# VALID Employment Project Consultation report

## 2020

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# Summary

As part of an NDIS-funded project about employment for people with intellectual disability, VALID interviewed twenty people with intellectual disabilities who work or have worked in open employment. VALID also interviewed twelve managers that employ people with intellectual disabilities. The purpose of these interviews was to find out about what employers do well to support people with intellectual disability at work.

According to the Everyone Can Work website:

**"** *Open employment is when people with and without intellectual disability work together in regular jobs. People who work in open employment work for at least minimum wage or through the Supported Wage System.* **"**

People who were interviewed agreed that employing people with an intellectual disability is a good idea and can improve the workplace for everyone. Managers said that employing people with an intellectual disability can bring new ideas and perspectives to the workplace. They also said that it is important to think not just about a person's role, but about the whole organisation, and to be prepared to welcome people and support them with clear processes.

Some of the things that people said were important were:

- clear expectations
- building trust
- honest feedback
- recognition of individual skills
- a commitment to workplace adjustments.

The information in this report will be used to inform the development of resources for VALID and other organisations about how best to support employees with intellectual disability to do their job well and feel valued and confident at each stage of their employment.

# Background

VALID (Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with Disability) is a non-profit advocacy organisation with a strong commitment to upholding the rights of people with intellectual disability.

VALID aims to empower individuals with intellectual disability to:

- exert control and influence over the decisions and choices which affect their lives

- inform and influence the policies, processes and practices of disability service agencies, governments, and other authorities

- exercise their human rights and citizenship status within their local communities.

VALID has a long history of employing people with intellectual disability. Current employees with intellectual disability work across a number of programs and projects and represent VALID in Victorian and national forums. Based on this experience, VALID is well-placed to offer advice to organisations working in the disability sector and other small businesses that may be looking to employ people with intellectual disability.

The VALID Employment Project is a one-year project, funded through the NDIS Information, Linkages and Capacity Building program. The project focuses on:

- what VALID can do to support employees with intellectual disability to understand and perform their roles and develop skills and career opportunities

- what additional supports are available to people with intellectual disability and employers and how they can be used well

- what we can learn from VALID's approach that can also be used to support small-medium businesses to employ people with intellectual disability.

# The Team

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# Acknowledgments

The VALID Employment Team would like to thank members of the Employment Community of Practice and Steering Committee for helping to develop questions, finding people to interview, and providing ongoing input and advice to the project team.

The team would also like to thank every person who took the time to be interviewed and share their experiences at work.

# A need for more understanding about what works

Although people with intellectual disability have a right 'to work on an equal basis with others' (Article 27, *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*), the reality for many people with intellectual disability is that they face significant challenges in finding and keeping jobs in open employment. These challenges include the negative attitudes of others before and during employment, discrimination in the workplace, feeling undervalued, and a perceived lack of opportunity to develop skills and progress in a career (Meltzer, Robinson and Fisher, 2019)[1].

There is a clear need for employers to do better in relation to employing people with intellectual disability. As one manager said:

> **"** *Every day I still get surprised how far behind we are, unfortunately, and I'm surprised that I'm surprised. I know this sounds really stupid, but like, I do think that I would kind of hope that we would be a bit further in, you know, in 2020 in Australia that there would be more opportunities and be more equality in the workplace.* **"**

Another said:

> **"** *When you think about it, if every person had the right condition, the right opportunities, the right support, all those kind of things all lined up, then yeah it's 100% of people could actually work.* **"**

The purpose of these interviews was to best understand what those opportunities and conditions are so that VALID and other employers can provide the right support to people with intellectual disability. To understand how to do this, VALID interviewed people with intellectual disability who work, and managers who employ people with intellectual disability. The team hoped to find out what are some of the good things that happen in workplaces so that they could:

- do these things at VALID
- make information for other workplaces about what they can do.

The team chose to interview people who worked at VALID and people who worked in other places.

# Who VALID spoke to

Thirty-two people were interviewed. This included twenty people with intellectual disability and twelve managers and other staff. About half of the people interviewed in both groups were people who worked at VALID. The other half were with people identified through the Employment Community of Practice. Employees represented a broader range of workplaces than the managers. Interviews with eight employees were arranged by the Disability Employment Service (DES). Interviews with managers were confined to VALID staff and other organisations in the disability sector. While there were some leads for interviews outside the sector, the arrival of COVID-19 meant that these interviews did not happen.

People referred to as 'managers' in this report included people in a range of roles such as colleagues and CEOs. While all of these people worked in organisations that work with people with intellectual disability, managers from one organisation shared strategies specific to working with autistic employees.

# How VALID did the interviews

Interviews took place over a four-week period during February and March 2020. Most of the interviews were conducted by two members of the Employment Project team. Some interviews were done by only one interviewer.

Most interviews took place at the VALID office. Some interviews were done at two Uniting Employment offices, others took place at the participant's workplace, and some people were interviewed on the phone. In some cases, this was because people worked in other states, and in some cases, it was because the project team started to work at home due to COVID-19. All but three of the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Information about the interview process including an information sheet, consent form and some of the questions to be asked were sent out to all interview participants the week before their interview.

[1]Meltzer, A., Robinson, S., Fisher, K.R. (2019), 'Barriers to finding and maintaining open employment for people with intellectual disability in Australia', *Social Policy and Administration*, 54 (1): 88–101.

# What VALID asked people



Interview questions were developed with input from the Community of Practice and the project steering committee. After an initial whiteboarding session to find out what questions people thought VALID should ask employees and managers, the project team made a list of questions under seven headings and sent it out for feedback. Feedback was provided by members of the Community of Practice, including members with intellectual disability about how to make the questions clear. There were seven questions for each topic. Each question also had a number of prompt questions that were used by the project team during the interviews.

Topics included:

- The best things about work.

- Recruitment – finding and applying for the job.

- Orientation – getting started at work.

- Understanding roles and responsibilities – knowing how to do your job well.

- Having the right support at work.

- Workplace culture – feeling welcome and included at work, and the important ways and expectations about how the organisation runs.

- Career opportunities – developing skills and training for the next step.

- Advice from people with intellectual disability who work and managers.

# Feedback from the Community of Practice

VALID's Employment Community of Practice has been an important part of the project from the beginning. The group includes VALID employees with and without an intellectual disability and representatives from other organisations doing work about employment for people with intellectual disability. A first draft of this report and a summary report were sent to all members of the group for feedback. The group talked about each recommendation at a meeting on Thursday 7th of May 2020.

People recommended that there be more focus on the fact that changes made to support people with intellectual disability will benefit everyone in the workplace. This also led to a conversation about the fact that singling out people with intellectual disability for additional support in the workplace may be 'humiliating' and counterproductive to the idea of making people feel included. Careful attention will need to be given to how we talk about these things in any resources that are developed.

There was also feedback from a member of the group with an intellectual disability that talking about 'trusting relationships' between a manager and staff may be confusing for people with an intellectual disability in the workplace. The project team will continue to work closely with the Community of Practice during the development of resources to make sure the language used is clear, inclusive and supports ongoing conversations between people with intellectual disability who work and their managers.

# What VALID found out

People who were interviewed, agreed that employing people with an intellectual disability was a good idea. Many people said that having people with intellectual disability in the workplace can improve the workplace for everyone. The managers VALID spoke to all worked in the disability sector and a number of them said employing people with an intellectual disability in their organisation brought new ideas and perspectives to their work. Managers were clear, though, that employing a person with an intellectual disability should not be an individual hiring decision, but a commitment to a workplace culture that values:

- clear expectations

- building trust

- honest feedback

- recognition of individual skills

- a commitment to workplace adjustments.

The responses people gave about each topic include reflections about what works well when hiring or managing people with intellectual disability and how it feels to be supported well, or poorly, at work. The report provides practical recommendations for employing and supporting people with intellectual disability at the end of each topic.
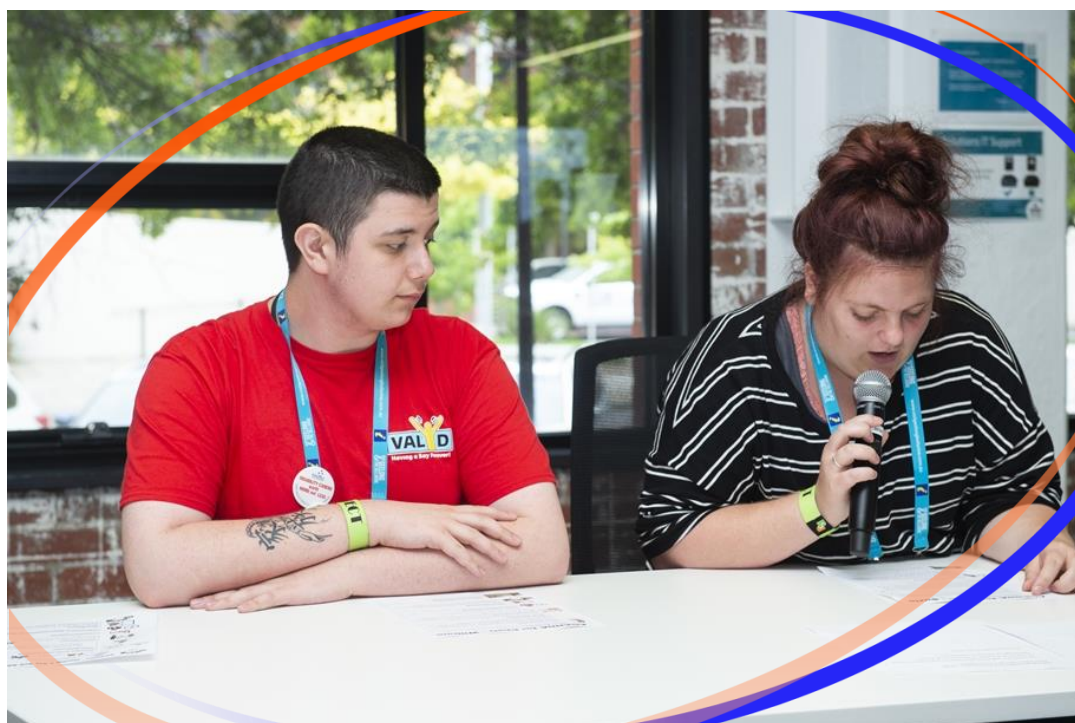
# What are the best things about work?

People were asked questions on the best things about working. The purpose of these questions was to understand what made work good, from an employee and manager perspective. For managers, this included a question about their favourite day at work. This gave them an opportunity to reflect more personally on their own experiences. People talked about the impact of working, on other parts of their lives, including:

- gaining confidence and social skills

- being given more responsibility outside of work

- having the opportunity to spend more time with a family member during travel to work.

## Meeting people and making friends

People with intellectual disability who were interviewed said that meeting people and making friends were important parts of their experience at work. The development of friendships was particularly talked about by VALID employees:

> *I started, like, having all my new friends … they've all decided to start making a fairly long conversation with me at our break times. (Excellent. And how does that make you feel?) Just extremely happy.*

Others also talked about the positive impact of being around people:

> *… if I've been in not [a] great mood in the morning, and then I go to Coles, the customers always make me in a better mood because they're all nice and I just have fun with them and stuff.*

## Getting out of the house

Another theme that was clear was that working gave people an opportunity to get out of their houses. Some responses from employees include:

> *Get out of the house, get a house to start. Meet people, and just feel, do something that's useful.*

> *Changed a lot and I find I'm a lot happier. Just like I earn a bit extra, not always in my bed watching TV.*

One man talked about spending time outside of his paid hours at work so that he didn't have to be at home:

> **"** *Like sometimes I go to work early, like three hours earlier than when I'm supposed to start, because I don't want to be at home sometimes. I just don't want to be at home.* **"**

Another employee talked about not wanting to spend all their time at a day service:

> **"** *Jobs are important to me because I'm like, I need to get out in the community. I don't want to be based at services and stuff like that.* **"**

## Earning money

Many employees talked about getting paid as being the best things about working, and it was clear that for some, this was linked to how they felt about their own worth. One said:

> **"** *The best things at work, you know, having a wage, not counting on the government to be paying you. That's the best thing about working. And, you know, just being treated as an equal in the workforce.* **"**

Another employee agreed, saying that the best things about work are:

> **"** *… being included in society and self-worth, to know that you're actually getting a pay check, like everyone else, you're able to pay and save for things and do things.* **"**

Earning money also led to increased independence and a range of opportunities. One man talked about his experience learning how to budget his wages:

> **"** *Best thing about working is you learn stuff and you're learning how [to] pretty much be a man and how to operate, like now that I'm working my mum's teaching me how to budget better … my gas, water, how much that's all going to work out. Pretty much she's teaching me so that when I'm ready I can move into my own house.* **"**

Others talked about saving money to travel.

## Learning new skills

Skill development was important to people, both in the workplace and recognising that these skills had an impact on other parts of their lives:

> **"** *I liked the skills side of it because if you don't build skills up, you don't know what you're capable of doing. Other than the money situation, it's more independence for me. I have to learn to get there by myself, by a certain time.* **"**

## Helping other people

Several people talked about the opportunity to help or teach others as being one of the best things about working:

> " *The best job is … helping the people out because they don't know how to do it. I just help them out if they [need it].* "

Another man was clearly happy talking about teaching someone else how to do the job:

> " *(How did you do that?) I just showed him the ropes. (By the look on your face, that felt pretty good to be able to do that?) Yeah, wish I was on the job. Yeah, it would be grouse to get another job.* "

A VALID employee talked about being able to help Victorians with disability who live in group homes, through work with the VALID8 team. Another said:

> " *My favourite things to do is probably meetings, being in meetings or supporting people with a disability that haven't been able to have a say and learning how to have a say in meetings. Watching some of the self-advocates that we've had over the years come back … seeing them come and seeing them grow is really something. It's good.* "

# What did managers say?

Managers and other employers were asked about their favourite day at work, in order to understand what they valued most about work. There were some common answers, including teamwork, making a difference, seeing achievement and being productive:

> **"** *I'm lucky enough to work in a job that makes a difference to people. I work in a job where I work in collaboration with a lot of other people, so I feel well supported in a team environment.* **"**

> **"** *I like interacting with people across the workplace. So checking in with how they're going makes me feel good and as you begin to build relationships, you become more trusting and confident and you gain a sense of belonging in a workplace. That makes me feel a bit warm and fuzzy. I like days when I learn new things. So it could be information, skills, it can be at a meeting or professional development or in the process of getting feedback or simply just when you're having conversations with other people.* **"**

> **"** *Usually it's when myself and my team … are working really well together and getting lots done, that's probably when I feel really happy at the end of the day, when we're getting lots done and we're really understanding each other and ticking boxes.* **"**

Themes of relationship and teamwork, achievement, and making a difference were shared. Additional focus on money and skill development was evident in employees with intellectual disability, while productivity was a focus for some managers.

# Recruitment – finding and getting a job

Questions about recruitment helped to understand what changes managers have made to their usual recruitment processes when employing people with intellectual disability, and what they found most helpful. It also helped to understand the experience of getting a job from the perspective of employees with an intellectual disability.

## Getting a job through personal relationships and networks

A number of people talked about finding and getting jobs through personal connections. The best example of this was the VALID employees who were recruited directly after participating in VALID networks and consultations over a number of years.

Two VALID employees shared their experience:

> **"** *I got a phone call from [a staff member] from VALID in the office asking me would I like to come in to work one day a week on a Thursday for eight hours.* **"**

> **"** *I didn't do an interview, it was like talk, it was like ([he] knew me before 'cause he's seen the work I do he thought oh I may be a good person to come along and work for VALID.* **"**

A number of managers also talked about recruiting people through networks, which meant they already knew what skills people had, and also that they did not have to spend time during a project period going through a formal recruitment process.

One man talked about his experience getting a job with Australia Post after years of spending time there:

> **"** *No just being around people, posties, talking to them and [I] saw them around. Spent the day there. And then he just told me one day, because he asked the second in charge, 'Who's that guy?' And then I finally got to meet him and then, about a year and 3–4 months, no about a year and six months I'm actively working.* **"**

Another man also talked about getting a job on his own at the local market:

> **"** *I got that job myself. (Did you? How did you get that?) I just walked in and said, 'Have you got a job?' And they gave me a job.* **"**

## Support from Disability Employment Services

A number of other people talked about getting jobs with support from a Disability Employment Service. Some of these people talked about their experiences with work trials or placements, and interviews with support from an employment consultant:

> **"** *The worker … found it and he helped me with my resume and then we went over together, and we had the interview. Then the boss gave me a trial, like what I could do, and then hired me.* **"**

While only one manager talked about using a Disability Employment Service to recruit staff with intellectual disability, another talked about her experience working for a Disability Employment Service and said:

> **"** *I think that disability organisations don't use that service effectively enough to look for staff. You know it's a free service, really, that they could use to their advantage, you know particularly looking to hire a person with an intellectual disability.* **"**

## Looking for new staff

Employers had a range of ways that they find new staff, and they were also open to new processes. Some workplaces were actively trying to make their recruitment processes better for people with intellectual disability. The need to be mindful of people's experiences was a common theme among interviewees:

> **"** *Just make the process as easy as possible for someone who might have never even had a job interview before because they've been too scared to apply because no one is going to employ them cos they've got a disability.* **"**

## Did you intentionally recruit people with intellectual disability? If so, why?

Given that all employers we interviewed work in the disability sector, it is not surprising that many talked about intentionally recruiting people with intellectual disability:

> **"** *We're an agency for people who have a disability, I think we should employ one, yes.* **"**

> **"** *We want to have a really diverse team … we have to have autistic people in our team. We can't be trying to help autistic people and not employ them.* **"**

One manager talked about her experience working with people with intellectual disability, and her concern that they have been marginalised:

> *I guess a motivator for me to really try and connect with that cohort and try to provide more opportunities because I know that people have got the capacities, it's just that lack of opportunity.*

## Advertising the position

While a few managers talked about using traditional advertising methods, there was a reliance on the use of networks to contact people who may be suitable for the role. This included sending information out to other organisations in the disability sector for it to be circulated. While this has been an effective method, one person raised the concern that people with intellectual disability outside of these networks may miss out on employment opportunities:

> *Like how do we even, how does a person who sits at home, they might be in their early twenties, intellectual disability, could potentially have a job out there but if it's not connected to anything, how are they going to find out about anything?*

They suggested using social media as a way to reach potential applicants. Another manager raised the value of providing opportunities to people with intellectual disability, to experience a traditional recruitment process:

> *Because I think it helps people with intellectual disabilities that are starting to move into the workforce understand that's the way the rest of the workforce works … That's really good to make sure they get feedback, understand why and it helps them improve their process. Because some of them probably never applied for a job before or been for an interview in a serious way.*

Managers also talked about information to include in advertisements and position descriptions. The need for information in accessible formats was highlighted, and one manager talked about the need to be explicit when inviting people with intellectual disability to apply:

> *Maybe they wouldn't have applied for the job if we didn't write that in there.*

Several people talked about using plain English or Easy Read position descriptions when advertising or recruiting for roles.

One manger described a flexible process for applying for a job:

> " [applicants would] send through a resume if they have one, but if they didn't have one just to send through a brief … description of themselves and what their interests are, and what they like, what they're interested in the role and some of their experience. And then if people weren't comfortable to do that, I would organise a telephone call … and I'd sit with them. So that would be their application. "

## The interview process

The VALID employees said that they did not have a formal interview but came in to talk to staff about the role with their supports as needed. Some brought their parents to be part of the conversation. People who had attended interviews had mixed feelings about the process. While several people said that they were not nervous during the interview process, one person described it as 'nerve-wracking'. Some employees talked about the interviews they attended with support from an employment consultant:

> " In the interview was quite good. Gave me a rundown and all that. Told me what he was expecting and all that. What my duties would be any my availability. "

Managers were conscious that interviews can be intimidating and that a relaxed approach may give people the opportunity to do better:

> " If you've ever been to one of those interviews where there's three or four people on the panel. So I just think that generally … and that can be quite daunting and a bit scary. "

There were a number of practical suggestions to address this, including:

- having people with intellectual disability on the interview panel
- sending the interview questions out in advance
- having an informal one-on-one conversation in place of a formal interview
- giving people the opportunity to have a support person at the interview
- asking people about any access requirements or workplace adjustments needed before the interview.

One manager gave an example of a modified interview process:

> " *We'd send out the questions prior to the interview. We'd also encourage them to bring with them someone as support, if that made them more comfortable. And always on the interview panel there would be someone with a disability who's part of the team, so they could talk to their experience and what it's like to be part of the team.* "

Another manager explained:

> " *We always had other people with a disability as part of that process, like from start to finish so it would be a co-design process all along. A person with a disability in the interview looking at also having a mixed gender sort of division, to try and make the person who comes feel the most comfortable.* "

## Asking people about access requirements or workplace adjustments

Several managers raised the need to ask people if they have any additional support needs for the interview:

> " *You know, making sure that we kind of pre-empt any kind of barriers that there might be, so asking them to provide information in advance about if they've got any access requirements and then we you know do our best to meet those.* "

Two managers talked about a phone call with the person being a good way to ask about this. They also mentioned these requirements can be addressed in job advertisements for the role:

> " *We do screening calls before we get anyone in for an interview, and when I make those screening calls, I'm really specific … about when you come in for a face-to-face interview, what do you need from us?* "

## Recommendations for the workplace

- Specifically invite people with intellectual disability to apply for roles.

- Give people information about workplace adjustments they can have during the recruitment process.

- Ask people what support they need before the interview.

- Give people the interview questions before the interview so they have time to get ready.

- Include people with intellectual disability in the recruitment process, including on the interview panel.

- Think about using a Disability Employment Service to find and employ people with disabilities.

# Orientation – getting started at work

Employees talked about some of the good things that happened when they started at work. Managers talked about their orientation processes and any changes they made when employing people with intellectual disability.

## Already knowing people and being familiar with the workplace is helpful

Employees talked about some of the best parts about starting work, to be already knowing people and being familiar with the workplace. In some cases, this was due to previous involvement in VALID networks. In others it was because people had done work trials:

> **"** … it made it very easy to start, because I knew exactly who I was going to meet, yeah. Like I wasn't going to walk into a place with a bunch of strangers. **"**

## The boss showing people around

Some employees talked about being given a tour of the workplace by the boss when they started. One man talked about his experience of being welcomed when he started the job:

> **"** When I first started, I come here and then [was] greeted with friendly handshakes and it made me feel really, really good because it made me feel more comfortable being here. More accepted and that's exactly what I want. I want to feel accepted. Like I'm wanted here. **"**

## Was the orientation process when employing people with intellectual disability different from the organisation's usual processes?

Managers were asked about the orientation process for new staff when employing people with intellectual disability, and whether it was different from their organisation's usual processes. One responded:

> **"** Yeah, you read a manual usually that's like fifty pages long and you have to do a whole lot of other sort of, you have to do a whole lot of reading and meeting with other people. I'm not sure how much that information actually remains in your brain, it's pretty overwhelming … I think that human connection is the most important thing. **"**

Most of the managers talked about their own process when employing people as being far less formal than their organisation's usual processes:

> ❚❚ *We weren't too prescriptive I think. We were sort of flying the plane while we were building it a bit, which might not be wise, but it seemed to work out in the end quite well.* ❚❚

This experience was shared by another manager who said:

> ❚❚ *That's been a little bit difficult because it was a first-time thing. So to hire five people all at the same time with a very limited experience in relation to employment … So you know it's clearly interesting, but it's almost like a trial and error thing. Some things work, other things don't.* ❚❚

## Be clear about what people should expect when they are starting in the workplace

One of the things that was made clear through interviews with managers, was that many employees with disability had no or limited experience working and may feel nervous or unsure when starting a new job. In addition to the usual information that is provided during orientation, people needed clear information about what the orientation process would involve, and detailed information about expectations in the workplace.

One manager had this to say:

> ❚❚ *It's important that they understand that process but what happens, so communication throughout, you know what's going to happen next so you need to fill in this, this and this paperwork and once we get that signed then this is what's going to happen and then you're coming for induction. But to have an actual schedule of the induction as well, not just that you know you do induction on Monday, but I found that it was quite helpful to have a bit of an outline, you're coming and then during the first couple of hours this is what you know, what's going to happen. Then we might go out for a coffee and we can have a chat and then it's lunch but you need to bring your own lunch or whatever it is. Be really clear about what people need to do because when people start a job like it's daunting enough as it is, but when you don't even know like where do I put my bag or where's there to buy lunch. Like some of those little things can make a big difference to help someone feel more comfortable on their first day.* ❚❚

# Clearly communicate your expectations of the person at work

Another manager agreed that there was a need to spend time at the start of someone's employment to talk about what responsibilities people had in the workplace, including being on time for work, being prepared for the day ahead and wearing appropriate clothing. Another also recommended taking time in the first few weeks of employment to focus on orienting to the workplace and talking through any questions that people might have. They suggested that it would be useful to have resources to support this aspect of the orientation process for people with intellectual disability. As another manager put it:

> **"** *Where many other non-disabled people had had those kinds of experiences just because that's the way [it is]. You'll all start green, you all get mentoring and support, you learn, you come up.* **"**

Another talked about the need to give people information about expectations in relation to people understanding that they could for example take personal leave:

> **"** *And if you're unwell, and don't feel well enough to work that day, you need to just tell me … and not to feel that, oh, 'I'm going to be punished' or 'I'm going to lose shifts'.* **"**

The need to learn about some of these aspects of work was also raised by an employee with an intellectual disability:

> **"** *But just learning confidentiality, I think that's one big thing for anybody that starts a new job, learning that there is a place and time for confidentiality, and you have to keep confidentiality. And learn how to break, and I've got to even learn, you know when I come home to turn off from work. And that's so hard … knowing your boundaries with staff, you don't ring them on their weekends. Only if it's an emergency.* **"**

The importance of understanding how to be part of a team was also highlighted:

> **"** *I think that everyone knowing their expectation of being part of a team is really important and the adjustment is big for anyone when they start a job for the first time and some people get it and some people take longer … So it's about being sensitive but firm in letting people now what is expected of them in their role.* **"**

# Clear information in accessible formats

People talked about the need for policies and procedures to sit behind these expectations, with some expressing the need for this information to be in accessible formats:

> **"** It's including everyone in the process, but also ensuring that everyone has information about what we're doing in a way that they understand … We have a code of conduct that's something that everyone's familiar with and all of our policies, if they aren't in Easy Read, they will be eventually. **"**

An employee agreed that there is a need for accessible information about expectations, and that this information needs to be supported by a conversation about it:

> **"** If we had, not rules, but if we had pictures, besides the ones that couldn't read I think that's where we would have to check who could read and who can't read, so we're not discriminating against, or because you've got a disability you mightn't be able to read. So if we sit down and have a chat with them and say to them, well do you understand this? And if they say no, then we say, well what happens if we put in a bit more plainer English for you? **"**

One manager also highlighted the need to ask people about the best way to communicate with them:

> **"** Some people said 'I don't want information this way' so we asked how people best liked to be communicated with and initiating that traffic light system so people felt they had equal voice. And we acknowledged. **"**

## The orientation process takes time

Most managers agreed that the orientation process should happen over a period of several weeks, as the person learns aspects of the job and as a trusting relationship develops. One manager suggested that this could start with a follow up conversation after the first day of orientation, to ask how the person was feeling after their first day, and if they had any questions or concerns.

An advantage of carrying out the orientation process over time, is the chance for employees to have a better sense of how the things they have talked about during the initial orientation apply to day-to-day working situations. As one manager described:

> *Now we say to them, 'Okay. Now we've got a real set of circumstances. This is why this is written in the job description and this is what we expect of you and these are the supports we will give you'. That's often helpful.*

This need to take time for orientation was apparent, where a group of staff were starting in the workplace, at the same time. Three managers described working with groups of people in project teams, and the importance of spending time getting to know each other and understanding expectations of the work together. One said:

> *We sent out a whole lot of information but the orientation was about bringing a group of people together, the team together from day one and just going through what we were required to do.*

## Administration and paperwork

Several managers raised concerns about the completion of paperwork, particularly in relation to timesheets and Centrelink requirements:

> *It proved to be quite challenging in terms of number one, the support they needed to be able to complete the stuff like time sheets and pays and we go through the rigmarole of dealing with Centrelink to reporting to everything of that nature …*

Another manager shared her experience:

> *… there's a whole series of forms that's really not easy for everybody to access and work their way through. (I'm sure lots of employees would find that.) Oh, everyone does.*

An exception was one organisation that had made an effort to ensure all processes worked for everyone in the organisation. This included a review of processes.

Given the possibility that the person has not been employed before or has not gone through the process of setting up paperwork, it is important to consider the role of administration and human relations teams in getting started at work. As one manager explained:

> **"** *We take more time to explain the processes of, for example, if that person hasn't gone through signing up for super or a tax file number, we go through those processes in more detail, and that's usually handled by … somebody from the HR or finance team.* **"**

## Getting to know people in the workplace

Starting in a new workplace involves more than just learning the job and getting to know your immediate team. One manager suggested that a way to help people feel comfortable at work as they get to know other people, was something they called a 'Who's Who in the Zoo':

> **"** *… a chart and it's got a picture of everyone in the organisation, it has their job title, and it has just a quick sentence of what that person does for a job.* **"**

They commented that this type of resource would be useful for everyone starting in a new workplace:

> **"** *That's the biggest problem whenever you have anyone new, and I think that builds anxiety when you know you need to go and ask people for help, but you feel awkward.* **"**

## Buddy system

One manager suggested that the period of orientation was a good time to introduce them to someone else in the workplace who does a similar job. Another explained:

> **"** *We had a buddy system. We tried to set it up in a way that reflected the project so the idea of building safe and respectful cultures, we tried to model it in the way that we were doing the project.* **"**

Another person cautioned that a buddy system may not be effective where people's personalities were not suited or it felt like a chore, and this could do more harm than good. They talked about looking for and supporting natural relationships between co-workers:

> **"** *… trying to find another employee that they connected with as well and then building that relationship in a really natural sneaky way, but not sneaky.* **"**

The benefit of a buddy system is that it gives people more than one person to talk to if they have questions or things that they don't feel that they need to talk to their manager about. A person in this role can provide good support while other natural workplace relationships develop.

## Recommendations for workplaces

- Give people an opportunity to get to know the workplace and other workers before starting.

- Give people clear information about what will happen in the orientation process (e.g. a timetable).

- The orientation process should take place over a few weeks.

- Give people clear information about what is expected of them at work.

- Tell people it's ok to ask questions and give them lots of opportunities to ask questions.

- Let people know who can answer their questions about paperwork when they start a job.

- Consider a 'buddy system' so that there is someone else that can provide support.

# Understanding roles and responsibilities – knowing how to do your job well

Employees were asked about how they know they are doing a good job. Managers were asked how they make sure people understand their roles and responsibilities. Being clear about expectations, giving lots of feedback in both directions and making a commitment to supervision were all identified as important ways to support people to know how to do their jobs well.

## Giving people clear information about what is expected of them in their role in their position description

Making sure that people have clear information about what is expected of them in their role is important. Several managers talked about making sure you have a good position description, which could then be used to talk about the role and clarify expectations. One talked about making sure that you sit down with people and explain it and making sure they get to ask questions. This process was also identified as a good opportunity to build a trusting, mutual relationship between the employee and manager:

> " *You can give out written material about roles and responsibilities but it's really about taking the time to talk through those areas. That's really important. Because you get a deeper understanding and learn more about one another just in having those conversations, and it was also an opportunity for people to change things if people had better ideas on how to proceed.* "

Another manager also identified this process as a way of understanding their individual strengths of team members:

> " *So going through the role, making sure people understand their responsibilities, but then also finding what those people can add to the team.* "

## Feedback is really important

Employees talked about the importance of feedback in knowing that they were doing a good job. This was the most common response. People welcomed feedback, both about things they do well and feedback to help people to do their job better.

> " *A couple of the managers, when I finish work, they say, 'Good job today' and yep. Like if there's something I don't know how to do, they'll tell me. If I do it right, they'll say that's how you do it.* "

> **"** *Well there was an occasion where one of the bigger bosses said, 'Well done for how you approached all those people, but maybe next time ask about this and that.' And I went, 'Okay.'* **"**

This feedback was given throughout the workday but may also happen in more structured settings, like debriefing after a workshop:

> **"** *If I'm going out to do training with staff, I'm learning from them as well and debriefing with them afterwards because I won't know if I'm doing something wrong if no one says to me, 'Look … you could've done it better this way'.* **"**

One man who had support from a Disability Employment Service said that although he had not been provided any feedback directly, he received feedback indirectly from his employment consultant:

> **"** *Well, I've heard that the managers have spoken to the owners about it, but yeah all I've known that I'm doing really well. They told [the employment consultant] about this, so I was like yep, pretty good. They like it, like me working there.* **"**

Managers also talked about the importance of knowing they are valued by their team through feedback, both from others in their workplace and from outside their organisation:

> **"** *I hear about the project work is going with them and the impact that it's having, and the benefit that it's having for people with intellectual disabilities. The differences that we're making. seeing the impact that our work has.* **"**

Everyone agreed that feedback is the most important way that people can understand their role, learn how to do their job well, and that honest feedback is useful and welcome:

> **"** *If you've got something to say, you can say it nicely, but just tell me the truth. If you don't like what I'm doing, you say it. It makes it easier for me, if that makes sense.* **"**

> **"** *I always like to get constructive criticism because it actually helps me do a better job. It helps me feed that back into other areas [at work] and just in general. Life in general because it's all about how we do life really, the work we do here.* **"**

This feedback should go both ways and include celebrating things that people do well:

> **"** *In terms of being supported well, we gave each other ongoing feedback. We also highlighted when people were doing things well. I think a lot of people don't do that but there are a lot of good things that happen in a day, in a meeting and it's really important I think that you point those things out as recognition and also as a celebration really of the good work that's been done along the way.* **"**

## Being asked for feedback or input

Being asked to provide feedback or input also lets people know that they are important and valued at work:

> **"** *Well when they talk to me and ask for help and they ask me questions or when they ask me to provide feedback when we do our meetings.* **"**

> **"** *A lot of the team members come to me and ask me questions. 'Cause I look at it this, I live the disability, they don't. So, I mean they come up and they'll ask me how do you feel about something and I'll say well I don't think a person with a disability would understand that, so they might put it in another way.* **"**

## Sense of achievement seeing at task completed

Some people talked about a sense of achievement at completing a task, and recognised their contribution to the running of the workplace: 'If I wasn't here, who would do it?' This was true for both employees and employers, with one manager whose role it was to support the employees with intellectual disability in her workplace, explaining her belief that if she wasn't doing the job, there would be a gap:

> **"** *I'm super busy all the time, so that tells me that there's clearly a need for this and if I wasn't doing it, I don't know who else would be doing … and every time I have conversations with someone, it brings up more questions and highlights the need for more focuses and things that we could do better.* **"**

## Keeping the conversation open and building trust

Building trust is particularly important where people may have had bad experiences at work in the past. One man talked about his experience asking for help at work:

> " *I always get nervous when I ask for help, because in the past I would get yelled at.* "

Building trust means that everyone will feel comfortable giving and receiving feedback and asking for support when it is needed. As one manager explained:

> " *I have a conversation with them and I continue to have a conversation with them. The most important thing is… getting to know them, as a person, and what works for them and what doesn't work. And then it's, time to, and put in some time to build some trust …. Building that level of trust where people are comfortable to say "I can't do it, I'm just not up for it" is really, really important. So getting to know the person you're working with… so you can pick up when perhaps things aren't travelling so well for them.* "

## Supervision

The process of supervision looked different in different workplaces. While some workplaces had standard processes that they used for all employees, others did not, and some processes used throughout organisations did not occur for people who were in part-time, casual or project roles. One manager raised the need to be mindful of the way we talk about supervision, saying:

> " *I think in itself can sound like you sort of I guess you know you're watching over someone's shoulder when in some ways you are making sure that they're accountable for what their role is and you're kind of checking in with them but also at the same time you're trying to be encouraging and supportive. So it's that balancing act.* "

They suggested using the organisation's supervision process as a starting point but giving people options about how they wanted the supervision process to be, and being open to trying different things:

> " *I'd explain that this is the way that the organisation you know does supervision. So there's this form and there [are] questions in here so we can either use this if you like, you know maybe we can try this and see how it works and just give the person opportunity to yeah, try it out. I think we gave them some generic guideline but then obviously left it open for anyone to put what they wanted. 'Cause sometimes access would also be about gender or it could be related to lots of different things. So we wanted not to be too prescriptive but give some guidance as to what we might be looking for.* "

## There is a need for both formal and informal supervision

There was acknowledgement that both formal and informal supervision processes are important:

> *" … you need both. Yeah, so you need to be able to just ask people informally, but it's good to have a system that says, okay, remember to sit down and ask because sometimes it's only in the formal systems where you remember to ask all your questions. "*

Managers generally felt more confident with the informal practices they used than formal, and some acknowledged a need to be better at the formal aspects of supervision. One described the process as being 'quite organic':

> *" … [we] catch up every couple of weeks … we have coffee and tea and biscuits and a chat and just chat about what's been happening. That's really it. Obviously if staff were in trouble or if they're really needing to debrief or there's an issue, then we'll sit down and talk about that. "*

## Formal supervision

One person described the need for formal supervision by saying:

> *" If you ask a couple of superficial questions, how you're going, is everything okay, you just get the answers, 'Yes, yes, yes'. You have to take longer and you have to ask better-framed questions that are more specific to find out if there's any problems or to find if people need more support … make sure you have time to sit together and you make sure that you ask some introductory questions and then some specific questions to really find out if things are okay. "*

Another manager described their formal process as a monthly meeting with a manager:

> *" We talk about issues that both parties can bring to the meeting, areas that people would like to improve, like professional development or things of that nature. We have a support and development, or like a supervision template, that we use in meetings. Everyone has the same one. It just has themes, but that's actually just the starting point for those meetings. There's a lot of flexibility around how the actual support and development meeting is run, 'cause it's kind of based on individual needs and what people want to talk about during that time. "*

While this process was used for all employees based in the office, it did not happen for casual staff who had informal conversations as they were needed. This was acknowledged as something that needed more attention, and is particularly relevant given the often part-time or casual roles that people with intellectual disability are employed in.

## Informal

All managers talked about the informal processes they used in the workplace to make sure people know how to do their job well and feel supported. Some of this happened incidentally through day to day conversation in the workplace:

> **"** *Yeah, so I would have check ins throughout the day when someone's here in the office, but it's very much along the lines of, 'You alright?', '"Yeah, great', 'Okay', done. If anything's going on otherwise, I would say, 'You look a bit a frazzled' or whatever.* **"**

One described that an informal catch up for project workers that happens out of the office allows the person an opportunity to 'check in and make sure they're going okay'.

## Recommendations for workplaces

- Give people clear information about what is expected of them in their role.

- Take time to develop trusting connections with people who will answer questions freely. People may feel more comfortable talking about what support they need.

- Give lots of feedback about things people are doing well and things that will help them to do their job better.

- Ask for feedback and ideas from employees.

- Use formal and informal supervision while at work.

- Use a guide for supervision and talk to the person to find out what works best for them.

- Make sure you have regular informal and formal processes in place for casual and part-time staff who may not get the day to day support that others get.

# Support at work – who helps you to know how to do your job well?

People with intellectual disability were asked who supports them at work, and what things are useful to them to do their job well. Managers were asked about how they found out what supports people needed at work.

## The role of support workers

The role of support workers was raised and received mixed responses. An employee talked about the important role that his support workers played in assisting him when he travels for work, and to act as an audience during preparation for speaking roles.

One manager talked about his frustration seeing an employee's support worker 'sitting in the corner of the room doing nothing, because he's not meant to assist him at work or something'. This manager suggested the need to understand and explore the concept of co-working. Alternatively, another manager described support workers as 'a wealth of energy and assistance':

> " As we went along we realised we could have the support workers in the room to also assist people that we had employed to do those things, and to be more active in their employment positions as well. So that's worked really well and that's happened as time has gone on and we have worked together on these timesheets and how they can best assist in doing that stuff when they're not at work, when they're at home. "

There is a need to better understand what assistance support workers can give people in their work role when they come with them into the workplace. While this will look different for each person, it can be talked about at the start of a person's employment and included in ongoing conversations between the employee and their manager.

## The role of family

One VALID employee talked about their parents having a role in helping them to get the right support. When asked, 'How does your manager know what support you need, so if you needed some extra help with stuff, how would they know that?' the person replied, 'They find out from people's parents'. A manager also talked about the role of family and others in understanding the person's support needs, saying:

> " If I felt that there was some additional support that I would need or questions I need to ask, it depends on the situation but I'd talk to the person and say … is there someone else that knows you really well that I could talk to, you know. I don't know, other support worker, family member, who knows you. "

## The role of Disability Employment Services

People talked about their support from the DES as mainly initially helping with paperwork to get set up with Centrelink, and then checking in occasionally to see how they are going:

> **"** *He calls me over the phone telling me that management tells him how I'm going and all that. If I need to improve or not. But other than that, he doesn't really see me as much unless I need something.* **"**

One manager was frustrated by the lack of action from the Disability Employment Service and suggested that a checklist or visual of what support people could expect to receive in the workplace would be useful for employers.

## Being shown what to do

Many of the people interviewed talked about the value in being shown what to do when learning a new task, often by the boss:

> **"** *Yeah, just show me what to do and then after a while, I can do it all myself, and I don't need anyone, I can do it all myself, didn't I? So that's all right.* **"**

> **"** *If I'm doing it wrong he shows me how to do it. Because he makes sure I understand how to do things and how to do things and if there's stuff that I don't understand he makes sure I understand it and he comes in and he shows me what to do for something new, work it out together.* **"**

One manager also talked about this as an effective way for their employee to learn new skills:

> **"** *We have a way of, if we've got a new job for her we will show, have something that's already done like an example of it where it's done. We will show her how to do it and then we'll watch her do it, and then you know sort of watch and maybe tell her if she does something wrong to start with. But then she'll pick it up pretty quick and she'll be doing it.* **"**

## Learning over time

Several others talked about learning through doing the job, or observing how things were done over time:

> " *When I first came to start work at the desk I started, you could say I started just observing … how, what they were doing. Which is what gave me a bit of a rough idea of what they do in the office, what their job was and what information they had to talk about with the group which is what I've been just following them.* "

> " *Yeah. At first it was like I didn't know where everything was, and then after just keep stocking up different places for different things, so I know where everything is.* "

## Working it out together

People talked about figuring out how to do the work together, with one manager saying:

> " *I want to learn as many new things as you do and let's learn together.* "

Another was clear that the relationship between them and the person was an important part of this process:

> " *I have to suss out the connection with an individual and then figure out how to learn the task together.* "

An employee described a process that she regularly uses with a colleague:

> " *We've set up a reflection page where I type in what I'm doing for the whole month and then before we send it to the person we've got to send it to I send it off to the staff member I need to send it to, and then this person and I will sit down and retype it up but she won't do this without me. She'll make a time with me and say, 'Well … do you think we can have five minutes now?' And we will write it up. And then … but she's not doing the work for me, she's making me work. 'Cause this person knows my abilities and knows I can do it so she's pushing me to do it.* "

# Are visual tools useful to support people at work?

There were mixed feelings about the use of visual tools such as checklists and photos to help people to complete tasks. Several people with intellectual disability who were not currently using pictures thought that they may be helpful:

> **"** *(What would you like that to look like?) Just a picture, a small saying about what it's for and then a check box next to it.* **"**

Others were less interested in these types of tools: (Was the chart helpful?) 'No.'

One woman talked about her experience using photos to learn how to complete the task of filling bread baskets, and said that just being shown how to do the task was more effective than photos or lists:

> **"** *Because you're actually watching them do it. With photos it's just a bit like – you've got to kind of figure out the idea.* **"**

Another man talked about wishing his checklist was not used so publicly, as it made him feel singled out:

> **"** *… they've made a list, I got a list where I have to do some tasks. When I'm there the hour, when I only do the hour, there's a list I have to do. And they put it, actually, there where, you know it's on the post, yeah so pretty much everyone, it's his list or something, to do list or something they called it. So every other person sees it … [I'd prefer] to probably have it somewhere hidden.* **"**

Managers also had mixed opinions about using tools. One suggested that while they may be useful for set processes like 'making a lasagne', they are not helpful for jobs that are non-structured. Some tools that were described as useful included laminated lists of tasks, including information about timing, and the use of timers and social stories:

> **"** *So, for example … one checklist, which is do these things at certain times and he has another checklist which is when there are no customers, do these things.* **"**

One organisation used a one-page profile, which is a person-centred support tool, to gather information about people's likes, strengths and how they like to be supported. All staff in the organisation completed this profile. Another talked about a support agreement for overnight travel as a way to clarify expectations when staff travel together.

The mixed response from both people with intellectual disability who work and managers, indicated that people with intellectual disability and managers need to have a conversation about what tools may be useful to someone at work and if these tools are useful. It is important to take steps and make sure any use of these tools does not result in the person feeling less equal than others in the workplace.

## Understand what supports people need by asking them

The overwhelming response to the question of how employers found out what additional supports people needed was 'just ask'. This started from the beginning of the process of employing someone:

> **"** *In a formal way at our office, we ask people if they have a disability, if they require any other things from us, whether they want ... not whether they want it disclosed or not, but you know, on paperwork. So we do that in a more formal way.* **"**

> **"** *And that's part of the interview process, the roles and responsibilities, I say to people it's, I can provide you with supports so you can do the best job you can. You've got a responsibility to let me know what you need from me.* **"**

There was recognition that as people may not feel comfortable sharing some of their support needs when they start in a new workplace, they may feel more comfortable sharing as the relationship progresses and trust is developed. There's a need to let people know that they can speak up about what they need at any time. As one manager stated:

> **"** *People told us what they needed after they felt safe to do so, if that makes sense. I think that can be hard because sometimes people feel like they'll be treated differently or in an adverse way if they require additional supports. But we all need different things at different times if we want to do work well.* **"**

## Observe and ask again

Several managers also suggested that observing people in the workplace as they got to know them was a good way to understand if a person may need some extra support:

> **"** *We were really keen on observing, so seeing things. So we looked for signs of when people looked comfortable or uncomfortable and we checked in about it.* **"**

One manager at an advocacy organisation also talked about support from teammates to understand how to best support someone:

> **"** *Initially we would ask people what support they need, but a lot of it has been us or other colleagues working with a staff with an intellectual disability and observing and seeing what support they might benefit from. Now, that will come back to me as a, 'Hey, I think this person might benefit from this', so then how can we make sure that that person gets more training or gets to build their skills in some area.* **"**

Perceived issues in the workplace may also be an indication that someone has a need for increased support:

> *Sometimes you find out because frustration builds in the workplace, either from the employee themselves or from their colleague or from yourself. So, if you start feeling frustrated about something, it probably means that you need to sit down and talk about it, figure out a way.*

> *If you have an expectation that this person's going to do this bit of work, and it doesn't happen … it can be not happening for lots of reasons … and the least likely is that they don't want to do it. Like, that is the least likely one. So if you know the person, you can pick up that and save yourself a lot of angst and to sit down and say, 'What's going on?'*

## Recognising that everyone needs support

Throughout all conversations about how to support someone, it is necessary to recognise that being well supported in the workplace, is not just important for employees with intellectual disability but for all employees. All of us need different supports at different times:

> *So I think we acknowledged that everybody deserves and needs support to do their job well with or without a disability. We also acknowledged that we're all learning. So we don't have all the answers and so it's that notion of being a continuous learning organisation and saying yeah, really, people might say that we know everything but we actually don't. To do that requires a level of vulnerability because you're saying I actually don't know everything.*

## Workplace adjustment policies and processes

Most of the managers interviewed were not sure whether their organisation had a workplace adjustment policy and were taking steps to understand people's support needs and to provide flexibility and support:

> *We do have a workplace adjustment, one of our employees we recently engaged with Job Access for workplace adjustment … it would be based on what the individual needs are … and then we wouldn't hesitate to make adjustments.*

## Making adjustments in the workplace is a commitment

One manager talked about adjustments such as having the right desk and keyboard, and self-opening doors as being easy to implement. There was more concern about adjustments that required a change in behaviour from other staff members, such as making sure that papers for meetings were sent out in advance, for those that used a screen-reader. She went on to explain that this type of adjustment requires commitment and an effort to break existing habits:

> *We got a boss continually turned up to meetings with printed, 'Oh, I just printed these off. I forgot to send them round beforehand'. You can't do that. You don't realise how engrained your own habits and it's really had to get into new habits. So, it's not an unreasonable adjustment. It's not a thing like a piece of equipment. It's a thing that says I have to make this commitment to always doing things this way and you haven't always had that commitment.*

## Did managers seek advice from other people in their own workplace or outside of it?

Managers were asked whether they sought advice about how best to support an employee with an intellectual disability. While some asked for advice from others in their workplace or networks, there was also acknowledgement that additional support may be useful:

> *You might need a mediator or you might … go to an employer organisation like Jobs Australia or something and find out what is a standard.*

The option to talk things through as issues arise was raised by one manager as something that would be useful:

> *I think I would value, as an employer, opportunities to talk this through with someone who has experience and who might reflect it back at me and say, 'Well, what if you looked at it this way', or 'What if you introduced … ?', and helped me, because probably I can find some of my own solutions for this, but… I could see that there've been a number of times where I've hit problems and I would go, if I could just ring someone up and go, 'Okay. This is really frustrating me. What should I do?', and either have that person go, 'Oh yes. Well, that's a common problem. Here's a resource', or [have] them say, 'Well, that's an uncommon problem. Why don't we talk it through?', and then have me find my own solution or something.*

## Understanding the resources and support that are available

One manager raised the need to understand the full range of programs and entitlements available to people with intellectual disability, as well as to understand the way that NDIS funding may be used to support someone at work. Another manager also talked about the need to know what resources are available for support:

> *" It was just about having knowledge of the sector and knowing what was out there. Like I'd never heard of Voice at the Table before, so once I was exposed to that, yeah, we were away. "*

## Recommendations for workplaces

- Have and use a workplace adjustment policy for all staff.

- Ask people what supports they need.

- Keep the conversation going – give people the opportunity to tell you what they need as you develop trust, and they get to know their job better.

- Talk about the other people in their lives that can provide support, and how that will work best for them – this may include family members, support workers or employment services.

- Observe and check in when you think someone may need more support.

- Work together to solve problems and try new ways of working.

- Show people what to do and give clear instructions.

- Ask the person if they think pictures or other visual tools would be useful. Some people don't like to use them.

# Workplace culture – feeling welcomed at work, and understanding how the organisation runs

When VALID spoke to people with intellectual disabilities about their experiences of feeling welcome and included at work there was a range of responses that told their story; often about gestures that everybody enjoys at work. General conversation about work or non-work-related topics, greetings, and engaging through jokes or banter were some of the typical responses. Making connections and building relationships with colleagues in the workplace encourages a sense of belonging to something bigger than yourself and feeling like part of a team. This was often reflected in the interviewees' responses:

> *" You develop friendships and all that and great co-workers that work together and you can joke around with them and muck around with them and it's not just males to males it's females, males, mixture. You can mess with the chefs as well if you want to but the right chef takes it as a joke, the other ones no. "*

Being shown around the workplace, how to go about your day and the work that you do is an important thing that others in the workplace can do to help people feel welcome, comfortable, and confident:

> *" And they made, as soon as I came in the door [my co-worker] and a few other people made me feel that I was welcome into the Launch Pad place for that and showed me around where the party places were … which made me feel fairly welcomed with the company. "*

## How did managers describe the culture of their workplaces?

Understanding the importance of clear, effective communication, and fostering positive healthy relationships to 'productivity', managers are keen to promote connection and a sense of belonging and loyalty among their employees:

> *" I think it's dynamic. I think very friendly. I think that we all rally together, and we help each other when we need something done. "*

> *" I think it's very supportive. I think people are either in the job because they have a personal connection, or they're in the job because they're compassionate people who just want to make a difference. "*

One manager reflected on the importance of workplace culture in relation to productivity:

> *" You're willing to work harder I think if you feel like you belong in a certain workplace. "*

## Contribution of people with intellectual disability to culture of the organisation

According to some managers that VALID spoke to about employing people with intellectual disability, it is clear that doing so offers a wide range of valuable contributions to the quality and integrity of the organisation. This includes the introduction of a refreshing perspective to the workplace culture or ways of doing things at work. Below are several quotes from managers who clearly articulate some terrific examples of the valuable contributions that people with an intellectual disability can make to the culture and uniqueness of an organisation, particularly within the disability sector:

> *I think just having people with different views and different experiences is really important … people just make statements sometimes and you think 'wow'. I just wouldn't have thought of that or it makes you see things in different, in a different light. I think that's really, really important when you're talking about real life experience of people and how they feel, how they interact, all that kind of stuff. A lot of the times people come out with stuff that will kind of blow you away.*

> *If we had a problem and we're trying to work out the best way to approach it and sometimes, just for the feedback from our members with intellectual disabilities, [it] is just so spot on. They just get right to the issue and get all problem solving, as opposed to us all overthinking it and you know? And it's really lovely to have all of that, everyone contributing together and being heard.*

> *I mean you know for me I think it just brings greater understanding as to what it is we're actually doing. And why we do the things that we do, because like again watching people grow. Watching people how they flourish, is such an important part of building a strong culture like in any organisation, but primarily with people that have an intellectual disability that has traditionally not had much confidence as such. Seeing that confidence grow and like seeing, like I said people flourish. It's a really positive environment to be in.*

One manager talked about the impact on her own participation in a unique and diverse workplace in other parts of her life:

> *I think, personally, [it] makes everybody a better person. I think you just become more compassionate and you learn how to speak to people differently. I've just learned to slow down, and I'm dealing with more people from the community now and such a diverse range of people that I think that I've had to learn how to communicate better.*

Some managers talked about the atmosphere of the workplace being different when people with intellectual disability were part of the team:

> " *I have found that having people with an intellectual disability in part of your team makes people feel more relaxed and sometimes there's this added aspect of humour as well, which is great.* "

## Friendships and social events

Both employees and managers talked about natural friendships developing in the workplace:

> " *It's just like any workplace. You might have colleagues at work or you might find people at work that you develop friendships with and that happens here as well with everyone.* "

People were also asked about and talked about workplace events like staff Christmas parties, which raised some interesting examples. One man talked about being invited to the Christmas party but not to the unofficial drinks that happened afterwards. One manager said that simply inviting people to events is not enough. Another talked about specific feedback from autistic employees in their organisation about the lack of attention to inclusion at the staff party. They said:

> " *Look. We have anxiety over unstructured events such as Christmas parties. Can you give us structure? What's happening at the Christmas party? You've given us a time to arrive and a time to leave, and you've said there will be food, so what are we doing, what do we wear, what type of food, and I think we need to get better at that.* "

Providing opportunities for people with intellectual disability to provide feedback and input into the culture of the organisation is an important part of creating an inclusive workplace.

## Role model the culture of the organisation, but also talk about it

Workplace cultures vary across organisations and take time to figure out. Less formal aspects of the way the organisation may need to be role modelled by other staff. This includes any unwritten rules about things like taking turns to buy coffee or lunch:

> " *There have been times where people with intellectual disability in particular that you have to explicitly explain some things, but also explicitly explain that it's not compulsory. Of course, good culture modelled, like every culture, people learn what's in front of them. If stuff is modelled well, they do it well, and if it's not, they don't.* "

# Meetings are an important part of workplace culture

Teams often meet in a structured way, sharing discussion and ideas. This is a terrific way for people to feel included if opinions are heard and valued. Sharing and gathering information together can be a bonding experience as the team develops their combined knowledge about topics or situations. Time spent together promotes getting to know one another. Being and feeling listened to also contributes to a strengthening of relationships, and therefore feeling of inclusiveness.

People shared their experiences of using inclusive meeting tips from Voice at the Table, including the use of coloured cards to help people to speak up in meetings. The introduction of this traffic light system has had a range of benefits for everybody, including people with intellectual disabilities. The system is well described by a manager below:

> *That always takes people a minute to get their head around but if they're open to it, I actually enjoy those meetings more, I find. So we have this system around [the] traffic light system. Red, yellow, green, around 'I don't know what you're saying, stop the meeting'. It could be what does that word mean, like what sort of language is that. And an amber might be 'I'm not sure what that means, could you clarify?' … it sort of makes it more friendly and people have to look for other … or you can see someone at the table edging towards a card and so people, it seems to me, people just become more aware of one another. It's a really good way of building respect I think within a meeting setting.*

One employee spoke highly about their experience of participating in meetings using the traffic light system, and when guest speakers present material in an accessible way, often using plain English and pictures. It's useful to consider these remarks in the context of feeling heard and respected, building relationships and skill development that are available in the workplace:

> *They've made me feel fairly welcome in those meetings … that I get to meet the guest speakers and listen to what they have to say to us or, so I can understand what they're talking about … I feel like I'm important, yes …*

And another employee said:

> *[and I know] they listen [to me ] … 'cause they look at you.*

Whether it be planned or unplanned, skill development naturally occurs through participating in work and team dynamics. Attending meetings on a regular basis introduces the development and nurturing of a skill set at a fundamental level. Turning up on time instils punctuality, connecting online via Zoom technology teaches IT competency and communicating remotely. Generating ideas through discussion enables activity and the function of working. Being part of a team usually means being part of an organisation and part of a sector.

Emphasis on the importance of a positive and strong workplace culture is often demonstrated by human service provider organisations, which lends them to employing people with intellectual disabilities; however, the corporate and government sectors similarly seek to provide a health positive workplace culture.

## Recommendations for workplaces

- Day to day talks are really important to make sure people feel welcome and included – make an effort every day to talk to people.

- Recognise the contribution that people make to the culture of your workplace.

- Meetings are important to culture and feeling welcome – use inclusive meeting practices like those found in Voice at the Table's tips for inclusive meetings.

- Include people with disabilities in the planning of events.

- Make sure when you plan and invite people to events like Christmas parties, you give clear information about what will happen and ask for feedback after the event.

# Next steps – skill development, networking, training, and professional development

People with intellectual disability who work, and managers were asked about opportunities to develop new skills, participate in training, and plan a career.

People with intellectual disability were keen to learn and be challenged: '... so if I'm doing a job or something, I need something challenging'.

Those who were interviewed had clear ideas about skills that they wanted to develop in their current workplace, and in some cases long term goals about careers.

Things that people were interested in included learning how to use a cash register and learning about governance. One man described waiting to work on the service line at the restaurant he worked at yet needing to wait for management to say that he could. When asked if he had talked to them about it, he replied:

> " Not really. I should ask them, but yeah, just for now I'll just stick to what I'm doing now. "

One of the women who had been employed through a Disability Employment Service talked about support from them to work towards a long-term goal of working in an administration role. She talked about her current role as being temporary:

> " Well I did my Cert III in Business. I kind of did that and then couldn't really get anywhere. I just figured if I work somewhere else for now it's kind of like a steppingstone towards it. "

Another man talked about how he would like to work at Woolworths next:

> " Just diversity of other cultures and meeting new people. They're really nice and then even when I wasn't working there, customers were asking me where things were. It's good to help people that don't know where things are. "

One VALID employee hoped to work more hours at VALID and expressed an interest in finding out what sort of work the other teams do.

## Conferences, public speaking, and networking opportunities

One area that people had an opportunity to develop skills in was public speaking. One man talked about his experience at the annual VALID Having A Say conference:

> *That was my first ever conference I ever attended. And that was really fun and I will definitely look forward to it again next year … despite how nervous I was speaking in front of 100 people, I'm very proud of it because it went so smooth. I didn't make any mistakes.*

## On the job training and professional development

For managers who had employed people for project work in the disability sector, there was recognition that debriefing and reflection after workshops or interviews was a form of professional development. As one manager explained:

> *We debriefed after interviews and shared what we'd learnt and how we'd do things differently. I guess I would see that as a form of reflective practice in a way and so that's a process of professional development. Not everyone does that or makes the time to do that and I think that's really important because a lot of learning can be had in that space.*

Advocacy organisations were well-placed to offer opportunities to attend workshops and training sessions. One manager at an advocacy organisation talked about targeted interview meetings:

> *Targeted interview meetings with all of our project workers, up to where we just got more information about support and interests, and areas where they might like to improve their skills and so, from there, we were able to offer some group training, but we threw a couple of facilitator training sessions, like, 'How to facilitate' workshop. We ran one on advocacy.*

One man with intellectual disability identified VALID's networks as an opportunity to learn and develop:

> *I've learnt a bit more each year while I'm in VALID. I learn a bit more through each year.*

This view was shared by a manager at VALID who talked about the growth and change that occurred in people who were part of VALID peer action groups over a number of years. This manager also suggested that volunteers and people in these groups be included in training opportunities.

Another manager acknowledged that professional development was not something that was done well in the organisation. This manager highlighted the difficulty of supporting people with professional development due to the confines of short-term project work. Employment within any sector encourages skill development by simply attending the workplace and participating. Progressive skill development can be made difficult by short term employment contracts or funding dependent, time-limited projects. There is room for a systematic approach to supporting people with intellectual disability so that they can identify areas for development and be supported to do this within their role.

## Supporting people to move on to new roles or find other work

Given that most of the people VALID spoke to were employed in short term, part-time employment or project roles, there is arguably a role for managers in supporting people to move into employment once the role finishes, or to find additional work for the days they are not employed. Managers talked about keeping an eye out for opportunities for employment including project work and consultations:

There's the basic project work that everyone has an opportunity to be involved in, which might be co-facilitating a workshop around employment or quality and safeguards or just sharing information. But then there are other additional opportunities that can arise, depending on the person who's interested and wants to expand in that area, but just a couple of examples are, being on a steering committee for other projects.

Managers talked about helping people to update resumes with skills from their current role, providing references, and providing encouragement to people to look for work, and being mindful not to disempower people through this process:

> **"** So always I'd encourage people to be looking at other work, and I, and looking at, if they are applying for other jobs to give, some people assistance with updating resumes, always be a referee. **"**

> **"** You also need to be quite mindful that you don't create more I guess helplessness and neediness for the person, that they then rely on someone else always kind of leading, doing the next step for them. So you could give them some pointers but I guess ultimately it's up to the person then to do what it is that they want to do next. **"**

## Recommendations for workplaces

- Make a plan with the person to find out new skills they want to develop next and talk about jobs the person is interested in.

- Include people in training opportunities.

- Make sure opportunities include casual, part-time and project workers where possible.

- Pass on information about employment, training, and opportunities to meet people and learn new skills for work.

- Be a referee and give people support to know what skills that they have learnt in their job to put on their resume.

# What else did we find out that is important?

## Short term, part-time project roles mean that people miss out on some of the most important parts of a good workplace

One thing that cannot be underestimated is the impact of short-term, part-time project roles on people with intellectual disability's place in the workplace. This is a common issue in the disability sector, where projects are often funded for a limited period of time. This has an impact at every stage of obtaining employment, starting from recruitment:

> *It seems that there's never enough time. I think sometimes, particularly when there's projects, we're under pressure 'cause we're already behind because the grant's been given, you know we're already kind of running behind. Yeah I guess just trying to be as organised as possible or trying to recruit as soon as possible and you know so that it can get people in the job as soon as possible.*

Reliance on project funding also made it difficult for people to settle into roles:

> *People are shuffled around into teams, depending on whether there was money to employ them … it's been a very disruptive way of employing people who actually need probably more focus and structure and direction in their work.*

This manager also argued that people with intellectual disability coming into these roles are expected to deal with more complexity than other people in the organisation. Describing a specific project, this manager said:

> *We had such a short timeframe to do really big work. And then had to stack them at the end because the work wasn't continued. You know, to put them off or whatever.*

## Power imbalances inherent in employment type

One manager talked about the need to recognise and talk about the power imbalances that existed between members of their project team, where the employees with intellectual disability were employed on short term contracts:

> *I think there is an inherent power imbalance. We work full-time, we have our ongoing role, they are coming in part-time … there's still a power imbalance when someone just comes in infrequently, versus people who are working full-time.*

This type of employment also means that people frequently miss out on things like access to equipment, staff meetings, formal supervision processes and social events. Given the importance of these things to people with intellectual disability and to supporting people well in the workplace, we need to find a way to make sure people have access to these things, and to consider whether there are alternatives to this type of employment.

# Some last words of advice

## What people with intellectual disability who work want to say to other people with intellectual disability who want to work

Employees were very clear in their advice for other people with intellectual disability who wanted to work, telling them to 'go for it':

**"** *I would tell them to go for it. I mean look, if I can do it, anybody can, a lot of people could do it. They may need a bit more support to learn the job … I would really encourage anyone with a disability to go and do open employment.* **"**

Specific advice included telling people you are looking:

**"** *If you want to find a job just spread your word out there and someone will come to you and will ask you if you want to work.* **"**

Others advised to keep trying:

**"** *Give it your best. Get out there, give it your best and try it, try as much as you can. Worst case scenario the other person's going to say no then try again. Keep trying until you find a job. Eventually find the job you like and go for it and if you want to do other things like studying and that before you get the job, go for it. Don't let anything hold you back. If you want to go for it, go for it.* **"**

## What people with intellectual disability want to say to managers

Employees also asked managers to give people a chance to work:

**"** *Don't say no to them. Just let them have a try and I'm sure they'll do great, because even though we don't look perfect we are perfect. We will do a good job.* **"**

**"** *It would be great for you to support this because, look, people with [intellectual] disability are the same as everybody else. They may need a little bit more training but look they're willing to learn.* **"**

People also had advice on how best to support people with intellectual disability at work:

> **❝** *Just give them time, I guess. Work day-by-day. If they are slow learners they've got to be – I guess trying to get someone that's more experienced, like a casual kind of thing to be there day-by-day to help them out, step-by-step kind of thing.* **❞**

> **❝** *Help them if they really need it, sometimes if they don't ask, like still check on them.* **❞**

There were calls for managers to understand the reality for some people with a disability, and to remember that we are all people:

> **❝** *Some people with disabilities they suffer from distress and that because they can't get work and that, it helps slow down anxiety, picks them up and gets them out in the world and I can do this, I can do that. Instead of thinking in the head oh no we can't do that.* **❞**

> **❝** *People with autism or cerebral palsy, or they can't control their movements or something, like they're still in there inside, they just can't control what they're doing, treat them like any other person. They'd like to do everything else, like people can, but people just can't notice that in them. It's like when I deal with customers I always think, 'Treat them how you would want to be treated'.* **❞**
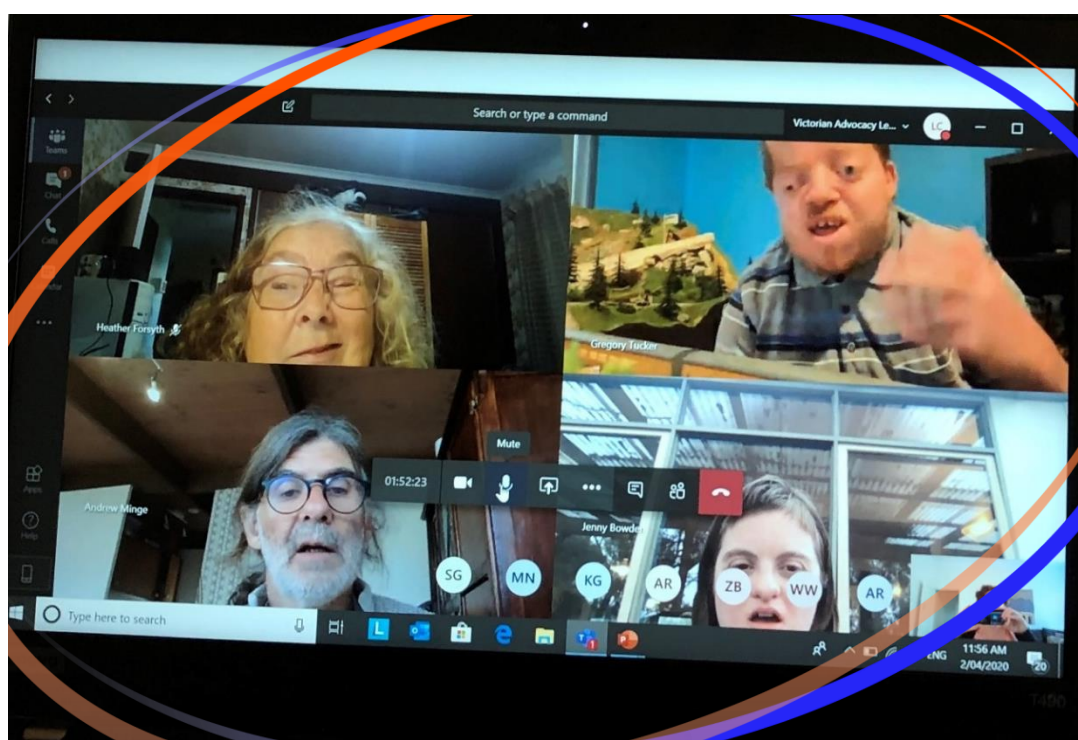
## What managers who employ people with intellectual disability want to say to other managers

Managers who had experience employing people with intellectual disability also recommended that other employers employed people with intellectual disability. Most managers with this experience also warned that employers need to be prepared to support people with intellectual disability. One manager said:

> " *You must do it. Your organisation will be better off. You will learn things you didn't realise you didn't know. You will be a better boss and the organisation will do better work if you employ people with intellectual disability. I would also say, don't rush into it with good intentions and nothing else.* "

Another talked about the need for the whole organisation to be ready so that they can welcome the person in a way that feels safe for them:

> " *I wrote 'do it' but make sure it's not tokenistic. I think that that's a really important thing. I think if organisations want to do that, they need to get organised. They need to do some internal training and thinking prior to employing people so the workplace is safe for them to enter. I don't mean 'safe' as in physically safe. I sort of mean more around cultural safety or something.* "

Being ready to welcome people into the workplace requires understanding and examining some of the pre-existing attitudes that we have about people with intellectual disability, and really thinking about how we include people with intellectual disability. Inviting people into the workplace is more than filling a single role:

> " *They really need to think deeply about what inclusion means … this isn't just about finding one job that's tailored to this one person.* "

> " *We're all influenced by community and ablest attitudes, all of that. As an employer, you might be the CEO and you might say, 'I just want to employ some people with [intellectual] disability', and they might buddy you up with someone who might not want to do that, or might not know how to do that. Or might have certain attitudes that are not conducive to a positive working relationship.* "

As another employer described:

> " *It's about does everyone say, 'Good morning' to the person? What's the culture like? Are people friendly? Are people inclusive about how they go about their day-to-day work and how might they influence that?* "

> **"** *Given the focus of people with intellectual disability on the importance of these factors, it is vital that we get these aspects right when employing people. Suggestions for supporting the workplace to prepare included developing a disability action plan and asking speakers with intellectual disability to speak in the workplace beforehand.* **"**

There was some advice to employers to reflect on their motivation for employing people with intellectual disability:

> **"** *I just would like it if organisations didn't think they were doing people a favour. It's that mindset of going, 'We're doing a good thing'. That's not how you employ people. That's not the reason why. So if you can shift that sort of mindset, I think that's pretty important.* **"**

> **"** *So not to just look at the processes but to look at the underlying assumptions that might sit beneath the surface. I think that's really detrimental for people, feeling like they belong or feeling like this is gainful and ongoing employment for me. They're not just doing me a favour. They see me as having value and offering things to the organisation, that without me, it actually would not be possible.* **"**

A number of managers talked about the importance of focusing on the strengths and skills that people bring to the role:

> **"** *It's on an individual basis. If the person can do the job and you connect with them and it's going to be a positive thing.* **"**

> **"** *Don't look at their disability. Look at what the person can bring and what the person offers. Speak to them, understand in terms of how they might be uniquely diverse from the rest of your workforce and how they can bring that in, you know what I mean. And that can be your strength. That can be something that is mutually beneficial to the service, to your organisation and to the person that's coming on board.* **"**

> **"** *As long as jobs are set up where the person can … show that they can work and make a contribution. I just think that changes attitudes to people as contributors.* **"**

We need to be careful not to replicate widespread attitudes of 'othering' towards people with intellectual disability in our own workplaces. This can only be done by looking honestly at our own attitudes and motivations and making sure that we are employing people for their strengths, skills, and contribution to the workplace.

Having the right processes in place was another topic mentioned by managers. Several managers talked about the potential to set people up to fail where adequate systems and supports are not in place:

> " *We also need to be prepared that if we are going to hire that person, we have to support them. You can't hire them to have diversity and then set them up for failure by not supporting them when they're in the organisation, so it's all well and good to say, 'Look, we've hired this person who has an ID', or, 'This person is autistic', but you need to actually make sure that you've got the skills and the processes in place to keep them employed.* "

Employers talked about the opportunity to look at existing systems within an organisation and make changes to make them simpler for people with intellectual disability, and for all employees:

> " *From my point of view it's brought [the organisation] to examine some of our processes and systems and … now we can simplify some of those things because they're maybe unnecessarily too complex and all that isn't needed.* "

One manager also recommended making sure these systems were developed with attention to the rights of people with intellectual disability:

> " *I think you need to develop systems based on acknowledgement of the right to self-determination and empowerment for people with [intellectual] disability otherwise people are more likely to have a negative experience. Both the employer and the employee.* "

We need to consider more than just a person's individual role and see them as a true member of the organisation that is included in all aspects of working life and able to access processes easily. As one manager said:

> " *I found that there were no, there was some structure there, in that they were good at giving her a list of things to do and they were good at a couple of other things … but the rest of the processes of the organisation were not properly accessible.* "

Access to and inclusion in all relevant workplace processes is both an opportunity for skill development and a reasonable expectation for any employee to have. Concentrating solely on a person's immediate role does not allow for this to occur.

## Recommendations for workplaces

- Give people with intellectual disability the opportunity to be employed.

- Know that people with intellectual disability need understanding and support, like everyone does.

- Make sure your workplace is prepared before you employ a person with intellectual disability, by:

    - understanding that you need to look at more than just the person's role; you need to look at the whole workplace.

    - understanding why you want to employ someone with an intellectual disability and any attitudes towards people with intellectual disability that you or other people in your workplace may have.

    - making sure everyone is prepared to be welcoming.

    - having clear, accessible systems and processes in place to support people.

# What will we do with this information?

The people with intellectual disability who work, and managers we interviewed have provided useful, specific information about how we can better support people with intellectual disability in the workplace. The information gathered through these interviews is particularly relevant to advocacy and other organisations in the disability sector and will also be useful to other small businesses. It will be used to develop resources for VALID and other organisations.