

Inform Podcast
Episode 14: Employment Assistance Fund - Transcript

Deborah Fairbairn

Just that little thing can make a big difference to everyday needs. With the Employment Assistance Fund, I've been provided with a magnifying glass just to help me read small text. I have a board next to me that has my large print phone numbers and things available for me to read. Little things that make a big difference.

Kirby Fenwick

Hello and welcome to Inform, a podcast where you'll be hearing from people with disabilities, as well as industry experts, on a range of topics. I'm your host, Kirby Fenwick.

In this episode of Inform, we'll be discussing the Employment Assistance Fund. Administered by JobAccess, the Employment Assistance Fund, or EAF, provides financial help to eligible people with a disability to cover the costs of work related modifications and equipment.

Today, we'll be joined by Deborah Fairbairn who you heard from at the start of this episode. Deborah is blind in her left eye, and has used the Employment Assistance Fund to ensure she has the right supports at work.

Also in this episode, we speak with Camille Greenwell. Camille is the Client Support Manager for the advisory and workplace modifications team at JobAccess. Camille has some great information about how the fund works and some great advice on how to access it.

But first, Deborah's story.

Deborah Fairbairn

I was born blind in my left eye. This affects my depth perception and my visual field. It wasn't picked up by doctors until I was seven. I had a little incident where I ran into a brick wall and was taken to hospital because I was knocked out. And they then realised that there was a problem with my vision.

I have a stigmatism in my right eye which affects how I see and view written material and it causes difficulty focus. I have glare sensitivity, which can impact using computers sitting in areas affected by light and I use programs and equipment to reduce that glare and work in a low light area.

Kirby Fenwick

Deborah's vision impairment didn't impact her working life until about 15 years ago.

Deborah Fairbairn

I was doing data entry and I was having a very difficult time seeing the information that I had to use to put onto the screen.

And my job was in jeopardy, because I wasn't able to see the data that I was required to data enter. If I couldn't do the job, I wouldn't be able to remain in the job.

Kirby Fenwick

It was at this point that Deborah learned about the Employment Assistance Fund.

Deborah Fairbairn

The Disability officer in my employment at that stage, I was working in a different industry, had knowledge of the Employment Assistance Fund and how to apply. So, they made all the introductions to the EAF.

And I was able to get a workplace adjustment arranged through my employer. That adjustment included a ZoomText upgrade, ZoomText training, and additional items to support my everyday tasks at work.

Kirby Fenwick

Deborah had never heard of ZoomText, in fact she'd never used any assistive technology at work up until this point so she had no idea what was available and how it could help. Luckily, the Employment Assistance Fund team did.

Deborah Fairbairn

I had never used any assistive technology prior to working in that role. I had never heard of ZoomText, had no idea what it was, or even how to use it.-They provided training and everything but they discussed that with me and told me that there's a program out there that can make things larger for you, doesn't affect everyone else using the computer if you have, if you have to share which at that case I was on a hot desk. So, I needed to have somewhere that not only was accessible for me, but also accessible for the other staff who worked there and didn't impact them working and it made me capable of doing my job. And I had no idea that that device existed.

The Employment Assistance Fund enabled me to remain employed in that position using the assistive technology I required to do my work. In that role, I then became the fastest data entry person in our team thanks to that assistance. In relation to my self-esteem, through the equipment that I was provided by the Employment Assistance Fund to do my work, I am a more productive, capable and positive worker now that I have the tools to assist me to perform my best.

If you are positive within yourself that flows into every part of your life.

Camille Greenwell

At JobAccess our goal is to help remove barriers to the employment of people with disability. We're here to help people with disability to get work, keep work and progress their careers and workplace adjustments can help create a level playing field. And with small solutions, we can make big differences.

Kirby Fenwick

That's Camille Greenwell, the Client Support Manager for the advisory and workplace modifications team at JobAccess. Camille says that Deborah's experience is far from unusual. Many people just don't know about the Employment Assistance Fund and the supports and assistance it can provide.

So just what is the Employment Assistance Fund?

Camille Greenwell

So, sometimes adjustments need to be made in the workplace for people with disability to be able to perform a particular job role or task. The Australian government provides funding through the Employment Assistance Fund, or EAF for short, to cover the cost of making these workplace changes.

And people are often surprised at the wide range of modifications and services that are available through the EAF to support people with disability in the workplace, as well as the significant impacts they can have on their productivity.

And these include adjustments or disability specific equipment for the physical workplace, modifications to work vehicles, assistive communication devices, Auslan interpreting for job interviews as well as job roles and specialist services for employees with specific learning disorders and mental health conditions. And we also fund disability awareness training, deafness awareness training and mental Hhealth training for colleagues of people that may made a little bit more understanding of a person with a disability.

And a few of the examples in relation to that is that a person with limited vision might find using a software program such as ZoomText to enlarge the font, very useful. And that would mean they would be able to access information on the computer. If a person has no vision, a program such as Jaws will actually read out text and again, that makes the information on a computer accessible to somebody.

We might also do something like building modifications for people not able to fully access a workplace. For example, somebody who uses a wheelchair might need a ramp to navigate a change of ground level.

We very much tailor the solutions to what the employee's job role and requirements are.

Kirby Fenwick

Camille says the first step to accessing support from the Employment Assistance Fund is to work out if you're eligible.

Camille Greenwell

So, the eligibility criteria that people need to meet is that they're working at least eight hours per week. Or if they're self-employed, they're working at least 20 hours per week and earning the minimum hourly income equivalent to the national

minimum wage. They need to be in that job that has continued or is expected to continue for 13 weeks or more. They need to be an Australian citizen or permanent resident. And they need to have an ongoing disability that's lasted or likely to last for at least two years. And the disability must limit, restrict or impair their ability to work in some way. Or they may be a job seeker with a job plan that has requirements to be able to seek work or commence work.

And sometimes when people are offered a job, you know, sometimes there might be a week or two until they actually start. And they don't have to have started to access the fund either. So, they may be offered a position, they may know, the building that they're in, and they may know, you know, where they would actually be working. And they may already know that that means that maybe they can't navigate a step. And then JobAccess would be able to come in once we had confirmation of employment, but before they'd started to be able to make modifications so that they could start on their start date.

Kirby Fenwick

Once you've confirmed your eligibility, the next step is to make your application. You can do this online via the JobAccess website, and we'll provide a link to that in the show notes.

Camille Greenwell

And if there is assistance needed to put the application on through the website, they're able to contact us by phone and we can certainly run through that with them.

Kirby Fenwick

So, you've figured out that you're eligible, and you've submitted your application. What happens next?

Camille Greenwell

Once the application is received, it's assessed by the team and the essential criteria will be gathered. If required, JobAccess will coordinate the national panel of assessors to visit the employee's workplace and conduct a free assessment. We then discuss the recommended workplace modifications and determine the most suitable solution which might be eligible for funding.

JobAccess is a reimbursement fund. And what that actually means is that someone usually the service provider or employer, pays for the items and seeks reimbursement from JobAccess. And again, JobAccess staff can assist with that process.

Kirby Fenwick

Camille says that if you're applying for support from the Employment Assistance Fund for the first time, you might notice that they ask a lot of questions.

Camille Greenwell

And the reason that we're doing that is so that we can actually make sure that the solution is going to meet their needs, and not make assumptions around what would be best for a person. We're very much wanting to understand what somebody is experiencing, so that we can then tailor that solution.

Kirby Fenwick

The free workplace assessments are a really important part of what makes the Employment Assistance Fund so useful because if you don't know what kind of adjustments or supports you might need, the assessors can help you figure that out.

Camille Greenwell

So, once we have worked out whether somebody is eligible for the EAF the professional advisor will then determine whether a worksite assessment is required, and sometimes for modifications that are less than \$1,000 or maybe a person has provided some information from one of their treating professionals, it may not be needed to conduct a worksite assessment.

If somebody might know that they need, for example, a particular piece of equipment, but they're not sure which one is best going to suit their needs. Or maybe they know that there's an issue in the workplace, but they actually just don't know the solution, then we will organise for one of our panel assessors to attend the workplace, and to have a look at what the issues are, and then make recommendations on what the solutions are.

There is no cost to that assessment to, to the employee or the employer, that is conducted by JobAccess.

Once the assessment is completed, we'll have a discussion with the assessor and the assessor will write a report, and a copy of that report will go to all parties. And once everyone's received it we'll call them and discuss the content of the report. So that might be the opportunity for the person to say, you know, yes, I agree. Or perhaps we could also look at this so it's not that we are doing the assessment and then saying this is what you have. We're doing the assessment to gather more information. And then we can have a discussion around what, what is going to be the best for all parties in the situation.

And as I say, it may not be needed in all cases, because sometimes someone will come to us and say, I know exactly what I need. I've trialled these particular ones. And, you know, here's some information confirming that this is what I need. But that's not always the case. Sometimes people are saying, I don't know the exact solution, and very much the assessment would be the starting point for that to gather the information.

Sometimes people might think that a particular solution is the best way to go. And then once we've actually investigated we might offer and discuss a different sort of solution. And mostly people are very happy because they're not aware of what

equipment might be out there to assist them. So that's part of the process that we do is help people become aware of what sorts of assistance might be available.

Kirby Fenwick

While the Employment Assistance Fund provides practical support, things like assistive technology or modifications to make a building accessible, its impact is far greater.

Camille Greenwell

For some people, oh for some people, it's the difference between staying employed and not being able to continue to work. And that's, that's a very important of everybody part of everybody's life, the capacity to be able to work the, the ability to be able to earn an income. But that's not the only reason that we actually work. And it's not the only benefit we get from work. Yes, the income is very important. But there's also the social interaction that we have day to day. And it's the, the feeling of being productive and making a difference to society. I think those things are really important. And sometimes the Employment Assistance Fund is the difference between somebody being able to work and maybe work in an area that they want to but sometimes just be able to work and not be able to.

Kirby Fenwick

Camille says that the results speak for themselves.

Camille Greenwell

We're passionate about what we do because we know what we do works. In the past financial year, we've managed over 4100 applications. And three months after an employee receives the funded support through JobAccess, we send out a survey to the applicants. Results from those surveys have found that 93% of employers indicated the assistance provided has helped as it was intended to. And 92% indicated their employees were more productive at work. Lastly, 97% of employees were able to keep their job for at least three months after receiving support through the Employment Assistance Fund.

Kirby Fenwick

Just knowing about the supports offered by the Employment Assistance Fund can make a big difference. That was the case for Deborah. And she has some tips for anyone looking to access the fund themselves.

Deborah Fairbairn

Most people with a disability have manageable conditions that do not prevent them from being capable of doing their work. They may just require some small adjustment to assist them to perform certain tasks. Unfortunately, some potential employers make an assumption that there will be a lot of difficulty with workplace modification. And that can create problems where there would not have been any. Knowing where to go to get the information and how to access that is vital.

Just knowing that there is someone who can assist both your employer and you to look at the role, look at the difficulties you may have in a particular area, and know that there's potentially an option to assist you to be able to stay in that job and work at your best. Just getting access to that information is the first step.

My tips or advice for accessing and using the Employment Assistance Fund would be if you have any questions, give them a call. They're experienced, well-informed and will easily explain the process to you. You can also talk to your disability employment service or your employer, if you feel comfortable to and they can help you to access the Employment Assistance Fund. It just takes a phone call, or you can go online and do an application. Have a look at, on the JobAccess website, you can have a look at how the Employment Assistance Fund works. But definitely all it takes is initially making that contact and they can provide you with information. The more information you have, the more well informed you are, and you can make the choices that are best suitable for you.

Kirby Fenwick

Camille also has some great tips for anyone thinking of accessing the Employment Assistance Fund.

Camille Greenwell

Okay, so some of the tips that I would offer for accessing and using the Employment Assistance Fund would be to remember, you don't have to do this on your own. So, our team is here to support you through the process from before you put an application on, and answer any questions that you may have through the process, or following approval, we're always happy to follow up with anything that might be needed.

I'd encourage everybody to review the EAF guidelines available online, to ensure that they meet the eligibility criteria and have all the necessary information at hand to make their application. And what that will do is actually make the process move quite smoothly from when you put the application on.

The other thing I'd say is you don't have to know the solution when you put on the application. Remember, we will very much help with this. And that's why we're asking the questions that we actually ask so that we can help together come up with the best solutions.

Kirby Fenwick

Thank you for listening to Inform, a production of Independence Australia. Inform is hosted and produced by me, Kirby Fenwick. Our managing editor is Alison Crowe.

Our thanks to JobAccess, Camille Greenwell and Deborah Fairbairn for being a part of this episode of the Inform podcast. You'll find links to the resources mentioned in this episode, plus more, in the show notes at informonline.org.au

This episode of Inform was recorded and produced on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulan nation. We pay our respects to elders past and present.

Inform is an independent production. Our aim is to help link people with disabilities and their informal supports with information and insights, as well as services and supports in the community.

We're always looking for interesting and engaging stories. So, if you have a story to tell, get in touch by emailing us at inform@independenceaustralia.com

That's I n f o r m at Independence Australia dot com.

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