**Disability Employment Taskforce - Review of the entire disability employment system and develop a National Disability Employment Framework to boost employment rates for people with disability**.

**Outlook Employments response to questions regarding the future shape of a DES service post 2018**

**What can improve employment outcomes for people with disability?**

There needs to be much more flexibility with benchmarks. A person who has not been in the workplace for many years due to their disability might be able to secure a five or six hour position initially with support. There needs to be some recognition of this as part of an overall continuum that includes growth in hours and development of career paths. Existing system is far too prescriptive.

In order to achieve higher participation rates of people disabilities in employment there needs to be a change in the direction of service provision. I believe a major structural change necessary with the system for acquiring disability employment contracts and the framework for delivering them. Some thoughts:

* **Contracts**: look to a future where they are no employment contract as such. A robust accreditation system would need to be in place for all disability employment providers. Providers would need to gain government approval to deliver a suite of employment and employment related services. Once an organisation is accredited business would be market driven. Potential participants would be able to choose a provider that best meets their needs and has a record of making sustainable placements.
* **Market share**: this is another area where the current providers have an allocated market share. There is the potential in future to run a service with no market share. Approved providers would be able to deliver services to any person with a disability who has a financial package aimed at getting them into work. This would also free providers up from the current geographic constraints of employment service areas.
* **Customers/Participants**: the relationship that providers currently have is essentially with the Federal government not with participants/customers. The future program could well have the central partnership being between the customer and provider. If a provider is able to provide the required services for the jobseeker then they will utilise that provider. To stay in business is essential to have a credible business model and the history of meeting participant needs.
* **Economic participation**: Looking at Minister Fifield’s recent CEDA presentation the future lies in engaging people with disabilities in such a way as to develop the required skills to find and maintain employment. The end goal being increased economic participation of people disabilities. To improve our effectiveness I believe we need to view this as continuum that would include assessment, training, voluntary work, work experience, work placement, wage subsidy, workplace modifications, post placement support, ongoing support, career development and outcome milestones. All these points would form a part of any future performance framework for providers.

These suggestions represent a radical departure from the current program driven service to a consumer driven environment. If we are to make substantial inroads into increasing the economic participation of people with disabilities will need to look at such options closely.

**What can help reduce barriers for employers hiring people with disability?**

There needs to be tax breaks for employers who employ people disabilities. This will work as a financial incentive particularly as we enter a period when there is a potential reduction in the labour force due to baby boomers retiring.

**How can we promote the benefits of employing people with disability?**

There needs to be a national advertising campaign similar to those around health issues such as smoking and depression. This campaign should highlight the diversity of successful employment placements secured by people with disabilities across a wide range of industries and disability types. This would go some way to challenging stereotypes regarding disability and work that are often found in the workplace. This work is done on an individual basis by our employment consultants every day but there needs to be a much broader approach that focuses on the great outcomes that are being achieved every day by people disabilities supported by disability employment providers.

**Pathways to other services**

**How effective are the pathways into these services?**

In general pathways have not been very effective. There has been a lot of silo behaviour. In particular the relationship between the school education system and disability employment providers has not been strong. The process which entails taking on students in their last six months of year 12 is too late in their school career to be beneficial. There needs to be involvement at a much earlier stage if we are to develop successful transition programs into open employment.

**How well do these programmes work together to support people with disability throughout their life-course, including for conditions episodic in nature?**

There needs to be a continuum approach to the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce. This process needs to be commencing in primary school at least. There needs to be more involvement disability employment providers within the education system at least from year nine. Vocational education for people disabilities needs to start at this point. It needs to be delivered by professional services that understand placement support to carry out the work. Disability employment providers can do this work more effectively than the school system.

Working with participants who have episodic conditions is challenging within the current Des system. A future system that is able to use NDIS packages with specialist mental health providers in tandem with disability employment services will improve the participation of people with more significant mental health conditions. Partnerships need to be developed now so that when the NDIS comes into full roll-out we are able to provide support to these people both in the workplace and in all other aspects of their lives.

**Are there other services which could assist people with disability to find a job?**

Programs such as “fitted for work” provide business clothing and preparation the interviews. These need to be expanded. They are currently only available for females and they need to be available for men as well.

The current situation with training results in people being persuaded to complete certificate level training with dubious training providers. The result is a meaningless qualification that precludes them from completing certificate training at the same or lower levels in meaningful courses. There needs to be a total review of this process to ensure that vulnerable people are not persuaded to complete short term low quality courses with no outcomes. There needs to be the flexibility to override this in the interests of ensuring the appropriate skilling up of participants. This will ensure more participants are able to enter skilled employment.

**What scope is there to move employment services to an individualised funding model?**

The transition to individually based funding model could be successful for employment services. In the first instance he would need to be with those who voluntarily on programme and in receipt of disability support pension. This could account for 20 to 30% of current case loads. If these participants had individual packages and could choose a disability employment provider who they believed would deliver employment outcomes it would be a very strong driver of quality service provision. There would have to be attention paid to the commitment of the individual to the service they have chosen. To have participants moving from one service to another frequently could cause problems for all involved. I believe we need a level of commitment for a period of service - e.g. 26 weeks as a minimum. This would give service providers enough time to show what they were able to achieve both in preparation to employment and placement. This would provide greater flexibility for all stakeholders as it would not be reliant on allocation of market share or geographic boundaries. The success of providers would rely upon the delivery of good quality employment service to participants and sustainable outcomes. This consumer driven approach would ensure that providers to deliver what they promise would prosper.

As regards those participants with compulsory participation requirements it would be much harder to roll-out individualised funding model. There are currently participants who openly say that they will not be gaining employment and have no intention of doing anything except the bare minimum to obtain their Centrelink benefit. If this cohort were to receive individual funding packages I see great difficulties in ensuring compliance and sustainable outcomes. This area needs a lot of planning & consultation work.

Services in areas such as education, health and income support all play a role in the ability or willingness of people with disability to gain employment. This also includes services for carers and family members, including income support payments and employment support

**How can elements of the disability support system better link with employment support to improve employment outcomes for people with disability?** There are a number of elements of the current disability support system that could be changed and improve outcomes for people with disability

1. Participants have disincentives to get off payments – they need to keep concession card for longer due to cost of medications (many have advised its they would be working to pay for meds)
2. Bring in mandatory job search/resume writing/work skills etc. training – enabling job seekers to do more rather than provider doing everything.
3. When evaluating income earned through employment there needs to be better recognition of the barriers faced by people with disabilities in the sliding scale of benefit they receive. Participants need to retain more of their benefit during the first six months of employment particularly those on disability support pension. If this is not the case the gains of obtaining paid employment may be small and work as a disincentive for job seekers coming off such benefits as the disability support pension.

**Are there other contextual factors of the jobseeker that should be considered?**

**Issues around the duration of the Des programme for participants** - the Des program last only 18 months and there is enormous pressure to gain outcomes often for people with multiple barriers to employment who have been out of the workforce for many years. It is our experience that in a sizeable number of cases participants will need more than one rotation of the Des program to gain a quality sustainable employment outcome. The pathway could include training, work experience, social outcomes linked to potential employment (EG gaining a drivers licence), a number of casual non-reclaimable employment positions and finally the person has the skill set and clear career goals to secure a quality sustainable outcome. These milestones need to be recognised in any performance framework. This pathway process may take a number of years. There is no reflection of this in the current performance framework. In fact service providers are penalised if they do not get full outcomes within 18 months. This needs to change in any future iteration of DES.

**Performance**

**How can DES providers better support people with disability in the workplace?**

For certain groups of participants on job support is an appropriate model particularly in the early stages of employment. We use this to teach tasks & often more importantly to build relationships with employers. The DES becomes the effective conduit between the new worker and the employer. Such relationship building has seen more jobs succeed and in cases where a job was going to be lost there have been jobs saves that sometimes have also resulted in additional placements with the same employer.

**How can DES providers better support employers?**

Disability employment providers need to spend resources in establishing and maintaining employer contacts particularly once a job has been secured.

DES providers are often asked by employers for suitable candidates for particular roles. The current competitive nature of the DES program means that we have a restricted pool of candidates within our particular caseload. There needs to be a system developed that would encourage and reward cooperation between providers with the main goal being providing employers with a range of candidates. The NDRC program can make this work at a large industry level but the bulk of our placements are small to medium enterprises

**How can the employment service model be improved to help providers deliver better support?**

The current DES model is so prescriptive in outcomes and milestones that it does not cater for the needs of job seekers with substantial barriers and employers with limited job offerings.

There needs to be a continuum of employment outcomes not just the 13 and 26 week. If a person with substantial barriers is able to get five hours a week in paid employment this should be recognised in some form as a significant step forward. By the same token an employer might be willing to offer a small number of hours initially. If this does not meet the participant’s benchmark then there is no recognition for any of the stakeholders involved in negotiating what could be an important stepping stone in a person's career. The other area that needs attention is career development

**Career Development**: The current system does not think to encourage career development for people with disabilities. It is basically a system that rewards providers for putting a person into the first available job and it lasting to 26 weeks. Once in that job there is no scope within the current contract’s performance framework for furthering a career. However within the disability service standards there is a focus on choice including career development. This needs to be reflected in any future performance framework.

**Does DES need to be redesigned to operate in an NDIS environment?** To operate in an NDIS environment that DES program needs to be completely redesigned. The principles of lifelong support is need to be factored into any future disability employment program with flexible outcome assessments that will measure broader milestones in the current 13 and 26 week focused program.

**Increasing the waiting 52 week outcomes weighting within any future performance framework.** The existing performance framework system still favours those providers who are able to achieve large numbers of 13 and 26 week outcomes. If sustainable ongoing employment is to be the real focus of this program an increased waiting within any future performance framework on 52 week outcomes would drive the desired behaviour in providers.

**Can we improve support for people moving out of ADEs into open employment?** The recent budget announcement of a two year concurrency period for those wishing to move from an ADE into open employment is a great step. This needs to be built upon in any future of disability employment program to include a period of pre-employment skill development as part of the transition into mainstream employment. The two year concurrency program needs to be available to all those who work in an ADE.

**How can ADEs operate as viable businesses?** Many ADEproviders have an overreliance on government funding. This model has been in place for decades. Those providers who actually run viable businesses use their government funding in a very different way. Our own organisation uses government funding only for the payment of support workers’ wages. There needs to be a total restructure of the ADE sector that may involve closure of organisations that operate non-viable businesses. For many the quantum leap from their current model to a viable business model is just too much to achieve. It would then be reasonable to open up the sector to viable businesses/ social enterprises that could employ people with disabilities using a suitable wage tool such as the SWS. In a post 2018 NDIS environment participants would then be able to choose a suitable provider and earn a meaningful wage.

**Support for Employers**

**Supports for Employers: Employment Assistance Fund, JobAccess, Supported Wage System, Wage Subsidy Scheme, National Disability Recruitment Coordinator and Job in Jeopardy Assistance**

**Are employers aware of these supports?**

The awareness level of employers is not good in spite of all the work done by disability employment providers on a daily basis. A lot more work needs to be done in the area of marketing. See response below

**How can supports help achieve long-term employment for people with disability?**

Support such as wage subsidy, workplace modifications and the supported wage system all contribute in a positive way to people with disabilities achieving long-term employment outcomes. However the wage subsidy amount of $1650 has not changed since the 1990s. There needs to be a significant increase in this subsidy especially for small to medium enterprises that have very limited cash flow and cannot afford the loss of production that may result from employing a person with significant barriers. A more realistic wage subsidy would make this a more attractive package especially for SME employers.

**Are the support needs of large employers different to the support needs of small employers?**

Supports of SME’s in our experience rely more on the provision of on job support. This is often due to limited staff numbers/ resources available to train new workers. The SME’s also use wage subsidies more often as they need the financial boost that offsets the lower productivity of the new worker.

**What other supports or approaches could increase employment participation of people with disability?** I believe there needs to be multiple pronged marketing approaches that clearly show the benefits of employing people with disabilities:

1. A national campaign funded by the Federal government to show in a graphical manner the benefits of employing people with disabilities. There are plenty of good news stories of placements all across Australia many with video footage.
2. There needs to be a continuation of the good work done by disability employment providers across many industries and business representative forums particularly in the small to medium enterprise area
3. The third prong to this approach should be a ramping up of the NDRC program to include substantial marketing/publicity campaign aimed at big business.

These strategies would ensure that more businesses were aware of the merits of employing a person with a disability and the existence of disability employment providers. Currently this awareness is at a low level and spite of their everyday work done by employment consultants and marketers within DES services.

**Other Supports for People with Disability**

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

**In what way do you think the NDIS can support employment outcomes for people with disability?**

The current Des program is designed in such a way that people with more significant disability cannot receive adequate levels of support within the funding framework. This is particularly so around areas of personal care. The NDIS in conjunction with a more flexible disability employment program could offer opportunities to a whole cohort of people with disabilities are currently missing out. That is those people with more significant disability where just getting up & travelling to work to make the whole process non-viable. Using NDIS support packages those people would be able to work with disability employment providers to provide an overarching support package which dealt with both the employment needs and personal support needs of the individual. Similar to the individually supported jobs programme in the 1990’s. This is the type of support that we would be able to offer in conjunction with the NDIS.

**What do you think we can learn from the NDIS to improve job services for people with disability?** The NDIS is truly individually focused. Packages are developed around a person's needs. Any future disability employment program needs to be driven by individual need rather than program drivers. There needs to be an overarching lifetime approach to employment in the same way that the NDIS addresses the needs of people with disability over the whole lifetime. This would involve a lot more cooperation between service providers in education, disability day programs, ADE’s, TTE programs, mental health organisations, accommodation providers, training providers, employers and social enterprises. This would mean a move away from the highly competitive program driven employment services to a much more collaborative approach. The star rating system is a part of this that would need to disappear as it does not drive the best outcomes for people with disabilities particularly in the areas of personal support needs & career development. There needs to be a performance framework that measures a broad range of outcomes/milestone over a person’s life/career.

**Personal Helpers and Mentors (PHaMs)**

**What more can be done to assist people with mental illness to find a job?**

Building of partnerships between disability employment providers and local mental health services is a proactive method of assisting people with mental illness to find employment. Many of these mental health organisations will be looking to the NDIS to provide support services to their clients. Our organisation is working with one such provider so that we will be able to target people with more significant mental health conditions who need a level of support that is beyond that provided by the current DES programme. The use of NDIS individual support packages will make this possible .In this way we will be able to provide overarching support to an individual around all the support needs both in and out of employment. This will provide a much more stable environment from which sustainable employment can be achieved.

**Social enterprises -should have a strong place in post 2018 Des -**this is one way of increasing the numbers of people with mental health conditions in employment within a job market that is very limited particularly in terms of entry level positions. Social Enterprises often allow for 25% of their staff to come from disadvantaged backgrounds including people with disability. These organisations by building skills & confidence act as a springboard to a person’s career into the broader open employment market.

**What more can be done to support people with mental illness in the workplace?**

This has been a consistent area of difficulty as the majority of participants do not wish to disclose their disability to the employer. The provision of support services outside of the workplace is where most of the work occurs. In order to provide support within the workplace there needs to be a continuing de stigmatisation of mental health issues across all areas. Highlighting success stories as part of an overall marketing campaign would help in addressing this problem.

**Life-course and Diversity**

**Are there particular milestones which have a positive impact on employment prospects for people with disability?** There are a number of milestones that are currently not measured that are significant in the lives of people with disability working towards economic participation. Starting with the education system there needs to be a significant increase in vocational education for all people with disabilities starting in primary schools. It needs to be an option on their (student & parents) radar. Later in school there needs to be meaningful vocational placement models around work experience related to potential career options. This could involve disability employment providers working with students from year eight or nine onwards. A similar system used to exist in Western Australia that was called “structured work place learning”. Completion of meaningful vocational work while in school is a significant milestone that people without disability have access to but this same opportunity is often denied to people with disabilities.

A well-structured transition to employment (TTE) program is important once the student has finished at 12 years of education. The involvement of disability employment providers with transition to employment providers is crucial in ensuring an effective transition into the workplace.

Once in the workplace there are issues around benchmarks. The current system is very prescriptive and is not representative of the true milestones for the participants we work with. For someone who has never been in the workplace or has been out of it for a long time a five-hour paid employment placement is a significant milestone. This needs to be in recognised in any future performance framework. Participants often increase their hours up over a period of time. Sometimes this period can be years and involve career development and training. Each point on this continuum needs to be recognised. Any system that rewards a single placement and does not account for career development fails to recognise that people disabilities have the same career development aspirations as the rest of society.

**What issues need to be considered in relation to specific groups of people with disability?**

People with mental health conditions need to be given specific consideration due to the often site cyclic nature of their disability. Milestones for this cohort need to allow for this difference. The path to sustainable employment can involve small successes followed by an episode that results in loss of a job. That process can form part of the consideration for the next placement. In this way future employment success can be built on a previous series of short placements. Any future performance framework needs to allow for this.

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July 2015