

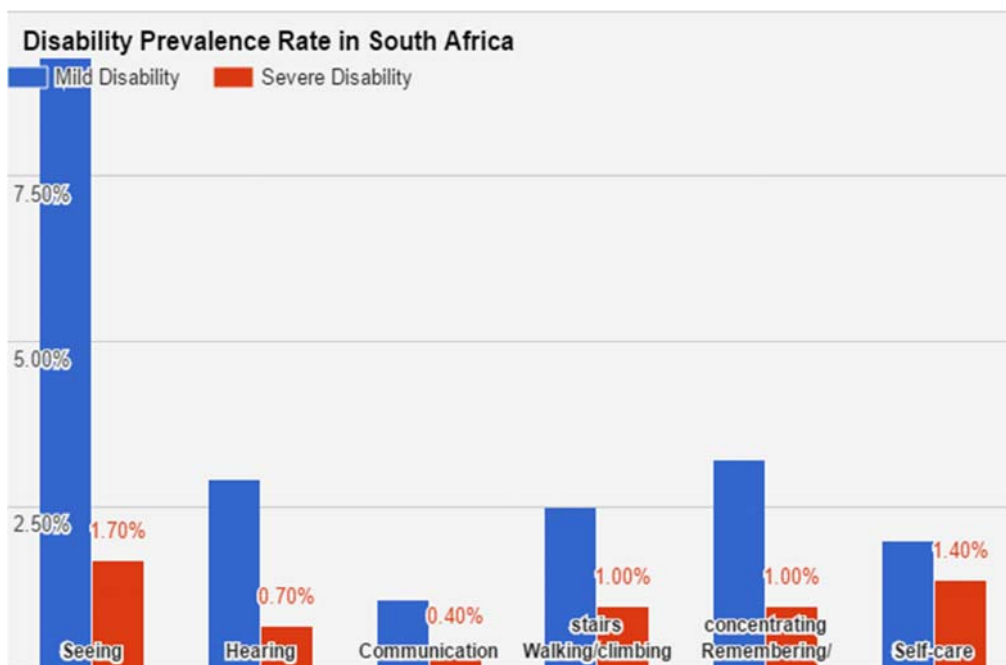


People with disabilities in the workplace

South Africa faces a wide-ranging set of empowerment issues: from redressing past racial injustices to ensuring gender equality, and safeguarding the rights of the LGBT community. These challenges make the country uniquely well-equipped to leverage tools designed to bring marginalised communities into the workplace.

The danger, however, lies in relying on one approach to empowerment for multiple groups that face very different problems. Transformation strategies need to be tailored to the unique challenges faced by different groups. This is perhaps most clearly true for the disabled, who face common barriers to entry to the workplace like prejudice or structural injustices. They must also cope with additional struggles in the form of inadequate provision of physical infrastructure, personal and medical support needed to unlock opportunities.

It is difficult to know exactly how many South Africans are disabled - due to multiple complex issues around the nature of the disability (physical, mental, specifics on individual disabilities), the cause of the disability (injury, birth, old age), and the threshold for what counts as disabled (severe versus mild disability). But some broad evidence is available. StatsSA estimates a national disability prevalence rate of 7,5%ⁱ. Disabilities disproportionately affect women, Black-Africans, and the elderly - deepening the impact on already marginalised groups. As can be seen in Figure 1, severe disability is still rare, but nevertheless does affect a significant number of South Africans.



Source: Statistics South Africa

There is clear evidence that these disabilities can be restrictive in allowing those individuals to live up to their full potential, and this scuppers their chances of contributing meaningfully in society. Amongst the disabled, only “5,3% had attained higher education, 23,8% had no formal education and 24,6% had some primary education.”ⁱⁱ People with disabilities are slightly more likely to not be economically active (12,5% for Black-Africans with disabilities, versus 10,2% for able-bodied Black-Africans), but the narrowness of the gap may reflect the crisis of South African unemployment, rather than positive progress in achieving equality for the disabled.

Unsurprisingly, this and other factors result in a substantial wage gap between the disabled and able bodied. All of the above discrepancies grow substantially worse depending on where someone lives, as well as their race, gender, and family income - while there are significant discrepancies between different types of disability. The more challenging question is why disabled people continue to operate at a disadvantage in both schools and the workplace.

People with disabilities are technically protected from discrimination by the Employment Equity Act and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act. Formal legal protection is further supplemented by several strategies and resources, including the White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy, the South African Human Rights Commission’s toolkit for private employers on employing people with disabilities, and international commitments such as the United Nation’s Disability Rights Charter.

Employing people with disabilities can also count towards companies’ Employment Equity standing. There are still legal gaps, with some uncertainty about the extent of liability placed on employers through the Employment Equity Act. But more fundamentally, the law is limited in its capacity to create real change without supporting interventions that target the major bottlenecks to empowering people with disability from reaching opportunities. There is also a much deeper obstacle: societal prejudices against people living with disabilities. They tend to be seen as naturally incapable.

In the work place, inequalities at school level play a role, with a lack of access to quality education undermining later earning opportunities. Estimates on the number of children with disabilities not attending school vary widely, with some estimates suggesting only 30% of children with disabilities who are of school-going age are attending schoolⁱⁱⁱ, and others suggesting that between 400,000 - 590,000 disabled students are out of the schooling system.^{iv} There is good reason to doubt the accuracy of these figures^v, but they do highlight how serious the problem is.

South Africa’s education system is torn between two approaches: the rollout of support to students with disabilities in schools, or the creation of specialist schools to care for these students. Both have problems. The first requires a complex process of equipping teachers with the knowledge and resources to care for students (which is a tough task in very resource constrained schools), the latter isolates students with disabilities from the rest of the school-going population, and can undermine access to similar resources while also deepening prejudices and misconceptions about people with disabilities. In following the current hybrid approach, the state needs drastically to improve the rollout of specialist resources to schools with disabled students.

As a first step, a number of Centres of Excellence, which are well equipped to provide the necessary facilities, should be considered. And more needs to be done to facilitate access to the model-C (through mandated access requirements) and private schools (through voucher schemes) that are best equipped to provide necessary support. The key outcome in the short-term must be the creation of enough facilities for all.

Direct problems in the workplace are equally taxing. A wide range of negative stereotypes exist regarding the ability of disabled people, which can drive entrenched discrimination on the part of employers, and among colleagues and line managers, which can affect promotion and day-to-day work. Physical infrastructure remains a serious barrier to employing PWDs, including among top tier firms.^{vi} Even basic facilities, like wheelchair friendly access, are too often not readily available.

While tackling discrimination will require a long-process of education and the enforcement of legislation, fixing the physical infrastructure can and should be achieved in the short-term. Key to this is managing who bears the cost of creating physical infrastructure that is accessible to people with disabilities. While National Building Regulations do include standards for facilities for people with disabilities, these are too often not complied with during construction, leaving firms to bear the cost of adapting offices. These firms are often less well equipped to do so, and must face higher costs to those involved in equipping the environment during construction. Strictly enforcing building standards can ensure that the best facilities are provided at the lowest costs.

Finally, one area where government can immediately improve the plight of people with disabilities is in the public sector. People with disabilities remain underrepresented in the public sector, with a substantial list of barriers identified in a 2008 study by the Public Service Commission, as can be seen in Table 1.^{vii} As a priority intervention, focus should be placed on improving access for local government facilities, which often lag furthest behind in terms of accessibility, and which are best equipped to assist disabled people in the types of rural communities where the disabled face the most pressing challenges. With both the public service and the broader country always desperately in need of skilled and talented workers, we cannot allow people with disabilities to be excluded from the opportunity to contribute to building a stronger government and a better society.

Barriers to the Employment of Persons with Disability in the Public Sector
Disability is not clearly defined
There is a lack of employment equity plans
Inadequate recruitment and retention strategies
Links with organisations representing person with disabilities are not optimised
Public servants disabled as a result of injuries sustained are not rehabilitated
Persons with disabilities do not apply for posts
There is an inability to attract suitably qualified and skilled persons with disabilities
Persons with disabilities are reluctant to disclose their status
Inadequate management information on persons with disabilities
Job hopping within public service results in retention problems
Management faces multiple implications associated with employing persons with disabilities
Persons with disabilities are marginalised by management
There is poor accessibility for persons with disabilities
Good practises are being applied by departments
The inherent 'cost implications' of appointing persons with disabilities
Based on 'Assessment on Disability Equity in the Public Service' by Public Service Commission

End Notes

ⁱ Based on physical disability only, with this defined as limitations on six functional domains, namely hearing, communication, remembering/concentrating, walking and self-care.

ⁱⁱ StatsSA, "Census 2011: Profile of persons with disabilities in South Africa": <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-01-59/Report-03-01-592011.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ "Integrated National Disability Strategy, White Paper", November 1997: http://www.gov.za/sites/www.gov.za/files/disability_2.pdf

^{iv} Human Rights Watch, "Complicit in Exclusion: South Africa's Failure to Guarantee an Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities": <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/08/18/complicit-exclusion/south-africas-failure-guarantee-inclusive-education-children>

^v Since there are only 11,2 million South Africans of school-going age, this figure seems out of proportion with the disability prevalence rate for the broader population.

^{vi} Maja P., Mann W., Sing D., Steyn A., & Naidoo P., "Employing people with disabilities in South Africa", *South African Journal of Occupational Therapy*, Volume 41, Number 1, March 2011.

^{vii} Public Service Commission, "Assessment on Disability Equity in the Public Service": <http://www.psc.gov.za/documents/2008/assessment%20disability.pdf>