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Disability
Employment
AUSTRALIA

THE DEA
PAPERS
001

On the Importance of Architecture

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About the DEA Papers

The DEA Papers are a growing series of policy and thought-leadership papers exploring disability employment through the lens of systems, architecture, and economic participation. Each paper examines a specific issue, while contributing to a broader body of work that seeks to understand how Australia's disability employment ecosystem works and how it can be improved.

The papers are designed to build on one another. As the series grows, each paper adds to a developing understanding of the forces shaping disability employment and the reforms required to improve outcomes for people with disability.



Disability Employment Australia acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respect to them, their cultures, and to their elders both past and present.



Disability Employment Australia is committed to fostering a culture of inclusivity, respect, and empowerment. Our aim is to celebrate differences and to create equal opportunities for all, irrespective of ability, background, or identity.

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The Proposition

Australia's disability employment gap is still too large. Around 26 percentage points separate the employment rates of people with and without disability – very similar to most comparable developed economies. This striking consistency suggests the gap is neither uniquely Australian nor explicable by any single Australian program or policy setting. It reflects something deeper in prevailing assumptions about disability and the way modern economies organise work.

The central proposition of this paper is that Australia has spent too much time working one (or more) layer down from the real problem.

We renovate programs, adjust eligibility rules, rewrite contracts, and refine performance settings, but too rarely ask what we are trying to achieve for people with disability, what it would actually take to get there, and how the current arrangements are experienced by the people whose lives they are meant to support. The result is a policy conversation that keeps refitting the machinery without asking whether the architecture can produce the outcomes we say we want.

By architecture, we mean the deliberate arrangement of responsibility, funding, incentives, information, and interfaces across the systems that shape employment. This paper makes two claims:

- First, disability employment services are often judged against outcomes produced by a much wider ecosystem.
- Second, that ecosystem can turn the consequences of exclusion into apparent evidence of incapability.

If Australia wants to become a world leader in disability employment, or simply to get a better return on the money it already spends, it needs architecture built around success from the early years onwards. People with disability should be expected and enabled to learn, work, earn, progress, and contribute, rather than be managed towards poverty, exclusion, and lifelong reliance on income support.

The Problem with Disability Employment Research and Thinking

Many researchers and institutions have made important contributions to the field of disability employment. Much of that work, however, makes the same critical mistake. It is too narrow.

Often they put forward theses like 'employment services are failing people with disability' and 'if we just do X and deliver Y (coincidentally my pet solution), that'll materially change things for people with disability'.

The common mistake is to observe poor disability employment outcomes and attribute them to whichever part of the system is under examination. The Grattan Institute's *Opening doors: Better jobs and fairer wages for disabled workers*, for example, opens from the premise that Australia's disability employment system is not delivering for those who need it most.¹

There is much to commend in that paper, and DEA agrees with many of its recommendations. But how would we assess the impact of cardiologists working in a country where 80 per cent of people smoke, obesity is widespread, physical activity is low, and preventative healthcare is inaccessible? Poor cardiovascular outcomes would not prove cardiologists inept. They could be working competently, even expertly, against powerful factors outside their control. But results would look bad, even if they are saving more lives than could reasonably be expected.

Much research and commentary on disability employment makes the same error.

1. Start with the troubling (and factually true) observation: employment rates for people with disability remain too low.
2. (Optional) Throw in the troubling (and factually untrue) view that this is stagnant and hasn't changed in decades.²
3. Identify a particular system or subsystem and ask why it is not producing better outcomes.
4. Make recommendations that may well be warranted and sensible but fail to address underlying causes.
5. (Sometimes) Recommendations are adopted, don't change things meaningfully, and then the cycle starts again.

Grattan concludes the disability employment system is not delivering. Some conclude employers are not doing their part (DEA has not been immune from this). Others point to welfare settings, disability supports, or workplace adjustments. What is rarely considered is whether these systems are being asked to overcome social and economic barriers whose effects dwarf their capacity to influence outcomes.

The disability employment system, currently vested as Inclusive Employment Australia, is one of the few parts of the wider ecosystem with explicit accountability for employment outcomes. That makes it an obvious target when employment rates for people with disability remain too low. But employment services do not control employer behaviour, shape education, build accessible transport or housing, eliminate poverty, or eradicate ableism. They work within constraints created elsewhere.

Disability employment outcomes are often treated as a proxy for the performance of the whole ecosystem. When that happens, researchers, media, and government can attribute systemic failure to the part of the system that is most visible, publicly funded, measured, and accountable.³

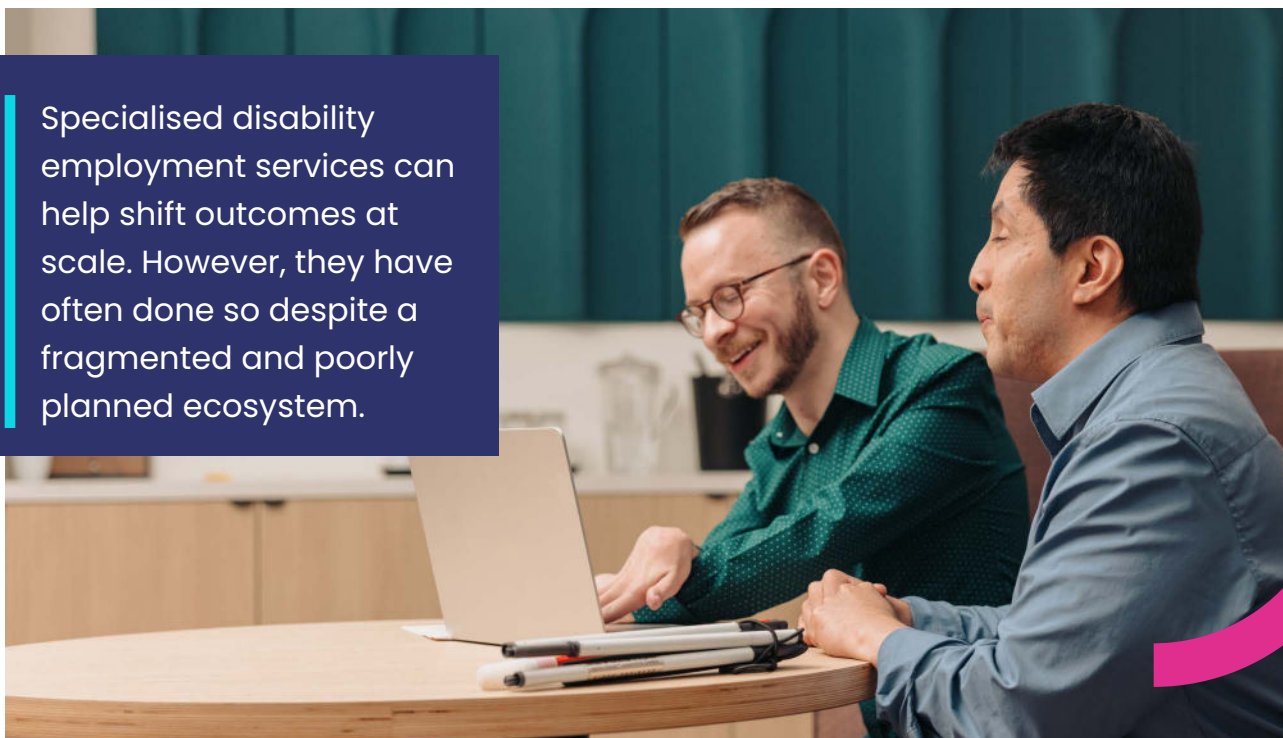
Ableism is nebulous. Discrimination is often hidden. Employers are not held collectively accountable for the disability employment gap, and nor are schools, transport systems, workplaces, health systems, or governments. Employment services become the convenient location for failure because they are the part of the ecosystem with an employment target attached and regular public reporting.

This does not mean employment services should escape scrutiny, and it doesn't mean that they can't be improved. Grattan is right to identify fragmentation between IEA and the NDIS, weak pathways into open employment for those with severe and complex disability, and the need for stronger demand-side action. The mistake is to use the persistence of that gap as proof that the service system itself is failing. That approach risks blaming the one part of the ecosystem explicitly trying (and frequently succeeding) to overcome exclusion for the accumulated effects of the exclusion itself.

Nor is this a counsel for hopelessness or fatalism. The situation has materially improved. The most recent Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers shows that between 2018 and 2022, labour force participation for working-age people with disability rose from 53.4 per cent to 60.5 per cent, while the number of employed people with disability increased from 984,200 to 1.496 million.⁴ This is substantial progress.

The Disability Employment Service (DES) was part of that story, with over 285,000 26-week outcomes over its seven-year duration.⁵ That is a significant contribution. Specialised disability employment services can help shift outcomes at scale. However, they have often done so despite a fragmented and poorly planned ecosystem.

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We want to see that recent improvement continue and accelerate. For that to happen, we need to create a whole ecosystem that works better for people with disability. This is the purpose of the **DEA Papers**.

This will be a numbered series of papers examining how Australia's disability employment ecosystem works, why outcomes emerge as they do, and what would need to change if Australia is serious about building something better.

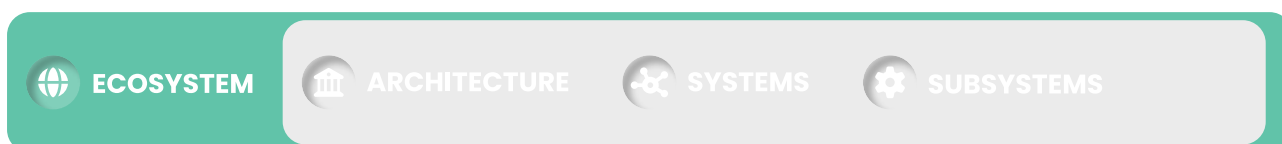
DEA's 2026–2029 strategy states that our purpose is *“to shape a disability employment ecosystem which drives increased economic participation for people with disability.”* The Papers will explore what that means in practice across architecture, incentives, pathways, markets, and institutional settings.

Each paper will stand on its own, but the series is intended to build cumulatively. The first paper will begin with the architecture of the system, then turn to blended transitions between the NDIS and Inclusive Employment Australia, NDIS employment settings, the role of employers and enterprise, and the future of supported employment.

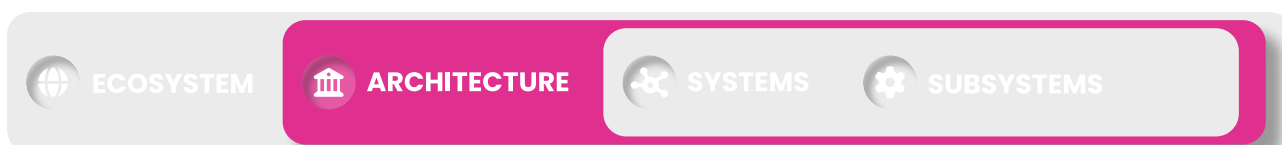
Later papers will extend that work as required.

Understanding the layers of disability employment

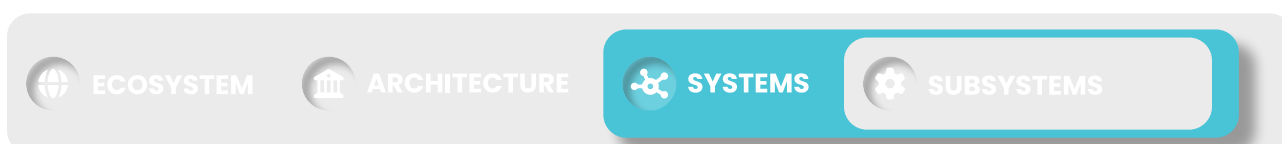
If serious reform must begin with the architecture, we need to be clear about what architecture means. Disability employment can be understood through four interconnected layers:



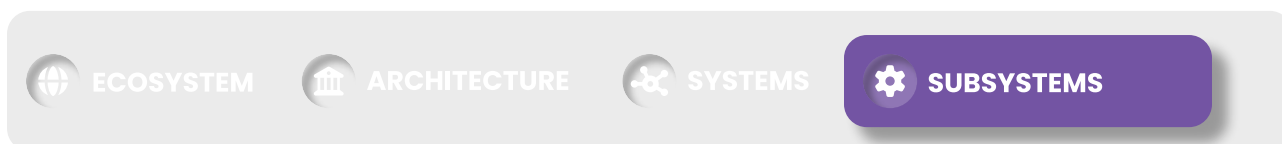
The **ecosystem** is the broadest layer. It is the full environment that shapes a person's experience of work. This is the level at which real lives are lived and where the consequences of disconnected systems are felt.



Architecture is the organising design of that ecosystem. It is how systems are created, connected, funded, governed, measured, and refined over time. Architecture is where intent becomes visible and where the absence of intent becomes costly.

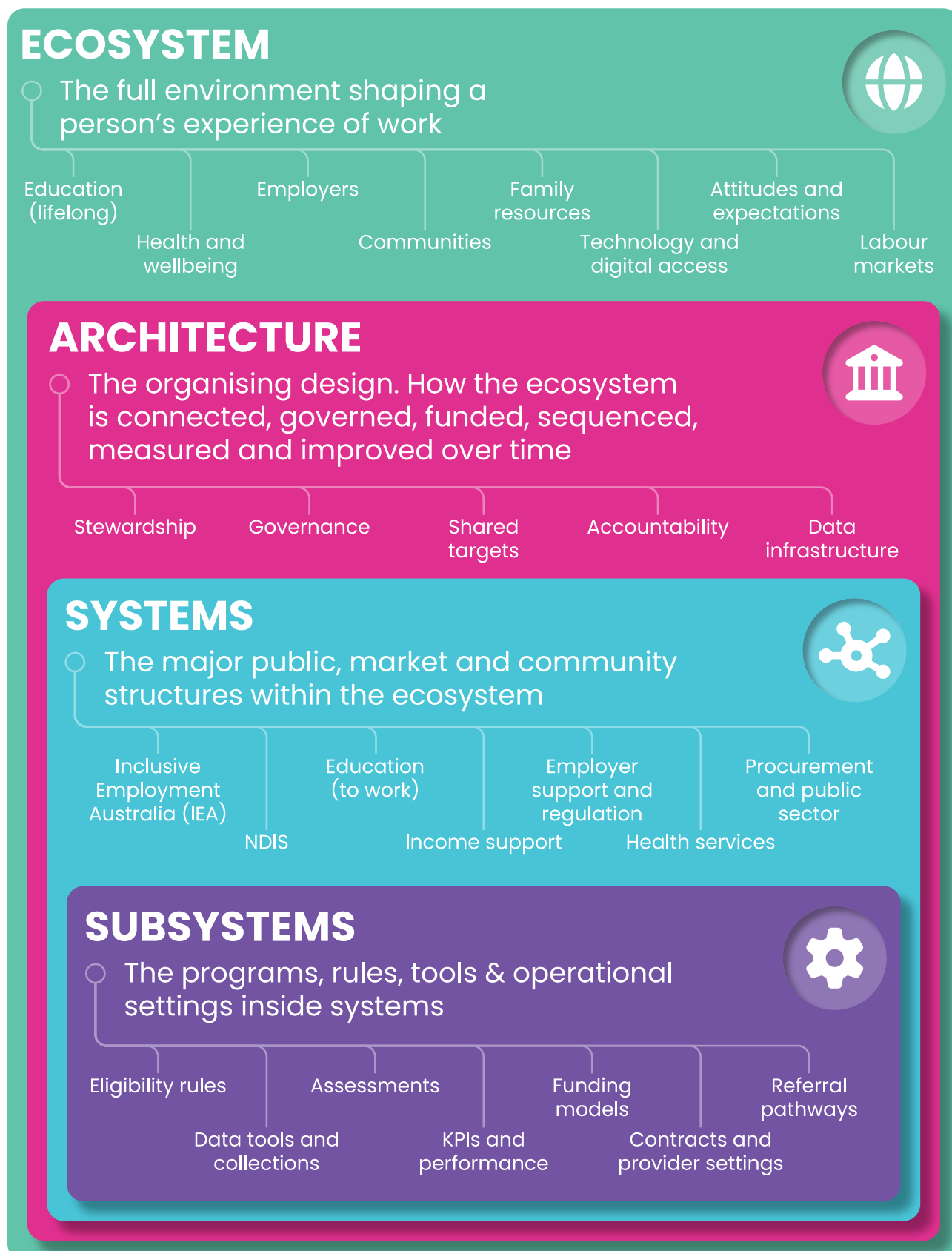


Systems are the major public, market, and community structures operating within the ecosystem, including IEA and the NDIS. They each have their own purpose, funding, language, accountabilities, and machinery.



Subsystems are the operational settings within those systems.

The graphic below depicts how disability employment operates across four interconnected layers. Each layer influences the others, but they perform different functions within the overall environment.



Most policy activity occurs at the system and subsystem levels because that is where government can most easily see activity, allocate funding, run procurements, write contracts, adjust rules, and count outputs. That work is necessary and can be valuable. But a technically efficient subsystem can still disappoint if the systems around it are pulling in different directions, or if no one has responsibility for the joins.

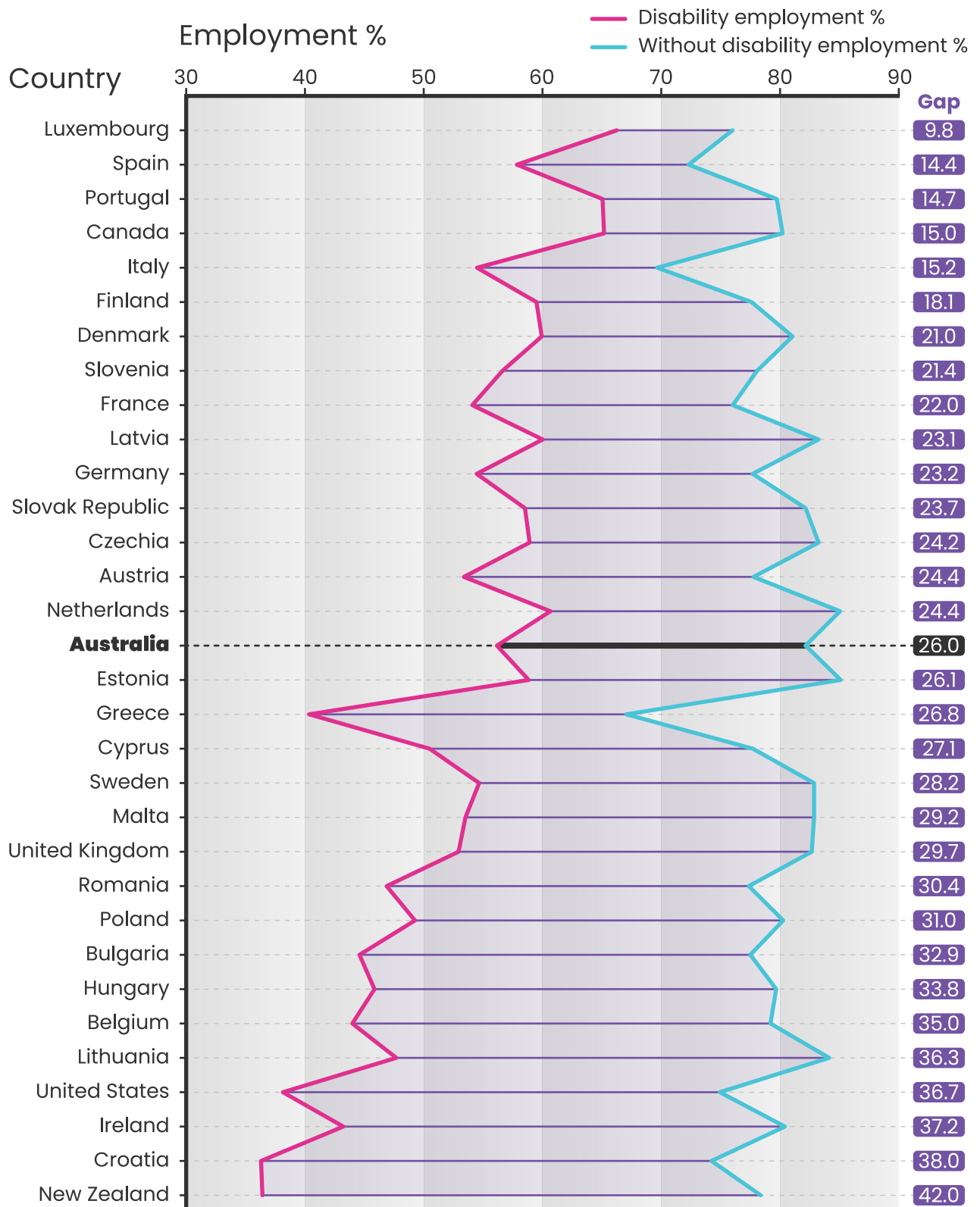
The DEA Papers therefore focus primarily on the ecosystem and its architecture. We will examine how Australia's disability employment ecosystem is organised, how its major systems interact, and where current design frustrates the participation it is meant to support.

System reform still belongs in the discussion. So do subsystem questions about programs, contracts, eligibility settings, funding models, procurement arrangements, and performance measures. DEA will continue to deal with those matters through its policy and advocacy work. The purpose of the DEA Papers is different. It asks how the wider ecosystem is arranged, what architecture currently governs it, and what a better Australian architecture for disability employment would require.

This framing draws together several strands of the argument. It reflects the OECD's call for disability mainstreaming across policy domains, the capability approach, and Article 27's vision of an open, inclusive, and accessible labour market.^{6 15 17} It also gives practical shape to the papers that follow. The ambition is to understand how the ecosystem works as a whole, how architecture shapes outcomes, and how Australia can build the conditions for much higher employment, career progression, and economic participation for people with disability.

Mind the Gap – the shape of disability employment across nations

In looking for solutions, it is useful to look globally and historically. The graphic below compares disability employment gaps across selected Western developed economies, placing Australia's performance in broader international context.



Please refer to [appendix 1](#) for complete dataset and notes for the graphic.

The graphic should not be read as a precise ranking of national performance. The measures are not harmonised and differ by survey design, age range, disability definition, reference year, and labour-market context. Even so, the pattern is hard to explain away. Across developed economies, people with disability are employed at materially lower rates than people without disability. The OECD has reported an average disability employment gap of about 27 percentage points across 32 countries, and this comparison places Australia squarely in the middle.⁶

If substantial disability employment gaps recur at broadly comparable levels across countries with different programs, governments, histories, and policy settings, this cannot sensibly be explained only by the efficacy of any single country's approach. The persistence and consistency of the gap across comparable economies points to something deeper in the way modern labour markets define, organise, value, and reward work.

Each exhibits a pattern in line with the following section.

Self reinforcing exclusion cycle

1) Standardised work

This begins with the way Western labour markets came to organise work. People with disability have always worked, including in family economies, craft production, industrial labour, agriculture, military economies, and local markets. Industrialisation itself produced disability through dangerous work, disease, poverty, and injury. Over time, however, industrial and post-industrial labour institutions increasingly organised work around standardised processes, timed performance, and interchangeable roles. Taylorism and Fordism did not invent that logic, but they gave it a powerful form.

2) The 'standard worker'

As work was standardised, so too was the worker imagined by it. The model worker became someone able to be in the right place at the right time, to move and communicate in expected ways, and to perform in environments designed around a narrow idea of normal. The care, transport, housing, health, and social infrastructure that made this possible were treated as someone else's problem, kept outside the employer's line of sight.⁷

3) Workplaces designed around the template

Work is never organised for a neutral human being. Every workplace carries an idea of the person who will fit it best. That idea shows up in how work is scheduled, taught, supervised, measured, and rewarded. It can seem natural because it is built into the ordinary machinery of employment, from recruitment and rosters to progression and performance. Its effects are anything but neutral. Acker and Williams show this through gendered organisations and the ideal worker.⁸

4) Exclusion from employment

Disability makes the standard-worker template visible because it foregrounds assumptions usually hidden inside ordinary job design. Work should produce value, and productivity matters. The difficulty begins when a conventional way of producing value becomes the benchmark for capability. Capability is then inferred from surface fit with familiar working patterns rather than from a serious assessment of whether a person can do the work with the right design, adjustment, and support. Researchers examining Denmark's disability employment system describe this as the influence of organisational norms about "normal work" and the "ideal worker", where judgments about employability are shaped by assumptions about how work is expected to be performed rather than by capability itself.¹⁰ When someone does not fit those conventions easily, they are excluded from employment, whether at the stage of recruitment or within the workplace itself.

5) Exclusion reinterpreted as lack of capability

In this way, employers can blur the distinction between the essential functions of a job and the customary profile of the person who has historically performed it. Organisational disability research identifies this misattribution clearly.¹¹ Once it takes hold, familiarity can pass for merit, and departure from the model can be misread as lack of capability. Employers experience this as comfort, people with disability experience it as prejudice, and Western economies experience it as a disability employment gap of 20 percentage points or more.

6) Limited opportunity

The consequence is lower opportunity for people with disability, from childhood onwards. Low expectations reduce access to the ordinary ingredients of a working life, including early experience, training, education, job opportunities, progression, and the chance to be seen succeeding. Over time, those missing opportunities produce thinner work histories, lower earnings, weaker employer confidence, and fewer visible examples of success.

This is where Merton's idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy becomes useful. A mistaken definition of a situation can prompt behaviour that makes the original assumption appear true.¹² If a labour market assumes people with disability are less likely to succeed, it offers fewer chances to build evidence of success. The absence of evidence then becomes evidence of absence.

Exclusion creates poorer outcomes, which are then treated as proof that exclusion was justified

7) Lower expectations close the loop

Lower expectations, produced by all these forces, are not only held by institutions. Over time, they can be absorbed by people with disability and their families, narrowing what feels possible and what it seems safe to aim for. Policy responds to the diminished horizon it has helped create. It offers safety nets, but too rarely the investment, design, and expectation needed to break the cycle and unlock people's potential.

This is how ableism comes to wear the clothing of evidence. A labour market organised around a narrow picture of the standard worker first excludes many people with disability, then treats the effects of that exclusion as proof that disability belongs primarily in the safety-net system. The logic is evident in Australia's Disability Support Pension. To qualify, applicants must show that their impairment prevents them from working at least 15 hours a week, or being retrained for such work, within the ensuing two years, including through participation in a Program of Support such as IEA.¹³ This is deficit thinking, redolent of the medical model of disability. We should not ask people to prove that they are too disabled to work. We should instead be asking what investment, support, job design, employer practice, and income security would allow people to exercise rights, build capability, and contribute productively within the Australian workforce.

How do we break this cycle?

The history of women's workforce participation is somewhat analogous. Goldin shows that change followed from shifts in education, fertility, household technology, legal rights, wages, expectations, and the organisation of work itself.⁹ The point is not that disability employment will follow the same path. It is that large shifts in participation require movement in work and in the society around work. The relationship is reinforcing. Social and attitudinal change makes it easier to redesign work at scale; redesigned work, in turn, gives people reason to revise their assumptions about disability and capability. This will not happen through goodwill or isolated program reform. It needs a force capable of changing expectations, incentives, rules, investment, and institutional behaviour at the same time. For disability employment, that force must predominantly come from government as the only institution capable of authorising and coordinating the national architecture.

Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – to which Australia is a signatory – gives this conclusion its human-rights anchor. It requires access to work in a labour market and work environment that are open, inclusive, and accessible. The UN Committee's interpretation makes clear that employment depends on more than an employment program. It depends on whether the conditions around work, from transport and education to workplace accessibility and social protection, allow people to enter, remain, and progress in employment.¹⁷ That is an ecosystem claim. It points to the architecture around work, not simply the design of an employment program.

Australia should set a clear disability employment target and organise national effort around achieving it

The policy implication is straightforward. Australia should set a clear disability employment target and organise national effort around achieving it. DEA has previously described this as a moonshot. That does not mean adopting the language of inspiration for its own sake. It means choosing a serious objective, accepting that every technical answer will not be known at the start, and building the machinery needed to learn our way towards it. The Apollo comparison is useful here because it was practical as much as ambitious. Flight Director Gene Kranz became associated with the phrase "failure is not an option", but its useful meaning is not bravado. It is the disciplined work of moving through choices, constraints, evidence, and trade-offs without losing sight of the objective.¹⁴

Only an ecosystem approach can capture that spirit and meet that standard. Responsibility has to reach across the administrative silos that currently divide the things people need in order to work. Schools, services, employers, income support, transport, procurement, data, and public-sector leadership all have a role, but none will be enough if they continue to act in isolation. The work should proceed in a spirit of curiosity and vigour. Set the target. Test what works. Learn quickly. Scale what proves effective. Hold each part of the system accountable for the levers it controls.



Schools, services, employers, income support, transport, procurement, data, and public-sector leadership all have a role, but none will be enough if they continue to act in isolation

An ecosystem approach locates responsibility where it belongs. Governments must steward the system across portfolios and funding streams. Employers must redesign work, recruitment, adjustment, and progression. Education systems must build expectations, transitions, skills, and early work experience. The NDIS must provide the disability-related supports that make participation possible. Employment services must deliver the specialist work they are uniquely placed to do and get people into work and keep them there. Each part of the architecture needs a clear role, transparent accountability, and a shared commitment to the national objective.

The argument so far has been that disability employment outcomes are shaped by architecture rather than any single program. The next question is what a better Australian architecture would actually look like in practice.

Improving the Australian Architecture to transform the Ecosystem

Subsequent DEA Papers will examine this architecture in greater depth, **beginning with DEA Paper Number 2 – Blended Transitions**. That paper will take up one of the clearest architectural problems in the current ecosystem. People move across IEA, the NDIS, education, community supports, employers, families, and local providers, but the systems around them too often remain organised as separate worlds. People do not live inside program boundaries, and good employment pathways should not depend on local goodwill, informal relationships, or providers taking risks to stitch funding streams together.

Before turning to that detailed work, it is useful to set out where DEA assesses that the Australian disability employment ecosystem currently sits, and where we need to get to. The following table is not a full reform blueprint. It is a high-level assessment of the direction of travel required if Australia is serious about moving from a fragmented service landscape to a coherent employment ecosystem. It also begins to translate architecture into practical attributes: a national target, stewardship, planned interfaces, learning loops, connected systems, and subsystem rules that pull in the same direction.

Layer	Current state	Desired direction
ECOSYSTEM 	• Lower outcomes • Ableism and low expectations • Narrow Pathways	• Higher participation • Better jobs • Genuine choice and progression
ARCHITECTURE 	• Accumulated, not designed • Weak joins • Unclear accountability • Fragmented data	• National target • Stewardship • Planned interfaces • Learning loops • People with disability have authoritative role
SYSTEMS 	• IEA, NDIS, Education • Income Support, Employers • Data pulling separately	• Connected contributors to employment participation
SUBSYSTEMS 	• Eligibility & assessment • Funding & performance rules creating friction	• Rules aligned to participation, quality, progression & learning

The graphic points to a simple conclusion. Australia already has many of the necessary pieces: specialist disability employment services, the NDIS, emerging foundational-support thinking, education and training systems, employer-facing supports, public procurement levers, income-support architecture, and a growing evidence base. The weakness is not mainly the absence of pieces. It is the quality of their arrangement. Good architecture therefore needs testable content. At a minimum, it should feature:

- a defined objective;
- allocated responsibilities;
- designed interfaces between systems;
- aligned incentives;
- shared information;
- feedback and learning mechanisms; and
- accountability for outcomes and for the joins between systems.

People with disability must have authority within that architecture, not merely be the people for whom it is designed. A system that works across a person's life has to be shaped by the people who live inside it. This is consistent with the Disability Royal Commission's emphasis on the voices, aspirations, and ideas of people with disability, and on reforms that support autonomy, inclusion, and human rights.¹⁶ That means participation in design, governance, evaluation, and adaptation, with lived experience treated as a source of authority rather than consultation after the important decisions have been made.

A better Australian architecture would make the pathway into work easier to see, enter, and sustain. It would start earlier, build higher expectations during childhood and schooling, and make specialist capability available before people have drifted through unsuitable services such as Workforce Australia. It would allow people to combine IEA, the NDIS, foundational supports, employers, education providers, social enterprises, and community organisations without fear, confusion, or duplication. Technology and data should make matching, navigation, adjustment, accountability, and learning easier rather than adding another layer of complexity.

That is the direction of the DEA Papers. Paper Number 1 sets the architectural frame. Paper Number 2 will examine blended transitions and the practical interfaces between IEA, the NDIS, education, employers, and community supports. Later papers will then examine specific systems and subsystems in more detail. That is the work now before us.

Conclusion

Australia cannot explain the disability employment gap simply through the performance of employment services or any other individual program. Across developed economies, substantial disability employment gaps continue to recur despite very different policy settings, institutions, and service arrangements. That pattern suggests the challenge sits deeper than program design alone. It lies in the way opportunity, work, and capability are organised across the broader ecosystem.

The architectural question is therefore not whether Australia possesses the right pieces. It already possesses many of them. The challenge is whether those pieces operate with a clear objective, defined responsibilities, designed interfaces, aligned incentives, and accountability for the joins between systems. People with disability must also hold genuine authority within that architecture, helping shape the systems intended to support them.

Australia should choose ambition. It should set a target worthy of the problem and build the architecture required to achieve it. That is the purpose of the DEA Papers and the task that follows from this first paper.



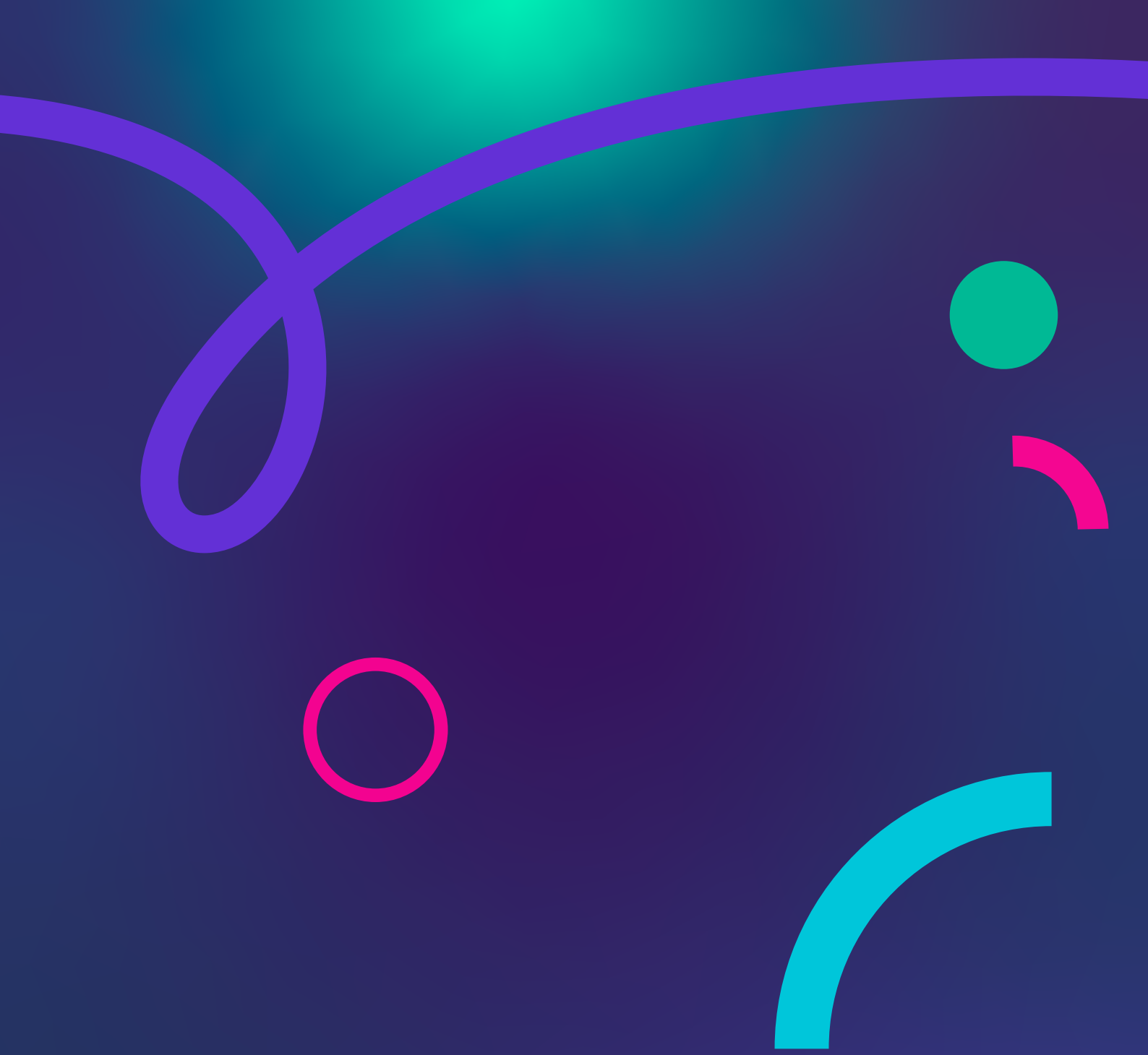
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Appendix 1: Comparing disability employment gaps across selected Western developed economies

Country	Year	Disability employment %	Without disability %	Gap, pp	Source / principal method
Luxembourg	2022	66.2	76.0	9.8	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Spain	2022	57.8	72.2	14.4	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Portugal	2022	65.0	79.7	14.7	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Canada	2022	65.1	80.1	15.0	Statistics Canada LFS/DSQ, 16–64gc
Italy	2022	54.4	69.6	15.2	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Finland	2022	59.4	77.5	18.1	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Denmark	2022	60.0	81.0	21.0	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Slovenia	2022	56.6	78.0	21.4	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
France	2022	54.0	76.0	22.0	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Latvia	2022	60.0	83.1	23.1	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Germany	2022	54.3	77.5	23.2	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Slovak Republic	2022	58.4	82.1	23.7	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Czechia	2022	58.9	83.1	24.2	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Austria	2022	53.2	77.6	24.4	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Netherlands	2022	60.6	85.0	24.4	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Australia	2022	56.0	82.0	26.0	ABS SDAC, 15–64; rounded
Estonia	2022	58.9	85.0	26.1	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Greece	2022	40.0	66.8	26.8	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Cyprus	2022	50.6	77.7	27.1	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Sweden	2022	54.5	82.7	28.2	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Malta	2022	53.5	82.7	29.2	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
United Kingdom	2025 Q2	52.8	82.5	29.7	LFS, Equality Act/GSS definition, 16–64gov
Romania	2022	46.8	77.2	30.4	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Poland	2022	49.1	80.1	31.0	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Bulgaria	2022	44.5	77.4	32.9	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Hungary	2022	45.8	79.6	33.8	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Belgium	2022	44.0	79.0	35.0	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Lithuania	2022	47.7	84.0	36.3	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
United States	2025	38.1	74.8	36.7	CPS six-function disability questions, 16–64bls
Ireland	2022	43.2	80.4	37.2	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
Croatia	2022	36.1	74.1	38.0	EC/Eurostat EU-SILC, GALI, 20–64
New Zealand	2026 Q2	36.4	78.4	42.0	HLFS/Washington Group Short Set, 15–64govt



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