Submission to the National Disability Employment Framework -Issues Paper

May 2015

1. **Overview**

My opinions on the issue of disability employment come from three experiences:

1. I am the mother of a young man with mild intellectual disability who has struggled to find and keep work since leaving school at 18. He is 32yrs old.
2. I have a sister who also has an intellectual disability who has been employed in open employment for the past 25yrs. She is 53yrs old.
3. I worked in disability advocacy for 18 yrs.

Therefore my views stem from real life, personal experience and are not anecdotal in nature.

It is a good thing that the Govt is looking at this issue, however, given my experience with Govt reviews over the past twenty years, it is imperative that the issues that are identified are actually addressed and not ignored as have been so many times in the past by successive Governments.

It is my intention to use both my son and my sister as examples throughout this submission as both have had very different experiences within the employment environment since leaving school and I think there are a couple of very good reasons for this.

My sister was born in 1960 and was schooled in a special school. At 16yrs, she finished school and was placed in a sheltered workshop where she worked for a number of years. She was very unhappy in this environment and my parents sought something better for her.

In the 80’s the idea of supporting people with disability in open employment entered the arena and my sister was linked with one of the first job support agencies set up in Sydney and they assisted her into a position in open employment and she remains in open employment today, 25yrs later. She loves her work and has had various roles over time but has remained in the open employment market.

My son was born in 1982. He started school in a special school. He then spent all of his primary schooling in an IM class in a mainstream school, but then moved to our local mainstream high school for years 7 – 10. He moved out of the special education environment completely which was my doing. I didn’t believe the special education environment was doing him any good.

On leaving school, he was linked to the first of many Disability Employment service providers. Our experience with these providers was terrible. They were inept, unprofessional and absolutely hopeless at supporting my son to find suitable, enjoyable, meaningful work. They placed him in numerous completely unsuitable roles which he hated and from which he was sacked on a number of occasions. This did his confidence and self esteem huge damage. He was labeled ‘work resistance’.

My son and I found him his first job and most other jobs he has had since. We found it easier, even though it wasn’t, to do it ourselves rather than subject him to the pointless processes that were required for him to remain a ‘client’ within the disability employment service sector and we were not prepared to put up with him being placed into jobs which were not right for him. Because of this, he and I were thought to be ‘difficult’ and were treated accordingly.

Over the years I have formed the view that back in the 80’s when the focus was firmly on getting people with disability into the open employment market, was a better time. Since then other elements have come into play which have had unhelpful, unintended consequences.

I think the option of ‘community participation programs’ which do not and in fact, cannot, have employment outcomes have led to a ‘parking’ of people who previously could have been found jobs, into meaningless, life wasting, activity based programs.

I also believe the move from having specific, stand alone, disability employment services, to them all being generalist services with a disability support arm, has led to the dilution of expertise and focus which is absolutely essential if we are to get people with disability into the workforce.

I have also seen too much focus on ‘training’ which leads to nowhere. People are trained in skills they are then never given the opportunity to use…all pointless and time and money wasting. It is so soul destroying to be constantly on the training treadmill but never getting off into a real job.

My son is currently employed as a casual, which provides him with no job security at all. But it is the best that can be found for him at the moment (according to the DES he is currently linked to).

His experience over the past 12 months while unemployed has been awful. He has only managed to stay afloat due to my presence in his life and my ability to support him financially when he needed it.

God help anyone who doesn’t have a supportive family behind them. Many processes conspire to keep people poor and dependent on either the Govt or their families. Many families will not have the resources to support an unemployed family member who is an adult living away from home.

**Newstart**: My son was deemed eligible for Newstart back in Nov 2014. This gave him $609.47 a fortnight to live on. He pays $300 a fortnight rent and has a car to run and a phone which is essential when job searching. He often did not have money for food or to pay for his car when rego and insurance was due. That is where his family helped. If we had not had the financial capacity to assist him, he would then have been without a car which would have limited his job seeking capacity even further.

Newstart is completely inadequate for anyone who is no longer living in the family home. It might be enough for an 18yr old on first leaving school but is not anywhere adequate for a person paying rent, running a car and having day to day living costs.

**Recommendation 1**: Newstart must be reviewed to provide each individual with a sufficient allowance on which they can live according to their circumstances.

**Centrelink**: I am struggling to know where to start when it comes to describing the struggles we had with the Centrelink processes. I am an intelligent, diligent, sensible, patient, capable person and I found Centrelink almost impossible to navigate. My son does not stand a chance, therefore I manage everything on his behalf (with his permission of course).

I am always present at every meeting my son has with Centrelink as he does not have the quick mind to assist with the mindfield that Centrelink is for the everyday person.

Having to spend 50mins waiting on the phone to get a simple questioned answered would not be possible for a person with a pre-paid mobile. I am able to do it from my land line, but simply shouldn’t have to!! What business would allow that to be the experience for their ‘customers’?

I have now mastered the on-line processes that enable income reporting etc. but it took great perseverance and a lot of time and enquiries to get it right. Many Centrelink customers will not have the time, capacity or the resources that I have at my disposal.

1. **Response to the Issues Paper**
2. **Workforce participation of people with disability**

Questions:

What can improve employment outcomes for people with disability?

What can help reduce barriers for people with disability seeking employment?

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

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

I completely disagree with the statement that there are ‘low levels of unemployment’ (of people with disability). I believe that the figures are very skewed by reports that count people ‘actively seeking work’ as employed!!! This is complete nonsense but during my advocacy work, I was party to conversations with senior staff from the Commonwealth Govt who clearly stated this as fact.

If you don’t actually have a job, you are unemployed…full stop.

**Underemployment** is just as problematic. Many of my friends who have sons and daughters with disability have really struggled to get them full time or even part time jobs. They are often provided with 10 – 12 hrs of work a week which is not nearly enough.

My sister is currently employed 12 hrs a week, but she could work at least 20 hrs a week but the employer won’t increase her hours and the job support agency won’t push them on it because she is ‘lucky’ to have a job at all (their words not mine).

**Job and skill matching:** When my son met with this current DES provider we provided then with a list of jobs and industries he was interested in pursuing. He has worked in manufacturing warehouses for the past 12yrs and is really wanting something different. The casual job he now has is working in a factory!!!! None of the jobs he was interested in were pursued and because he needs an income, he accepted the factory work…he is caught in a no win situation.

**Barriers to Workforce Participation**

**Employability skills:** not one of the DES providers that my son has been linked to has made any suggestion re training that he could do to assist him to be more ‘employable’.

**Stereotypical jobs:** Little thought is given to employment options outside those that have been traditional for people with disability. Hospitality ie McDonalds, paper shredding, factory work etc. More needs to be done around the concept of ‘crafting’ employment roles for people. Much more needs to be done to engage employers in freeing up tasks that could be crafted into a role for someone.

**Recommendation 2:** Set up a Taskforce to explore all the necessary elements required to engage, encourage and support employers in the employment of people with disability.

Another barrier to employment is the lack of expertise in the workforce employed by DES providers to supposedly support people into work. At no point have I ever come away impressed by the knowledge and skill set of the people assigned to support my son. Quite the contrary…I am always very concerned and disappointed and come away thinking that we are just better off managing all this ourselves.

1. **Principles for Changes to Disability Employment Services**

Questions:

Do you agree with these as the underlying set of principles for change?

Are there other principles you would include?

I support wholeheartedly the statement that there is a ‘*need for greater emphasis on training and job satisfaction and suitability, over job placement’*.

I also would suggest that much more expertise around job crafting is required. Most people would not know what this is. It is needed in the DES system so that the service can talk to employers about the benefits of crafting a position for a person who will be a great employee.

**Self employment opportunities.**

I also think that more emphasis and expertise is needed around the development of self employment opportunities for people. Assisting people to set up their own businesses if that is what they are wanting. It isn’t always going to be possible to support someone into an existing workplace, so supporting them to set up their own small business that suits their interests, time frames and support networks would be a great step forward.

For some people, existing workplaces are never going to be suitable environments for them, so rather than deciding the person is unemployable, it would be better to create something that works for them. It is time to think outside the traditional employment mindset of ‘placing a person into a position’.

**Income support.**

I realise that income support falls outside the parameter of this paper but the impact on unemployed people with disability who are not eligible for the disability support pension cannot be ignored.

**Recommendation 3: *Adequate financial support while job seeking must be made available.***

1. **Current Service Overview**

Questions:

How effective are the pathways into these services?

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

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

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

I don’t like the concept of a continuum of service, as too many people take it literally. There are many people who could work in open employment who are slotted into specialist supported environments simply because of their level of support need. No assumptions should be made on support needs alone. Some people with very high support needs want to work in open employment and should be supported to do so regardless of their support requirements. However I’ve spoken to many parents who have been told that because their son or daughter has high needs a specialist supported environment is all they can aspire to.

One of the main concerns I have with the emphasis on the NDIS is that not everyone with a disability will be eligible for it. What will happen to those people?

My son is the perfect example. Diagnosed with developmental delay and mild ID at a young age, he has been eligible for special schooling and disability employment support but he will never be eligible for the Disability Support Pension or the NDIS. So, what is his future going to look like??? He will always require support around his employment as he learns at a much slower rate than his same age peers and the older he gets the harder it is getting for him to find suitable, rewarding work.

I think for people like my son, an **individualized funding model** would be ideal if adequately funded. If he could be allocated a budget, we would take on the task of finding him work. He and I are the experts on what he is looking for and what his capabilities are and the type of work he would be great at.

What we would do with funding:

* Employ someone to work specifically with my son to job seek (at 32yrs of age it is not appropriate for me, his mother, to be with him at job interviews and to be making calls on his behalf)
* Run a scoping exercise re industries and jobs he would like to have a go at
* Craft a role around a particular position description found job searching
* Approach employers and ‘sell’ my son’s skill set to them in relation to the position they have advertised
* Support my son into the role until he knows the job well enough for the support person to withdraw.

There are a number of elements to this idea that are currently practiced within the supported employment sector, the difference being that the person supporting him is employed by him and is there just for him and will become an expert in what he is looking for and the supports he will need. They are not going to just ‘place’ him in a job to make the statistics look good.

This model might cost more upfront but if the end result is a full time job that a person stays in for years, the savings to Govt in income support, and job seeking infrastructure and services would be worth it.

**Recommendation 4:** Trial individualized funding for job seekers who identify as having an interest in the model.

1. **Employment Services in Context**

**Questions**

How can elements of the disability support system better link with employment support to improve employment outcomes for people with disability?

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

In my son’s life, getting his drivers license at the age of 28yrs made a huge difference to his capacity to seek work and attend interviews with Centrelink, his DES and potential employers.

He learnt to drive with my support. If he had been able to access learner driver support via his DES much earlier in his life he may have had an easier time of it.

He did attend a Driving Preparedness course at TAFE years ago, but it did not assist him with the actual behind the wheel learning that he required.

Where a person lives also impacts significantly on their employment. My sister moved from the family home 6 yrs ago into a home of her own. It is a rental property managed by a Community Housing Provider under a leasehold arrangement. We have had to be really strong around the location of her home at times of her having to move, as the housing provider doesn’t really understand the importance of the current location which we chose very deliberately.

My sister doesn’t and will never drive, so must be able to access public transport to get to her work. Without this, her employment would be instantly jeopardized.

She also needs to be able to access day to day things like a supermarket for shopping, a chemist for her medicines, the hairdressers etc. Without easy walking access to these things she would be much more dependent on her paid support (which comes from the Dept. of Aging, Disability and HomeCare). We have attempted to make her as independent from paid support as possible and it is short sighted of one arm of Govt not to take this into account as it will cost another arm of Govt more in the long run.

1. **Disability Employment Services (DES)**

**Questions**

How can DES providers better assist people with disability to prepare for and find a job?

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

How can DES providers better support employers?

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

Does DES need to be redesigned to operate in an NDIS environment?

My son’s current DES provider got him his current casual job in a factor environment. As I stated before, he was trying to get out of working in factories and we had many ideas of what else he would be interested in doing, but none of that came to anything. Once offered a well paying job, he needed to take it, casual or not, as he could not live on Newstart. He is caught between a rock and a hard place.

There are many things DES providers could do to assist people, but the most important thing is to listen to the persons dreams and aspirations and desires and take them seriously. I am always amazed at my son’s capacity to stay motivated and cheery in a world that never takes his wishes seriously. His resilience is amazing.

The paper identifies that current funding for DES providers will cease in March 2018. I presume that is because it is assumed the NDiS will take over. As I’ve identified before, my son will not be eligible for the NDiS and he will need support around employment for his whole life. What is going to be for him post 2018??

1. **Support for employers**

**Questions**

Are employers aware of these supports?

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

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

How can we encourage more engagement between employers and people with disability?

What other supports or approaches could increase employment participation of people with disability?

Most employers are not aware of the supports that are available to them, and in my experience with my son, they aren’t interested in them even when offered. They don’t seem to like the idea of having someone not of their staff, providing training and being present in the workplace. My son has had to manage without on the job support almost every time and mostly this has ended in him losing the employment because he really does need that initial support.

**Recommendation 5:** Large companies should be encourage to employ their own ‘on the job’ trainers to support people with disability into the workplace. It should be part of any large companies HR responsibilities. Perhaps as best practice, they could link with a local DES and offer jobs that might be of interest to people…how radical!!!