

Disability Employment Reforms Branch
GPO Box 9820
Department of Social Services
Canberra ACT 2601

DESConsultation@dss.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: Submission regarding New Disability Employment Support Model Consultation Paper

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission with respect to the New Disability Employment Support Model Consultation Paper. The Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA) welcomes the New Disability Employment Support Model Consultation Paper and appreciates being able to contribute a submission from the valuable perspective of small business employers.

The Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA)

COSBOA is the national peak body representing the interests of small business. Collectively, COSBOA's members represent an estimated 1.3 million of the 2.5 million small and family businesses that operate in Australia.

As a collaboration of peak organisations across a wide range of industries, COSBOA acknowledges small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are major contributors to the Australian economy. SMEs employ 68% of Australia's workforce. In GDP terms, SMEs together contribute 56% of value added. Small and medium businesses are therefore key partners in rebuilding Australia's economy as Australia emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Scope of submission

COSBOA's submission will be focused on the perspective of small business employers. The submission is largely based on the findings of COSBOA's 2018 research report entitled "Making it easier for small business to employ people with disability." The report was prepared for the Employment Reform Working Group of the National Disability and Carers Advisory Council. It was commissioned by the Department of Social Services and produced by COSBOA in association with 89 Degrees East and Truth-Serum. A copy of the report is attached for ease of reference.

In addition, COSBOA's collaborative consultation with respect to the New Disability Employment Support Model has also included discussions with representatives from the Australian Hairdressing Council, Sustainable Salons, Restaurant and Catering Industry Association, Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), Myotherapy Association Australia, CPA Australia and Disability Employment Australia. Responses are based on the perspectives of our members and our extensive experience with small and medium sized enterprises across Australia.

Human rights framework

It is particularly important to COSBOA that the rights of people with disability are appropriately recognised and upheld. Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of People with Disability recognises 'the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others' (UN General Assembly 2006). In addition to upholding the human rights of people with disability, COSBOA believes in promoting participation in employment as it is associated with the benefits of work as a usual part of life including economic and social inclusion, improved health and wellbeing, and contributing to a positive sense of identity and self-worth.

Summary of research objectives and findings

The focus of COSBOA's 2018 research project was to understand and uncover relevant enablers for small and medium sized business owners that would make it easier for owners and managers to employ a person with disability.

Objectives of the research project included:

1. Understanding experiences and challenges involved during the employment process for small business owners employing people with a disability.
2. Identifying ways in which government can reduce red tape for small business owners which would support employment opportunities for people with a disability.
3. Understanding barriers facing small business owners and managers who are not employing people with disability.
4. Identifying opportunities to support employment outcomes.

Key findings of the research project included that SME business owners were typically time poor and overloaded with internal and external expectations. They often lack the formal HR resources and processes that many larger businesses have, and the owner of a SME often holds multiple roles such as CEO, CFO, marketing director, sales director, business development director and many more. Consequently, any initiatives that add further administrative or supervisory functions are unlikely to attract interest, no matter how important.

Half of SMEs interviewed (50%) had employed a person with disability in the workplace (29% currently and 21% previously). Micro SME business owners employing between 1 to 4 people were least likely to employ a person with disability. The vast majority of SME employers (69%) stated that employing someone with a disability delivered a positive

employment outcome for their business, and more than half said their experience was 'very positive'. The key driver of the positive employment outcome for the SME business owner was that the person with a disability was considered to be 'a great worker,' had made a positive contribution to the workplace, and had the appropriate skills for the role.

More than half of SMEs surveyed (53%) were open to employing a person with a disability in the future and 1 in 4 (25%) were 'very likely'. SMEs who currently employed a person with a disability were the most likely to support future employment opportunities, where 87% stated they were likely to do so.

Mainstream media was creating greater awareness and acceptance of people with disability in the workplace, and small business owners valued diverse workplaces and inclusive recruitment which was driving acceptance and open-ness towards employing a person with disability. Disability was seen as a subset of diversity, and there was a positive sentiment towards hiring people from different backgrounds in order to create interesting and productive workplaces.

'Lack of applications' was the main reason SMEs hadn't employed a person with a disability. Recruitment approaches for SMEs were primarily word of mouth, social media and traditional recruitment channels. There was a need to bridge the gap between the job placements ads and candidates with the right skills who have a disability, as employers were open to receiving applications.

Small business was less likely to engage with Disability Employment Services or other disability agencies, primarily due to a lack of awareness/engagement and because these are not channels they naturally have any affiliation with or that they would normally consider using for recruitment.

Barriers getting in the way of the recruitment process for SMEs included:

1. Concerns about legal and ethical risks to the employer, particularly if the arrangement didn't work out.
2. Time and complexities involved in applying for funding for workplace modifications or wage subsidies.
3. Different disabilities posed different challenges, and many were unsure how to deal with this due to limited understanding about disability and supports required.
4. The word 'disability' was considered a label with negative connotations – terms like 'diversity' or 'inclusion' were perceived to be more appealing, clearer and associated with positive outcomes.
5. A lack of easily accessible information and advice about how to hire a person with disability.
6. Concerns regarding the cost and time involved with workplace adjustments that may be required (including time to apply for and administer any additional funding sources that may be available).

There was a need for greater education and information about these issues to be delivered at a relevant time for employers during the recruitment process. SMEs also stated that having 'trusted sources' for this information, such as through their own industry associations or organisations they are already dealing with on a daily basis, was an important factor. Establishing new working relationships with external agencies, either government or community, was considered an additional time burden that many small businesses were not able to absorb.

There was also a need for clarity and simplification in the language used around disability issues and services to 'demystify' disability and make it easier for SMEs who may otherwise have no experience of disability, to identify relevant skills, strengths, limitations and supports required for a potential candidate who has a disability.

Over half (52%) of SMEs believed there was a higher level of compliance and 'red-tape' involved when hiring a person with a disability compared to hiring staff members without a disability. Education on this issue, and simplifying any additional compliance requirements to create a more streamlined process for small business, both at the recruitment stage and for any ongoing support that may be required, would help address this perception.

Initiatives which small business owners and managers felt would have the highest impact to encourage action to consider employing a person with disability and bridge the employment gap included:

1. Ongoing specialist employee and employer support for SMEs throughout recruitment and employment processes (potentially through industry associations or other trusted sources), including transition to work supports, workplace preparedness and on the job training.
2. Better information and advice around how to hire a person with disability and job match skills and experience. There is a need for a simple classifications system for employers to understand the different disability types and potential modifications or additional supports required, and clarity around the skills, strengths and limitations that people with different disability types may have.
3. Streamline the existing application and approval process for financial assistance from government for workplace adjustments and wage assistance, and where possible remove the onus on SMEs for completing the paperwork or undertaking additional compliance activities.
4. Provide clearer information and advice around an SME's legal responsibilities and obligations related to employing a person with a disability. Ideally the information should be industry- and workplace-specific. It is important that the right message is delivered at the right time for employers to engage with the communication.
5. Produce more case studies, videos and examples of other small business experiences when hiring a person with a disability. It's motivating for SMEs to see how others are making it work in their business/industry, which creates a positive 'can-do' attitude.

As a result of the research findings, COSBOA believed there was a strong appetite amongst the small business community to become more actively engaged in delivering employment

outcomes for people with a disability, and to become more inclusive employers. This remains our position to date.

Our recent member consultation in relation to the New Disability Employment Support Model Consultation Paper confirms there is still a strong willingness to engage, however it is imperative that the barriers and complexities involved are reduced to enable a much greater uptake in the small business sector. For example, our members believe there is a stronger role for government to play in working with organisations such as the Australian Network on Disability to make their Access & Inclusion index more accessible for SMEs. Such an index helps small businesses better understand their current position, enabling them to make changes that support disability employment.

Report recommendations

The key recommendations from COSBOA's 2018 research report were as follows:

Recommendation 1

That 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. This could be trialed in targeted locations (metropolitan and regional) and supported through small business industry associations with direct links to SME employers.

Recommendation 2

That the 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. Once these materials are revised and made fit-for-purpose, a national awareness campaign is run in collaboration with small business industry associations to promote the new resources and promote the benefits of creating more inclusive workplaces at an individual, business and community level.

Recommendation 3

That the 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. This may include an extension to the role of DES providers to assist employers with the application and compliance processes required to access and acquit these grants.

Recommendation 4

That new information resources be developed, through codesign with small businesses, which 'demystifies' disability and that address the concerns of SMEs around the perceived additional legal and compliance issues associated with employing a person with a disability; provide clearer information about different disability types/categorisations and their impact on employment opportunities, as well as the benefits that different abilities can bring to the workplace; identify the

potential modifications that may be required to accommodate different types of disability, and provide information about assistive technologies and other products available to make workplaces safe and accessible for people of all abilities; and provide examples, through case studies, videos, podcasts and other social media formats, that promote the benefits of employing people with disability and address some of the perceived barriers/difficulties.

Recommendation 5

That 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. This high level forum could consider setting a national target and action plan to increase employment of people with disability over the next 10 years.

COSBOA stands by these recommendations and continues to advocate for a greater level of tailored support for small business employers to deliver successful employment opportunities to people with disability.

Ensuring successful placements

To assist people with disability to become successfully settled into long term training and employment opportunities and develop their long-term career pathways, it is essential to ensure the following occurs:

- 1. Careful matching of jobseekers with employers.** This involves agency staff having a sound, practical understanding of small business needs. Agency staff also must have the people skills needed to work closely with people with disabilities and to relate a jobseeker's capabilities and interests with an employer's requirements. The skill-set required for this role is not easily obtained and there is a lot of competition for agency staff with the right characteristics. The challenge of finding good people to work in the disability employment field is compounded by the relatively low wages on offer from some agencies.
- 2. Attractive wage subsidy rates.** Wage subsidies really do assist. Employers are often concerned about the productivity of new workers. They are concerned that a jobseeker with a disability will require additional supervision and training. Subsidies serve an important purpose in overcoming initial concerns of employers and compensating them for additional time spent making the placement successful.
- 3. On-the-job mentoring and coaching.** Disability Employment Services must be funded sufficiently to enable thorough follow-up mentoring and coaching with person with a disability. This coaching will often be done in the person's new workplace. The need for coaching will vary from person-to-person but it is important that it's done properly, not just as a tick-a-box exercise. This requires skilled, knowledgeable agency staff.

One of the major gaps has been in the provision of professional career counselling for jobseekers. This gap is evident across all public employment services provision. However, high quality professional career counselling is especially important for people with disabilities, who have many more barriers to overcome in seeking to create career pathways for themselves. Career guidance and counselling has become a very rare skill-set. The outsourced public employment services contracts have not placed an emphasis on the provision of these services.

A positive step forward would be to fund the professional development of career counselling as an integral part of disability employment services. This would also drive increased professionalism in the disability employment agency workforce.

Consultation Paper Questions

Our members were asked for their views in relation to the New Disability Employment Support Model Consultation Paper Questions 5.1 – 5.4. A summary of responses received is provided below, including the 'lived experience' perspective.

COSBOA acknowledges we do not have direct access to how DES providers operate, however we imagine many are already doing a considerable amount of the important work captured below. We recognise there are many excellent DES providers who have expert knowledge and skills. We recommend the Department highlights for employers their understanding of the successful provider engagements that currently take place on a weekly basis in the program.

COSBOA is also aware that Disability Employment Australia has extensive knowledge and experience with respect to DES provider engagement. We recommend continued consultation with Disability Employment Australia in relation to the following issues.

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

- Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that employers who are 'disability confident' have a stronger and more secure workforce. People with disability frequently demonstrate stronger loyalty – they will tend to stay with an employer for a longer duration than average, are frequently more productive, are great problem solvers and more. When considering becoming a disability confident employer it is necessary to establish well-developed and flexible workplace practices. Many people with disability may require flexible working hours, office arrangements etc. Flexibility in terms of technology, team development and culture are also extremely important.
- There are many disability peak-body organisations which hold regular forums and workshops for employers looking to employ people with disability and these can be an excellent place to start. These forums, workshops and projects help employers to understand the positive aspects of employing a person with disability and to avoid some of the potential pitfalls which may be encountered.

- Perhaps the most important consideration for an employer is to understand that an employee is usually the best person to understand their needs and the impact their disability has on their ability to work and be a part of a team. One should never look at a prospective or current employee through her or his own lens and this is particularly true for people with disability. Many people with disability have not been awarded roles for which they are perfectly qualified because a manager couldn't imagine how they might undertake the duties and responsibilities of a role.
- There is a need to educate employers about the benefits of employing a person with a disability, educate employers on types of disabilities and how the disabilities can positively integrate into open employment, educate employers on the types of government funding available for supports such as workplace modifications, and educate employers on the types of pay awards and wage assessment tools that are available when employing a person with a disability.
- There is a need to provide employers with an easy-to-understand information kit that contains guidelines around how to ask questions that may be relevant to a person's disability, particularly around any requirements for personal or professional support, workplace modifications and any employment responsibility limitations, and how best to align this to employer's expectations. The kit should also contain an advice hotline for employers to utilise when requiring information on how to best support the person with a disability if required. This could potentially be provided by the NDIS or Fair Work.
- When hiring and retaining people with disability, key pre-employment misconceptions and challenges need to be addressed to inform small businesses. Many fear they will have to make special dispensations, and will be liable if they are unable to in all scenarios. Consequently they may be putting hiring differently-abled staff in the 'too hard' pile. It is important to ensure all small business employers have accurate and easy-to-understand information accessible to them.

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?

- Like employers, DES providers must understand their clients and client groups. Many people with disability report that their provider has only recommended jobs for which they are over qualified and often not suitable in the first place. DES providers must lead by example and employ people with disability at all levels of their organisations. This demonstrates commitment to the purpose, particularly to clients and employers.
- When seeking jobs for clients they must understand their qualifications and job requirements, and involve their clients in all aspects of their work on behalf of that client.

- It is also important that DES providers understand funding and other initiatives established to assist people with disability to access the workforce including organisations such as JobAccess and the Employee Assistance fund, the Australian Network on Disability, and Blind Citizens Australia's 'Eye to the Future' project. Similarly, the NDIS offers funding to enable participants to become "work ready." DES providers should understand the NDIS landscape to the extent that they can advise their clients on the best way to maximise their NDIS plans to ensure they have the appropriate skills and attributes for the jobs for which they are applying.
- Some training or equipment may be required and the DES provider should understand what is available and how to access it. Further, they should be aware of the Work-Site assessment process and where they can obtain further advice or information. This information should be able to be passed on to employers and prospective employers to facilitate greater disability confidence across the workforce.
- DES should ensure the person with a disability is the right fit for the employer and that the employer can assist the person with a disability to achieve their employment goals. They should conduct a basic work trial with the person with a disability of no more than 4hrs to ascertain the correct employment placement.
- The DES provider in conjunction with the person with a disability and the employer should develop an employment plan with regular quarterly and annual employment reviews to ensure the person with a disability is on the right pathway to achieving their employment goals and that they align with the employer's expectations.
- DES should arrange a fair Supported Wage Assessment including input from both the person with a disability and the employer in the assessment.
- There is a need for pre-employment training for both employee and employer and ongoing mentoring support, as well as access to resources for compliance.

5.3. What are examples of good practice of employer engagement and employer-led initiatives that have been shown to improve employment outcomes for people with disability? How could these be scaled in the disability employment program?

- Many employers offer roles specifically targeted at people with disability, in an effort to increase workplace participation. Developing diversity and inclusion plans for people with disability, CALD backgrounds, GLTBI and gender diversity has been shown to improve productivity and to enhance employment for marginalised people such as people with disability.

- As well, small businesses can often be more flexible and adaptable and can often be considered preferred employers for people with disability. Diversity and inclusion training can be more easily conducted on an organisation-wide basis.
- Development of a person-centric employment plan that includes input from the person with a disability, the employer and any other relevant stakeholders. The employment should be mutually reviewed on a quarterly and annual basis with the inclusion of both short term and long term employment goals.
- Understanding the support requirements of a person with a disability and looking to strengthen employment opportunities through the exploration of employment responsibilities and task analysis.

5.4. What other information, services and supports do employers need to support employees with disability?

- Organisations should be prepared to ‘think outside the box’ and be flexible with respect to the needs of all employees. Many people with disability consider the current trend towards working from home a considerable advantage as it removes the often tedious and difficult task of commuting. As well, many people have home-office space well established for their needs and working from home reduces the burden on employers to adapt office space and purchase specific technologies. It does not reduce the requirement to ensure that all technology used in the workplace, or for remote employees, is accessible.

Case studies

Some positive examples of disability training and employment initiatives highlighted by our members include the BusyBeans Program, All Things Equal Café and Sustainable Salons. We have provided further details about these case studies below.

We are also aware there are many other good employment programs in existence. We encourage the Department to utilise a wide range of programs across different industries to understand current engagement with providers.

BusyBeans Program

The BusyBeans Program is facilitated by AimBig, a provider who takes pride in tailoring their services to the individual needs of the person with a disability. Their goal is to find individuals meaningful and sustainable employment. They use a range of experts to assist individuals to overcome barriers and achieve their own employment goals.

AimBig believes everyone is unique. They support and value diversity and inclusion with all staff, customers and suppliers through their commitment to the principles of Equal Employment Opportunity. Equal access to better health and employment outcomes is a core goal for everyone. With a strong focus on the whole person, AimBig considers the needs and accessibility requirements of their customers, staff and the community at every stage of the career journey.

AimBig's BusyBeans barista program offers ongoing, sustainable and meaningful employment for individuals living with a disability, illness or injury. The barista program delivers knowledge and specialised skills through their own coffee training centre. Participants learn techniques and customer service skills from experienced trainers. They start earning wages and enjoy the freedom and independence income offers, while building working relationships within a supportive and understanding organisation.

More information about the BusyBeans Program can be found at [BusyBeansJobs - Disability Employment Jobs | AimBig Employment](#).

All Things Equal Café

All Things Equal Café was founded by Jonathan Wenig is the father of 20 year old Tari Wenig. Tari has autism and faced challenges finding a job that suited her after she graduated from school in 2020.

Jonathan was concerned about Tari's career path and saw many other young people in a similar position. He founded a charity and raised nearly \$200,000 to open the café in Balaclava, Victoria.

Twelve of the café's employees, half of the café's entire staff, live with disabilities. The café has been so successful that parents regularly approach managers for jobs for their children with disabilities. This is largely because All Things Equal Café believes everyone is different and everyone is welcome.

More information about All Things Equal Café can be found at [All Things Equal — Cafe in Carlisle St, Balaclava](#).

Sustainable Salons

Sustainable Salons is a social enterprise that helps its salon members reduce their impact on the planet and invest in local communities. Founded by Paul Frasca and Ewelina Soroko, Sustainable Salons was launched in 2015 and now has over 1,000 members across Australia and New Zealand. The salon recycling program began in the hairdressing industry and now creates waste solutions for barber shops, beauty salons, dermal clinics and pet-grooming salons.

In partnership with Mylestones (QLD), Mambourin (VIC), Workpower (WA) and other operators, Sustainable Salons is creating stronger futures for people with a disability by providing purposeful work within their material collection and processing streams. All organisations are 'for purpose,' dedicated to helping people with a disability live fulfilling lives. Employment is a critical part of this. The Sydney depot directly employs people with a disability working across processing streams.

Sustainable Salons recognises that people with disabilities such as Asperger's Syndrome have impressive abilities. When treated with respect and taught correctly, individuals enjoy meaningful and fulfilling careers. Their lives can be improved with consistency, security of employment, being paid well and being valued as human beings. Human centred, inclusive

and supportive workplaces ensure individuals with disabilities feel connected to others and really want to be there.

Sustainable Salons recognises that employee placements through a Disability Employment Service are paid under the Supported Wage System (SWS) - a Fair Work requirement. This means that an employee must have an annual independent wage assessment and the pay rate is set by the assessor. The DES provider is responsible for ensuring that the employee is paid under the correct award wage relative to the industry in which the employee is placed in, and relative to their employment responsibilities.

Sustainable Salons is passionate about bringing diversity, inclusion and purpose into the corporate environment. They believe more support, information, resources and encouragement is required from government to ensure a greater number of businesses become involved in the future.

More information about Sustainable Salons can be found at [Sustainable Salons - Salon Recycling Service - Sustainable Salons](#).

Additional research

COSBOA has also reviewed other relevant research conducted in the area of disability employment. Attached is a 2021 report entitled “10 strategies for improving employment outcomes for people with disability.” This report presents 10 strategies for increasing the participation of people with disability in employment. It builds on evidence examined by the Brotherhood St. Laurence (BSL) in collaboration with the Disability and Health Unit at the University of Melbourne and BSL’s experience in developing, delivering and evaluating labour market programs for people vulnerable to economic and social exclusion. The strategies presented in the report identify helpful policies and practices for driving systemic change.

Summary

In summary, COSBOA believes there is a strong appetite amongst small business employers to become more actively engaged in delivering successful employment outcomes for people with disability. There is a real opportunity for small business employers to become ‘employers of choice’ by actively supporting diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

However, many small business employers have faced significant challenges in recent times due to COVID-19 lockdowns, worker shortages and severe financial hardship. They are often stressed and time poor. It is therefore imperative that the barriers and complexities involved in facilitating employment opportunities for people with disability are reduced as much as possible.

The solutions put forward in this submission provide a pathway to ensure greater uptake in the small business sector. More tailored support, attractive wage subsidy rates and easily accessible information is essential for small business employers across a wide range of industries.

Future consultation

COSBOA advocates for continued small business employer consultation with respect to the New Disability Employment Support Model.

Our members would appreciate ongoing involvement with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment, including opportunities to provide feedback on the progress of the New Disability Employment Support Model in the future.

On behalf of our members, I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to participate in this consultation process.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A Boyd". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Alexi Boyd
Chief Executive Officer
Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA)

1 February 2022