

Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace

Mid-Project Report

Summah McKinnon | June 2025



Acknowledgement of Country

People with Disability Australia (PWDA) acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them, to their cultures, and to their Elders both past and present.

We thank all those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have contributed to this project and who will continue to shape better outcomes for people with disability.

Acknowledgement of Lived Experience

PWDA acknowledges the lives and experiences of women with disability, and we recognise the individual stories of resilience that form the basis of this project. We thank the women with lived experience who contributed to this project and who we will continue to work with to drive awareness of and break down the unique barriers to workplace participation and leadership experienced by women with disability.

Language

This document uses binary language such as ‘women’ and ‘men’ in many places. We recognise that gender is socially constructed and does not exist in binary categories. We also recognise that women are adult humans whose subconscious sex is female. Additionally, we acknowledge that there are people whose experiences are not captured by the use of binary language, and that many of the experiences outlined in this document may be experienced by others in the Australian community.

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Executive Summary

With support from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's Office for Women, the Advancing Women project, managed by People with Disability Australia (PWDA), aims to increase participation in the workplace by women with disability and their representation in leadership roles. By providing a structured educational mentorship program, the project seeks to reach organisations and/or workplaces nationally to:

- Support women with disability to find sustainable pathways to ongoing employment and build pathways to leadership opportunities.
- Improve workplace safety and inclusion.
- Engage organisations in long-term systemic change.

Running from January 2023 to July 2026, the project is being delivered in phased stages. This mid-project report outlines the activities and outcomes of Phases 2 and 3, focusing on the pilot program delivery in partnership with one national organisation.

The Advancing Women project acknowledges that women with disability are ready and willing to participate in the workforce and take on leadership roles, but that there are barriers preventing them from doing so, including:

- Inaccessible recruitment processes
- A lack of understanding from employers
- Limited access to reasonable adjustments
- Underrepresentation of women with disability in the workplace
- A lack of opportunities in mainstream employment.

Findings from a survey conducted by PWDA as part of the project research reinforced these barriers, revealing:

- A lack of disability awareness by employers and employees
- Negative and discriminatory attitudes towards women with disability
- Difficulties negotiating reasonable adjustments and accommodations.

The Advancing Women project pilot addressed these barriers by centring the experiences of women with disability and offering practical, co-designed education and mentorship activities:

1. Education

- Training to address structural barriers including ableism, discriminatory attitudes and practices that limit access and advancement.
- Supports organisations to shift culture and adopt inclusive practices.

2. Mutual mentoring program

- Pairs women with disability (mentees) with women in leadership and executive roles (mentors):
 - Emphasises two-way learning, leadership development and peer support.
 - Provides tailored opportunities for mentees to build confidence and navigate systems.

The project pilot ran over 20 weeks, with nine (9) mentorship relationships in the pilot organisation. The education and mentorship activities were tailored to participant needs and refined through continuous feedback.



People with Disability Australia, Advancing Women Team Background

The Advancing Women project is managed by People with Disability Australia's Strategic Projects and Training team. This team includes a Project Manager and Project Coordinator—both women with disability—who draw on their personal experiences of navigating leadership and career advancement. Supported by their Advisory and Co-design network, the team have developed an education and mentorship program that addresses the unique barriers women with disability face in the workplace and in moving into leadership roles. The program creates safe, structured opportunities for participants to access resources, build skills and engage in peer-to-peer learning and networking.

PWDA are a national peak cross-disability rights and advocacy organisation, led by and for people with disability. Founded in 1981, PWDA represents the interests of people with all kinds of disability. PWDA is a not-for-profit, member driven, community-based organisation. PWDA's membership is made up of people with disability and organisations mainly constituted by people with disability.

PWDA's vision is of a socially just, accessible and inclusive community, in which the human rights, belonging, contribution, potential and diversity of all people with disability are recognised, respected and celebrated with pride.

PWDA work both nationally and internationally, and PWDA's work is grounded in a human rights framework that recognises the United Nations human rights conventions and related mechanisms as fundamental tools for advancing the rights of people with disability. PWDA deliver programs, services and activities in partnership with its members and supporters as well as a variety of stakeholders across the government, disability, education and research sectors.

PWDA have a clear vision for the purpose and impact of their work and have a comprehensive set of values, beliefs and principles that guide and inspire PWDA's work.

Key Project Stats

15 Organisations participated in the Advancing Women introductory Discovery Session

1 National organisation completed the Advancing Women education and mentorship program

18 Individual participants reached

9 Mentorship partnerships created

1 Mentee in the time of the mentorship program successfully transitioned into a new people leader role.

Key Project Themes

Disability Awareness

An inclusive and culturally safe organisation ensures employees receive training and ongoing practical opportunities to implement their learning. This approach is essential for better understanding the experiences of women with disability in the workplace and for fostering an environment that is not only accessible but also attitudinally safe.

Although many organisations participate in Disability Awareness training, there continues to be significant gaps in workforce knowledge regarding the unique intersectional barriers faced by women with disability in their leadership and career advancement.

The Advancing Women pilot identified that education combined with mutual mentoring provides a valuable opportunity for organisations to address these barriers and promote a more inclusive working environment. For meaningful change to occur, it is crucial all employees within an organisation engage in building awareness of these unique barriers and commitment to addressing them.

Mutual Mentorship Experience

Mutual mentorship offers a powerful model for women with disability navigating leadership and career pathways, providing both professional and personal development. Unlike traditional top-down mentoring, mutual mentorship creates space for shared learning, where both mentees and mentors bring valuable insights and experiences to the relationship.

For mentees, this approach can foster confidence, visibility, connection, and a strong sense of agency. It also enables the exploration of leadership identity in a safe and supportive environment. At the same time, mentors gain deeper understanding of disability-inclusive leadership, challenging bias, and improving practices within their organisations. These two-way learning relationships help shift workplace culture and open new, inclusive pathways to leadership and career advancement.

Organisational Support and Policies

Organisational support and inclusive policies are critical to the success and sustainability of projects like Advancing Women. While mentorship can build skills and confidence, real progress depends on workplaces being structurally equipped to support women with disability. Policies that clearly articulate and are actively committed to accessibility, reasonable adjustments, and anti-discrimination, provide a foundation for inclusive practice. The project's findings reinforced that without organisational buy-in, even the most engaged mentors and mentees encounter systemic barriers.

Support and Community

Mentees reported that meeting other women with disability was a rare and affirming experience, supporting the importance of representation and connectedness. For women with disability, navigating leadership and career advancement can be an isolating experience, particularly in workplaces where they are underrepresented or lack access to role models. The Advancing Women project creates intentional spaces and a community where mentees can connect with others who share similar lived experiences, challenges and aspirations. These connections foster a strong sense of belonging and mutual encouragement.

Sponsorship and Advocacy

While mentorship focuses on guidance and support, sponsorship actively opens doors, endorses talent and advocates for women with disability in spaces where decisions are made. Advocacy from leadership helps challenge entrenched biases and shift organisational culture. Representation alone is insufficient without strategic support to access leadership and career advancement opportunities.

Networking

The lack of opportunities for both formal and informal networking is a significant barrier to leadership and career advancement for women with disability. While organisations and workplaces tend to more actively engage in inclusive education and training, opportunities for networking don't often present themselves. The Advancing Women pilot program was delivered with one organisation which identified a gap in providing opportunities for the mentees to connect with other women with disability across sectors and industries.



Advancing Women Project Timeline

Date	Description of Activity
August 2023 – January 2024	Initiation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needs Assessment and Gaps Analysis report 2023 Expert advisory panel recruitment Co-design member recruitment.
October 2023 – May 2024	Planning and Design <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research learning frameworks Engagement plan Monitoring, evaluation and learning tool International Women’s Day Event (Online) Co-design eLearning development Education videography production.
November 2023 – December 2024	Execution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentor and Mentee recruitment Education and Mentorship program September 2024 – December 2024.
December 2024 – January 2025	Evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post pilot project survey Post pilot focus groups with mentees and mentors.

Advancing Women Project Sessions

Date	Number of Organisations	Location	Activity
June 2024	1	National	Discovery Session
August 2024	1	National	Mentor and Mentee Brief
September 2024	1	National	Education and Mentorship program commencement
November 2024	1	National	“Leading Inclusively” Workshop Delivery
December 2024	1	National	Education and mentorship program completion
December 2024	15	NSW, ACT, WA, VIC, QLD, TAS	Advancing Women Discovery Sessions
January 2025	1	National	Advancing Women, Community Conversations

Advancing Women Discovery Sessions

Locations of Participating Organisations

National Organisations **3**

Queensland **1**

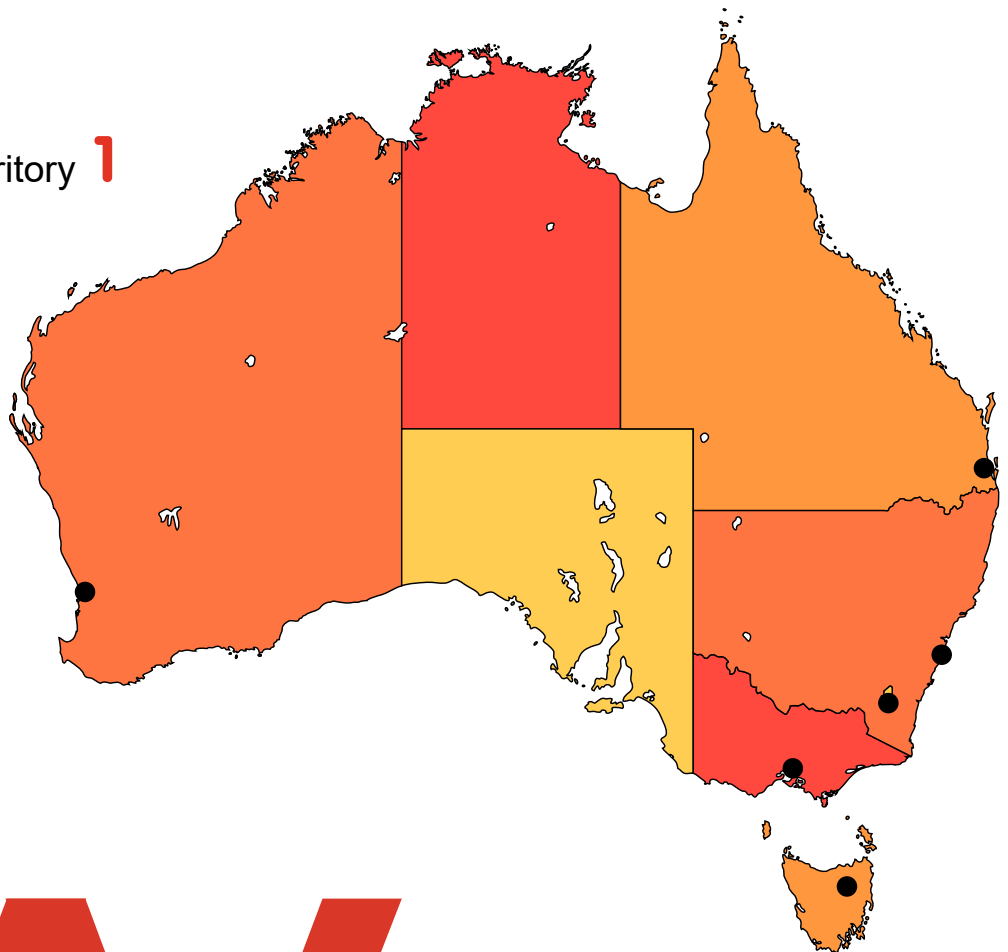
New South Wales **4**

Australian Capital Territory **1**

Victoria **2**

Tasmania **1**

Western Australia **3**





Advancing Women Project Materials

The Advancing Women project materials were developed by members of People with Disability Australia's Strategic Project's and Training team, in partnership with HD Academics, Empowering Pathway's and Heidi La Paglia Reid Consulting. The materials were produced from the findings and recommendations taken from the Advancing Women 2023 Needs Assessment and Gaps Analysis, and with input from the Advancing Women advisory panel and co-design members. The materials consisted of eLearning modules, a mentorship program and interactive workshops.

Discovery session workshop

The Discovery Session workshop is an introduction to the Advancing Women project and is delivered to organisations who express interest in taking part. The workshop offers the opportunity to showcase the program background research and logic of the education and mentoring program materials.

eLearning and mentorship package

The 20-week online eLearning and mentorship package explores the unique barriers women with disability face in the workplace. The mentors and mentees explore leadership skills, collaborate on activities and discuss how they might implement these into their daily workplace practice. This mentorship method is a dynamic learning exchange that provides mutual benefits for both the mentor and mentee.

Workshop "Leading Inclusively"

This engaging online workshop employs a yarning circle methodology and is facilitated by a First Nations woman with disability. "Leading Inclusively" explores diverse leadership models, interpersonal skills, and leadership capabilities for both mentors and mentees. The workshop creates a platform for meaningful conversations on leadership, fostering collaboration and the development of more inclusive workplaces.

Community of Practice

The Community of Practice is an informal online meet up for mentees to openly discuss leadership with other women with disability from outside their organisation. It is an opportunity to talk openly about their experiences in the workplace and share ideas on how they have overcome barriers in their careers.

Three (3) co-design members were upskilled and supported to independently run the pilot Community of Practice. The pilot was a paid opportunity to prepare questions to lead and facilitate conversations with mentees.



Evaluation and Learning:

Beyond Traditional Evaluation

The Advancing Women project pilot was evaluated using a bespoke monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEAL) framework to collect the experiences of the mentees and mentors on their journey.

Evaluation tools included surveys, reflection pieces, and community conversations to measure effectiveness and progress, and collect personal insights on the learnings and experiences of the nine (9) women with disability who participated as mentees, and the nine (9) women in existing leadership positions who participated as mentors.

Acknowledging that the Advancing Women program aims to improve the experiences and participation rates of women with disability in the workforce, it is important to consider how outcomes are measured. Evaluation should focus on what is most beneficial to the recipients of the program, rather than reflecting the existing power imbalances the program aims to tackle.

Traditional approaches to MEAL often rely on facts and figures, such as the percentage of women with disability in the workforce, but these indicators alone do not give insight into the structural and/or cultural factors that impact on these statistics and continue to limit workforce participation for women with disability.

As outlined in PWDA's 'Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace: Needs Assessment & Gap Analysis Findings Report',¹ the workforce barriers for women with disability are deeply embedded in systems and attitudes. The barriers are structural and underpinned by prejudiced attitudes about gender and disability; factors that are not easily shifted.

For this reason, it is essential the project evaluation incorporates measures that capture cultural change, not just statistical improvements. This approach is key in assessing the project's ability to drive meaningful, lasting impact into the future.

1 PWDA (2024) *Advancing Women with Disability in the Workplace: Needs Assessment & Gap Analysis Findings Report*, People with Disability Australia, Sydney.

A Participatory Approach

To support inclusive and meaningful participation, PWDA implemented additional data collection tools developed specifically for the project Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Framework (MEAL). These tools were designed to collect multiple types of data and maximise involvement from participants with varying access requirements and preferred modes of expression.

Survey

To determine the effectiveness of the education and training program and track the progress of the participating organisations, surveys were distributed to mentors and mentees within the pilot organisation.

Co-Design Reflections

To support a successful co-design process, members of the co-design group were given the opportunity to reflect on and provide feedback about the process and content throughout the pilot.

Creative Journals

To ensure the evaluation process was accessible and to empower participants to tell their own stories, mentees and mentors were given the opportunity to journal their experiences through letters and artworks at two (2) points in the project.

Community Conversation

In line with the project's commitment to shifting power to participants, peer-led workshops were held after the pilot to give participants the opportunity for shared reflection. The sessions allowed participants to discuss their experiences with others involved in the project. Sessions were held separately for women with disability, and workers and mentors.

Each session was led by a trained facilitator, who guided the discussion using prompts and questions. The community conversations included five to ten participants and ran for one hour.

Mentee Feedback

Mentees were surveyed, participated in reflection pieces and joined a community conversation.

What did mentees like about their mentoring experience?

- Participants valued the safe space provided by the program to discuss their challenges and receive support from their mentors.
- The program inspired the mentees to consider leadership roles, although they also recognised the additional challenges they would face on this journey.

What are some things the mentees learned?

- The program helped the mentees understand the complexities and challenges they may experience in leadership roles more generally.
- The challenges of leadership roles were highlighted, with the mentees expressing concerns about the lack of support and accommodations the further they advance in their careers.
- Mentees highlighted their understanding of the difference between leadership and people management, with some mentees feeling that leadership is not always about managing people but about driving change and making decisions.
- There was a desire for more support in advancing their careers, including sponsorship and networking opportunities.

Feedback From Mentors

Mentors were surveyed, participated in reflection pieces and joined a community conversation.

What did mentors like about their mentorship experience?

- Mentors expressed the value found in the positive relationships built during the mentorship.
- Mentors discussed the importance of creating connections and building communities among women with disability.
- The mentors shared that there is so much value in networking and learning from peers and other mentors in similar situations.

What are some things the mentors learned?

- Mentors gained improved understanding and insights into the lack of support and challenges faced by employees with disability.
- Mentors noted positive changes in attitudes towards inclusivity and support for employees with disability.
- Recognition that more attitudinal changes are required across organisations.
- The mentors expressed that ideally mentors were women with lived experiences of disability but acknowledged this is not always possible.
- The mentors identified gaps in workplace policies and practices as the area requiring the most change. They said this needs to be addressed to better support employees with disability.

Case Study: Career Advancement for Women with Disability into Leadership – a Mentee Experience

Background

Women with disability face unique barriers in their career advancement into leadership roles. As they ascend the professional ladder, the experience expressed by women with disability in the Advancing Women pilot program is that the expectation of self-sufficiency increases, while access to accommodations and support often diminishes. This case study explores the lived experience of one mentee from the Advancing Women pilot program, navigating their path to career advancement, highlighting systemic challenges and the value of peer support, mentorship and inclusive leadership development programs.

Challenges in Career Advancement

In the experience of the mentee, there is an observation that as roles become more senior, there is a cultural expectation that leaders should not require accommodations. The mentee stated, “this assumption isolates women with disability, who may still be managing their own access needs while supporting others”. They went on to say, “the higher the position, the less visible and acceptable it becomes to raise these needs, creating a paradox where support is most needed but least available”.

On their journey to career advancement, it was expressed, “for neurodivergent individuals, leadership roles can be particularly taxing due to rigid expectations around communication, performance and decision-making”. The mentee stated, “leadership roles often lack flexibility or understanding of flexible approaches to work, making the experience more stressful and less sustainable”.

Mentorship: Supportive Activities and Program Impact

This case study of the mentee’s experience identified the following areas of impact from participating in the Advancing Women mentorship program, whereby individuals were provided critical support through:

- **Peer Connection:** Sharing experiences with others facing similar challenges reduced isolation and fostered a sense of belonging.
- **Collective Problem-Solving:** Exchanging strategies and solutions helped participants recognise systemic issues rather than internalising them as personal failings.

The Mentee Experience: Leading Inclusively Workshop Highlight, Michelle Hyde and the Yarning Circle

A standout moment in the program was the online workshop led by Michelle Hyde. The mentee said, “Michelle’s facilitation was inspiring and deeply impactful”. They went on to say, “her ability to create a meaningful and inclusive space left a lasting impression, with participants expressing eagerness to engage with her work in the future”.

Mentorship Experience

A key element of the Advancing Women program was a mentor-mentee partnership. The mentee identified that the mentor was selected for her leadership qualities rather than knowledge of access and inclusion. This provided invaluable guidance, as she shared her personal challenges as a woman in leadership and how she has worked through these on her career journey. The mentee said “interestingly, disability was never explicitly discussed, yet the mentor’s inclusive and respectful approach created a safe and empowering space”. They went on to say “this highlights that genuine human connection, and respect, can sometimes outweigh formal training in access and inclusion”.

Conclusion

This case study shows the importance of peer networks, inclusive mentorship and partnerships, as well as culturally safe spaces in supporting the leadership journeys of women with disability. It also calls attention to the need for systemic change—where accommodations and understanding are embedded at all levels of leadership, not just entry level positions in the workplace.

Key Recommendations

Based on internal learnings from the Advancing Women Mentorship pilot program and feedback from mentees, mentors, staff and facilitators, eight (8) key recommendations for the future development of the program are:

- **Expand Sponsorship Opportunities:** Foster networking between mentees and other leaders within the organisation to create more sponsorship and advocacy opportunities.
- **Build a Community for Women with Disability:** Support mentees by providing dedicated spaces for women with disability to connect, collaborate and learn.
- **Engage in Advancing Women Education:** Ensure all employees participate in education programs focused on advancing women with disability, including employees from all areas of the organisation.
- **Promote Cross-Sector Engagement:** Create opportunities, such as workshops, for mentees to engage with other women with disability across different sectors and industries.
- **Cultivate Positive Partnerships:** Provide clear expectations and foundational guidance at the outset of the program to support the development of strong, safe and enjoyable mentor-mentee relationships.
- **Match Mentees with Leaders with disability:** Whenever possible, pair mentees with women with disability in leadership positions.

Where to next for the Advancing Women project in 2025

The Advancing Women project is moving towards its second pilot launch in August 2025, with a growing list of partner organisations on board.

Action Plan: A proposed action plan for the Advancing Women project in 2025 and beyond.

Date	Action plan
February 2025 – April 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mentorship Recruitment: Continue recruiting participating organisations.• Evaluation Agreement: Develop a new evaluation agreement.• Pilot Findings: Consolidate findings and recommendations from the pilot.• Mid-Project Report: Draft the mid-project report.• Introductory Guidebook: Design the mentorship program introductory guidebook.• Welcome Packs: Design and purchase merchandise for welcome packs.



Date	Action plan
April 2025 – June 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-Design Sessions: Complete member engagement sessions for co-design. • New Mentorship Activities: Develop new activities based on recommendations. • eLearning Modules: Update and implement new topics in eLearning modules based on findings. • Scoping Session: Develop content for a new week one online “scoping session” for the mentorship program. • Mentorship Platform: Design the mentorship platform in “Mentor Loop”. • Mentee Workshops: Design online mentee “Learning Linkups” for cross sector and industry collaboration and learning. • Mid-Project Report: Publish and send the mid-project report to key stakeholders.
August 2025 – December 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Execution Phase • Distribute mentor and mentee welcome packs. • Deliver mentor and mentee guidebooks. • Conduct the week one mentorship scoping session workshop for mentors and mentees. • Commence the education and mentorship program. • Deliver “Leading Inclusively” workshop. • Deliver three (3) online “Learning Linkup” mentee sessions.
December 2025 – January 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation Phase • Conduct a post-pilot project survey. • Hold post-pilot focus groups with mentees and mentors. • Design a program model to replicate for broader roll out, and continue building on the impact of second pilot phase.

Advancing Women Project Expands Its Reach

Summah McKinnon and Shannon Welch, from PWDA's Strategic Projects team, were invited to present at a Curtin University event, held at the University of Sydney. They shared PWDA's expertise on workplace access and inclusion, along with the research findings and recommendations that have shaped the Advancing Women project into what it is today.

Curtin University, in partnership with Women in Leadership from Vietnam, expressed strong interest in applying these Australian-based learnings in an international context. This marks a significant milestone for the project—not only has the Advancing Women project made national impact, but it is also now contributing to global conversations on access and inclusion for women with disability in the workplace and creating equitable opportunities to advance in their careers.



Key Advancing Women Project

Mentorship Staff

- Summah McKinnon (People with Disability Australia, Dharawal NSW)
- Shannon Welch (People with Disability Australia, Gadigal NSW)
- Simone Tunbridge (People with Disability Australia, Dharawal NSW)
- Dr Michelle Hyde (H/D Academics, ACT)
- Heidi La Paglia Reid (TAS)
- Natalie Elliot (Empowering Pathways).

Staff Statements

“Working on the Advancing Women project has been such a privilege. Throughout its development, and especially through collaboration with the advisory and co-design members, I’ve come to truly understand what makes a mentorship program successful for women with disability.

The educational content and learning opportunities have not only helped mentors grow in their understanding and ability to influence more accessible and inclusive workplaces, but they’ve also taught me something deeply personal. As a woman with disability, I’ve realised how valuable my lived experience is. The barriers I’ve faced in advancing my career are not just challenges—they’re strengths that I can use to support other women on their journeys.

What I’ve observed and heard from mentees is that the most valued part of their experience is the connection and sharing with other women with disability. Creating a space where mentees can come together, learn, and collaborate has been key to building their confidence and supporting their career growth. Being able to speak openly about their individual experiences and hear others’ stories has organically created a sense of community among everyone involved in the project.”

Summah McKinnon

“As the Project Coordinator for the Advancing Women pilot, I witnessed first-hand the transformative impact of our initiatives. The project underscored the importance of gender equity specific to disability and provided invaluable lessons on fostering inclusive leadership. I believe this project has the potential to truly transform organisations and drive systemic change”.

Shannon Welch

“I am proud and honoured to be associated with the Advancing Women in Leadership Program as an advisor, content writer and facilitator of the ‘Leading Inclusively’ workshops. This is such a valuable program in terms of increasing workforce participation and leadership representation for women with disability. It is also actively creating a safe, welcoming and authentically inclusive space for women to speak freely, to collaborate and to network. Participants are actively involved in creating this space and I look forward to seeing how this innovative program develops even further”.

Michelle Hyde

“Advancing Women is a vital initiative working to dismantle the systemic barriers that women with disability face in the workplace. Contributing to the project’s advisory group, training modules, mentoring program, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning framework was an opportunity to help drive meaningful change. Creating workplaces that are not just accessible, but truly inclusive, requires ongoing commitment, and I was proud to work alongside a team dedicated to making that a reality”.

Heidi La Paglia Reid





Your Contribution Matters

People with Disability Australia would like to thank everyone involved for their commitment to the Advancing Women Mentorship Program.

Contact person

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