ENSURING A STRONG FUTURE FOR SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT

ADE’s have provided opportunities for people with significant challenges in safe environments for many decades. We believe that there is a place and, in fact, an urgent need for reform in this area but there must be a solution that allows people to continue to find a safe place to work in and to prosper.

Achieving the supported employee’s individual short term goal and career aspirations would be a ‘the desired outcome or in addition to learning new skills in a supported environment. This may be being able to develop skills, talents and contribution through meaningful activity of the individual in a supported environment initially. A measure could be introduced relating to the transition to open employment by the volume of referrals to the DES program.

The ultimate participation outcome would be to gain open employment following a period of supported employment for all that have chosen this as their goal. Leading to financial independence for the individual and giving more choices and opportunities to fulfil other ambitions in life. This could be measured through reporting mechanisms from ADE’s and through employee surveys.

There are numerous factors that would contribute to ‘fall offs’ from open employment and transitioning back to supported employment including:

* the preparation plan and risk plan (inclusive of disability/health maintenance- on the job needs; expectations of both the employee and employer; adjusting to the new workplace, etc.) is not robust in design for the employee prior to commencing the open employment
* inability to make friends with workmates in open employment, feeling isolated and that they don’t fit in
* the lack of information and support in place to help the employee effectively deliver on their existing duties, such as making reasonable adjustments
* lack of on the job support, or timeliness of required intervention after placement in the employment
* lack of disability awareness of employer and other employees, that could be overcome through training in the workplace
* employer expectations and lack of knowledge of supporting a person with disability and able employees not having patience or understanding, pushing them aside to get the job done
* limited knowledge by employers of accessing JobAccess for adjustments in the workplace that may be required to sustain the position

Supported employees need to understand that opportunities do exist for those able to work in the open market. Supported employees can be provided increased opportunities if:

* collaboration and networking is increased between ADE, NDIS and DES providers
* Education occurs between ADE, NDIS and DES on each of their services particularly how participants are supported in open employment
* Participant’s understanding of the post placement support provided to them in open employment is improved. Meetings with the employer, participant, and consultants assist in gaining insight on how best to deal with any potential issues with minimal disruption to the workplace. and in addition to the participant understanding expectations and the support they will be given
* Understanding the gaps between supported and open employment in the local areas. By collaborating with local providers an innovative approach could be piloted to address the gaps making the transition smoother, thus participants have increased opportunity and desire to choose open employment.
* Local forums/open days that showcase “ability” in local areas, having supported employees in attendance could assist them also in choosing open employment

Like any workforce, transitioning from supported employment to open employment would mean turnover with the supported employer. Continuous turnover brings a range of issues such as reduced productivity and retraining etc. although this is “expected in a supported employer” there are KPI’s, etc. that would have to be met. Supported employers may hold on to more “abled” supported employees as productivity is higher.

With the landscape of supported employment changes affecting ADE’s some may be hesitant to potentially lose employees when they gain open employment through DES that meets the participant’s work capacity. Therefore, some ADE’s may not be positively promoting the concurrent programme of DES to their employees. Some ADE’s do not hold a thorough in-depth knowledge of the available DES services, this could be improved through government promotion and education.

Choice of open employment can be improved through promotion by government, NDIS providers, ADE’s and DES providers.

A visual brochure for supported employees, their families and carers could be developed to demonstrate how all providers link together to assist the employee gain open employment and the choice of supports that are on offer to them. For many it is hard to combine all the separate literature together to gain an overview of how the providers all fit together on their journey to open employment. There is definitely confusion since the introduction of NDIS, upcoming changes to ADE’s and the future DES model and how it all fits together.

Example: A visual roadmap with Icons that depict each service with a small brief of where and how they fit together.

* ADE’s develop workplace skills, experience and training in a work-like environment
* NDIS supports your Plan based on your goals – support with accessing community services, Assistive Technology; funded supports; Housing
* DES are experts in preparing for work, networking with employers, placing the individual into open employment and supporting them for up to 12 months.

All participants and aforementioned parties could be offered, for example, an educational promotional package relating to raising participants aspirations and gives advice on pathways into open employment opportunities including Path Internships for <25 year olds, work experience, traineeships and apprenticeships that can be accessed through support from DES providers.

Increasing employer opportunities is a key element in providing open employment opportunities, with some employers reluctant to give people with disability a chance. Some employers Jobfind have dealt with through DES do not feel that they have the knowledge, capacity or confidence to offer employment and some are concerned about how to support a person with disability in work. Education and promotion needs developing to ensure employers are ‘disability confident’ needs to be delivered.

Working with employers through promotion will aid in changing attitudes towards disability. Promoting awareness of the capabilities, contributions and potential of people with disability to build positive perceptions and contributing long term to shifting attitudes and outcomes, promoting equality and inclusion to create real and lasting change. Promotion needs to encourage employers to think differently about disability and to take action to improve how they attract, recruit and retain disabled workers.

Government promotion and education should include strengthening the ‘business case’ for inclusive practices and the benefits to business.

Raising aspirations of ADE employees may need to be a primary focus by the supported employer to increasing the volume of access to DES. There may need to be analysis undertaken on:

* How/or if ADE employees are supported by the employer on realising their potential an ambitions
* How/or if ADE employees are educated by the employer on the DES services available to them, to enable the employee to have a fully informed choice

Is there a requirement, or should there be a requirement for ADE’s to cover both of the points above to increase participation to the DES concurrent program.

Supported employers role should enable linkages for their employees with DES providers whilst the employee is working in the supported environment and gaining current skills and work-like routine to aid with transition.

Supported employees need to be offered choice and control including:

* A clear understanding of what opportunities are available and what is best suited to their needs/ability (choice and control).
* Specialist career counsellors to assist NDIS participants on the right path to achieve employment goals. Some participants may only able be to work in supported employment, some may need to commence in supported employment but with a view to transition to open employment and some may be eligible for open employment in the immediate future.
* Work experience programs increases the likelihood of a participant moving into sustainable employment within desired vocations. For example, an AMEP (Adult Migrant English Program) SLPET (Settlement Language Pathways to Employment and Training) course model, which includes 8 weeks of classroom tuition on workplace culture/employability skills etc. as well as 2 weeks of work experience in an open market employer. The programs are structured and supported and could be modified to people with disability.

Working with organisations who would like to raise their CSR profile to include inclusiveness. These organisations are likely to embed specialised programs into the organisation, not only for the participant but for all employees with programs including a “buddy” system for support.

The complementary servicing between DES and ADE’s needs to be promoted by government, NDIS, DES and ADE’s. This promotion needs to reach out to not only ADE employees but family, friends, carers and advocates to ensure the employees fully understand the opportunity that is available to gain open employment in their field of interest, whilst also maintaining their supported employment if they so choose.

In our experience offering a tailored, flexible and supportive service to participants preparing them for open employment and build self-confidence has raised aspirations in participants. Aspirations and self- confidence is a major barrier to employment in the majority of our participants when first registered.

Immediately following placements in open employment dedicated support is aligned with our risk assessment and with the individual’s need. Being responsive by offering immediate intervention to maintain the employment with both the participant and employer, sustains jobs.

With the new DES contract offering greater choice and control by people with disability it should encourage more direct referrals to the programme through collaboration between DES, ADE’s and NDIS providers. As a DES provider we aim to invite ADE’s and NDIS to all our expos, information days and functions to aid with building relationships and develop knowledge of all services between all parties.

We pose the question – Should ADE’s and/or NDIS have KPI to meet for referrals to the DES program where participant’s choice was to open employment?

Instilling belief in each individual that there is a job out there for them in their local community will attract NDIS participants to employment opportunities in the future. In addition to offering training and experience to build confidence in the participant and skills that meets the need of available local employment area opportunities. It is critical that skills and experience match local available job opportunities.

Education through promotion will aid greatly in attracting NDIS participants to employment opportunities. Promotion could include real life good news stories of other people with disability gaining open employment and how it has changed their life for the better.

Additionally stories of employers who welcome diversity in the workplace to give confidence to participants that they do have employment opportunities and encourage other employers of the benefits of diversity in the workplace.

Education may address some of the many incorrect beliefs witnessed firsthand that are held by participants and families, for example:

* ADE’s provide work for those unlikely to access open employment
* I will lose my DSP payment if I get a real job
* no one wants to hire me as I have a disability
* employers don’t hire people with disability if ‘normal’ people apply
* there are so many unemployed people in my area so I have no hope of getting a job as I have disability

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On the other side of the equation is the misconceptions about people with disability some employers hold. Again through ongoing education through promotion it will assist more employers to value diversity in the workplace and increase more flexible employment opportunities for people with disability.

An awareness of JobAccess available services, NDIS support, government wage subsidies to offset initial costs to the employer, DES post placement support service and DES available funding is not known by many employers we approach on a daily basis.

Wage increases costs in line with modern award would be incurred by ADE’s that choose to reform to more open employment models. For ADE’s that redevelop as service providers offering NDIS supports there would be Human Resource costs of recruitment for specialised staffing, training and on-boarding and where ADE’s specialised in the provision of employment support as a non-employer again there is an outlay for training expenses.

Yes the Government should have a role in supporting new market entrants and star-ups in the short term as the compliance, the services, the process and procedures can be a minefield. In the short term the government could have designated “Contract Advisors” for providers to access in a timely manner. Currently it can take time to obtain answers / assistance when needed. Advisors could come onsite and assess operations and provide relevant advice to ensure sustainability for new market entrants and start-ups.

To promote viable expansion in the employer/provider market investment could include a grant for companies to increase their CSR profile to include inclusion, and employment programs for people with disability. EG. IKEA and Coca-Cola

Although this is a competitive market regarding providers/employers there needs to be an increased level of collaboration which includes sharing of best practices and case studies, whether they are good news stories or learnings.

Quarterly meetings hosted by the Department (similar to DHS meetings), to bring together stakeholders from ADE, NDIS and DES providers as well as invitations to employers from the local areas would encourage discussions and information sharing and could include local industry updates.

Other ideas include development of an online forum or blog, for when cases are quite complex to seek advice, offer advice based on previous experiences or expertise and a providers annual national forum/conference for stake holders, to include guest speakers, workshops, outcomes of pilot programs, information on new pilot programs, government and industry updates..

NDIS could enable an employment first approach in planning by utilising the ‘work backwards’ approach to achieve the participant’s goal and the steps that would be required on the pathway to open employment. Open employment will not be achievable for every participant, but employment should be a possibility for every participant.

KPI’s to assist NDIS providers could be introduced and designing an NDIS dashboard for providers to access that measures monthly each providers’ open employment placements. This would be a transparent report to all NDIS providers and encourage performance in this area.

Different approaches are needed as it shouldn’t be a “one size fits all” approach to all groups of supported employees. People with disability is a cohort, but then so are the age groups i.e. the millennials, Generation X and the Baby Boomers. They are all specific cohorts, with specific traits that need to be considered. Supported employers need to have an understanding of how to support these various cohorts in the workplace.

By engaging with a DES provider early in the SLES program, the collaboration between SLES and the DES provider could see school leavers build skills, confidence and engage in employment much sooner. DES would assist with further education and training to enhance opportunities.

The NDIA could or should work as a stewardship with companies in the open employment market who would be open to discussions on offering supported employment opportunities i.e. as part of a possible grant process as stated early in the response paper.