

Breaking Barriers: Inclusive Recruitment Insights from People with Disability.

October 2025



Acknowledgements.

We acknowledge that Australia contains hundreds of nations, spanning 65,000+ years, and we live and work on land unceded by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Their wisdom, storytelling, and deep listening is a history we pay respect to in the way we conduct business.

We acknowledge the knowledge, insights, and lived experience of people with disability. Their contributions through participation, partnership, and leadership inform our work and challenge us to design research and generate insights that reflect the complexity of real life. We are committed to listening carefully, acting respectfully, and centring lived experience in ways that are purposeful and pragmatic.

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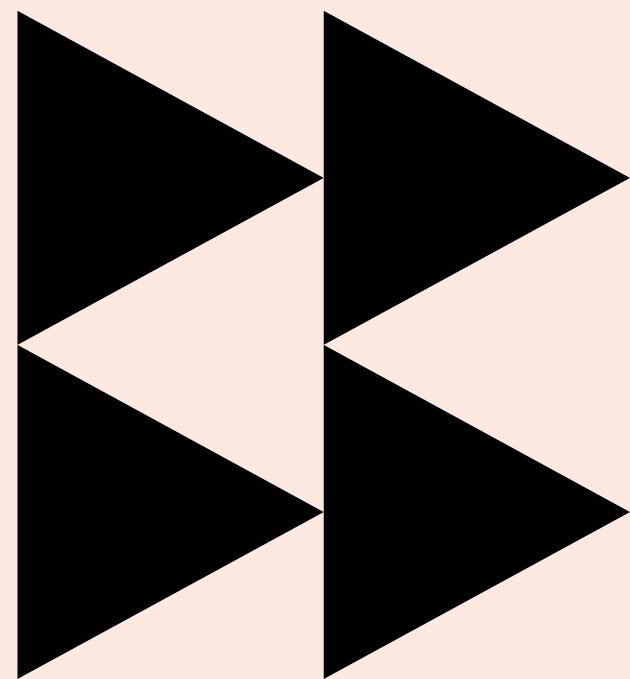
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1. Executive Summary.

“If you can’t design a job ad that blind people can read, how can you design a workplace where we can work?”

This project, commissioned by and delivered in partnership with Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, set out to understand how people with disability, including those who are blind or have low vision, experience online recruitment processes. Delivered by Knowable Me, a disability-led research social enterprise, the study combined a national survey, in-depth interviews, expert consultations, and structured reviews of recruitment websites and job ads by people with disability and users of assistive technology.

Key Insights.

Across interviews, surveys, and desk research, clear patterns emerged about how digital recruitment processes impact people with disability in Australia. While participants represented a wide range of disabilities and employment experiences, their perspectives converged around several shared challenges and opportunities for change.

1. Online recruitment systems remain a major accessibility barrier.

Job seekers described online application portals as complex, inconsistent, and often inaccessible. Common barriers included, no screen-reader support, image-based CAPTCHAs, inaccessible PDFs, drag-and-drop upload fields, and timed assessments incompatible with assistive technologies. These issues create unnecessary friction and, in many cases, prevent qualified applicants from completing submissions. The lack of progress indicators or meaningful feedback compounds this frustration, leaving many to describe the process as “a black hole.”

2. Disclosure of disability is shaped by fear, fatigue, and trust.

Most participants avoid disclosing disability in early application stages due to fear of discrimination or automatic disqualification—especially within automated systems. Disclosure is often delayed until an interview or after hiring, unless an organisation signals clear safety through inclusive language, visible policies, or designated contact points. Trust is built through consistency. When diversity statements align with practice and when candidates can see or hear from other employees with disability.

3. AI and automation amplify existing bias.

Participants expressed deep concern that AI tools replicate or worsen bias by screening out candidates with disability indicators, resume gaps, or unconventional career paths. While some acknowledged potential for AI to reduce bias if designed inclusively, most felt current systems lack transparency, human review, and critical thinking. Automated video interviews and keyword screening were described as particularly exclusionary for neurodivergent and blind candidates.

4. Inaccessible language and unnecessary criteria exclude candidates.

Job advertisements commonly include exclusionary phrases such as “must have driver’s licence,” “excellent communication skills,” or “able to work independently.” These requirements, often unrelated to core job duties, discourage or disqualify many capable applicants. Participants also highlighted performative diversity statements that signal inclusion but fail to reflect real organisational practice.

5. Meaningful work is about purpose and belonging.

Work is valued not only for income but for structure, social connection, and self-worth. Participants repeatedly linked employment to wellbeing and community contribution. However, they described workplaces that fail to adapt to fluctuating health or access needs, pushing many into casual or part-time arrangements that offer flexibility at the cost of security.

6. Affirmative measures are welcomed, but must be credible.

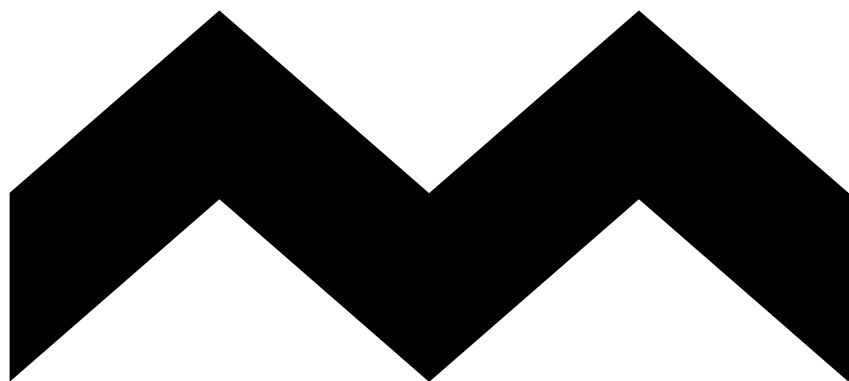
Designated or affirmative action roles for people with disability were broadly supported, provided they are genuine, fairly paid, and embedded within inclusive organisational culture rather than tokenistic “tick-box” exercises. Participants stressed that lived experience is an asset and should be valued and remunerated like any other skill.

7. The employment ecosystem needs systemic reform.

Disability Employment Services and government recruitment systems were widely criticised as inaccessible, confusing, and disconnected from real-world experience. Participants called for proactive barrier removal, not reactive adjustments. They want standardised accessible forms, options beyond written statements and applications, and consistent accessibility standards across all job boards and agencies.

In summary.

Digital recruitment has not yet caught up with inclusion. For people with disability, the promise of technology is undermined by poor design, opaque systems, and a lack of trust. The most powerful enablers identified were clarity, consistency, and human connection—when candidates can see evidence of genuine inclusion and when technology is designed with them, not for them.



2. Project Background & Objectives.

Guide Dogs NSW/ACT is leading a systems-level campaign to improve employment outcomes for people who are blind or have low vision. The campaign aims to challenge outdated recruitment practices and shift public, employer, and policy attitudes toward more inclusive hiring across Australia.

In August 2025, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT engaged Knowable Me — a disability-led social enterprise specialising in inclusive research — to investigate how people with disability, including those who are blind or have low vision, experience online recruitment processes.

The project examined the accessibility, usability, and fairness of digital recruitment systems and explored how automation, platform design, and employer practices influence candidate experiences. Research activities included a national survey, in-depth interviews, expert consultations, and structured website and content testing by people with disability and users of assistive technology.

The key objectives of this project were to:

- Map the digital and procedural barriers people with disability face during online recruitment, including accessibility issues and systemic exclusion points.
- Explore employer awareness, confidence, and uptake of inclusive recruitment frameworks and policies, such as GSE Rule 26 in NSW.
- Understand candidate experiences and disclosure decisions, and how attitudes toward disability and inclusion shape their outcomes.
- Identify opportunities to build awareness, improve practice, and inform advocacy to drive systemic change in recruitment equity.
- Generate insights that can be translated into campaign materials, community resources, and policy recommendations.

By grounding this work in lived experience, the project aimed to deliver evidence-based insights that challenge assumptions, highlight invisible barriers, and shape a more inclusive recruitment landscape for people with disability.

3. Research Methodology.

The research combined quantitative and qualitative methods to capture both the breadth and depth of experiences people with disability have when applying for jobs online. The approach was grounded in lived experience and prioritised accessibility, authenticity, and practical insight over compliance-based evaluation.

3.1 Research Components.

1. **National Survey (n=300)**

A quantitative survey explored how people with disability, including those who are blind or have low vision, navigate online recruitment systems. It examined accessibility barriers, decision-making about disclosure, and confidence and trust in digital hiring processes.

2. **In-Depth Interviews (12–18 participants)**

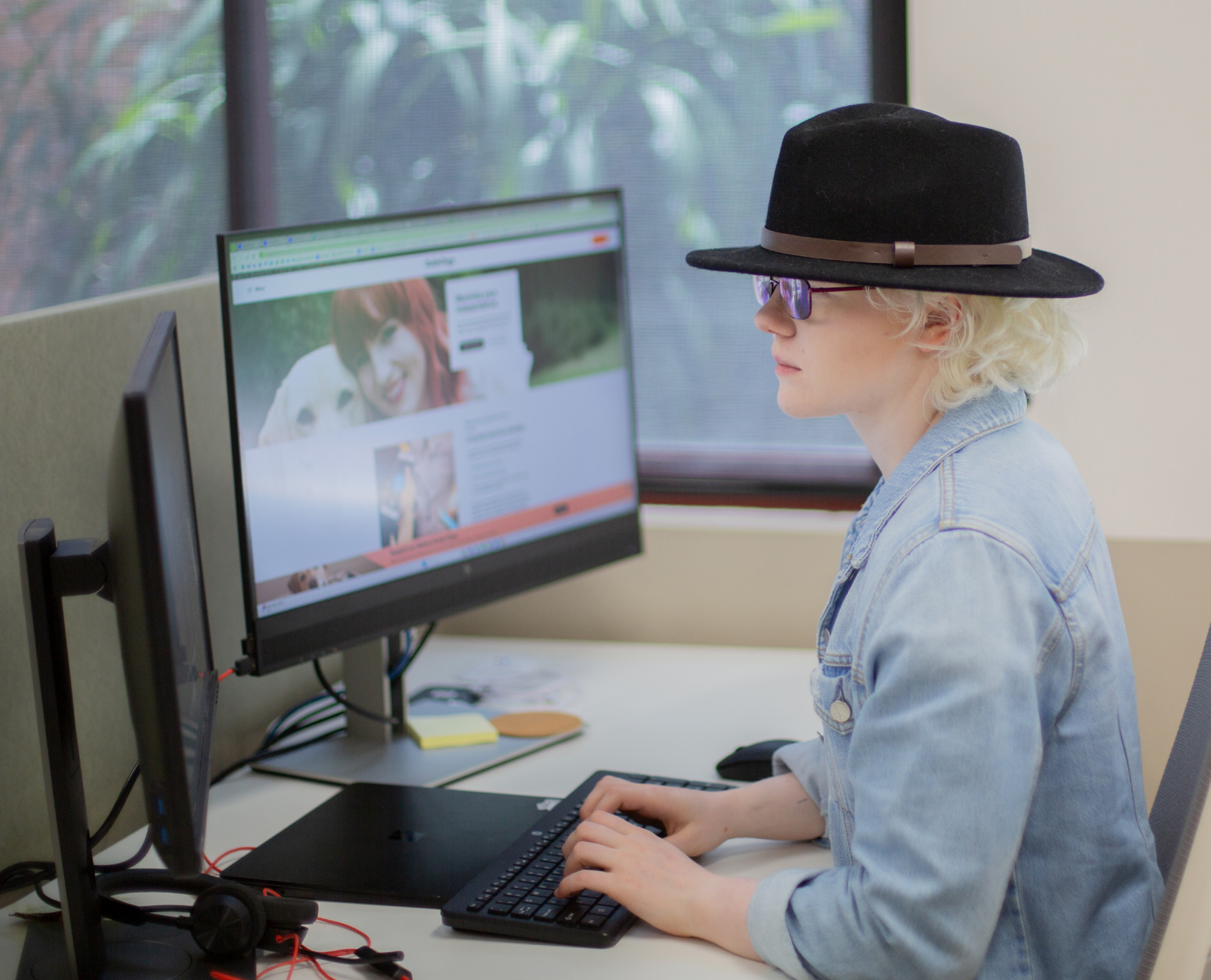
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both job seekers and recruitment professionals across sectors. These discussions explored attitudes, motivations, and perceived risks around inclusive recruitment, as well as opportunities to strengthen equity and transparency in hiring.

3. **Expert Consultation**

Interviews and discussions with accessibility specialists and employment experts provided context on system design, policy frameworks, and the practical challenges of implementing inclusive recruitment practices.

4. **Website and Content Analysis**

Structured analysis of selected recruitment websites and job advertisements was completed by people with disability and users of assistive technology. This process simulated real-world job searches and application journeys to identify pain points, accessibility failures, and behavioural drop-off moments.



3.2 Analysis and Synthesis.

Findings from each component were integrated to identify key narrative tensions, patterns of exclusion, and opportunities for systemic improvement. The analysis combined behavioural mapping, language analysis, and attitudinal data to form a comprehensive picture of how recruitment processes can either enable or exclude candidates with disability.

3.3 Ethics and Inclusion.

As a disability-led social enterprise, Knowable Me applies inclusive research principles across all projects. Participation was voluntary, and all data collection adhered to ADIA (Australian Data and Insights Association) ethical standards. Survey and interview materials were designed in accessible formats, and participants were compensated fairly for their time and expertise.

4. Meaningful Work.

Work gives people with disability purpose, connection, and identity — but long-standing attitudes and systemic barriers still make them the hard choice when all they're asking for is a fair go.

The human value of work.

Work is about more than a paycheck. For many people with disability, having a job means purpose, connection, and a sense of normalcy. Participants in our research described how working gives them structure and social inclusion — one noted that employment provided “purpose and connection to the world,” whereas being out of work left them feeling “aimless and isolated”. Several highlighted the pride and self-worth derived from contributing their skills and the opportunity to meet new people and continue learning on the job. In the right role, work can even be healing: it offers a chance to move past previous setbacks and build confidence anew.

Shared struggles, amplified barriers.

Context matters: getting a job is hard for everyone right now. Candidates without disability are already navigating credential creep, opaque selection criteria, automated filters, unpaid task stages, “perfect-fit” expectations, and rigid return-to-office mandates. For people with disability, each of those headwinds is amplified: resume gaps are read as risk, requests for flexibility are misread as unreliability, adjustment needs are seen as complexity, and inaccessible platforms block progress altogether. In that environment, disabled candidates can be perceived as the “hard choice”—not because they bring less value, but because employers anticipate more effort, more paperwork, and more uncertainty. That perception—rather than capability—too often decides outcomes.

In a tight job market, getting a foot in the door should come down to merit and effort — a fair go, not a head start. Yet many people with disability are competing on uneven ground, where perception and process weigh heavier than potential.

The effort–opportunity gap.

Yet a profound tension exists between these aspirations and the limited opportunities many encounter. Participants spoke of extremely high application effort for very little return, and unemployment rates for people with disability remain far above the general population (a statistic that underscores their experiences). As one person bluntly put it, finding and keeping a job as a blind person is “very difficult” due to inaccessible hiring practices and employers being “scared off” by the accommodations they might need. Highly qualified candidates often find themselves overlooked. Some have applied for dozens upon dozens of positions without success, or feel they must settle for roles well below their capability just to get a foot in the door. Others feel funnelled into disability-specific jobs or industries, not by lack of ambition but by a practical recognition that mainstream employers may not give them a fair chance.

This gap between what people want from work – a meaningful career, fair pay, growth – and what they’re often offered (if anything at all) leads to frustration. A number of participants expressed that they just want “normal jobs” in inclusive environments, rather than roles created only for people with disability that sometimes come with lower pay or status.

The drive to contribute.

Despite the barriers, their drive for purposeful work remains strong. Many are actively seeking opportunities to contribute and be valued like anyone else, and they believe that with the right adjustments and open-minded employers, they can thrive. The challenge is making sure the recruitment system opens the door for them, rather than keeping it shut.

5. Disability Disclosure and Adjustments.

Deciding whether to disclose a disability isn't about honesty — it's about safety. Until employers earn trust, disclosure will remain a calculated risk.

The calculus of disclosure.

Deciding if and when to disclose a disability in the job application process is a deeply personal, often fraught decision. Many candidates described it as a strategic dilemma with high emotional stakes. A prevalent approach is caution: most prefer not to disclose disability status in initial applications, fearing it will trigger bias or immediate disqualification. They want to be judged on their skills first, without the shadow of stereotypes.

“For written and online applications, do not disclose. They can't see you — all they're going to see is your disability.” — Interview participant

The default is often to withhold disability information until later in the hiring process (if at all), or only disclose on a need-to-know basis when an accommodation is required.

Fear and fatigue.

The reluctance is rooted in lived experience. Participants overwhelmingly feared discrimination if they revealed their disability — a fear reinforced by past incidents of ignorance and bias. One person explained they never tick the disability box or mention their condition because they believe it would “negatively impact my chances”, opting to wait until an interview to discuss it.

There is also disclosure fatigue: the process of explaining one's disability and needs over and over (on application forms, to recruiters, to hiring managers) can be exhausting. It's not just filling out a form; it's bracing for how each new person might react. The emotional labour of disclosure — worrying whether you'll be seen as “too hard” or a “risky” hire — takes a toll.

Many candidates strategise ways to signal their needs without formally “coming out” as disabled, such as requesting a specific adjustment (“I will need an interpreter for the interview”) rather than stating a medical label. This distinction between identity disclosure and adjustment disclosure emerged frequently.

When disclosure becomes an advantage.

Not everyone keeps their disability hidden. A few participants saw benefits in openness under the right conditions.

- **Affirmative action roles:** Some public-sector candidates disclosed upfront when applying for roles under schemes that guarantee an interview, seeing disclosure as an enabler, not a liability.
- **Cultural litmus test:** Others used early disclosure to test employer culture — reasoning that if bias existed, it was better to know early.
- **Authenticity:** A number of neurodivergent participants said disclosure was simply part of being honest: colleagues would notice differences anyway, so it was better to “get it out of the way early.”

Walking the tightrope.

Even those who disclose tend to do it selectively and repeatedly — perhaps mentioning it to HR after an offer to arrange adjustments, but not to the hiring manager before a decision is made. The process can feel like a tightrope walk: hide too much and you risk not getting the support you need; reveal too soon and you risk losing the opportunity.

The burden often falls on candidates to manage other people’s reactions. One participant shared that after finally disclosing a learning disability to their manager, they were quietly dropped from the roster soon after. Experiences like this reinforce why so many keep their guard up.

Until workplaces demonstrate consistent safety and fairness, disclosure will remain a calculated risk — one that many handle with extreme care.

6. Signals That It's 'Safe to Apply'.

People with disability read between the lines — trust is built before a single application is sent.

What builds confidence to apply.

Before a person with disability even starts an application, they're scanning for clues:

Does this organisation actually want me here? Jobseekers told us that visible trust signals like inclusion statements, website accessibility, images of diverse teams, or mentions of adjustments, can make or break their decision to apply.

“If a job ad says they welcome people with disability, that's the first green light I look for.” — Interview participant

When done well, these messages set a tone of safety and respect. A simple sentence like “We welcome applications from people with disability and will make adjustments as needed” reassures candidates that difference won't be seen as difficulty. Specific examples are even stronger: referencing policies about interviewing candidates with disability or outlining adjustments that can be provided demonstrates that inclusion is more than sentiment.

When silence or inconsistency breaks trust.

The absence of any signal can speak louder than words. Many respondents said that if disability isn't mentioned anywhere, they assume it hasn't been considered. “If it's not there, it's probably not for me.”

Equally damaging is inconsistency — an employer that claims to be inclusive but uses inaccessible forms or never responds to adjustment requests. Candidates notice the disconnect between marketing and lived practice. Once trust is broken, it's hard to rebuild: jobseekers often skip future listings from that organisation entirely.

Authenticity over optics.

Participants were quick to distinguish between performative and authentic inclusion. A single line buried at the end of an ad — “We are an equal opportunity employer” — no longer carries weight. “Everyone says that. It doesn’t mean they’ll actually call you.”

Real trust comes from transparency and follow-through. Candidates look for tangible signs: staff stories that mention adjustments, evidence of flexible working, or disability-specific initiatives. They also cross-check reputation through peer networks and social media. Employers with genuine track records of inclusion quickly become “safe” names in the community — those without, just as quickly, fall off the list.

The role of technology and accessibility.

Trust is not just emotional; it’s technical. Several participants said that an accessible website or application portal was their first indicator of whether an employer understood inclusion. A system that times out, isn’t usable with a screen-reader, or hides contact options tells candidates all they need to know.



7. The Use of AI in Recruitment.

People want fair chances, not black boxes. Automation without transparency erodes trust before anyone's even hired.

The invisible gatekeeper.

For many jobseekers, it's no longer clear whether their application ever reaches a human. Participants spoke of sending dozens of applications through automated systems and never receiving a response — not even a rejection. Several described the experience as “shouting into the void,” unsure if they'd been screened out by software or simply ignored. “You can tell it's a computer deciding. You never get a call, not even a rejection — just silence.”

People with disability felt this acutely. Algorithms designed to filter for “best fit” can inadvertently punish anyone whose résumé doesn't follow a conventional path. Gaps for medical leave, career breaks, or periods of rehabilitation are easily read as risk. Systems built to reward consistency and continuous employment quietly disadvantage the very people who've had to navigate instability.

Participants shared their suspicion that they were being rejected long before a person saw their application. One interviewee who uses a wheelchair said they had “no chance of being selected” when applying online, while another called AI “a disaster for people with autism” because it fails to understand the nuance behind non-linear careers or unconventional communication styles.

The promise and the risk.

Despite the frustration, many participants saw potential in automation — if it’s designed and deployed ethically. Some recruiters and disability advocates said AI could *reduce* bias by standardising assessments, flagging inaccessible language, or prompting reviewers to consider diverse applicants. But right now, that’s largely theoretical.

Much of what’s being described as AI in recruitment isn’t intelligent at all. It’s rule-based automation — programmed filters that sort candidates by keywords, location, or work history. These systems act more like blunt instruments than nuanced decision-makers. They can’t interpret context, transferable skills, or explainable gaps; they simply exclude anything that doesn’t fit the pattern they were told to follow. The irony is that genuine AI, if developed responsibly, could one day handle these subtleties far better than humans. But the tools most jobseekers encounter today are far from that reality.

When designed without input from people with disability, automated systems often reinforce bias rather than remove it. Tools that screen résumés by keywords can prioritise conformity over capability. Algorithms trained on past hiring data replicate past exclusion. And facial-analysis or voice-analysis tools used in some video interview platforms raise deep concerns for candidates with visible disabilities or speech differences.

“I prefer a human to read my application — someone who can understand context. A computer can’t tell if I took time off because of illness or because I wasn’t motivated.”

Bias by design.

Bias doesn’t always come from bad intent; it’s built into the data. AI learns from patterns — and if the pattern of the past is exclusion, the system will faithfully reproduce it. The problem isn’t just the technology itself; it’s who designs it, who trains it, and who’s missing from the conversation.

Participants said that automated systems often “feel cold” and unforgiving, leaving them powerless to challenge decisions or ask for feedback. Recruiters we interviewed admitted they rarely understand exactly how the algorithms score candidates, and that vendor explanations are usually limited to marketing language like “smart matching.” When both sides lack visibility, accountability disappears.

Keeping the human in the loop.

The solution isn't rejecting technology outright — it's designing it differently. People with disability aren't anti-AI; they're anti-unchecked automation. They want systems that augment human judgment, not replace it.

Participants suggested simple improvements: flagging when automation is being used, allowing applicants to request human review, and giving recruiters tools to override algorithmic rankings. Transparency and oversight build confidence on both sides. As one participant put it:

“If I know a person is going to read it, I'll put my whole self in that application. If I think it's just a bot, I keep it short because I know it won't matter.”

When designed with inclusion in mind, AI could become an ally — surfacing qualified candidates who might otherwise be overlooked, and helping recruiters spot their own blind spots. But without transparency, it risks hardcoding bias and turning opportunity into a lottery no one understands.

Fairness, in the end, requires a person who's willing to see another person — not just a score.



8. Transparency of Recruitment Platforms.

If people can't see how the system works, they assume it's working against them.

What we examined.

This stage of the research reviewed five of Australia's most widely used job platforms — SEEK, Indeed, LinkedIn, EthicalJobs, and Pro Bono Australia — to understand how each communicates the use of automation and artificial intelligence (AI) to jobseekers and recruiters.

The review assessed public information available through platform websites, employer resources, and terms of use, alongside experiences shared by interview and survey participants.

While all five platforms reference automation or AI in some way, the level of explanation, visibility, and legal context provided to users varies.

What jobseekers see.

From a jobseeker's perspective, the use of automation is largely invisible.

- SEEK mentions AI within a Responsible AI Statement and through features such as “Strong Applicant” badges and personalised job recommendations. However, the specific logic behind these features is not explained to candidates, and applicants are not notified if automated ranking influences the outcome.
- Indeed uses automation in matching, job ranking, and screener-question filters. Its documentation notes that AI “does not determine who sees or applies” but does not detail how these automated processes affect visibility or selection.

- LinkedIn uses machine learning to personalise job feeds and identify “Top Applicants” or “Likely to Hear Back.” Its AI transparency pages outline fairness principles but not the detailed mechanics behind rankings.
- EthicalJobs and Pro Bono Australia rely on human review rather than algorithmic ranking. Neither platform promotes the use of AI or automation beyond standard posting and email functions.

For jobseekers, the difference between genuine AI and basic automation is unclear. Many assume advanced technology is making decisions about their applications when, in reality, much of what is labelled “AI” operates as rule-based filtering or keyword matching which is a blunt instrument rather than an intelligent assessor.

What recruiters understand.

Recruiter-facing transparency varies across the same platforms.

- SEEK and Indeed provide resources explaining how automated tools can support hiring, and both reference Australian legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Fair Work Act 2009 in their employer materials.
- LinkedIn outlines its Responsible AI and Diversity by Design frameworks and specifies that protected characteristics such as disability are not used in AI training data. Its global guidance is extensive, though not specific to Australian law.
- EthicalJobs and Pro Bono Australia operate as manual systems. Recruiters receive all applications directly without algorithmic filtering.

Recruiters using larger commercial platforms often expressed uncertainty about how ranking or matching tools operate in practice. In some cases, vendors provide descriptions focused on efficiency and optimisation rather than the underlying logic or safeguards against bias. This limited understanding makes it difficult for hiring managers to explain outcomes to applicants or verify fairness in automated shortlisting.

Guidance on law and inclusion.

Only a few platforms make direct links between automation and legal responsibility. Where guidance exists — as in SEEK and Indeed’s employer resources — it typically directs recruiters to government information about equal opportunity and workplace law. Other platforms emphasise values-based or ethical commitments but provide little operational or jurisdiction-specific guidance.

This variation matters because automation and AI do not remove an employer’s legal obligations. Under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, responsibility for fair and non-discriminatory hiring remains with the employer, even when using third-party technology.

The information gap.

Across all platforms, a consistent visibility gap remains for both candidates and recruiters.

- Jobseekers are not clearly told when or how automation is used to process applications.
- Recruiters often cannot see or audit how their own shortlisting tools rank or filter candidates.
- Platforms rarely distinguish between automation and AI, leading to misconceptions about sophistication and accountability.

For people with disability, this lack of transparency amplifies uncertainty. Without knowing whether screening is human or automated, applicants cannot tell if they were overlooked because of bias, accessibility issues, or system logic.

What transparency could look like.

The research identified several opportunities for improvement that would benefit all users:

- **Plain-language disclosure** — clearly indicate when automated ranking or screening is used, and explain its purpose.
- **Candidate feedback** — allow applicants to understand how their responses or résumé matched the role.
- **Human review options** — provide the ability to request manual consideration.
- **Legal signposting** — link recruiters directly to relevant Australian legislation and adjustment guidance.
- **Accessible communication** — ensure that any AI or automation statements are written and formatted to meet accessibility standards.



9. Legal and Regulatory Impacts.

Australia’s discrimination laws look strong on paper — but in practice, they protect almost no one.

Rules that rarely reach reality.

Australia’s legal framework for equal opportunity is comprehensive — in theory. The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA)*, *Fair Work Act 2009*, and various state-based measures such as *GSE Rule 26 (NSW)* and the *RecruitAbility* scheme in the Australian Public Service all aim to promote inclusion and fairness in hiring.

But for most people with disability, these laws sit in the background like unused scaffolding: visible, sturdy-looking, and largely disconnected from day-to-day experience. In the modern job market, where recruitment happens through online platforms and algorithmic screening, these protections feel dated, hard to access, and almost impossible to enforce.

Burden without benefit.

Participants described a consistent pattern: the burden of proof always falls on the person with disability. If they suspect bias, they have to decide whether to chase justice or keep chasing work. Most choose the latter.

“You can try to fight it, but it takes months and you still don’t have a job at the end of it.”

Many said that pursuing a formal complaint would take more energy and resources than they could afford. Others feared being labelled as “difficult” within small professional networks. Even when discrimination is blatant, the process of proving it is daunting.

Very few people in this study had ever taken formal action under the DDA. Those who had raised concerns informally said the response was overwhelmingly silence.

Affirmative action, minimal impact.

Affirmative measures such as *GSE Rule 26* in NSW and *RecruitAbility* were created with the right intent. On paper, they promise access, fairness, and a level playing field. For many participants, these initiatives initially represented hope: evidence that government and major employers were finally acting on inclusion rather than just talking about it.

That optimism has faded. In practice, most said these schemes only highlight how far those doors remain closed. Several described applying for targeted roles and never hearing back. Others felt the process was no different to mainstream recruitment; except that the promise of inclusion made the silence and rejection hurt even more.

Some participants saw these programs as performative and a way for organisations to appear compliant or progressive without changing how decisions are actually made. Others found them isolating: set apart by a label rather than integrated into genuine opportunity.

No one in this study reported a positive or transformative experience with these schemes. The disappointment was sharper because the expectation was higher. What was meant to signal progress instead left many feeling more excluded and let down by systems that were supposed to work for them, not just look good on paper.

Responsibility blurred by technology.

Digital hiring has only complicated accountability. Automation and AI are now standard in recruitment, yet the laws governing discrimination were written long before these tools existed.

If a candidate is filtered out by a keyword algorithm or inaccessible form, whose responsibility is it? The technology vendor, the employer, or the recruiter?

Legally, the answer is the employer. Participants, recruiters, and even some HR specialists expressed confusion about how anti-discrimination law applies to outsourced or automated processes. Platforms rarely mention it. The result is a growing accountability gap: bias can occur in an algorithmic split second, but no one is clearly responsible for fixing it.



A framework few can use.

At the time of writing this report, the DDA is under review. The current protections rely on people asserting their rights, not on proactive enforcement. That approach assumes individuals have equal power, resources, and resilience to challenge discrimination — an assumption that doesn't hold in practice.

Most jobseekers simply don't have the energy to fight for a law that offers little immediate return. For many, the decision isn't about justice, it's about wanting and needing to be employed. The law may prohibit discrimination, but it does little to prevent it.

When protection isn't participation.

What this research makes clear is that Australia's legal system is not failing because it lacks rules; it's failing because those rules aren't usable. They rely on a person being discriminated against, identifying it, and then having the capacity to pursue it — all while trying to get or keep work.

In this context, protection is almost meaningless. People with disability don't want to be defended after the fact; they want to be welcomed in the first place.

10. Communication and Clarity.

Clear communication makes recruitment fairer for everyone — and accessible for those who need it most.

Clarity is the difference between inclusion and exclusion.

Every job application is, at its heart, an exchange of information. What's written, and what isn't, shapes whether people feel invited in or quietly screened out. Participants in this study spoke as much about confusion as they did about discrimination: unclear instructions, missing details, contradictory information, and job ads that left them guessing.

For people with disability, unclear communication compounds existing barriers. An inaccessible application process isn't just frustrating, it's a locked door. A missing phone number for adjustment requests signals that those requests aren't really expected. When the process is ambiguous, people with disability are left to do the extra work of interpretation, which is exactly what inclusive design is supposed to remove.

Clarity in job ads.

Participants repeatedly emphasised the power of plain language and completeness. They want to know what the job involves, how to apply, and what to expect: written simply and honestly.

- Ambiguous criteria such as “excellent communication skills” or “must be resilient” were seen as coded language that can mask bias or discourage applicants who don't fit a narrow stereotype.
- Vague or overly formal descriptions leave candidates unsure how their skills align.

- Missing details like location, flexibility, or salary range make it harder to judge whether the role is viable before applying.
- “Driver’s License Required” on jobs that don’t seem to include any driving in the list of job responsibilities.

When job ads are written clearly and accessibly, they don’t just help people with disability — they help everyone.

Silence after submission.

Across both interviews and the survey, one of the strongest frustrations was silence. Candidates described applications disappearing into a “black hole,” with no confirmation, no feedback, and no closure. That silence takes a psychological toll, eroding confidence and trust.

For people with disability, this absence of response can carry extra weight. Without feedback, it’s impossible to know whether they were unsuccessful for legitimate reasons or excluded by inaccessible systems or bias. Even a brief, automated note to confirm receipt or outcome was viewed as a mark of respect.

Plain language, not plain effort.

Recruitment today moves fast. Managers and recruiters often handle hundreds of applications for a single role, with limited time to assess them. In that environment, clarity isn’t an accessibility feature, it’s an efficiency tool. When information is clear, both sides spend less time guessing what the other means.

For candidates, plain language removes barriers. For recruiters, it reduces confusion and follow-up. Everyone benefits when expectations are clear from the start. Plain language also doesn’t mean simplifying the job. Describing the organisation and the work in a way that anyone can understand that is organised, direct, and free of unnecessary jargon benefits everyone.

Feedback as inclusion.

Feedback in the context of applying for jobs should be described as a form of inclusion. It acknowledges effort and maintains dignity. A brief explanation of outcome, or even general advice on future applications can transform rejection into respect. When feedback is absent, people disengage from that organisation entirely.

Accessibility in communication design.

Many communication barriers are technical rather than attitudinal. Several participants noted common accessibility issues in job portals and correspondence:

- Application forms that time out before completion.
- Poor and busy information layouts
- PDFs that are not screen-reader compatible.
- Email templates or portals without contact names or direct reply-to options.
- Adjustment requests ignored because they went to unmonitored inboxes.

Accessible communication is not an add-on; it's a core part of fair recruitment. Clear, predictable processes reduce anxiety, save time, and signal that the employer understands inclusion as part of competence, not charity.

When communication builds trust.

Good communication doesn't require expensive technology or new systems. It requires consistency.

- If inclusion is mentioned in a job ad, reinforce it in every step of the process.
- If candidates are invited to request adjustments, respond promptly and personally.
- If an application process changes, explain how and why.

Transparency, tone, and timing matter as much as accessibility. When communication is clear, people feel seen — and when it isn't, they assume they're not wanted.

11. Inclusive Language in Job Ads.

Language in job ads does more than describe a role — it decides who feels invited to apply.

Inclusive language in job ads can broaden access to employment and demonstrate a genuine commitment to diversity. A simple review of tone, language, and unnecessary requirements can make a major difference in inviting disabled talent into the workforce.

Job ads on Australia’s top job sites increasingly use inclusive language, but there are gaps in authenticity and accessibility. Around 20–30% of job ads include general diversity terms (e.g. “inclusive workplace,” “equal opportunity”), but explicit mentions of disability (e.g. “disability,” “neurodivergence,” “reasonable adjustments”) are rare—typically under 5%. Tone analysis revealed that inclusive language is often present but may feel insincere without consistent language or practical detail. We also found incongruent phrases such as driver’s license requirements and inflexible work arrangements in jobs that have no indication why as to why, and that may exclude disabled applicants.

Frequency of Inclusive Language.

Across 1,500 job ads from Seek, Indeed, and LinkedIn, general inclusion language appeared in 25–35% of ads, while disability-specific terms appeared in 3–7%. Disability-related terms such as “reasonable adjustments “ were extremely rare outside of disability-focused roles or progressive organisations.

Platform Comparison.

Platform	General Inclusion	Disability-Specific
Seek	25%	5%
Indeed	28%	4%
LinkedIn	35%	6%

Industry Comparison.

Sector	Inclusion Terms	Disability Terms
Government / Public	Approx. 60%	Approx. 20% (often encourage people with disability to apply.)
Finance & Banking	Approx. 30%	Approx. 5%
Tech / IT	Approx. 25%	Approx. 5%
Healthcare	Approx. 20%	Approx. 10% (including mental health roles)
Retail / Hospitality	Approx. 15%	Approx. 3%

Authenticity of Inclusive Language.

Ads were scored on a 1–10 scale based on tone, sentiment, and consistency between diversity statements and overall job content. Key criteria included:

- Specific, integrated messaging
- Positive, human-centered tone
- Avoidance of contradictions between inclusion and job requirements.

Many ads fell in a middle ground: they included some inclusive phrasing (boosting sentiment), but the phrasing was generic, or the rest of the ad didn't strongly reinforce it.

Average authenticity score: 6/10

To illustrate, here are sample ads with authenticity scores and analysis of their language:

Ad A – Software Engineer.

- Score: 4/10, “performative”
- The ad ended with “<company> is an equal opportunity employer.” However, the bulk of the posting used intense language like “we seek coding ninjas who thrive under pressure” and listed exhaustive requirements like open availability on weekends, and a tolerance for a “fast-paced, relentless environment”.
- The inclusion statement felt like an afterthought for compliance.
- The tone was inconsistent with true inclusivity. For instance, no mention of flexible hours or support despite a very demanding description. This disjoint earned a low authenticity score.
- The sentiment of the EEO line was positive-neutral, but context made it seem hollow.

Ad B – Administrative Officer at Government Dept.

- Score: 8/10, “genuine”
- This public sector job ad opened with a diversity commitment statement at the top, noting “We welcome applications from people of all backgrounds, including people with disabilities, and can provide reasonable adjustments in the recruitment process.”
- The overall tone was supportive and inclusive, highlighting work-life balance and team collaboration.
- The inclusion message was specific (explicitly mentioning disability and adjustments) and placed prominently, which research suggests makes it more credible to candidates.
- Because the ad’s content (e.g. “flexible work arrangements available”) backed up the promise of inclusion, it scored high on authenticity.

Ad C – Nonprofit Program Coordinator.

- Score: 9/10, “very genuine”
- A youth services nonprofit’s ad wove inclusivity into its narrative. It mentioned “inclusive workplace culture” in describing the organisation and noted “building a team as diverse as the community we serve”.
- In the role duties, it highlighted “creating an environment where all participants and staff feel they belong”.
- The tone was welcoming and community-oriented throughout.
- There was no perfunctory legal blurb; instead, the language felt personalised and mission-driven.
- This sincerity, plus clear alignment between the inclusion values and job context, made it highly authentic.

Ableist Language and Structural Barriers.

Beyond quantifying inclusive phrases, we scanned the job ads for wording that might unintentionally discourage or bar candidates with disabilities, even when not truly required by the job, or, we were unable to determine how they were related to the role.

Examples of potentially problematic phrases:

- **“Must have driver’s license”**: Appeared in approximately 10% of ads, without listed driving duties
- **“Excellent communication skills”** – Appeared in 20–30% of ads (especially for professional roles). This seems innocuous, but when used as a blanket requirement without justification, it can deter people with disability and becomes a proxy for bias. Allowing those with atypical speech patterns or social interaction styles, who could still perform the job well, to be screened out.
- **“Must be able to work independently”** often paired with “and in a team” – This appeared in about 15% of ads in our sample. It’s a common boilerplate requirement that is overemphasised. It can signal that no support will be provided. While independence is valued, stating it as an absolute requirement may signal no tolerance for different working styles or support needs.
- **Physical demands (e.g. “lift 15kg”)** – A number of ads (especially generic templates for office jobs or internships) listed criteria like “must be able to lift 15kg”, “able to stand for long periods”, or “frequently required to sit, walk, or reach with hands and arms”. These appeared in an estimated 5% of ads, notably in some IT and administrative roles where such abilities are not core to the job.
- **“Thrives in a fast-paced/high-pressure environment”** – About 8% of ads used phrases like “fast-paced”, “high intensity”, “work under pressure”, or “resilience to stress” in the job description. While meant to set expectations, this language can signal an unforgiving and inflexible environment. These phrases are problematic when used as puff to make a job seem more exciting and may deter perfectly qualified candidates from applying.

These phrases were often included out of habit rather than necessity and can screen out qualified disabled candidates.

12. Insights from People Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision.

“I know most jobs, even the ones I’m skilled, experienced, and qualified for, won’t consider me. So I only apply where I think I might actually have a chance.”

For people who are blind or have low vision, job seeking often begins with an obstacle. Many participants described the first barrier not as bias, but as basic inaccessibility: job boards and online forms that can’t be read by screen readers, timed application portals that can’t be navigated without sight, and video interviews that assume everyone can see the screen.

“Often the web forms you need to fill out are inaccessible. There’s huge amounts of writing to get through, and then the tests or video interviews don’t even work with screen readers.”

Even finding jobs can require assistance. Some participants said they could not search or apply independently and relied on family, friends, or employment support workers to complete forms. This dependence adds friction, delays, and loss of privacy to an already unequal process.

“If I don’t have anyone around to help with technical accessibility issues, I can’t apply for the job.”

Online isn’t automatically accessible.

Digital recruitment has removed paper barriers but replaced them with digital ones. While many blind applicants appreciate being able to apply online and avoiding handwritten or printed forms, they said accessibility is inconsistent.

“Being able to apply online is great because I can’t fill out paper forms. But the systems can still be biased and inaccessible for screen reader users.”

Participants described frustration when organisations claiming to be disability

inclusive used inaccessible job platforms or required tests that failed with adaptive technology.

“You get frustrated and wonder why you bother applying in the first place, especially when it’s a disability service provider that says they’re inclusive.”

Another recurring barrier was the assumption of a driver’s license. Many job descriptions included “must have a driver’s licence” or “access to a car,” even for roles that didn’t seem to require travel. For people with vision impairment, this instantly narrowed the field of potential jobs.

“There are so many jobs I can’t apply for just because of the licence requirement, even when driving isn’t part of the job.”

Disclosure, honesty, and strategy.

Disclosure is a particularly complex decision for blind or low vision candidates. Some said their disability was obvious from their résumé or references; others said they tried to withhold it until necessary, aware that early disclosure often leads to rejection.

“I want them to judge me on me first, but sometimes they ask and I feel like I can’t lie.”

“I’d disclose if I need adjustments for an interview, but generally not before — there’s too much risk of discrimination.”

Many adopt a strategic approach — disclosing only when it might serve as an asset or when it’s impossible to hide.

“If I think it helps me get the job, I disclose. If I think they’ll make a fuss when I show up, I’d rather they know early — so if they back out, that’s on them.”

Others felt that honesty should be part of starting a working relationship but were disheartened that this openness was rarely met with fairness.

“It’s very difficult to disclose personal information to someone you’ve never met, but I want to start the relationship on the right foot.”

Skill, loyalty, and misperception.

Participants were clear about what they bring to the workplace: adaptability, creative problem-solving, and commitment. They said these strengths often go unnoticed because employers focus on adjustments rather than ability.

“As a blind person, I bring a fantastic ability to solve problems to any workplace I’m part of.”

Technology is both the challenge and the opportunity for blind and low vision jobseekers. Many depend on screen readers, magnifiers, or refreshable braille displays to navigate online forms, yet feel that few recruitment platforms meet minimum accessibility standards.

“Websites need to comply with accessibility guidelines. Not a single thing should be going wrong. The backend needs to be accessible too. Blind people can be on interview panels and recruit staff.”

Support that doesn’t always support.

Employment services, including disability-specific agencies, were described as inconsistent at best and counterproductive at worst. Participants said some providers pressured them to apply for unsuitable roles or training programs to meet internal performance targets.

“The disability job agencies are useless. They just want you to take another course because they get paid for it.”

Recruiters were seen as another point of failure:

“Even when the employer knew me, the recruiter didn’t pass on my name, so I didn’t even make the long list.”

The emotional cost of exclusion.

Behind every inaccessible form or rejection sits an emotional toll. Many participants said the repeated experience of being overlooked had changed how they approach work altogether.

“I know most jobs I’m qualified for will never consider me, so I just apply for the ones where I might actually have a chance.”

Others spoke of being turned away at the door — literally — when guide dogs or mobility aids were perceived as “too difficult.”

“I was told my Seeing Eye Dog would take up too much space in the office. I’d already disclosed my disability — they just changed their mind when they saw it.”

One participant summed it up simply:

“If you can’t design a job ad that blind people can read, how can you design a workplace where we can work?”





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