



Five tips for industry supervisors to support inclusive placements: A student's point of view

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In Australia, it's estimated that 1 in 5 people (approximately 4.4 million Australians) have some form of disability. Disability is commonly defined as "any condition of the body or mind that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities and interact with the world around them" (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). Disabilities can be physical, such as restricted movement or vision impairment, or they could be social or impact a person's learning, such as autism or dyslexia. As such, some disabilities may be "invisible"; however, regardless of what type of disability a person has, it's up to them to decide how they choose to disclose or discuss their disabilities with others.

As an industry supervisor of a student on a work-integrated learning (WIL) placement, you may host a student with disability. They may or may not choose to disclose what disabilities they have. If they don't, it's rude to ask. Often, students will choose to disclose their accommodations, or requests for modifications to the work environment or daily tasks, without sharing their specific disability. Please remember, this is their right.

As a student with disabilities myself, I know it's important to share with industry supervisors some tips on how to best create inclusive work environments for students on placement. Let's get started!

1. Maintain healthy communication

Effective communication is always a two-way street. But remember, in a work placement situation, it's often important for you, the supervisor, to take the first step. I appreciate it when the supervisor reaches out to check in with me and ask how I'm going. This is especially true at times when I've gone silent, because if I've withdrawn it's usually because I'm nervous or feel overwhelmed.

As a supervisor, it's a good idea to set regular meetings with your students to help them stay on track. Also, try your best to create a welcoming environment. Let students know that they can share any issues with you, and invite them to let you know in advance if they need extra help with something. During catch-ups with your student, it's also a good idea to ask them if the work environment or tasks are comfortable for them, or if they need any additional modifications.

2. Be flexible

Many people work differently and more efficiently at different times of the day. This is especially true for some people with disability, who may be prone to flare ups of their condition at specific times. A good piece of advice for supervisors, therefore, is to try to maintain flexibility in the work environment. For example, if the student needs to move their hours around or change workdays, try to be as flexible as you can. Students with disability may also have specialist medical appointments that are difficult to change, and you can ask them in advance to share any dates that they won't be able to work.

Take a strengths-based view on what students can do during their placement. Rather than ask students "Is there anything you can't do?", ask "What are you great at?" or "What do you enjoy doing?". This will help you reinforce that you value them as part of the team and don't take a deficit view of their disability.

3. Provide a bird eye's view of the plan

As mentioned previously, students with disability may need to plan in advance around medical appointments or other commitments related to their needs. From the beginning of the placement, share a bird eye's view of what you hope the student will achieve in their placement and any major milestones they need to be aware of. Sign off on this plan collaboratively, so you both feel comfortable with its content (other issues may arise, though, so stay flexible).

For some students, placement may also be the first time they've been in a professional work environment. Take time to familiarise the student with the background of the organisation or team, and send them any key documents. If a student uses a screen reader, ask them what type of format they prefer.

4. Establish your relationship-style

Every student is different. Some students will be happy to openly discuss their disabilities and answer questions that you or members of your team may have about how to improve inclusion; however, some students may not want to take on this role and be a "spokesperson" or "token" for disability. If in doubt, simply ask your student about their preferences. As the supervisor, you have a unique place of power. Remember that the student may feel intimidated by you or want to please you. You can alleviate this by making

it clear that you have no expectations around what they share; you simply want to create a healthy working environment and support their success.

Please note, it's never acceptable to share aspects of someone's disability with others without prior permission. If the student hasn't told people in the workplace other than you, then you should maintain confidentiality.

5. Reflect on support structures

It's a good idea to consider a variety of support structures to ensure students feel comfortable and can continue to contribute. A secondary supervisor, perhaps someone more junior who they can go to for "silly" questions, might be a good idea. You can also ask the student for their preferences around meeting the larger team or being invited to meetings or workshops, even if just to listen. If you go on leave or get sick, connect the student with someone else who can supervise them while you're away.