find it more difficult to be promoted.

This is true for women as well. Our research is about how the two interact: how being both a woman and a person with disability impacts someone’s ability to find work and at what level.

## Data on the experiences of people with disability in the Victorian Public Sector

The lived experiences of people with disability in the Victorian Public Sector is important information. We analysed the responses of people with disability in the staff survey (People Matter Survey, 2021). We found that they were more likely to be a woman, non-binary or another gender identity. They were also more likely to

* have used flexible work arrangements, such as part-time work or working from home, if they were a woman
* have requested workplace adjustments for disability, if they were a woman, non-binary or another gender identity
* think their workplace culture is less inclusive for people with disability.

These responses were based on people who shared their disability information. Some people chose not to. These responses may not reflect all people with disability working in the Victorian Public Sector

## Hearing from women with disability employed by the Victorian Public Service

After looking at the answers in the VPS staff survey, we talked to women with disability who were working in the VPS. 49 people participated in the research. Some participants told us they felt valued and that they had opportunities to develop their careers. Some had mainly negative experiences. They did not feel included and worried about their future. Most had a range of experiences, both positive and negative. Their experiences depended on where they worked and who they worked with.

We analysed what participants told us in the interviews and we identified eight themes.

### Theme 1: Sharing Disability Information

Some participants had positive experiences of sharing their disability information. They asked for changes and felt supported. It made them feel more confident. Their team learned from them and understood how to work with them better.

“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”

Others did not feel safe about telling people about their disability. They knew that many people have negative and unfair beliefs about their disability (stigma). They were most worried about how it might affect their next job.

“You get typecast [only given one kind of role] as, she can't do that, or they may not involve you in opportunities or they just don't understand”

The VPS has jobs that give priority to people with disability. Some participants shared disability information to apply for them. They found it easy to apply for those jobs. They felt welcomed. Their teams already knew how to help them meet their needs.

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

Many participants felt that they were not able to apply for certain jobs because of barriers, such as:

* fixed ideas about what kind of person was best for the job
* fixed ideas of how to do those jobs including how much time to spend doing it.

“There needs to be a culture shift in the way people think about disability, because ableism [discrimination or prejudice towards people with disability**]** is absolutely rife”

They said that this was particularly true for higher-paid jobs like being managers and leaders. The barriers included in the eight themes exclude women for disability from accessing those jobs.

### Theme 2: Requesting Workplace Adjustments

There are simple changes (adjustments) that can make easier for people to work.

For example:

* Being able to change roles into part-time positions.
* Working in an environment that is comfortable and welcoming.
* Having the right equipment, for example, appropriate chairs or helpful technology.

Some participants found it easy to get adjustments. They had good information on what they could ask for. Many did not have to start the conversation. They were directly asked what they needed. It was a normal part of joining the team.

“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.”

Others did not ask for adjustments because of:

* not knowing what they could ask for
* not knowing how to ask for them
* concern that it would change how others thought of them
* concern that they would not be able to access higher paid jobs later.

“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”

Some participants tried to ask for adjustments. It was too difficult. They gave up.

“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”

Some were offered adjustments they did not need or ask for. It made them think that others had negative and unfair beliefs about their disability (stigma). It did not help them feel welcome and supported.

### Theme 3: Disability Advocacy

Many participants had to advocate for themselves. They had to speak openly about themselves and their needs, argue for their rights and challenge negative beliefs of others. Some felt they also needed to advocate for other people.

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

Some became passionate about advocacy. They wanted to help the VPS to be more welcoming and supportive of differences. They wanted to inspire other people like them.

“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”

Some learned new skills from advocating. They knew how to get what they needed. Some became better at talking to large groups of people. Some felt better about themselves.

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

Some found it very tiring to have to do the extra work of advocating. Some worried that the adjustments they needed made it harder for their team members to accept them. They did not want to be a burden or to be seen as needing special treatment.

“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”

Some participants did not choose to become advocates. They had to do extra work to access what they needed. They had to do the work of advocating for themselves many times.

*‘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]*

Other studies show that women who advocate for themselves are seen less positively than men who do. They can face the stigma of being too demanding and may struggle to find paid jobs.

### Theme 4: Team Relations

Women with disability are better included when they have positive relationships with people in their teams. When their colleagues take the time to build those relationships, it can help women with disability feel confident, supported and respected.

Some participants were able to feel accepted for who they are. They felt they could bring their whole self to work.

*“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”*

The Enablers Network helped some participants. It made them more confident about changing roles in the VPS.

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

If relationships are not positive, some women with disability hide (mask) their disability. They try to fit what is considered normal. This can be exhausting and is bad for their mental health. They did not think that bringing their whole self to work was normal for the VPS. They thought they would be less supported and safe if they moved teams or workplaces within the VPS. This makes it difficult for them to get new career opportunities.

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]

Some participants did not feel safe enough to share their disability identity. They had experienced or heard about:

* bullying and active discrimination against people with disabilities
* hostile and unsupportive (toxic) work or team cultures
* people openly saying negative things about people with disabilities.

### Theme 5: Impact of Managers and Supervisors

Some participants had managers who were supportive when they shared their disability information. The managers were welcoming and accommodating.

“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”

Managers can have a big impact on the careers of women with disability. Some participants had managers who encouraged them and helped them to find new opportunities.

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

Managers can help create inclusive workplaces that help women with disability feel their experiences are 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?

However, many had negative experiences with their managers. They felt like they were thought of as a burden and a problem. Some began to doubt their own ability.

“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”

Some participant’s managers did not seem interested in helping them to grow and develop.

“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”

This could be due to their manager not thinking they are capable. This is a common experience for people with disability and for women in some careers. Sometimes managers don’t realise that they have those beliefs (unconscious bias).

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

It can be frustrating to be denied opportunities to grow and develop. Some participants reported that their managers were openly unsupportive.

“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”

Some participants thought that perhaps their managers were too busy to support them. It is more difficult to be open and flexible when there is a lot of pressure.

### Theme 6: Mentorship

A mentor helps someone to develop the skills and knowledge needed to support their career. The person they help is called a mentee. Mentors can learn from their mentees and experience of being a mentor. Often people seek mentors at higher levels to give them advice. Sometimes they mentor each other (peer mentoring). The VPS recognises that having good mentors builds self-confidence and helps to progress the career of the mentee.

Many participants tried to find mentors. It was particularly important for those that had difficult experiences with their managers.

“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”

They were positive about the formal mentoring programs. It gave them a structure to find people rather than having to work it out themselves. However, they did not always manage to get benefit from it. They needed more time or support.

“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”

There is a lack of diversity in senior roles in the VPS. This makes it more difficult for women with disability to find mentors that understand their situation.

“which mentor will I have? A mentor who doesn’t fit any of my intersectionality?”

Some participants overcame this by seeking informal mentoring relationships. They connected with peers with different areas of knowledge.

“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”

Informal mentoring helps women with disability to develop skills and knowledge. However, some participants felt they still needed more formal help to progress with their career.

“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”

### Theme 7: Disability Leadership

It is very motivating for women with disability to see people like themselves in senior roles.

It makes them think:

* they have a future career in an organisation
* the workplace is committed to including everyone
* the workplace will value what they bring
* they will have opportunities to become a leader themselves.

“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”

Most participants noticed that there were not many senior leaders like themselves.

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

They thought it could be due to fixed ideas and expectations about how to be a senior manager which were different from how many women with disability organise their work (ableism). Those fixed ideas were reflected in the way jobs were advertised. This stops woman with disability from applying.

“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”

Participants also felt that seeing a few people succeed was not enough. They needed to be able to see how to achieve that for themselves.

“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”

Some wondered if there were senior managers who did not feel safe to share information about their disability.

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

They saw that sharing their own disability information led to lack of opportunities and progression. They thought it would be even more difficult for people in senior roles to share that information given what was expected of them.

### Theme 8: Policy Context and Application

Many participants thought that VPS policies are heading in the right direction to becoming more inclusive. They were very positive about policies that made it easy to access workplace adjustments and provided funding for them. However, they also noticed that being able to access this support depended on the attitudes and understanding of their managers.

“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”

Participants found it difficult to have to keep getting medical certificates for leave related to disability. It costs them time, money, and effort. Again, the amount of difficulty depended on their managers.

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

#### Secondments

Participants were very positive about opportunities to try other jobs for a short time (secondments). They felt it was a safe way to develop new knowledge and skills.

“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*”*

However, being able to access secondments depended on what their managers thought of them. Sometimes the roles came with expectations about how to do the work (ableism) that participants felt they could not meet.

Some participants were asked to act up (fill in) in management roles for a long time without clear guidelines or expectations. This was very stressful. They did not feel valued and could not work out how to do better or become permanent.

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

***Pathways***

Participants felt that the disability graduate program was a positive step for inclusion. They suggested that the support be extended beyond the first year.

“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”

Participants found it hard to know what their future career could look like and how to get there. They needed more information to know how to progress. One participant discovered that there were supports available. But only because she did the extra work of finding it out.

“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*”*

Many participants felt they could not progress in their careers because of the fixed ideas of how to be a managers or leader (ableism).

#### Using Targets

Participants discussed the benefits and drawbacks of gender and disability targets. Targets can create focus and drive changes. However, they can also hide discrimination. Half of the employees of an organisation might be women, but they might all be at the lowest level and from the same culture. They may hire people with disability but hold unconscious bias about some types of disability.

“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?”

***Hybrid Workplace Arrangements***

During the COVID-19 restriction, flexible working arrangements were necessary for everyone. For some participants it was their first experience of being able to meet their needs without argument. Some had more energy and drive as a result. Some no longer needed to reduce their work hours. Others felt able to take on the extra work of advocating for themselves and others.

“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 makes a huge difference to whether you feel that you’re authentically yourself”

Some participants found that the flexible work arrangements made them more isolated and disconnected. Some found themselves working too hard.

Some participants found that going into the work on some days and working from home on the others (hybrid workplace arrangements) was a positive experience. However, they highlighted that not having their own desk meant:

* having to carry everything they need
* not knowing if the desk or chair would be suitable.

If a desk was reserved for a participant because of their disability, it meant that all staff were aware they needed special conditions. However, some participants did not want to share their disability information because of negative views (stigma).

“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”

Some participants felt pressure to return to the office full-time.

“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”

***Consultation and Universal Design***

The VPS wants to be more inclusive. Participants identified that they should consult their employees with disability. It should not be up to the individual to advocate to meet their needs. It should be normal and necessary to discuss everyone’s needs with them.

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

In the end, the goal is for the workplace to be accessible to everyone. Then no one needs to disclose disability information to argue for adjustments. This may include:

* Physical accessibility, for example, always having alternatives to stairs to get to a meeting place and everyone having adjustable desks and chairs.
* Sensory accessibility, for example, paying attention to noise pollution, difficult lighting, and overwhelming smells.
* Attitudes of others, for example, making hybrid and flexible work arrangements normal and acceptable, and reviewing fixed ideas of how to do jobs (ableism).

“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”

Organisations can tell when they are succeeding at being more inclusive. All their employees feel positive about their workplace culture. In the People Matters Survey (2021), employees with disability were more likely to say that the VPS workplace culture is not inclusive for people with disability. Their voices matter. Listening to them will help the VPS be more inclusive for everyone.

## Inclusive practices suggested for the Victorian Public Service

Participants gave suggestions of how to make the VPS more inclusive. They have been grouped themes into three key areas. Different areas of the VPS could start by focussing on one area and share any lessons they learn with other areas.

### Key Area 1: Managers and Supervisors

Managers and supervisors impact how people feel at work and whether they can progress in their careers. Participants suggested that managers:

* reach out and listen to them rather than waiting for employees to bring things up
* help women with disabilities work out how to progress with their careers
* be respectful in discussions about workplace adjustments
* build trust so that employees feel safe to discuss their disability information
* listen and learn about the experiences of women with disability and how that impacts their career
* take action to remove barriers to make their workplace for inclusive for everyone, including people with disability from different cultures, with different first languages and with different gender identities
* find out and tell woman with disability about supports that the VPS is already providing, including mentoring schemes and leadership development programs
* understand how the work environment and expectations impacts women with disabilities and seek support to change them
* mentor women with disability.

### Key Area 2: Culture and Psychological Safety

Feeling accepted for who you are is very important for mental wellbeing. Participants wanted to be able to bring their whole self to work. They suggested that the VPS:

* help managers and teams understand how to be respectful and welcoming of difference so that people can feel safe to be who they are
* listen to people’s experiences and value them in discussions about how to be more inclusive of people with disability and other differences
* value the experience of women with disability and what they bring to their work
* make it easier for people to have workplace adjustments
* change fixed ideas about how jobs should be done and what kind of people are needed, particularly for management and leadership roles.
* ask leaders to listen to different people’s perspectives and inquire into issues
* help women with disability find ways to progress in their careers.

Following these suggestions will help the VPS meet its strategic priorities.

### Key Area 3: Inclusive Design and Implementation of Policies and Practices

Participants thought that VPS policies are heading in the right direction to becoming more inclusive. To make them more inclusive, the VPS can:

* include women with disability in policy development and review
* listen to many different people’s lived experiences and needs, including gender diverse people and people with different ethnic and language backgrounds
* make workplace adjustments normal and easy to access for everyone instead of relying on individuals to advocate and share disability information
* change how jobs are advertised to reflect more flexible views on how they can be done and who is needed, particularly for management and leadership roles
* make flexible workplace conditions normal and easy to access for everyone, including part-time work and working from home
* make sure secondment, and other opportunities, are open to women with disability across the VPS.

Participants also suggested holding disability focussed activities across the year. This would help to show the VPS commitment to inclusion.

### Ideas for women with disability in the VPS

Change takes time. Participants shared ideas of how to find more support here and now. They mentioned:

* seeking mentoring opportunities (formal and informal) through the Enablers Network
* attending self-advocacy workshops from the Enablers Network
* connecting with community-based organisations that provide advocacy services and training or support for people with disability
* sharing their experiences with other women with disability to make connections, build relationships and learn from each other.

These suggestions recognise that women with disability can take action to help themselves. They don’t replace the responsibility of the VPS to develop more inclusive practices.

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