**Submission to:**

**National Disability Employment Framework Consultation 2015**

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**Introduction**

ParaQuad Association Tasmania is a not- for- profit organisation who assist people living with spinal cord injury and also others with physical disability. ParaQuad Assoc. Tas. is interested in the National Disability Employment Framework Consultation as many of our clients have either experienced the difficulties associated with employment or have overcome barriers in order to participate in employment.

**Barriers to Employment**

Statistics show that labour force participation from those with disability was significantly lower than that of the able bodied population with 53% of the people with disability employed compared to 83% of able bodied individuals. (ABS, 2012). There many factors which contribute to the difference in these figures. Some of these factors include employer and societal attitudes, lack of support for employers, lack of clear service provision for employees and lack of opportunity to gain employment.

In order for the workforce to become a more inclusive environment towards people with a disability obstacles within the culture, system and environment should be removed in order to allow participation in the workforce and access to support. (PwC, 2011). Some cultural changes need to occur among employers, as the main barriers identified are those of discrimination, stigma, misconceptions and also fear. This is partially due to the lack of communication between service providers and employers. This perpetuates the problem as employers are unsupported and don’t know the facts regarding employing a person with a disability.

**Service provider issues and employer support**

The ParaQuad Tas. Ways to Work Report, shows that 4 in 5 people were approached by a previous employer during the early rehabilitation period. This gave individuals assurance, which allowed them to focus on their rehabilitation. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p. 57)

**Case Study A 7.4.3 p59 Ways to Work Report Early Contact and Support from and Employer**

A sustained a spinal injury in a fall about four years ago which left her with paraplegia. The accident occurred at home and was unrelated to work. Like other Tasmanians A was flown to the Austin Hospital in Melbourne for acute care and then to the Royal Talbot for her early rehabilitation. Even though her husband was able to be with her she nevertheless describes the experience of distance rehabilitation as ‘shocking’.

What happened for A during this time was unlike the experience of most injured people. A’s employer has a strong culture of pastoral care towards it’s employees and provided immense support for A during this time.

A was visited by her Human Resources (HR) Manager early in rehabilitation and on several further occasions and was told she would have a job when she returned home. The Manager couldn’t be exactly sure what it would be but there would definitely be a position for A. For A this meant ‘things were taken care of- life seemed to be preserved or cushioned in some way’. She said she developed a sort of tunnel vision that enabled her to gradually work through the things that needed to be done. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p.59)

The Case Study above notes the importance of early employer contact with individuals and the benefits when this occurs. Reduced concern regarding future independence enables the individual to focus on life and improving their health and well-being through rehabilitation. Whereas, when the future is uncertain, individuals are mostly concerned with trying to find ways to gain independence again. This shows how critical it is for the system to support employers in re-entering their employees into the workplace. It is important to note that in the Ways to Work Report, an employer stated there was a need for information in the early stages of rehabilitation, regarding planning the return of their employee to the workplace. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p.57 )

Lack of support in the work environment has been identified as an issue which needs addressing as some individuals with disability at work can’t get the supported hours they need in order to perform their duties at work in the most productive and efficient manner. Simple tasks can become near impossible when people are left without support in the workplace. As support is essential to the efficiency and productiveness of work, individuals have been sacrificing supported time at their homes, in order to use that support time at work so they are able to perform their duties in a more efficient manner. This is especially true of professionals who are working 50 plus hours a week and require 40 hours supported time per week and are failing to acquire this support. Individuals feel they are being failed by the system as if they quit their position they would be entitled to 40 hours supported time at home but it mustn’t be used for work. It has been reported that intense lobbying and advocacy have changed nothing as this issue falls on deaf ears. (PwC, 2011)

ParaQuad’s research for the Ways to work report showed that employers generally were very positive about employing people with disabilities, with several already doing so. Most employers had policies supporting flexible hours however, were not very supportive of a work from home arrangement. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p.vii )

Among employers there is a general ‘one size fits all’ approach which occurs when employing someone with a disability. (Shut Out, 2009)

Employers are generally not flexible in adapting job descriptions or finding the best ‘fit’ for employees within their business. This leads to a ‘fill the vacancy’ mentality; instead, employers need to look at the individual, assess the needs of the individual, and then assess how elements of the position could be adapted or modified to suit the person. “It’s helpful to be talking to job seekers about their interests and aspirations and then seeing where or how they might fit into the organisation, rather than approaching it from the point of view that you’ve got a vacancy or a space you’re trying to fill”. (NCVER, 2010)

As stated in the Ways to work report, key factors identified in assisting people with Spinal Cord Injury to return to the workplace, were adaptions such as use of computer for tasks. The use of assistive technologies enabled employees to conduct work from their home, as well as at work. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p.60)

In cases of severe limitation, other assistive devices such as voice software and phone diallers can be utilised, and devices which operate from the computer to control heaters, doors, switches and power points, can also be installed by employers to modify the work environment in order to assist employees with their work. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p.64)

“Krause et al (1996) also emphasised the importance of computer access for people with SCI as a means of enhancing employment”. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p.61 )

Financial issues can also become barriers to employment for people living with disability. It has been shown through service provider experience, that some employers take advantage of the financial incentives given to them when they employ individuals with disability. ACCI state in their report that short term employment and initiatives most often do not continue past the initial funding period and that the result is a loss in drive, initiative and talent. (ACCI, 2013)

In order to encourage engagement of those with disability currently not in employment a clear action plan and focus on medium to long term projects (4-5 years) need to be implemented by government and adopted by employers.

**Negative experiences of employment services**

It is suggested through the Ways to Work report that the services system is complicated and is difficult to navigate. Individuals are discussing the services they are provided with others in order to find what they need and compare options. By providing access to complaints mechanisms which are ‘easy to use’ and access to advocacy, changes can be brought about which enable providers to better understand what people with disability need from providers. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p.73)

Any barriers to employment experienced by people with disability minimises the opportunity to experience the benefits of employment. Commonly people with disability already have personal challenges which effect their ability to return to employment. However, ParaQuad report states that when interviewees were asked about these challenges, they identified increased transports costs, organising people to assist and car modification to be a more significant cost to employment than their personal challenges. The reported benefits of working were regarding increased quality of life. One interviewee stated “Better than staying home watching tv- drive me mad. A reason to get up in the morning”. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p. 79)

Research has shown that people with disability want to work and it is not the ability to perform the work which they lack it is the opportunity to be engaged in meaningful work. (Shut Out, 2009)

**Why change is needed**

Tasmanian SCI Patients

AsParaQuad deals with Spinal Cord Injury Sufferers in Tasmania, there are accounts of the initial accident and hospitalisation as being ‘shocking’ due to the trauma of the experience. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p. 59). Tasmanian SCI patients are flown to Melbourne where they remain for up to 18 months depending on the severity of injury. Employment is just one aspect of the ‘shock’ and change in their lives after the initial event (p9). Upon clients return to Tasmania work can provide much needed stability in the individuals life. “One service provider noted that expectations of friends and family at home may have a bearing on what the injured person will achieve. An expectation of return to work is among those factors that can promote employment.”(p56) Empowerment of individuals & increased access to information could make the rehabilitation of Tasmanian SCI patients more stress-free. It could also assist the individuals to re-engage in employment after returning to Tasmania (Wolstenholme, 2007, p. 73)

Employment holds many benefits for individuals including financial gain, personal gain, community and social integration, structure and self-worth. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p.1)

A range of life and health issues need to be addressed to make return to work a possibility. Delay in finding solutions to these issues is likely to postpone return to work, as resolving these issues take precedence over finding work. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p.29)

The current system presents difficulties to people with disability and as there is a lack of *‘easy to use’- we encourage you to tell us about any problems you have with our service’* type of complaint & review mechanisms the process can be long and draining. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p.34 )

As the following interviewee states, there are difficulties with the system and returning home to Tasmania after a SCI is far from easy. *“Seemed like I had to fight for everything and they never really helped. Centrelink is good now. They should understand people’s needs- would love to come back and found a house, a job, a lady and mates but it doesn’t work like that in the real world….. Work is one of the last things on your mind when you are sorting all this out. Still got Dr’s appointments and Physio’s and at that time couldn’t drive….. Nice to have a big folder when you come back”.* (Wolstenholme, 2007, p.30 )

**Changing Community Attitudes**

There needs to be a change in community attitudes towards people with disability. An inclusive attitude is the path towards people feeling they are living free of stigma, have meaningful work, fulfilling lives and the opportunities to engage in life to the fullest. As stated by the PwC Report “People are disabled by society, not just by their bodies”. (Wolstenholme, 2007, p.31)

People are influenced by their external environment such as family, friends and the system. Considerable amounts of what a person thinks about themselves, and their expectation of life is developed through their experiences, whether these be lived or observed. (PwC, 2011). Change within the system and within the community are essential as the stereotypes put on people living with disability are a significant barrier to social inclusion, participation and access to services and support. (PwC, 2011).

Extended periods being exposed to negative interactions creates a ‘horizon limiting’ view of life and the possibilities available to an individual. Over time this view of life begins to influence an individuals behaviour, and what they see as their possibilities or opportunities for their life. (PwC, 2011)

People with disability need to be given the opportunity to engage in employment, therefore moving them away from the ‘welfare’ culture, and engage in mainstream culture. (PwC, 2011)

To achieve this the person must be the centre of the systems’ focus, and the system must investigate what makes them individual. In this way the system would be able to better match the needs of the individual with appropriate mainstream activities such as employment.

Individuals with disabilities have ordinary needs in terms of health and well being, financial and social security; as well as education and Training (PwC, 2011)

To recognise this, and assist individuals to become involved in main stream life, work and education will bring us closer to becoming an inclusive society. To treat people with disabilities as equals, and not to be marginalised, and forced into a ‘system’ which contributes to the stigmatisation of people with disability should be a collective goal. Giving people the support to be involved in mainstream activities is essential to the success of integrating people into a mainstream workforce as providing support does not mean there should be stigma attached to who they are if they have a disability and need help. It is important to recognise the limitations placed on people with disability inadvertently by others and to challenge these views.

**Economic Need for Change**

There are many economic benefits to integrating people with disability into mainstream workforce. Australia’s ageing population, the future cost and availability of carers and Australia’s economic growth are the factors which will mainly be affected. It is projected that by 2099 Australia’s population will be double that of current figures, and 4 million people across Australia will be living with a severe core activity limitation. (communication, mobility and self care. (ABS, 2003.) (PwC, 2011)

Due to the increase in Australia’s population it is predicted there will be less available informal care. In order to address this issue the system would need to be able to fit many more people with disability into mainstream work, including providing the necessary supports to employers and employees to enable productive employment by the individual. In turn this would lower the number of people needing informal care and would free informal carers to return to employment also. “45% of people who live with disability in Australia live in or near poverty, more than double the OECD average of 22%.” (PwC, 2011)

If the system could assist employers in getting people with disability into meaningful employment the rate of people living in poverty would dramatically decrease. Overall, this would be a great outcome for the economy and the individuals as individuals would then be able to support themselves and not feel they had to rely on the system to provide for them.

**Improving Employment for People with Disability**

There are ways to improve employment for people with disability at every level of our society. Not only can changes be made within the system and Government, but also at a community employer and individual level.

Government needs to ensure that there are supports in place for employers and employees regarding employment and that the provided supports are ongoing in the long term in order for both sides to feel comfortable when employing people with disability. Necessary supports and services provided by Government need to be communicated to employers so they understand what supports are in place and what assistance is available to them. In Doing so, misconceptions, stigmas and fears would be broken down hence barriers would begin to die away helping the community to harbour an inclusive attitude towards people with disability.

Research has shown in this report that employers are generally open to the idea of employing people with disability, however needing to modify work environments and job positions is difficult for employers to carry out as they often don’t have the information they need. This is why it is essential that employers are better informed and enabled to modify the workplace for employees by service provider and support systems.

Early employer contact is essential in providing assurance to new spinal cord patients that they will have a job when they leave hospital and come home, in the same way, early contact for other disabilities which are accident related would assist in the same manner, ensuring these people re-enter the workforce. Information on re-entering employees into the workforce needs to be made available for employers who want to do this so they are not so hesitant in offering.

There also needs to be further investigation into the issues surrounding availability of supported work hours for employees with a disability as stated in this report. It seems currently, some consider the supported time they may be able to receive if the left their jobs and returned home to gain more supported hours, however this is not what should be occurring. If enough supported time can be given to people to give them the necessary support and keep them in work it would be to everyone’s advantage.

Government needs to asses implementing a mid to long term based outcomes system where financial incentives to employ people with disability are given over a longer time period, and with ongoing supports ensuring that long term employment outcomes are met. (P8 ACCI) In the long term this system may save the government money due to less money being paid in incentives over a longer time frame the periods of time. There needs to be strict regulation of financial incentives and consequence implemented for employers who purely hire disabled worker for the financial incentives and then sack employees when the incentives cease; therefore employers would not receive repeat financial incentives for constantly changing staff.

Also, if employees are happier in their work and employers are supporting employee development and are happy with their work, the individual feels empowered. Empowering the individual to be employed in meaningful and satisfying work leads to better self-sufficiency, better self-image and increased confidence.

**Conclusion**

ParaQuad Association Tasmania Inc. see the difficulty people with spinal cord injuries encounter from the time of their injury to the time they come home, also into their futures. New SCI patients have many obstacles and issue to overcome once they return to Tasmania after rehabilitation and often has a negative impact on their ability to re-enter the workforce quickly.

We believe, in order to ease the process of return to work for SCI sufferers and many other physical disabilities alike, the barriers discussed in this report need to be understood and mechanisms for change implemented. The effect longer term of enabling people with disability to work is not only positive for the individual but also for our economy and communities.

Promoting a culture of inclusiveness among employers, and going to the effort to adapt and modify the workplace for employees with disability, is the starting place for a change of attitudes within community. However, this cannot happen until service providers are able to provide readily accessible information on ‘the next steps’ regarding health and also employment to families and patients. Once the support is available for employers the confidence in employing people with disability will rise and no longer prove to be a barrier.

Increasing participation in employment for people with disability is achievable. When service providers, support providers, Government, employers, individuals and families can be better informed and begin to fill the gaps facing people with disability gaining employment we will be able to move forward and address some of the other issues such as society’s attitude toward those with disability which would be a big step forward in disability rights.

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