



Disability Employment Australia response to the NDES consultation paper 2021



Disability Employment Australia response May 2021



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About Disability Employment Australia

Disability Employment Australia is the peak body for Australia's Disability Employment Services (DES). We are recognised internationally as the pre-eminent organisation representing, supporting and resourcing disability employment throughout Australia.

As a membership organisation, we represent the interests of stakeholders of disability employment throughout Australia to government bodies, as well as consumer and employer groups. Disability Employment Australia supports the Australian Government to deliver high quality employment support to people with disability in Australia.

We have a unique responsibility to foster excellence, innovation and flexibility of service within the Disability Employment Services program. We support our members to achieve best practice service provision in their role to find employment outcomes for people with disability. We advise, advocate, train, inform and undertake events to strengthen and promote the sector.

We believe in the right of every member of society to be fully included in the community and to have control over their own life choices. Participation in the open labour market is a crucial factor in realising these goals.

We strive to inspire, challenge and celebrate disability employment.

DEA has been a leader in the disability employment sector for a quarter of a century, and our membership encompasses 75% of the sector's providers. DEA has been at the forefront of informed debate with government through critical changes and developments including:

- moving from block to case-based funding
- developing the participant assessment model
- Centrelink taking over as the gatekeeper streaming participants to the appropriate service
- uncapping of DES
- moving from state-based support to a national representative peak body support
- establishing a Disability Employment Hall of fame
- developing the DES Essentials training package
- moving to five-year contracts
- the 2015-17 DES review
- advocating a National Disability Employment Strategy



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Introduction

Introduction

DEA applauds the Federal Government's historic establishment of a National Disability Employment Strategy. Since the late 1980s, federal and state governments have engaged with, and committed to, employment service assistance and supports for people with disability aspiring to work and a career. Governments have recognised that open employment is the critical gateway to social and economic independence. There have been successes with this approach and many significant, salient learnings. However, some factors continue to test and strain the critical step-change needed to close the 30-point workforce participation gap between people with disability and those without.

The National Disability Employment Strategy Consultation Paper states: "Employment and financial security continues to be an important issue for people with disability and should be a priority for the National Disability Strategy (NDS) 2021-2031"¹. The National Disability Employment Strategy (the Employment Strategy) will provide clear goals based on evidence, outcomes, solutions, practices and initiatives. Aligning the Employment Strategy with the NDS will strengthen its value and its impact.

The history of disability employment reforms and effect on participation rates for people with disability should be used as a critical assessment tool in the Employment Strategy to identify what should and should not be revisited.

The Employment Strategy is framed by a basic, critical truth: the many people with disability, even profound, working today and contributing to Australia's economic and social capital prove that disability is not a barrier to being active in society.

What we know from the history of disability employment is that successful outcomes are delivered where resources are aligned to support education and learning pathways that lead to employment, and where employers and people with disability are supported in workplaces to gain and maintain employment.

A key vehicle in improving employment outcomes for people with disability has been the services delivered under what is today known as the DES program, although reforms and changes to this program over many years have diluted its focus and diminished its possibilities.

The shift in resources from placement and support activities to administrative and compliance requirements is one example. Historical data shows around 15% of DES agency resources have been applied to management, administration and compliance. Today that figure is closer to 50%. DES must be for its participants and employers.

DSS has established a DES Taskforce to consider key strategic issues, challenges and opportunities for the current DES program, and to develop ideas for transforming DES. DEA is aware the context is the future of employment services. Notably DESE's jobactive into NESM; NDIS employment supports, SLES and the transformation of ADEs; mental health reforms; Community Development Programs as they relate to employment; and state-based employment initiatives. Similarly, we note that the employment services continuum and the Employment Strategy must align with the Australian Government Digital Transformation strategy and project.



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DES must be at the core of the Employment Strategy design and transformation. Those elements of good practice learned throughout the history of disability employment must be central to future efforts. Collaborative effort across the various levels of government is essential to achieving the national objective of improving the number of people with disability in jobs.

DEA is heartened by the consultation paper, in particular the four core priority areas. These are critical and require deeper thinking, arguments and ideas backed by demonstrable evidence and practical solutions with time-sensitive support. Improvements are required in all four priority areas to see improvements in employment outcomes and the workforce participation gap close. Improvements in just one of these priority areas alone would see employment outcomes increase, but any increases will be slight and difficult to sustain. However, improvements in all four, loosely interlinked, areas would see sharp increases in workforce participation rates. More importantly, the improvements would be sustainable. That is the weight of the Employment Strategy.

¹ Australian Government Department of Social Services 2021, *National Disability Employment Strategy – Consultation Paper*, Australian Government Department of Social Services, Australia.



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Recommendations

Recommendations

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| <p><u>Recommendation 1:</u> Establish a world first Disability Employment Centre of Excellence to house evidence based best practice and act as the conduit for employers seeking to employ people with disability, including an employer taskforce with an aggressive time-framed goal to introduce, or at the very least trial, some of the many evidence-based recommendations made over the years</p> |
| <p><u>Recommendation 2:</u> Hold an annual Disability Employment summit for employers and people with disability to review and progress the Employment Strategy</p> |
| <p><u>Recommendation 3:</u> Take the 2018 Parliamentary Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training report, 'Unique Individuals, Broad Skills; Inquiry into school to work transition' Chapter 5, as a platform to establish an inquiry specifically into school to work transition for young people with disability.</p> |
| <p><u>Recommendation 4:</u> Expand DES Eligible School Leavers program to allow more students with disability in their school years to access employment transition preparation and support.</p> |
| <p><u>Recommendation 5:</u> Reform the assessment system which would enhance service and referrals to employment assistance, to ensure people with disability get the best individual service.</p> |
| <p><u>Recommendation 6:</u> Increase the value of DES KPI3, Quality to the same standing as KPI1/KPI2, when evaluating DES performance.</p> |
| <p><u>Recommendation 7:</u> Establish an Accessibility Reference Group to assist government transform its services into the digital realm, ensuring people with disability don't get left behind.</p> |
| <p><u>Recommendation 8:</u> Conduct a national marketing strategy to target changing community attitudes about disability, using employment as the key.</p> |
| <p><u>Recommendation 9:</u> Conduct a Commonwealth Government campaign to increase awareness of assistance and supports available through Disability Employment Services, JobAccess, the Employee Assistance Fund and the National Disability Recruitment Coordinator.</p> |



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Chapter 1: Lifting
employer engagement,
capability and demand

Chapter 1

Lifting employer engagement, capability and demand. Providing employers with the tools and abilities to confidently hire support and develop more people with disability.

What we already know about employer engagement

There is a range of resources and approaches developed over time to support employer engagement, including:

- *Employers Guide to Partnering with Disability Employment Services*²
- *Employ Outside the Box: The Business Case For Employing People with Disability*³
- *Recruiting People with a Disability: An Employer Perspective*⁴
- *A systematic review of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities*⁵

However, there has not been any real shift in the percentages of employers actively engaged in employing people with disability.

Research clearly shows that most employers are not against employing people with disability, but that they either don't know how to do it or are concerned about costs and risk.

For example, the Willing to Work enquiry (2016) produced a number of resources around good practice when employing people with disability. These practices include leadership commitment, ensuring non-discriminatory recruitment and retention practices, building workplace flexibility, facilitating transitions and providing targeted education and training in the workplace.⁶

The Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA) also produced a report titled 'Employing people with a disability in small business – what would make it easier?'⁷ This report made key recommendations to encourage small business to employ more people with disability (COSBOA report recommendations can be accessed in Appendix 2).

Implementing employer engagement recommendations made in previous research papers

Some of these recommendations may seem like common sense, but many have not been taken up or actioned. DEA strongly encourages government to adopt some of these recommendations – all are achievable, and many could utilise the expertise of DES services. The Commonwealth must take active leadership by implementing these recommendations.

The Employment Strategy would also benefit from a funded employer taskforce with an aggressive, time-framed goal to introduce, or at the very least trial, some of the many evidence-based recommendations made over the years.

² https://disabilityemployment.org.au/static/media/Employers_Guide_Web_Ready.pdf

³ https://www.australianchamber.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/eotb_-_disability.pdf

⁴ https://disabilityemployment.org.au/static/items/disability_employment_report_web.pdf

⁵ https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/93886/3/A%20systematic%20review%20benefits_TSpace.pdf

⁶ https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/publications/willing-work-good-practice-examples-employers-2016?_ga=2.64744616.660589923.1621491342-825019947.1620180696

⁷ <https://www.cosboa.org.au/past-projects/employability-project>



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DES is a logical response to connect people with disability, employers and available support programs to successfully recruit and retain people with disability. It is much more reasonable to expect DES staff to know about employer support initiatives than employers. Responses from DEA's 2021 Members Survey indicate that about 15% of people employed by DES providers identify as having a disability.

Historically, DES relied upon the employer being viewed as a priority customer of the DES provider.

Here is a quick description of what those steps looked like:

- Understanding the employer's needs and the demands of the workplace.
- Meeting between DES staff, the employer and key personnel to ensure a solid understanding of the business, the workplace culture, the demands of the job, and to deliver information about relevant government supports.
- Matching a prospective client with disability, involving the employer and DES support personnel, who were expected to have a detailed understanding of the employment goals and capacities of the clients.
- Sometimes, site visits to the employer's business by relevant support workers to fully understand the job and engagement with relevant co-workers before the job starts.
- Having DES staff onsite to introduce the new employee and provide on-the-job training, including ongoing onsite training until the employer, co-workers and new employee were comfortable and satisfied.
- The DES support worker would then ensure continued support for the worker and employer. The expectation of rapid response to any workplace issue or performance concern gave the employer a level of comfort and knowledge.
- This ongoing support ensured the DES provider identified opportunities for job advancement and potential new employment opportunities. This also provided a value-added recruitment service to the employer.

Resources to support employers and build disability confidence need to be targeted, industry-specific, and provide relevant examples across the range of employer situations.

The key to meeting this challenge is to:

- educate employers about current understandings
- develop confidence and capability to engage
- offer clear and consistent supports to employ people with disability
- tell their stories.

Web-based resources, information and support programs have merit. The key web-based resource for disability employment stakeholders is JobAccess. DSS conducted an evaluation of JobAccess in 2018/19. That evaluation found that "the JobAccess Service is highly valued by all target audiences. JobAccess Users most value the EAF (88%) and the Information and Advice service (87%), while employers most value the NDRC (76%) and Employment Service Providers most value the Website (76%)"⁸

Clearly, it is working. The evaluation notes that improvements can be made. They relate to raising the profile and awareness of resources available to employers.

It is also important for governments to send clear signals to the private sector and 'walk the talk' by becoming major employers of people with disability. The Commonwealth has started sending the right signals, but runs on the board will be a better gauge.

⁸ <https://www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-carers-publications-articles/evaluation-of-jobaccess-service-june-2019> p. 9



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Purchasing arrangements by government should recognise employers that employ people with disability within all contracting arrangements.

DEA would like to see a government campaign developed to “increase employee and employer awareness of government supports available through Disability Employment Services, JobAccess, the Employee Assistance Fund and the National Disability Recruitment Coordinator”.

Case Study 1

James found securing work challenging. His biggest obstacle was that he struggled to convince employers to take him on without paid employment on his resume.

“I was unemployed for such a long time,” James says. “Normally, I find it very difficult to get past the interview stage because, unfortunately, as much as I can vocalise my skills, employers don’t really see it unless they see you are working at some point.”

A DES provider worked with James to build his confidence and value as an employee. They set up pragmatic steps to find and keep a job at a local tavern. James impressed the tavern owner, has now been working in their bistro for 12 months and is thriving in his new role.



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Chapter 2: Building
employment skills,
experience and
confidence of young
people with disability.

Chapter 2

Building employment skills, experience and confidence of young people with disability. Ensuring young people with disability are supported to obtain meaningful work and careers of their choice.

Parliamentary Inquiry into 'school to work transition'

In 2018, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training delivered its final report on the 'Unique Individuals, Broad Skills; Inquiry into school to work transition'. While the inquiry covered transition for all students from school to work, it did reserve a specific focus for young people with disability, including a number of recommendations.

DEA urges the government to consider the relevant chapter in the report and its recommendations as a starting point for the Employment Strategy. This would strengthen the alignment with the NDS (2010-20) and Outcome 5, Learning and Skills four policy directions as they relate to young people transitioning from school to work. DEA also urges the government to read inquiry submission 74, presented by the advocacy organisation, Children and Young People with Disability.

Year13 Disability and Career Advice Survey

For most people, the development of life skills happens formally and informally. The lessons learned from different experiences give us with the necessary tools to navigate our way through life and enable us to lead successful lives.

For many people with disability, the opportunities to develop many of these life skills to help lead a successful life are less available.

The Disability and Career Advice Survey (January 2021)⁹ provides highly relevant information to inform and influence how we meet the challenge of improving work readiness for young people with disability. That 92% of young people with disability saw paid employment as their preferred post school goal shows the importance of building effective pathways from school to employment.

The important role of schools

School is a key experience in developing our young people. Expectations of young people with disability are often lower than that of their peers without disability. This has a direct impact upon the types of experiences and the consequent aspirations of young people with disability.



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There is definitely a role for schools and DES to play in career development and discussion. The Year 13 study found that “only half of young people with a disability felt their school offered them the same level of career development as students without a disability. Parents had a lower perception of this, with only one third feeling their child had equal career development opportunities”.¹⁰

Some research also supports part-time work and vocational education as a positive and important indicator of successful future employment for young people with disability. “Student part-time working, vocational education and vocational work placements were all found to lead to better outcomes for young people transitioning from study to full-time work, in part through the development of these soft employability skills.”¹⁰ Family and carers supported 47% of respondents looking for work; 29% nominated their school; 22% friends; and 20% said nobody.¹¹

The important role of DES

DES providers could play an active role in career discussions and broker part-time employment for students with disability. The DES program would need to be more flexible for this approach to be successful – this is not a new idea; a majority of DES operated like this from the late 1980s until around 2011. It allowed more young people to transition via clearer and more congruent pathways to employment, training and/or study.

DEA has discussed with both DSS and the NDIA how various systems need to better fit an individual’s journey. The Employment Strategy offers a perfect context to unite linking policies, departments, jurisdictions and stakeholders to redevelop the meaning and value of education for young people with disability.

The Year13 survey findings are an excellent starting point, but there are many other Australian and international research papers that conclude the same. A transition model is in place because the policies and practices fall short of providing for young people with disability.

So, let’s look at what is provided to young people without disability and literally replicate that. Let’s start encouraging young people with disability to dream and aspire and identify with being what they want to be. Then, make those possibilities accessible. To start this, the most critical barrier is attitudes. That will be discussed in another chapter. However, without widespread attitude change, through changing the narrative based on real actions, the ability to reset Transition to Work will simply be a redesigned program.

Over 85% of school students with identified disability in Australian schools are defined as having a developmental disability. Traditional approaches channel these students to congregate care models of community inclusion or Supported Employment, for example, Australian Disability Enterprises.

⁹<https://www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-career-advice-survey-report>, p14

¹⁰<http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/5/2/Young-people-entering-work-a-review-of-the-research-accessible-version.pdf>, p42

¹¹<https://www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-career-advice-survey-report>, p.37



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Schools and DES working together

DES has offered a real alternative for many of these young people for more than 30 years. Many workers with disability have proven their value as productive and loyal employees over many years. We note that DES could, and should, work with much greater numbers of these young people than it does.

Engaging students and parents early in thinking about employment goals is important. Students with disability are at greater risk of leaving school early and subsequently experience lower employment rates than other students.

Supports at school to access work experience and career advice must be available and tailored to an individual's interests and skills for people with disability to achieve the goal of paid employment.

They must also be informed by local and current labour market intelligence that guides effort and informs young people of the opportunities and skills needed to successfully access the labour market. These supports must be introduced much earlier than the transition year in the school experience. Creating an aspirational approach that has teachers, parents and the young person with disability aligned on the expectation of paid employment post school is critical.

It is also a goal that requires relevant exemplars of successful peer transition to paid employment for the key stakeholders to believe and invest in.

An individual's needs cannot be met without collaborative effort across systems and stakeholders, and the investment of state education resources.

This DES school engagement allowed teachers, parents and young people with disability to aspire to paid employment. Crucially, it has played a key part in school retention and in improving access to work experience opportunities relevant to the young person.

DES support would see more young people with disability accessing casual work opportunities while still at school, thus building better pathways to post-school employment.

Case Study 2

"Getting my first pay cheque was just the most exciting thing!" says Jodie.

Her DES job coach, who secured her a role as a COVID marshal at a local gym, said: "We did a lot of hands-on work with Jodie because there was a lot of responsibility."

Jodie notes: "[The DES] eased my anxiety as to what I need to do, what products I need to use, safety requirements. I feel productive, especially with the list of tasks they gave me, you can tell how much I've done."

The gym manager is full of praise for her COVID marshal: "Our customers have high standards, especially where cleanliness is concerned. Jodie is a fantastic worker, very interactive with the members and we love her."

"[The DES] has supported her sporting dreams," says Jodie's mum. "Now, they're supporting her employment dreams and her career."



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Chapter 3: Improving
systems and services for
jobseekers and employers.

Chapter 3

Improving systems and services for jobseekers and employers. Making it simpler for job seekers with disability and employers to navigate and utilise government services, and driving better performance from service providers.

The assessment system

The consultation paper states a vision of “an inclusive Australian society where all people have access to meaningful work opportunities”¹². Many people with disability will be supported by a government program to prepare and assist them to find work – whether it is DES, Jobactive or NDIS employment supports. As part of this, many people with disability are assessed by Services Australia via an Employment Services Assessment (ESAt).

Many problems have been associated with the assessment system. DEA strongly supports the need for better assessments and an improved gateway to employment-related services for people with disability to help improve systems and services for jobseekers and employers.

DEA also supports removing the benchmarking system assigned to participants as part of the ESAt process. It is an antiquated, deficit-based model, not fit for purpose in determining disability policy across the next 10 years that references the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and endorses the Social Model of Disability.

A better performing DES program will lead to more jobs for people with disability. The DES program should be refocused to ensure it effectively supports the needs of participants and employers. DSS needs to simplify contract compliance factors to make it easier for services to place people into sustainable employment.

Digital servicing and the New Employment Services Model

DEA has serious concerns about the recent Federal Budget announcement about DES-eligible participants being referred to digital services via the New Employment Services Model. The department has not released any modelling about this initiative so it is impossible for the sector to analyse it, for participants who will be offered this service. We are also deeply concerned that many participants will sit in digital services for 12 months, potentially setting them back unnecessarily and even diminishing their interest to participate in the workforce. We vigorously advocate for early intervention via face-to-face DES servicing to move more people into employment earlier and improve employment rates for people with disability.

Nevertheless, DEA endorses the Australian Government Digital Transformation Strategy with the caveat that people with disability are not left behind. DEA proposes that the Employment Strategy include reference to how the DTS aligns with employment assistance and supports for people with disability, especially in terms of accessibility.

Mutual obligation and meaningful work

Again, the paper associated with this consultation states a vision of “an inclusive Australian society where all people have access to meaningful work opportunities”¹³. For this to occur, there needs to be a change to mutual obligation requirements. There is a disconnect between government policy around accepting suitable work and mutual obligation requirements. Almost 80% of the DES caseload have some form of mutual obligation requirements.

¹²<https://engage.dss.gov.au/national-disability-employment-strategy/national-disability-employment-strategy-consultation-paper/>, p6

¹³<https://engage.dss.gov.au/national-disability-employment-strategy/national-disability-employment-strategy-consultation-paper/>, p6



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Anyone with disability in the current jobactive system and on JobSeeker Allowance also has mutual obligation requirements. This means that service provision must operate under these very strict requirements, again adding another function beyond motivating, preparing and placement of people with disability into work.

Furthermore, part of the DES program requirements is about preparing jobseekers for work via job preparation, motivation, training and education. Again, the mutual obligation requirements cause problems for people with disability around the preparation for work, and then referral to jobs. People who are placed into work they enjoy and that meets career goals tend to stay in these jobs for longer periods. Jobseekers referred to 'any' job are less likely to stay for long. The government needs to re-assess some of the mutual obligation requirements so that jobseekers are referred to suitable jobs.

Improving the DES program

The opportunity to re-establish DES providers as the key conduit for both jobseekers and employers should be central to this challenge. DES eligible jobseekers should be linked to the DES system early in their secondary school lives. Again, it is a reasonable expectation that DES providers are fully informed of the broader array of government services, and that they become the access point for school staff, the jobseeker and/or relevant carers.

Program design around ongoing support ought to be reviewed to ensure DES providers have the flexibility and resources to adequately support those people with disability in work, and their employers. Ongoing support rates should increase if the DSS makes requirements around this payment easier for providers to claim. DSS needs to review program requirements around ongoing support to make this more flexible for DES providers.

A greater focus upon independent quality assurance audits that are diagnostic rather than summative should provide government with the confidence to move away from the transactional nature of the current DES program. This change in approach would also place greater emphasis upon the building of essential relationships by DES providers across the various networks and stakeholders.

Ultimately, DES performance should be measured by a combination of the feedback gleaned from quality assurance processes and relative labour market placement and employment outcomes achieved. Such outcomes should ultimately reflect the success rate of the DES provider in keeping active jobseekers in employment.

Further, consideration should be given to the current milestone funding model and the behavioural effects this has on the market.

Reforming the mainstream employment program

There also needs to be some reform of the mainstream employment program, jobactive, soon to be known as the New Employment Services Model. The current model already aims to support many people with disability. As at 31 March 2021, there were 259,000 jobseekers with a disability participating in jobactive¹⁴. This is a huge number. In addition to this, over 50% of participants in DES have been unemployed for over three years¹⁵.

Potential participants need a better understanding of what they are being referred to and what services are being offered so they can make the best choice for themselves.

DEA recommends reform of the assessment system to ensure people with disability get the best individual service, which would enhance service and referrals to employment. As part of the mainstream employment program reforms, DEA is very concerned about DES participants being offered the digital trial. We are concerned that it will simply leave them unemployed for longer, ending up in DES 12 months on.

¹⁴ <https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/Downloads/EmploymentRegion>

¹⁵ <https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/Downloads/DisabilityEmploymentServicesData/MonthlyData>



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NDIS improvements

DEA also recommends that the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy 2019–2022 be amended to include clear goals for transition to work supports beyond 2021 for young people with disability. Clear links should also be created between SLES and DES Eligible School Leavers programs. Outcome reports of SLES and employment supports should be made available to the public.

DES can play a very important role in transitioning ADE participants into open employment, increasing employment outcomes for people with disability. DEA believes that the NDIA needs to adopt a much more active approach for transition from ADE support to open employment via DES services.

To engage systems you must understand their purpose and they must be accessible. The Employment Strategy aligned with the NDS, reforming DES, Jobs and Recovery budget initiatives, and attuned to the Digital Transformation Strategy could offer distinct opportunities to improve systems for people with disability receiving support and assistance to find and keep a job and employers.

The UK's Government Digital Services project has created a cross-government accessibility team. They also have a cross-government design community. Drawing from their experience, Australia could create an Accessibility Reference Group to assist government to transform its services into the digital realm, ensuring people with disability don't get left behind.

Other changes that would improve systems

Additionally, minor changes to current programs would greatly assist participants. DEA advocates the following program changes:

- Review of the definition of employment for all employment-related programs. There have been enormous changes in employment over the past 20 years, in particular in response to the impacts of COVID19.
- Removing benchmarks as an indicator to claiming outcomes in DES. Employers do not understand this, and the benchmarking is based on a medical model of disability rather than a human rights approach.
- The expansion of the eligibility criteria of the DES Eligible School Leavers program to allow more students with disability in their final years of high school to access employment transition support.

Case Study 3

Rachel lives with the Autism Spectrum Disorder as well as anxiety and finds it hard to communicate and interact with people. She secured work at a café in her regional hometown.

Working with a supportive family business meant that Rachel was able to sustain employment through the COVID-19 pandemic. "Rachel is just lovely to have around. She is always very positive and reliable," says the café owner. Rachel is absolutely thrilled and says, "I felt I had been given a chance to prove my self-worth."

Rachel's DES job coach says, "She is always so pro-active, positive. Despite her challenges, she is a highly motivated young lady, always striving overcome the obstacles on her path."



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Chapter 4: Changing
community attitudes.

Chapter 4

Changing community attitudes. Changing people's perception and expectation about the capability of people with disability in the workplace.

Changing community perceptions of people with disability is a significant and necessary objective. Achieving sustained change about ingrained social attitudes requires a long-term effort and is achievable through repetitive positive images.

Marketing strategy

An over-arching fully funded national marketing strategy is required to continue to change community attitudes about disability. Such a marketing strategy needs to be a whole-of-government approach strongly informed by, and which includes, people with disability. Employment should be a key focus of the campaign.

Attitudes and perceptions about people with disability are usually held at a personal level. Actions that will change personal attitudes include information, education, training, positive portrayal, and supported opportunities for contact with people with disability. Critical are awareness campaigns and training; social contact programs; and positive portrayal of people with disability. A good recent example is the TV program 'Employable Me'. Education must start at an early age – primary school awareness will mean acceptance and better engagement by secondary school.

Governments are critical in changing attitudes. For example, the Disability Services Act, the National Disability Strategy, the UNCRPD Article 27, the Disability Discrimination Act and state level discrimination Acts are all legislative tools driving change and beliefs in our society. The Commonwealth has a responsibility to fund campaigns that dovetail to these legislative measures in order to create a better future for people with disability and a richer, more cohesive society.

The National Disability Strategy

The Commonwealth and State Governments are currently developing a National Disability Strategy (2021-31). The current National Disability Strategy contains six key elements or policy areas:

- inclusive communities (relating to the physical and the built environment and also civic life);
- rights protection, justice and legislation
- economic security
- personal and community support for persons with disabilities
- learning and skills
- health and wellbeing.

DEA believes the implementation of the Employment Strategy, aligned and incorporated into the NDS, will make particular impact on economic security for people with disability and benefit the goals of the NDS. It is crucial that the Employment Strategy includes clear goals, actions, and timeframes for actions, and that these actions are monitored and adjusted as required.



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From Shut Out to Willing to Work to the Employment Strategy

The Willing to Work report (2016) extensively reported that “employment discrimination against people with disability is ongoing and systemic. At the recruitment stage, bias, inaccessibility and exclusion were recurring issues”.¹⁶

When drafting the Employment Strategy, DEA would strongly encourage the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments implement some of the key recommendations from this report, including leadership commitment; non-discriminatory recruitment and retention; building workplace flexibility; providing targeted education and training in the workplace; and building healthy workplaces, including health and wellbeing programs for staff.

The 2009 report, ‘Shut Out: The experience of people with disabilities and their families in Australia’¹⁷, was developed from wide ranging consultations across Australia to inform the development of a National Disability Strategy. It found across all life domains, including seeking employment, that people with disability faced clear and consistent barriers in the form of negative attitudes, misconceptions and discrimination. The Employment Strategy has a duty to ensure a future strategy is not still dealing with these unacceptable practices and behaviours.

Case Study 4

Kevin is a skilled craftsman who lives with an intellectual disability. He spends his days turning slabs of timber into unique pieces of furniture.

Initially, the manager of a local engineering company was hesitant about hiring a person with disability, but after seeing Kevin in action and learning that the DES would be supporting him every step of the way, they decided to give him a go.

The manager says that ongoing support from the DES has made all the difference in helping Kevin become more independent in both work and home life. “I feel a lot more confident now that I’ve learnt how to use the tools,” says Kevin.

His DES support worker notes Kevin’s change in confidence: “Kevin has become more vocal, speaking with peers and his employer more, and following instructions a lot better. He’s learnt new skills that people didn’t think he was capable of.”

¹⁶ <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/projects/willing-work-national-inquiry-employment-discrimination>

¹⁷ <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/publications-articles/policy-research/shut-out-the-experience-of-people-with-disabilities-and-their-families-in-australia>



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Conclusion

Conclusion

The Employment Strategy Consultation paper notes that “there is a broad economic imperative to support people with disability to work”. The DES program has seen the greatest level of employment placements over the last three months since the new DES started in July 2018. DEA shares DSS’ view that the placement rate is highly likely to continue to rise, which will lead to a demonstrable increase in DES participants staying in their jobs. Employment outcomes are directly linked to well-designed initiatives.

DSS can consider the consultation paper submissions to build a robust and workable Employment Strategy as it monitors in real time what DES can deliver. DES has engaged employers, worked to break down attitudinal barriers, been a principal support for young people with disability transitioning to work and coped with systems challenges for 30 years. It is well placed to inform all four priority areas of the Employment Strategy. How DES is reformed is critical to the value and impact of the Employment Strategy.

This point is not merely made to protect the future of DES. The consultation paper notes as a key issue, that there is “a lack of clarity and flexibility around the connection between the National Disability Insurance Scheme, DES and jobactive”. DEA has reinforced the need for a specific specialist employment service for people with disability who are not NDIS eligible but require a level of support and assistance the generalist employment model cannot provide.

The NDS statement (December 2020) that “governments will continue taking a unified, national approach to improving the lives of people with disability and to achieving the vision of the Strategy, that of an inclusive Australian society”. The Commonwealth Government’s employment assistance continuum that includes an Online Employment Service option, a generalist employment initiative available, DES if you require more specialist support, and NDIS if you are eligible, responds directly to the NDS. The Employment Strategy will reinforce that suite of initiatives.

The Employment Strategy must reverberate through multiple initiatives, challenging entrenched wisdom and systems while enhancing and continually improving supports that will bring much greater numbers of people with disability into the labour market. We trust that DEA’s submission, with its solutions-based recommendations, adds to the value and impact of this important project.

Finally, it was a delight to be introduced to Robert Warren’s art on the first two pages of the consultation paper.



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Appendices

Appendix 1: Employer engagement recommendations

The Council of Small Business Organisations Australia report, 'Employing people with a disability in small business - what would make it easier?' made key recommendations to encourage small business to employ more people with disability (<https://www.cosboa.org.au/past-projects/employability-project.>) DEA thinks these recommendations are important to revisit. These included:

- Government develop and trial a new small-scale program aimed at supporting SME employers throughout the recruitment and employment process, including transition to work supports, workplace preparedness and on the job training/support.
- Job Access website—and other government materials aimed at communicating and promoting disability employment services, funding assistance and support service—be reviewed and updated to include material specifically relevant to small business, with a section targeted specifically at SMEs
- Department review all existing application and compliance processes available through JobAccess to streamline and make processes more efficient and manageable from a small business employer perspective.
- That new information resources be developed, through codesign with small businesses, which 'demystifies' disability.
- A national forum is convened of government representatives, disability consumer organisations, small business organisations and disability service organisations (including Disability Employment Services representatives) to identify a series of mutually beneficial new approaches and initiatives to overcome the identified barriers at the national and local level.



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Appendix 2: A proven DES/schools transition model

A State Transition Program was developed between three school sectors, the VET sector, the state government and DES providers.

The State Transition Program, operating for nearly 20 years, was developed and coordinated by a DES provider with specialist expertise working with people with intellectual and learning disability. A collaborative approach involving a range of other DES providers has ensured school leavers with disability have had access to the DES service most appropriate for them.

Building a strong partnership between schools and employment services promotes the opportunities and vision of Open Employment within school communities. As more students, teachers and parents see the pathways taken by peers, aspirations rise about what is both possible and desirable.

A further development of this collaborative approach extended the reach of DES providers into an early intervention approach through the Better Pathways initiative which aimed to support a smooth transition from school to Open Employment for students with disability.

The key elements of this initiative were:

The mentoring of students with disability at risk of early disengagement from learning.

Commencing in year 9, mentors directly linked to a DES provider work with students, families, schools and other relevant services to support goal-planning and decision-making. A “vision” of employment and further learning is encouraged and supported.

Establishing a clear plan for the transition year:

This assists students who struggle with change due to their disability to prepare for this significant step in life. It also ensures resources from the student's own networks, school-based resources and those of the DES system are collectively focussed upon this learning pathway to employment.

Facilitating/brokering accredited training and workplace experience:

Labour market competitiveness is improved by enabling students with disability to achieve vocational qualifications as part of their secondary schooling. Practical experiences in real work settings further support the student to make choices about career directions.

Establishing ongoing relationships between the student, their parents/carers, teachers and post school services early in the transition year:

Involvement of a DES worker is a key factor in this approach to transition. Planning is driven by student aspiration, not service/program design. A key element is the investment in the student through interventions that support personal leadership skills and life goal-setting.

Providing on-going employment support from the service post-school:

Long term partnerships with the DES staff ensures that the young person has support with career advancement and other challenges encountered by most young people as they transition to the world of work.



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Appendix 3: More service improvement ideas

DEA convened a meeting of leaders in the disability employment sector (DEA Hall of Fame). Key ideas from this meeting focussed on lifting employer engagement, capability and demand, including:

- Reviewing KPI measurement of the DES program, and make alterations to encourage better employer engagement;
- Developing service delivery that balances employer needs with participant needs;
- Rationalising compliance requirements of DES to make it easier for providers to engage with employers. Should staffing resources be needed to meet program assurance activity at the expense of working with employers, reset the balance of program and provider resources away from working to systems requirements;
- Utilising evidence-based strategies to meet the needs of medium and large employers. For example, The Kessler Foundation 2017 National Employment & Disability Survey which sought to identify the processes and practices used by employers to increase the employment of people with disabilities and their effectiveness;
- Strategies for building and maintaining positive relationship with all employers;
- Working with state and federal departments on new targets for employing people with disability;
- Developing the capability of staff employed in the sector about effective employer engagement, post placement support, and ongoing support and work assistance;
- Utilising online training tools, such as DEA DES Essentials; and
- Encouraging events similar to Job Shadow Day that bring together local employers and people with disability.



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