## Acknowledgement of country:

I live on Gadigal lands. I pay my respects to the traditional owners; past, present, and emerging. many of whom are subject to the unemployment policies of the Australian government. Sovereignty was never ceded. This was, is, and always will be Aboriginal land.

## About me:

I am a 52 year old woman with cerebral palsy. I have been disabled from birth. I spent most of my life using crutches. I have two Bachelor degrees, a Masters and several other qualifications. In 2013, I developed injuries, as a result of a lifetime on crutches. I was advised to use a power wheelchair – particularly when I needed to carry anything. I was unable to continue in my job as an English Language Teacher. My doctor told me I should apply for the DSP. It was refused. Since then, I have spent a lot more time on unemployment benefits than off them. I have a huge amount of experience with Disability Employment Services.

I am currently on Job Seeker and attempting to start my own business, along with satisfying my Compulsory Mutual Obligations. The present system has nothing to offer to improve my circumstances. If change in DES comes at all, it will come too slowly to benefit me much. I hope that as a result of contributing to this review, the next generation of disabled people will be much better included in Australian society.

## How this Submission was prepared

This submission responds to many of the questions posed in the consultation paper “Shaping your New Disability Employment Support Program”. Questions where I do not have relevant knowledge or experience were omitted.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1**: Anyone who either wants to work, or is required to seek work, and has an impairment which restricts everyday activities should be able to access a DES programme.

**Recommendation 2:** A job pathway or other Approved Activity must improve employment options or lead off JobSeeker to the DSP without Compulsory Mutual Obligations.

**Recommendation 3 :** A job pathway must not be a holding pattern and “keep busy” requirement until the job seeker transfers to the Age Pension.

**Recommendation 4:** Unpaid work should be restricted to non-profit making entities.

**Recommendation 5:** DES needs to work with the Employment Assistance Fund (EAF) and job seekers prior to employment. Job seekers need the resources to confidently inform an employer, in an interview, what reasonable adjustments will enable them to do the job at least as well as the non-disabled candidate.

**Recommendation 6:** A future disability employment support programme must include employment pathways that allow disabled people to develop and demonstrate the skills that employers are seeking; to the level that makes disabled job seekers competitive in the open market, while protecting the job seeker from exploitation.

**Recommendation 7:** Assessment should be conducted by a person with qualifications and experience relevant to the disability being assessed.

**Recommendation 8:** Assessment needs to determine whether the disabled person can secure work that is a good fit for them and is able to meet the expectations of employers as well as their competition can.

**Recommendation 9:** DES consultants should be disabled people.

**Recommendation 10:** Disability Employment Services should employ evidence-based strategies such as IPS or Customised Employment which match employees to suitable opportunities, taking into account their skills and interests.

**Recommendation 11:** Information about employers/positions that are actively seeking disabled workers should be broadcast by DES, so that job seekers can apply directly, without gate-keeping.

**Recommendation 12:** Disabled people should have access to Rehabilitation Counsellors and other suitably trained vocational professionals.

**Recommendation 13:** Public service job application training should be available to disabled job seekers.

**Recommendation 14:** Mature age disabled workers should have access to job transition pathways for re-skilling.

**Recommendation 15:** Young disabled people should be supported throughout high school to help them explore and evaluate their career options. This work should be done by counsellors who understand the particular challenges the young people face – as a result of their own disability and employers’ lack of disability confidence/prejudice.

**Recommendation 16:** Assistance should be available to young disabled people to find casual work while they complete their schooling, to enable them to participate alongside their peers.

**Recommendation 17:** DES should facilitate employer engagement with disabled workers and their employers.

**Recommendation 18:** Government should introduce quotas for the employment of disabled workers.

**Recommendation 19:** The present system of Compulsory Mutual Obligations should be abolished.

**Recommendation 20:** Job seekers should be genuinely able to negotiate a workable plan for job seeking with an appropriately skilled employment provider, based on mutual respect, that includes accountabilities and flexibilities for both parties.

**Recommendation 21:** Unpaid work must be time limited with specific, measurable goals, and done under the same protections as other work, such as health and safety.

**Recommendation 22:** DES providers should be accountable to job seekers for their efforts to assist them.

**Recommendation 23:** Employment Support should be re -nationalised so that the job seeker is the primary client of the providers.

**Recommendation 24:** Guaranteed employment should be provided for all job seekers who want it, with voluntary participation; at no less than the minimum wage.

**Recommendation 25:** The Australian government should aim for true full employment (ie unemployment less than 2%.)

**Recommendation 26:** DES Providers should receive training to help them understand the situation of people with different disabilities, the reasons why employers hire or don't hire us and how to implement proven strategies that can help increase our hire and retention rates.

**Recommendation 27:** Data collected to consider the success of DES should look at the disability un/underemployment rate. It should consider changes over time as well as comparisons between the disabled population and the general population, with strategies that fail to perform substantially adjusted in light of the evidence or discontinued.

**Recommendation 28:** DES providers should have and advertise relevant qualifications, experience and successes.

* 1. **Who should be able to access a disability employment support program?**

Anyone who either wants to work or is required to seek work and has an impairment which restricts everyday activities should be able to access a DES programme. It shouldn't be restricted to people whose impairment will last longer than six months. If they are seeking work and have an impairment, that should be enough. Let people whose disabilities may not be permanent self select.

**Recommendation 1:** Anyone who either wants to work or is required to seek work and has an impairment which restricts everyday activities should be able to access a DES programme.

* 1. **Should a future disability employment support program include employment pathways such as casual and part-time employment, community engagement, voluntary work and short-term unpaid work experience?**

It is essential that a future disability employment support programme includes employment pathways that allow disabled people to develop and clearly demonstrate the skills that employers are seeking.

As a wheelchair user, many entry-level jobs are unavailable to me. I can't work as a waitress. I can't stack shelves. Being an “on the floor” shop assistant Is not practical. Even telephone-based jobs can be difficult because they often require data entry while speaking to the customer. I can only type quickly if I use a text to type programme.

These entry level jobs are the ones people usually use to gain the experience they need to move on to better forms of employment. They're also the kind of jobs people usually get while they're looking around for the job they really want. They are the kinds of jobs that make and keep people employable. They are the kinds of jobs that people like me can't get. Without work, whether in a job I really want or not, I become less and less attractive to employers as time passes.

When I was assessed for and denied the DSP, it was decided that I could do a “sedentary clerical job”. The assessor did not ask how quickly I can type. Employers do ask. I can only type quickly if I use a text to type program, which requires a fairly quiet environment. It's not practical in a shared workspace.

The assessor did not consider what kind of “sedentary clerical jobs” actually existed and whether I had the appropriate skills to secure one against my competition. Years of unsuccessful job seeking demonstrate that I rarely do.

Many job advertisements seek people who can “hit the ground running” and “thrive in a busy environment”. The increasing number of casual and short term jobs makes these qualities even more essential and puts work for many disabled people even further out of reach.

Casual and short-term employment can offer useful experience as well as pay rates better than the current poverty rate of JobSeeker. They do, however, come with risks which need to be taken into account. Casual and short-term jobs make it easy for employers to exploit their employees. I have had casual jobs where I was underpaid. I was clearly told that my option was to accept that or find another job. Casuals can be put off for no reason. I’ve had bosses pointedly remind me of this if I have dared to question. Casual employees can be put off with no notice. An employer has little incentive to take the time to find a way to keep an employee on when they can instead put off the person who hasn't worked out and choose someone else who can hit the ground running.

Insecure work has a much more significant impact on disabled workers then it does on other people because it is often so much harder for us to secure the job in the first place. Personally, as a wheelchair user, I have to find a job I have the appropriate skills for, that is physically accessible, with accompanying accessible travel options and an employer who is willing to take me on. If the job is casual or short term, I have to do that again and again and again. It's exhausting and demoralising. The older I get the harder it is because employers are also less inclined to hire older workers.

Disabled job seekers may need to experiment to find what works for us and what works for our employers. We need time and space to do that, including the freedom to fail and try something else. We are, after all, often entering uncharted territory. Some efforts won’t succeed.

Disabled job seekers should be able to use short term unpaid work to explore work options, move on to an apprenticeship/ traineeship, designed to develop and demonstrate specific employability skills, then apply for jobs we have a real chance of getting.

There should, however, be a time limit on how long a job seeker is required to remain in each stage of such a process. If we are not progressing towards the next stage, we need to be offered an alternative. Try something else or reassess the requirement and ability to work in light of the experience and grant the DSP, without Compulsory Mutual Obligations..

Disabled people should not be required to waste years of our lives trying unsuccessfully to meet the expectations of an able-bodied world.

**Recommendation 2:** A job pathway or other Approved Activity must improve employment options or lead off JobSeeker to the DSP without Compulsory Mutual Obligations.

**Recommendation 3 :** A job pathway must not be a holding pattern and “keep busy” requirement until the job seeker transfers to the Age Pension.

**Recommendation 4:** Unpaid work should be restricted to non-profit making entities.

Unpaid work for profit making businesses is exploitation.

DES needs to work with the Employment Assistance Fund (EAF) and job seekers, before candidates are called to interviews, to develop strategies to overcome the barriers we face. This needs to happen well before we are called to interviews, which are usually called at short notice.

When we attend a job interview, we need to be able to confidently inform the employer what the options are to enable us to do the job at least as well as the non-disabled candidate. If we can’t, the non-disabled candidate has a clear advantage. Employing them is easier and will be the result.

At present, the EAF does not work with job seekers. They will only offer assistance after an offer of employment has been made. Employers will not make an offer of employment if they are not confident that the candidate will be able to do the job. I have missed out on several job opportunities in the past because I was unable to layout a clear strategy for reasonable adjustments that would enable me to do the job. It's difficult for me to do that without support from someone who is familiar with what the options might be.

I have also lost at least two jobs because I was too slow - probably because I had to use a keyboard to type. It's possible that EAF might have had a strategy that could have helped me but I never had a chance to talk to them. By the time the employer decides that I'm too slow, they're already considering putting me off - especially when the job in question is casual.

**Recommendation 5:** DES needs to work with the Employment Assistance Fund (EAF) and job seekers prior to employment. Job seekers need the resources to confidently inform an employer, in an interview, what reasonable adjustments will enable them to do the job at least as well as the non-disabled candidate.

**Recommendation 6:** A future disability employment support programme must include employment pathways that allow disabled people to develop and demonstrate the skills that employers are seeking, to the level that makes disabled job seekers competitive in the open market.

**2.1. How can the assessment process be improved to connect people with disability to the right employment services?**

Start with an assessor who is familiar with the disabilities of the person being assessed. I have cerebral palsy and mobility issues. I was assessed by a speech pathologist. I do not have a speech disability. She was not an appropriate person to assess me.

**Recommendation 7:** Assessment should be conducted by a person with qualifications and experience relevant to the disability being assessed.

**2.2. What should be considered during the assessment process when determining support required to help a person reach their work potential?**

The assessment needs to assess the disabled person’s real ability to compete successfully against non-disabled job seekers for the same job. The assessment needs to determine whether the disabled person is able to meet the expectations of employers as well as their competition can. Not just “Can the disabled person perform task X?” but can they do it fast enough, often enough and to a high enough standard to secure and retain employment? Deciding that we are able to work without considering the context in which we need to secure employment sets us up for failure and a life of poverty..

Enabling a person to reach their work potential also needs to include considering their interests and desires. Too often, disabled people are shoved into the first hole that consultants think we might possibly be able to plug. We are unable to protest because if we refuse a “suitable job” our benefits can be cut. When we turn out not to be a good fit, we get put off and put through the wringer again. It hurts. It damages us. It makes us less employable in the future. It makes us less able to contribute to the community.

**Recommendation 8:** The assessment needs to determine whether the disabled person can find work that is a good fit for them and is able to meet the expectations of employers as well as their competition can.

**2.3. How can the assessment process stream an individual with disability toward the right type of employment support, depending on need and goal?**

Disability Employment Services need to be more specialised. As a wheelchair user, I need to be working with consultants who spend a lot of time thinking about how to accommodate wheelchair users. My needs are very different to the needs of people with mental health issues, cognitive impairment or neuro- divergence.

**2.4. Are there different assessments needed at different stages of an individual’s work journey, as they prepare for work, find and maintain employment, and progress their career?**

Your question appears to assume that seeking work will naturally result in finding work. In my experience, there is a long road of raised and dashed hopes, financial stress, embarrassment, shame, exclusion, rejection and pain in between one job interview and the next; if there is a next interview. Disabled job seekers can submit hundreds of applications, attend many interviews and receive myriad rejections before we find employment; if we find it at all.

If we find employment; then the next question is, how long will we keep it? Sometimes the answer is, “only a few weeks”. It’s just long enough to have told friends the good news. Having to tell those friends that we've now been put off from the job they know we were so excited about is heartbreaking and humiliating. Then we have to start over again and find a way to deal with the damage we have sustained along the way. That is the experience the current system creates for disabled job seekers.

The requirements for study, job seeking and work are different. The support needed by a person who has been looking for work over an extended period are different to the requirements of a new job seeker.

Any assessment always needs to consider the kind of work a person wants to do, so that we are always working towards the end goal. Personally, I have never had problems completing study with good results. Turning that study into ongoing employment has often been challenging. An initial assessment labels a person a Job Seeker or a pensioner. If, after engaging with appropriate strategies, the job seeker remains unemployed, they should be re-assessed for the DSP, taking that into consideration.

**3.1 What has been your experience of receiving employment support from a DES or other employment services provider? What was good about the support? What improvements would you recommend?**

DES consultants are little more than compliance police – there to ensure I fulfil my Compulsory Mutual Obligation requirements. I have never found a DES consultant who has any idea of the challenges I face as a disabled person seeking work. They have certainly never offered any useful strategies to work around my limitations or identify and make the most of my strengths. They have no idea what my tertiary qualifications involve and know nothing about the relevant jobs. Those best equipped to support disabled people to find employment would be Rehabilitation Counsellors and other suitably trained vocational professionals who are themselves disabled.

Whenever I start with a new provider, they are very positive. They look at my work experience and believe I will be easy to employ. They do not talk to me about the barriers I face and how to work around them. They have no idea how many employers have “no” written all over their faces as soon as I get into the room. Some consultants seem to have the expectation that employers will want to employ someone with disability just because it's a nice thing to do. In my experience, employers are primarily concerned about the bottom line and do not believe that people with disability who take longer to do things are going to help them improve it.

I've had a DES consultant tell me not to focus on my disability, when it was clearly the focus of the employers. I've had DES providers bring me in for a job interview and then tell me, on arrival, that the job was physically unsuitable for me and I would not be interviewed. I've had them send me to job trials that were inaccessible. I've had them allow me to turn up for an appointment before informing me that my consultant was off sick and wouldn't be meeting me. When I objected to that their response was, “Don't worry, we’ll still mark your name off”. I was there for assistance finding employment. They clearly considered their primary role to be that of compliance police. I've had them fail to keep appointments. I have rarely had positive experiences with DES consultants. This system does more to provide employment for them than it does to find work for me. It also provides cover for the government. It creates the illusion that disabled job seekers are receiving assistance, when in fact, we are not.

DES consultants need to look at what I can do and how that could be built on to become an employability skill.

The best people at creative thinking when it comes to how to work with disability are often disabled people. We need DES consultants to be disabled people.

**Recommendation 9:** DES consultants should be disabled people.

Disability employment services need to be using evidence based strategies. IPS (Individual Placement and Support) is already being used by the Australian government to assist young people with mental health issues into open employment.[[1]](#endnote-1) It can be adjusted for use with people with physical disabilities.[[2]](#endnote-2) Customised Employment, originating in the US, is already being used in Victoria[[3]](#endnote-3). Although the strategy originally focussed on creating employment options for intellectually disabled people, “since 2001, ODEP's demonstration projects have proven that these strategies can be successful for all applicants”[[4]](#endnote-4). (ODEP - Office of Disability Employment Policy in the USA.) Customised Employment can be used for anyone facing barriers to employment. Customised employment matches the skills and interests of the employee to the needs of the employer and negotiates a job that suits both.

To improve disability employment, we need a system that is person centred. Employment consultants need to be looking at the skills, interests and potential that disabled job seekers bring to the table and working with us and with employers to see where we can best contribute.

We need more opportunity to negotiate suitable employment. The usual system is that the employer decides what they want, creates a job advertisement and anyone who thinks they are a good fit for that position applies for the job. There is no invitation to negotiate. People in high paying jobs expect to negotiate and know how to do it. As a person who has often struggled to find employment, I don't feel confident to open up the space to negotiate employment conditions. Asking for any adjustments just makes the non-disabled applicant the easier choice. We need employers who *offer* to tailor jobs to fit the employee.

**Recommendation 10:** Disability Employment Services should employ evidence-based strategies such as IPS or Customised Employment which match employees to suitable opportunities, taking into account their skills and interests.

Where there are employers who are actively interested in employing disabled people, DES should be broadcasting that information to disabled jobseekers so that we know who to apply to. This currently does not happen. DES consultants should not be gate-keepers for these applications. Disabled job seekers know what we have to offer better than DES consultants. Tell the job seekers who the disability friendly employers are and let us decide whether we have anything to offer them.

**Recommendation 11:** Information about employers/positions that are actively seeking disabled workers should be broadcast by DES so that job seekers can apply directly, without gate-keeping.

**3.2. What type of services and support would best help a person with disability find and keep a suitable job, and progress their career? Who should provide this support?**

Disabled job seekers need access to professional rehabilitation counsellors and other relevantly trained vocational professionals, including those with an understanding of work relating to university qualifications. We need as much help and support as possible to come from other disabled people. Where disabled people are not available to provide the support, there need to be systems in place to train them up. Even someone whose disability is quite different to my own usually understands more of my experience as a disabled person than someone who has no disability.

As a wheelchair user I have a lot of questions about a job that other people simply don't need to ask. Will I be able to type quickly enough? Will I be able to move from A to B quickly enough? Do I need to be able to type while I'm on the phone? Will it be practical to use voice to text for typing? How accessible is my workspace and how accessible is the transport to get there? Are there any accessible shops and cafes nearby? I need to break down all the tasks that are part of my job and think about the physical aspects of them in a way that other people simply don't. I need somebody who is able to work with me to identify those questions and find the answers.

**Recommendation 12:** Disabled people should have access to Rehabilitation Counsellors and other suitably trained vocational professionals.

The Public Service offers training to existing staff on how to effectively apply for a government job. this training should be offered to those job seekers his skills indicate that they could be suitable to work in the public service.

**Recommendation 13:** Public service job application training should be available to disabled job seekers.

**3.3. What education and training opportunities help people with disability overcome the entry barriers to employment?**

I have always done well at study. Converting good academic results into good employment has been harder. As a wheelchair user, many entry level jobs are not available to me. Many experiences that allow other people to discover opportunities are not available. Volunteering with specific achievable goals to develop recognised employability skills would be of value as would apprenticeships/ traineeships, designed to give disabled workers employment pathways..

However, in my experience, the biggest entry barrier to employment for disabled people is the attitude of the employer. Disabled people are constantly functioning in a world that is not designed to or keen to accommodate us. We are constantly finding work arounds to deal with it. Employers don't look at us and see creative thinkers. Too often, they see broken people because they have been taught that disability is a tragedy to respond to with pity and charity. Only last year, a total stranger saw me in the street in my wheelchair and thought the appropriate response was to cast me in the role of a beggar and offer me money. I was simply waiting for a moving van.

Employers need to change their attitude. They need to expect to find a role in which a disabled person can contribute. They need to understand that disabled people have a valuable contribution to make. They need to learn the value of a diverse workplace. They need to understand that there are several different ways to do things. They need to be flexible regarding the requirements of a job and the hours. They need to recognise that employing disabled people might mean making adjustments to a job description, not just the height of a table.

**3.4. How can people receiving disability employment services also be supported to address other barriers to employment (e.g. health service or housing assistance)?**

Medicare needs to cover all doctor’s visits including specialists, mental health services and dental services. it should also cover allied health services such as podiatry. All new home builds - government or private - should be built to universal access standards. Existing housing that does not meet those standards should be assessed to consider whether there are strategies that could at least improve the access.

DES providers may be able to refer people to social workers or others who could help them with housing or health issues, if needed. DES providers should not be expected to fulfil all of these roles. If they are, they will do it badly. Their skill level for employment support is low enough already.

**3.5. What employment support do mature age people with disability need to successfully gain or retain employment, or transition into new employment or a new career?**

We need Rehabilitation Counsellors. As with other job seekers, mature age disabled job seekers need assistance to identify our employability skills and see how those could apply in roles that are different to those we have filled before. We made need transition pathways to enable us to develop and demonstrate new skills to the required level.

DES Providers also need to recognise that many employers practise age discrimination and when they do that is not the responsibility of the job seeker. All mature age workers (disabled or not) can be subject to age discrimination. Paid work experience (at a rate commensurate with those in employment) would allow mature age candidates to demonstrate our skills. Requiring large companies to work to quotas reflective of the representation in the working age population for disabled and mature age employees would create opportunities.

**Recommendation 14:** Mature age disabled workers should have access to job transition pathways for re-skilling.

**4.1. What support do young people with disability need to successfully move out of education into suitable work?**

I am now 52 years old. Looking back on my own experience, I had little idea what was required in different jobs and what difficulties I might face physically, without considering the prejudice of employers and co-workers. Having someone work with me through school to identify my skills and interests and the best options to turn them into employment would have been good.

**4.3. Should there be assistance to prepare young people to think about work much earlier than after they leave school?**

Assistance to prepare young people in thinking about work needs to start before they are required to make choices about the subjects they will and will not study at school. Those choices started to be made, for me, at the end of year 9 and had an impact on future options.

**Recommendation 15:** Young disabled people should be supported throughout high school to help them explore and evaluate their career options. This work should be done by counsellors who understand the particular challenges the young people face – as a result of their own disability and employers’ lack of disability confidence/prejudice.

**4.4. How can disability employment services work better with the education system to enhance employment prospects for young people?**

Most young people find their first job while they are still at school. disabled young people should also have this opportunity.

**Recommendation 16:** Assistance should be available to young disabled people to find casual work while they complete their schooling, to enable them to participate alongside their peers.

**5.1. What are the most important things that can be done to build an employer’s confidence to employ a person with disability?**

I’ve had several employers tell me they were initially unsure about taking me on but, in the end, very glad they had.

The most important thing you can do to build an employer’s confidence to employ a person with disability is to create a situation where they experience disabled employees in action. Take them to Tradeblock Deaf café[[5]](#endnote-5), in Melbourne, which is open to the public and run entirely in Auslan. Take them to the workplaces of other disabled workers. Let them ask questions of the employees and employers about how it works. Provide them with free disability confidence training, run by disabled trainers. It's much easier to imagine having a disabled employee if you've engaged with some. Do it in person, not just on video.

Employment quotas are essential. Employers are concerned for their bottom line. If they have a choice between employing a disabled or non-disabled candidate, employers are likely to continue to take the easier, known option and choose the non-disabled candidate. Discrimination, whether deliberate or not, is illegal in recruitment but almost impossible to prove.

**Recommendation 17:** DES should facilitate employer engagement with disabled workers and their employers.

**Recommendation 18:** Government should introduce quotas for the employment of disabled workers.

**5.2. What services and supports does a disability employment support service need to offer employers to enable them to recruit people with disability, maintain their employment and promote career growth?**

DES needs to be looking at the employability skills employers seek, identifying job seekers who could realistically develop those skills and working with government and employers to develop pathways to make it happen.

A disability support service needs to help employers and employees negotiate a job description and environment that works for both. They need to help both parties ask questions and voice concerns up front. They need to catch concerns and work to resolve them before either party starts to decide things aren’t working out.

A disability support service needs to help a jobseeker identify which specific supports they require to demonstrate convincingly, in the interview, that they can do the job as well as or better than the next candidate. Those supports need to be costed and readily available so that employing the disabled worker is just as attractive as employing a non-disabled one.

**6.1. What specific assistance or flexibilities would better support people with disability to meet their mutual obligation requirements?**

Job seekers should be genuinely able to negotiate a workable plan with an appropriately skilled employment provider that will help them to find suitable work. They should be able to explore options and take actions appropriate to their particular circumstances to gain the skills and experience that will help them to reach their employment goals.

Compulsory Mutual Obligations are not mutual and should be abolished. They are not an evidence-based strategy to transition Jobseekers into suitable employment. They are a “keep busy” scheme based on an unsubstantiated assumption that job seekers will only look for work if they are forced to do so. In fact, they create a situation where meeting Compulsory Obligations becomes more important for both the consultant and the jobseeker than finding sustainable employment. Compulsory Obligations turn DES consultants into well-paid compliance police. As a job seeker, I am reminded in every written communication that compliance is required on threat of payment suspension. The present Compulsory obligations are about the government exercising coercive power over job seekers. It’s oppressive, insulting and demoralising.

I am required to waste time applying for the requisite number of jobs, regardless of their suitability. This gives me less time and energy to write the tailored, well researched job applications that get interviews and lead to employment. It sets me up for failure and frustration, rather than success. It damages my self-esteem and makes me less confident when I do apply for jobs I might be suited to.

In the last couple of jobs I've had, my ongoing experience of rejection through job seeking made me much less confident at work and had a negative impact on my ability to do the job..

I live in a community where many shops, workplaces, homes, train stations, and taxis are not accessible to me. In a circumstance of genuinely mutual obligation, the government would meet its obligation to me to ensure that all shops, workplaces, homes and forms of transport were accessible. This would better support people with disability to apply for jobs they could actually access. In a truly mutual situation, the government would be obligated to work with employers to provide suitable paid work to everyone who required it.

Or alternatively, since I have vastly reduced opportunities to find work, mutuality would mean similarly reduced requirements.

The present Compulsory Mutual Obligations do nothing to improve my skills. They actively prevent me from spending my time productively.

While what is required from me under is Compulsory Mutual Obligations clear and oft-repeated, there is no corresponding, clear commitment from my provider as to what action I can expect from them.

**Recommendation 19:** The present system of Compulsory Mutual Obligations should be abolished.

**Recommendation 20:** Job seekers should be genuinely able to negotiate a workable plan for job seeking with an appropriately skilled employment provider, based on mutual respect, that includes accountabilities and flexibilities for both parties.

**Recommendation 22:** DES providers should be accountable to job seekers for their efforts to assist them.

**6.2. How should a future program consider other forms of participation and engagement, such as voluntary work or community engagement?**

Any unpaid work experience should be time limited and include the same workplace conditions as other workers have, including for health and safety. It must be structured to ensure that it leads to demonstrated, marketable employability skills. Employers should be consulted to ensure that unpaid work programs will, in fact, achieve their objectives of developing marketable employability skills. The effectiveness of these programs needs to be measured. If they do not improve employability, they should be discontinued. In the case of individual job seekers, something else should be tried after a reasonable period, or the person’s ability to work should be reassessed taking the experience into account.

No one should be left in an unpaid work program indefinitely. Unpaid labour is open to exploitation. The amount of time a job seeker is required to engage in unpaid work should be limited. Job seekers should not be required to provide unlimited free labour in return for poverty payments. Unpaid workers need workplace protections just as paid workers do.

**Recommendation 21:** Unpaid work should be time limited with specific, measurable goals and done under the same protections as other work, such as health and safety.

**Funding and Disability Employment Services**

The only truly successful job placement I ever had through a job service was via the Commonwealth Rehab Service. Private enterprise is not fit to fulfil the government’s responsibility to support job seekers (disabled or not) pivot from one job to the next, as required in today’s fast changing job market. Private enterprise, including private employment providers will, in a capitalist system always do what is most profitable for their business. The government, not the Job Seeker, is the client that matters in the present system. The Job seeker is a means to an end. If you want employment providers to be focused on placing workers in jobs where they succeed, you need the job seekers to be the primary clients. To get all job seekers into employment, do away with private providers.

Provide guaranteed employment for all job seekers who want it; at no less than the minimum wage. Lifting people out of poverty will strengthen the economy. It will also offer support and marketable experience rather than oppression to those who do the guaranteed work. It will improve the employability of those involved as well as our general well being and mental health.. Participation in a job guarantee scheme must be voluntary.

It is significant that when Treasury says Australia is at or near “full employment”, they’re not talking about getting as many people into work as possible and keeping them employed, with an unemployment rate less than 2%. That hasn't been the desire of the Australian government since the mid 70s. When treasury talks about “full employment” they are referring to the level of employment they believe the economy can cope with while keeping a lid on inflation - currently a little under 5%[[6]](#endnote-6). That means that slightly less than 5% of workers are sacrificed by the system. Some of us are required to remain unemployed in order to ensure that inflation remains at a manageable level. Disabled people have an unemployment rate twice that of other groups[[7]](#endnote-7). We make up quite a lot of that 5% that apparently keeps the rest of the economy out of trouble -and then we are punished for it by being required to meet “mutual obligations”.

**Recommendation 23:** Employment Support should be re -nationalised so that the job seeker is the primary client of the providers.

**Recommendation 24:** Guaranteed employment should be provided for all job seekers who want it, with voluntary participation; at no less than the minimum wage.

**Recommendation 25:** The Australian government should aim for true full employment (ie unemployment less than 2%.)

**8.5. What is needed to lift workforce capability and the quality of the workforce delivering disability employment services and supports for both participants and employers?**

Disability employment services should be offered by disabled people. A disabled consultant will have a better idea of the situation a disabled job seeker faces and more to offer in terms of how to deal with the difficulties. Every time an employer deals with the provider they will be dealing with a disabled person, making it clear that disabled people are employable. Many employers have never met a disabled worker, so of course it's hard for them to imagine putting us on.

DES Providers should have training to help them understand the situation of people with different disabilities, the reasons why employers hire or don't hire us and proven strategies that can help increase our hire and retention rates. They need to be able to help us walk into an interview able to demonstrate to the employer that hiring us is going to be just as practical and positive as hiring the non-disabled candidate.

I've looked at the job advertisements for disability employment consultants. DES providers look for people with good sales and networking skills. The job ads I've seen don't even list lived experience of disability or understanding of disability as desirable, let alone required. They don’t list recruitment experience either. It’s unsurprising that DES providers don’t get good results when they don’t recruit workers with relevant experience.

**Recommendation 26:** DES Providers should receive training to help them understand the situation of people with different disabilities, the reasons why employers hire or don't hire us and how to implement proven strategies that can help increase our hire and retention rates.

**8.6. Is there a market need for specialist providers (disability/industry/age cohorts) that would increase employment opportunities?**

Disabled job seekers require access to Rehabilitation Counsellors and vocational specialists. If we also have to work with employment consultants, they should be consultants who specialise in, for example, working with job seekers who use wheelchairs. As a group, wheelchair users still have differing needs but as a wheelchair user, the barriers I face to employment will overlap more with other wheelchair users than they will with people who have cognitive impairment, mental health issues or are neurodivergent. Focusing will allow consultants to build up more useful experience and could improve their chances of helping to place us effectively.

As a person with multiple university degrees, I also find it quite notable that employment consultants know little about the kind of jobs that those qualifications might make me suitable for. Employment Consultants are almost always focused on bottom end jobs.

As a job seeker who is now over 50, as well as disabled, I am also very aware of the tendency of employers to prefer younger workers. Assisting older workers into employment is likely to be a specialised skill. It requires working with older job seekers to identify and market our employability skills. It also requires Identifying employers that are more likely to value our experience rather than labelling us as “past it”. Consultants who focus on that part of the job seeker cohort are more likely to develop the skills that will help.

A strategy of Customised Employment, which negotiates a job based on the skills and interest of the worker, appropriately matched with the names of the employer addresses these issues by default.

**9.1. What will success look like for: a) people with disability b) the community c) employers d) service providers e) Government**

Successful disability employment for me as a disabled person will mean every disabled person who is required to have a job and every disabled person who wants a job has work that we can do, which matches our interests and skills. Employment provides sufficient income to meet our needs and help us to achieve our life goals. It will mean freedom from mutual obligations. It will mean work where we feel valued and included and where we have the opportunity to progress, if we wish. DSP Rates will increase because anyone unable to find employment, with appropriate support, will be on the Disability Support Pension, not left to “age-out” on JobSeeker.

A successful DES program will work with me as an individual to identify my strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to maximise my chances of on-going employment. It will work with me and with employers to identify and negotiate suitable placements. It will offer Customised Employment. Any activity I am obliged to engage in as a job seeker will be evidence-based, not ideologically bashed. I will be supported, not oppressed or punished for being out of work. My DES provider will be accountable to me for the support they offer.

If we have a successful disability employment program, community members will see disabled people working. That will become normal. Never again will someone congratulate me for being out in public, simply because I am in a wheelchair.

For employers, a successful disability employment service will mean that they are disability confident; that they expect and actively seek to include disabled people amongst their workforce.

For service providers, a successful disability employment service means developing the ability to place people in employment that suits their skills and interests and makes their employment sustainable. It means not being compliance police. It means offering unemployed people respect and support; not threats, punishment and coercion.

For a good government, successful disability employment services offer support that keeps people out of poverty and helps them deal with changing circumstances effectively. A good disability employment service does not cause further damage to people who are already in a bad situation.

If a DES programme is effective, more disabled people will be employed and remain employed six months, one year and five years down the track. The disability unemployment rate will go down and stay there. Initially, the number of employers who described themselves as disability confident will increase. As time goes on disability confidence will become normal and asking about it will be strange. All disabled people who want work or require work will find employment.

If disabled workers are in jobs that meet their needs, their mental health should be better.

**9.2. What data do we need to know if the program has been effective?**

What is the disability un/underemployment rate? Has it improved and by how much?

How many disabled job seekers remain employed after 6 months, 12 months, 3 years and 5 years?

What percentage of businesses employ disabled workers? How does that compare to the percentage of disabled workers in the population and has it improved? By how much?

How does the income of disabled people compare to the income of the general population and has it improved? By how much? How do the mean, the median and the range of income for disabled workers compare to the general worker population?

What are the results of using different employment strategies such as IPS and Customised Employment compared to what DES achieved without them?

**Recommendation 27:** Data collected to consider the success of DES should look at the disability un/underemployment rate. It should consider changes over time as well as comparisons between the disabled population and the general population, with strategies that fail to perform substantially adjusted in light of the evidence or discontinued.

**9.3. How can people with disability, employers and providers help to measure and report on the performance of the new program?**

Disabled people can report whether rehabilitation counsellors and employment consultants are working to identify and address their strengths weaknesses opportunities and threats when it comes to employment. We can report on the support we receive. Our best form of “report” will be to find and keep a job or be transferred from Job Seeker to the DSP, without Compulsory Mutual Obligations.

Employers can give feedback on their experience employing disabled people both to improve the process and to encourage other employers to employ disabled people.

Providers will obviously report on how many people find work, as well as the number of people moved on to the DSP, who should not be required to look for work.

**9.4. What do people with disability and employers need to make an informed choice to select the best provider for their needs and how should this information be made available?**

As a job seeker, I'd like to know what qualifications and experience my consultant has and what results the provider has achieved. I’d like to work with someone who has professional training in rehabilitation counselling and vocational services. I'd like to know that I'm working with a service that has demonstrated experience finding employment for people who are wheelchair users. I'd like to know what kind of jobs they've found for people like me; tertiary educated women over 50 who use wheelchairs. This information should be easy to find on the Internet - on provider websites and via job access.

**Recommendation 28:** DES providers should have and advertise relevant qualifications, experience and successes.

## Conclusion

Disabled people of working age have been between a rock and a hard place for way too long. The government has increasingly judged us able to work and refused us the Disability Support Pension. At the same time, employers increasingly demand employees who can hit the ground running. Many members of the general public still express shock, surprise and admiration for any disabled person who does something as mundane as work for a living. They don't expect to work alongside us.

The Australian government has been happy to classify more of us as able to work and equally happy to keep us in poverty, requiring us to waste years of our lives looking for jobs that quite often are just not there for us.

This review provides an opportunity for the Australian government to address the mismatches between their own decisions, the services they provide and the expectations of employers. It's an opportunity to provide disabled people with the support we actually need to participate in the workplace according to our abilities. It’s an opportunity to put an end to a system that requires us to seek work when we don't have the appropriate skills and are unable to develop them to a standard that makes securing and maintaining employment realistic.

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3. Customised Employment, Scope Australia <https://www.scopeaust.org.au/services-for-individuals/customised-employment/> accessed 6/12/21 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice “Customised Employment, Work First Customised Employment™ Program Outline” 2018 p4 <https://www.cderp.com.au/ewExternalFiles/CE%20Program%20Outline.pdf> accessed 6/12/21 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Tradeblock Deaf Cafe <https://www.vcd.vic.edu.au/tradeblock/> accessed 1/12/21 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
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7. People with Disability in Australia, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, October 2020 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment/unemployment> accessed 30/11/21 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)