**Willing to Work: National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination against Older Australians and Australians with Disability**

# Submission No 125

**Name** Alexander (Alex) Ross McInnes

**Submission made by**

Older Australian in work

☐ Older Australian looking for work

☐ Older Australian who would like to work

☐ Older Australian who is not working and does not wish to work

Australian with disability in work

Please describe:

# Submission regarding Older Australians / Australians with Disability / Both

### **Your experience**

**Have you (or the person you are submitting on behalf of) experienced employment discrimination?**

Yes

No

Not sure

**Did you take any action in relation to the employment discrimination you experienced?**

Yes

No

**Please tell us more, for example, what action you took and how effective you felt it was; or why you chose not to take any action.**

After 14 months in a mid- level management position at a remote/ isolated and previously dysfunctional branch of a State Government agency, it was determined my impairment “could” present a hazard to myself and the agency.

I had been employed by the agency for 8 to 9 years prior to performing the acting role with the knowledge of my impairment being in the public domain. I have completed relevant industry/ professional qualifications programmed by the agency and others at my own initiative.

The reasons given were not documented in any relevant Job Description Form ( JDF ), local Workplan or general accepted practice, but were deemed “required” to the role at the time after 14 months in the role.

My application to the state Equal Opportunity Commission ( EOC ) was accepted on the basis of more recent activities related to the circumstance above as that had exceeded the application time line. My interview was managed by an EOC Case Manager and an agreement was reached.

Since that time I have not had any success/ response in applications for similar positions and a statement made by the agency at interview with the EOC “if in HR’s opinion there is a perceived hazard to me or the agency, my application will be blocked” would appear to be a current policy to the point I am performing mundane work at a level significantly lower than I was acting and well below my capacity.

The EOC and subsequent inactivity have been effective. My Professional Development Discussions are more a performance appraisal with managers telling me their opinions and dismissing my initiatives.

**Did your experience of employment discrimination impact on your participation in the workforce? (For example, did you have to stop work, change jobs or take sick leave?)**

Yes

No

**Please tell us more**

My initial employment at a country office resulted some years after beginning in serious counselling with extended bouts of stress leave. I was particularly ill and was the precursor to researching other roles within the agency with less field work.

I performed the branch manager role in every respect achieving significant agency and region milestones early in the opportunity and continued to attain targets for the remainder. I performed each of the documented JDF and Workplan tasks. I participated in regional and management training relevant to my professional development and career aspirations outlined in a development plan.

In making the decision to terminate my acting role, a task quoted as fundamental to the role was documented as a “possible” hazard despite having performed these activities for 8 years prior to my opportunity and on an adhoc basis in normal management activity covering for staff on leave or ill and in this case due to extensive distances between branch catchment areas as I passed through travelling to and from region meetings, training or agency obligations.

A “job” was found for me in the city. The “job was data entry in a corner of a large room. Monthly meetings with an HR officer and my manager. These meetings were intimidating and humiliating to the point I visited a psychologist for 2 months.

I am currently performing a demeaning role whereby my Team Leader sends me work on a very adhoc basis as it has been acknowledged my customer skills are exemplary. I am currently surplus to requirements to this Directorate and in conjunction with legislation enacted in Western Australia earlier this year, my situation is tenuous and quite stressful.

I was one of two participants in a leadership program for people with disability promoted and paid for by my agency during this time.**[Redacted]**.

Myself and the other agency participants successfully completed the course and have had mention as part of promoting the course and our completion. Late last year, I noticed an article on our intranet promoting the agency’s leadership training and our Director General’s presentation to the recent graduates. I did not remember receiving an invitation and made enquiries. The response I received from a very senior manager stated “ you were part of a program offsite and these graduates completed the course in- house”.

My reply to her was that I would expect the leadership development was part of an overarching whole of agency strategy and as the agency paid for both, “separating” one group from another based on the premise some graduates are not worthy of hearing these inspiring words is at best wrong and worst discriminatory. As a result, I have had a number of administrative issues resolved, but I am hardly satisfied and my career has suffered considerably

Throughout my time in this agency, I have made note of the statement on each employment opportunity information package going to the public domain the statement “*We strive to foster a diverse workforce at all levels which embraces women, people from culturally diverse backgrounds, people with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. This objective helps to ensure a sensitive approach in dealing with a diverse range of customers, a broader input into our decision-making processes and more appropriate and responsive services”* appears.

I have not seen any examples of people with disability being promoted or career/ management achievements are highlighted in our yearly Disability week. Many and mostly the same people every year are interviewed as to how their lives have been enhanced by the opportunity to work for our agency. I do not wish to diminish nor make light of the significant achievements, but they are all at entry level, data processing and front counter jobs with little or no career development opportunity. Where are the people with extensive career ambitions with disability who have participated in agency promoted development programs and training at their own initiative? I know personally of three others who have either not had career discussions or are languishing in the same position with frequent task changes and no real point.

I received feedback on an unsuccessful Expression of Interest in acting opportunity within the directorate in which I work. The respondant gave me reasons which may or may not be reasonable, but he concluded with the statement “people at this age” must continue obtaining contemporary knowledge and training. This statement was made despite my resume noting very recent courses and training/ experience all of which was relevant to the position.

I am also making applications to other agencies more suited to my personality with moderate success and a better chance recognising my Abilities.

### **Barriers**

**Do you think older Australians/Australians with disability face barriers when they look for work or are in a job?**

Yes

No

Not sure

**If yes, or not sure, what do you think these barriers might be?**

The barriers are perception based, ephemeral or ill- conceived opinion. Our office moved premises recently necessitating alternative commuting arrangements for the entire staff. I was asked ( quietly ) by team mates not my managers, whether I would cope with the “long walk” from a railway station a number of us chose to disembark and walk to the new office.

The ”concern” was expressed despite a one kilometre walk from railway station to previous office taken both ways most days with the new distance shorter with more steps uphill and slopes. The teammates had perceptions of difficulty despite knowing me for over 1 year.

Discussions between myself and some HR officers re the stroke I suffered, are constantly relating to my medications and the potential ongoing blood/ heart issues. In correcting them, I state plainly I incurred an aneurysm of the right front lobe of my brain causing a large scar to remain and the loss of use of my left hand. I have no blood/ heart issues. The fact most meetings have this fact reiterated leads me to believe perceptions of “stroke sufferers” are people who indeed die, have major mobility issues and are old at the time or before their time.

My aneurysm changed my life irreparably, but the recovery I have made through determination, belief in myself, friends and family are huge. The fact I was made redundant from **[redacted]** national telecommunications company in Australia and have since secured a position in the Government workforce has also contributed enormously to my recovery, emotional and general health. The journey has been unnecessarily stressful due to many misperceptions, misinformation and poor direction from successive HR managers and immediate supervisory managers.

I believe the barriers above affect work seekers. If the role statements state selection criteria not requiring dual handed activities, It is not divulged. In my case, my issues are well known within my employer and this affects selection halting my career and preventing development.

**Does employment discrimination have an impact on gaining and keeping employment for older Australians/Australians with disability?**

Yes

No

Not sure

**Are there any practices, attitudes or laws which discourage or prevent equal participation in employment of older Australians/Australians with disability?**

Yes

No

Not sure

**Please tell us more**

I believe I have noted practices/ attitudes under a previous heading. I believe laws and policies are strong. Policies and legislation eg Occupational Health and Safety ( OSH ), are being used when convenient or under a false belief to establish a hazard where there is none or a situation identified as OSH which requires strong action such as excision and re- placement.

In my case, I was removed from a position due to a potential hazard to myself or my employer. In the ten years to my removal, there were no incidents of any sort. I had been performing field work requiring entry, navigation, assessment photography, documentation and exit to some of the most abused properties anybody could imagine. I drove to these properties with an engineered steering wheel attachment I purchased. The distances were sometimes immense. My acting opportunity required me to be a manager with less field work. I performed field activities in the circumstances noted earlier. I was required to drive large distances for region meetings and training.

Oddly enough, I was required to drive 750 Km each way to an assessment related to the perceived hazard I was presenting. One day’s drive each way on my own where there is a perceived OHS issue.

I have had comments and extraordinarily patronising comments from younger team mates when working in computer applications. The perception the inner workings of an application are known only to this generation are quickly put right when I use keyboard shortcuts to navigate or edit text. I explain these were the only option when computers first started and all navigation was in the BASIC operational mode. I started my working life in 1972 as a telecommunications technician in the Telegraphs and Data section of the PMG/ Telecom Australia/ Telstra. I installed and maintained the very first digital data circuits and facilities in many parts of Australia.

Perceptions and misinformation are the main inhibitors to equal employment opportunity for older Australians and those with disability

**What are the incentives and disincentives for older Australians/Australians with disability to work?**

**Incentives:**

Self- worth. Self- confidence. Self- belief. Contribution to a meaningful end. Emotional development. Educational development. Sense of and actual achievement. Supporting ourselves through earning income. Ability to plan personal aspirations through earning income. Example to my children, grandchildren and the greater community.

**Disincentives:**

Continual defence of actions. Explaining issues. Patronising attitudes. Lack of confidence in actual information related to decisions made “in your best interests”. Humiliation. Embarrassment, “Why bother” attitude results.

### **Good practice**

**Are there examples of good practice and workplace policies in employing and retaining older Australians/ Australians with disability?**

Yes

No

Not sure

**Please tell us of examples of good practice in employing and retaining older Australians/ Australians with disability in work that you are aware of.**

### **Solutions**

**What action should be taken to address employment discrimination against older Australians/Australians with disability?**

Acting with respect and without bias. Actions we are all encouraged to espouse and believe when interacting with members of other Equal Opportunity categories of community members. Each person has particular and personal stories and experiences which are not generally known, but can contribute considerably to any organisation……………if given the chance.

**What should be done to enhance workforce participation of older Australians/Australians with disability?**

As in previous paragraph.

**What outcomes or recommendations would you like to see from this National Inquiry?**

Outcomes: Revealing the contribution, perception and work ethic Older Australians and Australians with Impairment WILL make to any organisation.

Recommendations: With respect to findings and or revelations, I believe the strongest possible condemnation of discrimination in all areas and aspects of people’s lives. If possible, have participants included in the event as background or as speakers.

Personally I am very angry and frustrated at my own circumstances, but my overarching “Rule of Thumb” is that no matter my issues, there are others who are experiencing far more challenging discrimination.

At past Prime Minister E. G. Whitlam’s funeral service, Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson stated in his eulogy ”only those who have known discrimination truly know its evil”. The statement was applied to the history of the aboriginal peoples of Australia, but I believe with a passion it applies across the board to *age, gender, orientation, race and disability.*

Thank you.