# Response to Consultation paper: Shaping your new disability employment support program

## Introduction

Employ for Ability is a social purpose business setup to help people on the autism spectrum and other neurodivergent conditions to find a pathway to work. Employ for Ability was set up by Managing Director, David Smith in 2019.

In Australia 1 person in 44 (CDC, 2020) is on the autism spectrum and the unemployment rate is 34% (ABS 2018). Adults with an autism diagnosis are less likely to be employed than people with an intellectual disability, down syndrome or physical disability (NDIS 2018). This made no sense to me as people on the autism spectrum have an incredible amount to offer, have low rates of absenteeism, are more likely to work harder, smarter and quicker than their neurotypical peers (JP Morgan Chase 2016).

After completing the Oxford Advanced Management and Leadership program in 2016, David resolved that he wanted to help improve the employment rate of autistic talent, he completed post graduate qualifications in Autism from Griffith university and decided to embark on this journey.

David left a corporate leadership role in the tech recruitment industry to build a business that would help reduce the unemployment rate of adults on the autism spectrum by focusing on their strengths and abilities, rather than their so called disabilities. The aim was to look at them holistically and provide support so they could succeed at work. LinkedIn article from 2019 talks about our beginning. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/start-employ-ability-pty-ltd-david-smith/>.

“The sense of purpose I have experienced in placing people so far has been amazing. Seeing the joy in the faces of the neurodiverse workers, the transformations in their families and the realisation from employers that what they considered disability employment is actually giving them a competitive advantage has been profound.”

 This is still true 3 years later and in fact, more so as we have now placed over 100 individuals and have grown to a team of 18 staff delivering a broader range of services to support people transition to work.

Our practical experience since 2019, is that more than 90% of the candidates we work with who have been registered with a DES provider had never obtained paid employment, under that system of support. Most had given up and not stayed registered as the experience was affecting their mental well being. Many other candidates had never registered with a DES provider and where not receiving any unemployment benefits. They had applied for mainstream roles and never received an offer, so had given up and stayed at home.

We have three streams of clients:

1. School Leavers Employment Support (SLES) who have completed year 12 and we support them with their NDIS funding to develop their skills, competence and ability to work in a role to gain confidence, learn about managing their conditions in a work environment with a tailored holistic support model around them so they can succeed. We currently have 30 people in our SLES program. In the first 12 months of piloting this program we had 10 candidates. 8 have gained permanent part time work and of those 8, 5 are completing tertiary vocational training courses and/or traineeships. The other 2 participants are undertaking volunteering and continuing self-development, learning to manage their significant disabilities in the current Covid world. Our current group of new SLES participants (the new 20) are undertaking self development courses to become job ready. Some are undertaking work experience with job coaches and 5 have obtained casual work in the recent weeks. This cohort looks like continuing the trend of 80% gaining meaningful work compared to other SLES providers who use it as a precursor to DES where they place less than 10% into meaningful work.
2. Clients over 21 with an NDIS plan who have not received any success with a DES provider. We provide a program tailored to them similar to our SLES program that provides holistic support to get them into work experience with a job coach/support worker and then into permanent or part time work. Since 2019 we have placed more than 100 people into work using this program at a success rate of 80%. Work has ranged from Public Service positions at the APS 1-5 level, entry level positions into technology firms, retail, hospitality, freight and logistics, administration, finance and trades.
3. Participants who do not have an NDIS plan and have been referred by DES providers or family members due to lack of progress in the current system. On a pro-bono basis we assist these clients and place them into roles, using the methodology of the group 2 clients above. DES providers then claim the current funding model they are entitled too when we find them a role and support them to keep the role.

The NIDS funding model has worked well for our participants and our company to provide a reliable funding model to help people gain employment. No two participants have the same needs due to their range of complex challenges, but with trained staff and reliable funding we are able to make the model work. As a guide, a person who has never worked will need funding to the same level as the SLES funding model as a minimum to support them over a 12 month period with many needing additional funding for specialised OT support. The funding we have utilised so far does not allow us to provide any financial incentive to an employer to hire a person with disability. The work we do with employers is generally unfunded. We need to partner with a DES to provide a wage incentive or funding for training.

## Specialist Versus generalist

We came to this industry with clear focus that being a specialist provider for people on the autism spectrum and other neurodivergent conditions would provide us with the expertise to assist this cohort of people who had received poor outcomes from the current DES model. If you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism. Each person is unique and needs a different support program to help them reach their goals. Teaching them to be neurotypical does not work as evident by the current results for autism in DES. Interviews measure social and communications skills, areas that people on the autism spectrum do not have as strengths. Teaching people how to apply for mainstream roles via mainstream processes such as interviews is disabling and like asking a person in a wheel chair to go and climb stairs to get to work. Or asking a gay person to not be gay at work.

Our specialised approach seeks to understand the persons neurodivergent profile and comorbid conditions such as anxiety, ADHD, intellectual disability, Down Syndrome, learning or reading challenges. We then provide a tailored program of support to develop in them the confidence, work readiness and skills to handle difficult situations they will face in a neurotypical workplace. We focus on the following key areas through an autism lens:

1. Employment communication skills
2. Anxiety management skills
3. Executive functioning and time management skills
4. Safe use of public transport
5. Finance skills
6. Work experience
7. Working with a job coach and mentor
8. Self advocacy to be able to request reasonable adjustments
9. Adulting skills to live independently

The key aspects for helping a person on the autism spectrum to find and maintain suitable employments are as follows:

1. Trained, autism aware support workers and job coaches
2. Access to autism focused training to develop work ready skills ( not teaching them to be neurotypical)
3. Access to work experience opportunities so they can try different roles to find their strengths. They don’t know what they don’t know.
4. Job Coach/support workers who can take them and support them during work experience. Taking into account comorbidities such as anxiety. Staff need to be trained in how to handle different sensory challenges or behavioural challenges. Behaviour is communication.
5. Autism aware employers. Before placing a work experience person the employer needs to participate in autism awareness training
6. Manager training in how to manage a person on the autism spectrum
7. Support post placement which will be episodic depending on changes or circumstances. Support for both the manager and employee. Understanding that no support may be needed for a few months as both manager and employee learn how to work well with each other, but intense support may be needed if change occurs such as job role changes, new manager comes in, Covid restrictions mean work from home or return to work from work from home.

## Supporting young adults post tertiary education

Young adults who have completed tertiary studies need the same levels of support that students leaving year 12 do. Offering a SLES style funding program for post tertiary students would give them the same ability to obtain meaningful work as a post year 12 student has. At present SLES is only offered to post year 12 upto age 21. The supports we provide post uni or TAFE students is the same model as SLES, but due to their NDIS funding being lower they get less support and take longer to gain employment or receive less support at work making the transition to full time or part work less successful. An element of the funding needs to be to provide training and support to the managers of hiring organisations.

## Funding models and innovation

Specialised DES providers that have expertise in a range of disabilities should be funded using a model similar to NDIS where individuals are assessed based on need and appropriate levels of funding are made available based on the individuals needs. At present participants can choose from a limited range of generalist providers and have no visibility of what funding is provided to the DES provider. At present someone can have finding and keeping a job funding under NDIS and also be serviced by a DES provider. In essence double dipping by providers. In our experience we need to partner with a DES provider in some circumstances to provide a wage subsidy to an employer. We are funded by a persons NDIS plan funding and the DES provider does a very limited part of their service and is paid for the placement and milestones.

## Modern work options for people with disability

The DES model views work as a part time or full time traditional model. Work today can be in full time, part time, casual, self employment, volunteering or gig work.

We worked with a non-verbal young man with autism as his primary disability. He loved dogs and has a super power in putting Ikea or flat pack furniture together. He also loves recycling. We worked with the young man and his mum to create a micro business where he walks neighbours dogs with his support worker three times a week. He also collects cans and bottles from the local businesses in his suburb with his support worker and collects the 10c per can from the return it scheme. He is in the final stages of setting up an online presence to advertise his skills in assembly of flat pack furniture. This type of work would not be classified as work under the current DES model, but he works on things he loves, makes some money in addition to his disability support pension and contributes to society with a sense of purpose. He had been registered with a DES provider for 2 years and had zero outcomes in that time.

Another lady we placed into a casual role that has now become permanent part time had been in the DES system for many years. She had not had paid work at award wages for more than 20 years. As she is mostly non verbal and on the autism spectrum her DES provider and NDIS providers had not asked her what she would like to do from a work perspective. They did not understand her autism and how to communicate effectively with her or her family. Her support coordinator approached our firm for assistance due to our high rate of placement. We asked this lady what she wanted to work in and she said she loved McDonalds. Her sister said that 20 years ago she had worked at McDonalds and loved it, but family circumstances meant nobody could take her to work so it stopped. She had been doing things she hated with her DES provider and support workers but nobody was listening to her.

With our model we provided coaching to our participant about work, matched her with a job coach/mentor and obtained a work experience opportunity at McDonalds. After 3 x 3 hour shifts on work experience she started paid work on a casual basis. After being reliable, working hard and demonstrating her skills at the 3 month mark, she was offered a permanent part time role of 15 hours per week. She still has a support worker for some of that time and we are actively removing the job worker support over time and training the managers to provide that support. From Feb 2022 she will be working with only her supervisor supporting her and the support worker available on a as needs basis. The worker is confident and loves going to work. The link below is a video the ACT Government made about this story. We are really proud that our model worked to help this lady where current DES models had failed for many years. <https://www.involvedcbr.com.au/news/article/349/inclusion-employment-video>

## Mutual obligation and disability

People on the autism spectrum require tailored supports to get them into employment or to participate in work. The current mutual obligation process of requiring them to apply for 20 jobs each period is disabling, causing harm and not helping the government meets its goals or the worker build confidence towards gaining employment. For many it means that drop out of receiving benefits and stop applying for work.

People on the autism spectrum do need to participate in programs and work towards finding employment as an obligation for the funding they receive from the government. A mutual obligation should be based on the worker participating in an autism pathway program, attending scheduled training courses and meeting with their job coach. They should turn up for work experience and show progress towards achieving the goals set out when they join the program. For some this will be less than other workers due to their abilities. Not all workers are going to get full time work, some may develop skills to do volunteer work or disability enterprise work.

## Funding models to incentive good outcomes

We currently work utulising the NDIS funding model. It works well for building a persons capacity towards work, but does not provide funding to offer incentives to employers or to provide training to employers and managers on how to manage a person on the autism spectrum.

Each person on the autism spectrum will need different funding dependant on their autism profile, comorbid conditions, work ability and ability to learn. A one glove fits all model of funding will provide the same outcomes of less than 10% being placed as seen in the current DES model. Work experience with a job coach needs to be one of the key funding areas, as is tailored learning on work skills, adulting skills, independence, linkages to vocational education.

A specialist autism employment consultant should assess each person entering the system and map out a funding plan unique to that persons needs and have milestones linked.

As an example.

Joe is 24 and on the autism spectrum, has anxiety disorder, ADHD and PTSD from previous trauma. Has not worked successfully and has started but not completed vocational training. Funding is based on the NDIS price guide, but does not include travel or km as funded by the NDIS.

Joe will need 5 hours of career planning and assessment to determine suitable job pathways, identify strengths, understanding learning style, sensory profile, work capacity and areas of interest/strength. ($193.99) $969.95

Autism Support consultant: Tailored support to learn about anxiety management techniques, Interoception, executive functioning skills development to be on time, ready for work and organised. 40 hours. ($65.09) $2603.60

Employment Communication Training. 10 week program to develop the communication, social skills, and ability to work in a neurotypical work place, with one on one social coaching. $4000

Time Management training. $1200. Course and one on one support to learn how to set goals towards getting to work, achieving tasks that require organisational skills

Job Coach support for work experience. ($65.09) 120 hours over 3 months $7810.80

Training for employers on autism and regular coaching for a manager who has hired a part time staff member on the autism spectrum over 6 months $4000

Financial skills for a new worker. Teaching them about saving, managing their income, pay slips, tx, superannuation, goal setting etc. $1200

Regular support post placement over 6 months $4000. Regular check in, discussing anxiety causing events at work, communication challenges at work.

Total without a wage subsidy for the employer. $25784.35 over a 12 month period.

Some workers will require more and some less than this example above.

If a worker attends the regular training sessions, participates in work experience and the above plan, then monthly payments would be the milestones.