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Ensuring a strong future for supported employment December 2017

**Ability Works Australia’s response to questions posed in the discussion paper – March 2018**

1. ***Are there other principles, which should guide the Government’s policy direction for supported employment?***

Supporting those with moderate to high levels of support is important. Wage setting and funding mechanisms therefore need to reflect this aspect of ADE work. Future wage setting tools may ‘price out’ those with high support needs/low productivity if adequate subsidies are not provided, especially if these tools (or tool) only take into account productive output.

Whilst current funding arrangements see a mirroring of the Case Based Funding (CBF) system, ADEs have had to work considerably harder to maintain this funding base due to the additional ‘non employment’ factors surrounding the management of NDIS funding. Services are now having to liaise with a number of parties and resolve an inordinate amount of anomalies just to get back to ‘square one’ in terms of the funding they traditionally received. Whist it is understood that some of this relates to the nature of the change brought on by the scheme’s roll out and improvements can be made at a ‘systems’ level within organisations, it is apparent that some of the work that has been created will have to be managed by ADEs (and other providers mind you) as an ongoing concern. Future funding needs to reflect this additional impost.

Supported employment also needs to be more widely promoted as an option by the NDIA/LAC providers at the planning stage, as growth of the sector will not be possible without this pathway being more fully developed.

***2. What is a ‘good’ participation outcome for a supported employee and how can good outcomes be measured?***

A good participation outcome for a supported employee is one that meets their individual needs and capacity – e.g. working their preferred hours in a job and environment that fulfils their vocational interest. Financial reward is a factor, but not a significant driving motivator for most supported employees in our experience. A level of appropriate support is required to ensure that ‘good’ participation outcomes are achievable, as is ensuring that there is adequate operational activity within the ADE to support the preferred level of participation. Outcomes can be measured through direct interviews with employees and their families, satisfaction surveys, auditing processes and the like. Length of service and ADE employee retention rates can be other indicators.

***3. What do supported employees most value about working in an ADE?***

Having a sense of purpose and achievement is vitally important to supported employees. Being able to work in the community and have a job like their parents, siblings, friends etc is a powerful driver. Often we hear employees saying that they are “just like everyone else” when they reflect on having a job. Financial reward is a factor, but not a significant driving motivator for most supported employees in our experience. A sense of being and social connectedness are essentially life changing factors for our employees.

A quote from the parent of a supported employee “*Dridan had found his niche in the world - and is hopefully making a valuable contribution to society as well as giving his life some purpose”.*

***4. Why do most supported employees transition back to supported employment from open employment?***

Open employment may be an aspiration for some employees, but for those with moderate to high support needs, this is not always a practical option. Traditionally there has been an undercurrent that ADEs should be playing more of a transitional model in this respect, and this emphasis has potentially been disproportionate in the context of the cohort that ADEs support (as indicated in the discussion paper, DES providers service relatively few people living with an intellectual disability and this is because the competitive employment environment is less equipped to include and support this cohort than ADEs are).

Employees may transition back from open employment for a number of reasons: A lack of inherent and at time ‘invisible’ supports available in open employment, diminished social/peer support and ultimately open employment presenting a less ‘forgiving’ environment in terms of performance and expectations. Ultimately employees who cannot maintain roles in open employment would typically require higher levels of ongoing support than what can be practically and consistently provided in those environments.

A quote from a parent of a supported employee *“He did work experience in Coles Hawthorn and Foodworks East Ivanhoe. But he needs someone to supervise him and a normal workplace can’t afford that as they need to make money. They’d get annoyed with him as he can’t tell the difference between orange juice and mango juice when he had to stack shelves. Supported Employment is better for him”.*

***5. How can more supported employees be provided the opportunity to choose open employment?***

Again there may be an assumption that this is a desired outcome for a significant number of supported employees – this needs to be checked. If open employment is a desired outcome, then ensuring concurrent funding opportunities are supported while they explore options is important. Safety nets also need to be established ensuring that a return to the ADE environment is possible should the placement in open employment not be sustainable.

***6. Why is participant access to concurrent DES and ADE support services so low?***

Perhaps this is not widely understood by providers and employees/families etc? There are also insufficient linkages between ADEs and DES programs – segregation of funding arrangements a few years ago cemented that position (DSS/DEWR). Network meetings were once held that included ADEs, DES, DSS and other agencies. Perhaps they could be recommissioned and include NDIA, LAC and Support Coordination reps? DES providers may also be reluctant to refer people back to ADEs (or new participants who are not yet ready for open employment) as this may not count or even have a deleterious impact on ratings/organisational KPIs.

***7. What is the role a supported employer can play in building employee capacity for transition to open employment?***

By progressively building the employee’s confidence, experience and skills through work in the ADE and instilling a ‘work readiness’ approach in terms of what constitutes acceptable vocational behaviours. By identifying those employees who have the most potential for open employment and talking openly and positively about this as an option and bringing the employees stakeholder group along for the ride – addressing concerns and hesitations as may be required. Being able to advise the employee/family that return to the ADE is possible should a sortie into open employment not work out is also important. Most ADEs would have this as a ‘discussion’ point in the Individual employment plan process. Linking/establishing a relationship with a DES would also be beneficial to the process.

***8. What will attract NDIS participants to employment opportunities in the future?***

Flexible working hours, the provision of a variety of fulfilling roles, fair wage outcomes, good social/peer support opportunities, work that is tailored to the specific support and vocational needs of individuals. Employers that can also provide a degree of non-vocational supports or be able to refer people to other agencies that provide those supports may also be in a position of advantage, although ADEs have to be mindful of mission blur, especially in the NDIS environment where it is tempting to grow and look for opportunities to supplement/expand income streams.

***9. How are ADEs marketing their services to an expanded market of potential NDIS participants?***

ADEs need to maintain their existing/traditional network of referring agents – case management services, day placement providers, schools, DES providers (who have clients that they cannot place into open employment), mental health services etc.

Whilst doing this ADEs need to grow these traditional markets and explore the new emerging NDIS related ones, especially through Support Coordination agencies.

Generally NDIA and LAC planners need to promote the employment option at the planning stage, but it’s difficult to say how much influence ADEs can have in that space. This work probably needs to be done through a peak body such as NDS or the NDIA itself, given the focus of the NDIS around community and economic participation. There was talk of ‘employment champions’ being recruited and used by the NDIS, but there has been very little traction in this area from our understanding. The % of approved plans that have employment as an option are very low and this can’t all be about a lack of interest/motivation from participants – it comes down to participants being advised of all options – including the ADE option.

ADEs who offer a point of difference or could be considered ‘employers of choice’ are more likely to attract new participants in an uncapped environment. This could be assisted through the type and or variety of work on offer and of course by providing employment benefits that resonate with individuals (e.g. generous/above award entitlements).

Waiting for traffic to come was an option in a capped program, especially if employee turnover was low. If the desire is to provide an extended number of opportunities to people with disabilities and expand the operational capacity of the ADE, organisations now have to be much more pro-active in their marketing, so having a good social media presence, an attractive and effective website and being ‘active’ in the desired cohort geographic areas amongst potential referring agents is becoming increasingly important.

***10. What is the range of NDIS supports that ADEs currently offer?***

Our understanding is that most standalone (those organisations who pre NDIS did not offer accommodation or activity/recreationally based services e.g.) ADEs are maintaining their presence in the ‘finding and keeping a job’ space. Some have started to dabble into non-traditional/non vocational areas, but ADEs need to be aware of mission drift and the costs and distractions associated with this.

We are working to further our understanding of the SLES program and how this can be incorporated within the suite of services offered by ADEs. This is appealing as it relates directly to employment and employment readiness.

***11. What costs would be involved for ADEs that choose to:  
a) reform to more open employment models?***

***b) redevelop as service providers offering other NDIS supports?***

***c) specialise in the provision of employment support as a   
non-employer?***

If by ‘more open employment models’ reference is being made to a more integrated employment setting with a greater mix of people with and without disabilities working together or work enclave type set ups (ADE work groups working in other businesses), then there would be a number of factors to influence an increase to the organisation’s cost structure across the employment of additional ‘co-workers’ and supervisory/support staff (re enclave) models.

If ADEs were to offer other NDIS supports they would need to employ the staff (perhaps specialised) to provide those services and set up and maintain the systems to support these activities. Management structures may need to alter/expand to support this diversification.

If augmenting traditional ADE activities with brokering out specialist employment support as a non-employer, then a network of employers/customers would need to be established, so there would need to be specific business development activities in this space. If the ‘parent’ employer was a non ADE, then the ADE would sub contract out their staff to provide the in house support services that the employer may require. Unless the host employer had a number of employees in the same location, it would be difficult to see how this would be a viable concern.

***12. Should the Government have a role in supporting new market entrants and start-ups in the short-term?***

If the new entrant to the ADE market had a solid business case and could demonstrate participant interest/need, then support from Government in the short term would be a reasonable consideration. It would be important that like opportunities for development were also provided to existing providers.

***13. What investment, or industry adjustment will promote viable expansion in the employer/provider market?***

Further emphasis and support for social/sustainable procurement is important here – especially for Government and tier one corporates who have arguably a greater opportunity to ‘lead the way’ in this respect. Quotas or targets for Govt./orgs to meet in terms of allocating work to ADEs/social enterprises are integral to this and further promotion of a Standard like ISO 20400 will help to enhance the interest in and commitment to purchasing decisions that have a positive impact on communities and disadvantaged people.

If there are sufficient commercial opportunities in an operational respect, existing ADEs and new entrants will have the confidence to support an increasing number of employees with disabilities. Employees with disabilities will be attracted to ADEs that can offer ongoing work and at levels that meet individual needs (up to 5 days per week for those who are interested and capable of working these hours).

***14. How could employer/providers share learnings of their success and failures within a competitive market?***

There has always been consideration within the ADE sector to maintaining the balance between collaboration and competition. In the NDIS environment, the pendulum has swung further towards ‘collaboration’ than ever before as organisations develop their NDIS competency and learn from each other in this space. If an ADE is confident in their offerings to both their employees/NDIS participants and their commercial clients, and they offer sufficiently in terms of ‘points of difference’, they will be less inclined to be concerned about the ‘competition’ element. The development of relationships with other like-minded organisations is important and trust needs to be developed through a series of interactions that move parties progressively away from the ‘competitor’ territory.

Collaboration through networks/network meetings and through a peak body (such as NDS) are also helpful mechanisms in this respect. Promotion of successes through a forum such as Buyability might also be of advantage to a sector wide audience.

***15. How can wage supplementation be better targeted?***

The status of the environment post the completion of the current FWC deliberations into the possible amendments to the SES Award (2010) has to be fully understood before this question can be truly addressed.

1. ***How can the NDIS enable an employment first approach in planning?***

The NDIS needs to ensure that planners are fully versed in the options available to participants and ensure that ADEs are included in the suite of options discussed at the very initial stages of the planning journey, even if a participant does not have an employment history or an obvious bent towards employment. There are many people for example who have spent long periods of time participating in ‘activity’ based programs that have the capacity to work in ADEs and when given the opportunity or at least provided with some insight with respect to the option, may choose to investigate this pathway. Assessment and identification of employment potential should be an important and inherent part of the NDIS planning process.

Planners also need to be able to identify and potentially work through ‘roadblocks’ to employment transition, which may include a lack of confidence from the participant, concerns from families, over reliance on existing provider arrangements etc.

1. ***How do current assessment processes drive the inclusion of employment supports in an NDIS participant’s plan?  
   a) Are existing employment assessment processes appropriate for NDIS participants?***

It is uncertain as to whether existing processes actually do this. Perhaps more work needs to be done with respect to potential supported employees and identifying/measuring their capacity to work at the NDIS planning stage.

1. ***Are there different approaches to planning that could be explored for different groups of supported employees (e.g. younger workers, established workers, retirement transition)?  
   a) How could SLES better support school leavers to build skills and confidence in order to move from school to employment?***

SLES could play a transitional role by providing the mechanism for school leavers to not only develop a set of work ready skills and attitudes but to ‘try before they buy’ into an ADE environment. A complimentary work experience model as such.

Planners also need to introduce the employment related conversation (regardless of the participant’s age/prior experience and activities etc) into the early stages of the planning process and provide options for supported employment based on a sound knowledge of the sector. At this point in the NDIS’ development, it would appear that this sound knowledge is still being developed, so this growth needs to be supported by the agency and through the training, information and support that they provide to their planners. Site visits from NDIA/LAC providers would be warmly received by most ADEs.

1. ***What role could or should an NDIA Local Area Coordinator or planner have in linking participants to an employment opportunity?***

The NDIA planner or LAC should be responsible for providing the concepts around the employment option and in the absence of Support Coordination perhaps then play a more direct role in the referral activity. Exploring options and making direct referrals may be particularly important for the cohort of potential employees with intellectual disability who may initially find some of the concepts around employment challenging to grasp or who may struggle to take the ‘next steps’ independently and in the absence of other stakeholder (e.g. family) support.

1. ***What role could or should NDIA market stewardship have in developing a market with a range of employment, other support, or participation options for existing supported employees?***

It is felt that natural market forces will suffice in this respect. That said, funding levels, across supported employment and other services have to reflect the ‘cost of support’ and provide opportunities for enterprises to develop and maintain viable operations which translate to being able to offer ongoing and quality services to participants.

In the ADE example, even if it is argued that the traditional funding levels set around the DMI/assessed support needs of employees are reasonable, something needs to be done to address the costs associated with the increased red tape/administration/sleuthing etc that the transition to the NDIS has created and will probably embed as a part of ADE functioning in this new paradigm.

As the majority of ADEs do not have a national footprint, there is a need for an organisation to coordinate ADEs or act in a project management capacity, when a potential customer requires a national service. For this to occur, the body would need to find a way to ensure uniformity of service delivery, so participating ADEs are not subject to potential damage from non-uniform quality and service delivery. This role could potentially be played by NDS Buyability.

Shane Daniel

Ability Works Australia

General Manager – Employment,

Workplace Training & Support

Sue Boyce

Ability Works Australia

Chief Executive Officer

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