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## **Establishing a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence**

### **Introduction**

ProsperT brings together experts in strategy, learning, consulting, coaching and growth services to increase the capacity of the employment services sector to better meet the needs of job seekers, transforming lives, businesses and communities one sustainable job at a time.

Our clients comprise large and small providers who have business in metropolitan, regional and rural/remote locations. Our services have a global reach with clients in Australia, New Zealand, North America, United Kingdom and Europe.

Our response to the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence Options Paper focuses on employer engagement, learning and development, and employer satisfaction. We believe that demand-led approaches to employment for people with disability are a powerful strategy for creating a more dynamic and effective employment ecosystem that benefits both job seekers and businesses alike.

### **1.1 Why do we need a Centre?**

ProsperT supports the establishment of a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence (The Centre) as a key strategic response to addressing the stagnant unemployment rate for people with disability over the past 30 years. This Centre should be a hub to gather and share evidence of effective disability employment strategies and resources with an emphasis on employer engagement practices nationally and globally.

Currently, there is a lack of information, data and insights relating to employer feedback and satisfaction with employment services. The Centre should play a role in tracking the relative performance of Disability Employment Services (DES) against OECD benchmarks to ensure ongoing improvement and accountability. These benchmarks should include employer satisfaction, repeat business and new business referrals. The dissemination of relevant data through open data approaches further empowers employment service providers with critical insights such as employment patterns by location, retention trends and the value of various intervention supports.

Ultimately, the Centre can address a gap in the coordination of efforts to improve the employment outcomes of people with disability. The aim should be to align the intent, expertise, and experience of all stakeholders into a cohesive and well-informed strategy.

### **1.2 What should be the core functions of the Centre?**

The core functions of the Centre should include being a facilitator for learning and development opportunities, undertaking comprehensive reviews and endorsements of various training options, and actively providing training initiatives to reshape employer attitudes and policies.

Beyond its role in learning and development, the Centre should commission and/or identify research initiatives. This involves championing best practices informed by evidence and subsequently disseminating and translating these best practices into practical tools and resources. This multifaceted approach ensures that employers, employment service providers, and individuals with disabilities can readily access and implement proven strategies, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and supportive employment landscape.

Finally, the Centre should promote collaboration across employers, employment service providers, community organisations and other stakeholders, highlighting the significance of collective efforts for sustainable impact. This should be implemented through events, workshops, online forums and networking opportunities.

The Centre should not, in our opinion, become overly academic with the focus on long term research methodologies that do not, in the short to medium term, deliver benefits to a broad range of stakeholders.

### **2.1 Who can the Centre assist? Are any groups missing?**

While the Centre should prioritise job seekers with disabilities, it is essential to support a wide range of stakeholders, including employers, community groups, peak organisations and education and training providers. To ensure that the Centre meets the needs and expectations of stakeholders, we believe an independent board or advisory group comprising these organisations should be established along with lived experience of job seekers.

Further consideration should be given to extending the Centre's assistance to the under-employed (such as Australian Disability Enterprise workers and those returning to the workforce) and employees seeking to progress in their careers from an initial entry level role. Overseas markets include this in their focus and, in our belief, this is a vastly untapped resource effecting our nation's productivity growth.

### **2.2 How can the Centre work with stakeholders to increase the employment rate for people with disability?**

The Centre can play a pivotal role in educating employers about the challenges faced by people with disability in the workforce. Offering guidance on effective engagement with DES providers and assisting employers in meeting diversity and inclusion targets will contribute to closing the employment gap. Regular publication of reports which highlight 'what works' will be useful for employers. In addition, best practice resources for practical implementation will further drive positive change among employers. The Centre could take on responsibility for developing employer focussed mentors who can coach employers on the nature of different disabilities and how best to recruit, onboard and develop their new team members.

### **2.3 What can the Centre do to increase the capability and capacity of employment service providers?**

The Centre's focus should extend to promoting training workshops, webinars, and case studies for employment service providers. Training should cover topics such as employment engagement, stakeholder engagement, employee engagement and retention, business intelligence and Customer Relationship Management integration.

Additionally, the Centre should highlight how to incorporate lived experiences in service delivery models using techniques such as co-design. Extending on this, another focus area should be the continuous improvement in service delivery models for both employers and job seekers.

The Centre should not duplicate the already good work taking place in the sector, but instead seek to collaborate, promote and complement efforts. For example, Prospert's existing learning programs already promote best practices and are well-regarded by the sector. We are keen for the Centre to contribute to the success of this work, rather than replicate or duplicate programs.

### **3.1 What are your views on the models presented?**

The Centre should be a not-for-profit organisation with expertise in research, program design, learning and development, advocacy and communications. The Centre should function as an independent, stand-alone institution, underpinned by sustained government support through long-term funding commitments. While the option of being housed within an existing organisation is feasible, care must be taken to avoid conflicts of interest, such as direct delivery of employment services or engagement in commercial interests. This strategic approach ensures the Centre's autonomy and unwavering focus on its core mission without compromising its integrity.

### **3.2 Are there any models for a Centre to consider that are not included in this paper?**

A University partnership could provide a unique perspective and collaborative opportunities that benefit research and training initiatives. Care needs to be taken to ensure the Centre does not become driven by academic processes and that partnering Universities are involved for their specialisms. For example, several employment services providers already collaborate with tertiary education providers in showcasing evidence based disability employment trials.

### **3.3 What can the Government take from existing models of Centre of Excellence? What should be ruled out?**

Collaboration with external expertise is crucial. The Centre should seek partnerships with organisations highly skilled in relevant fields. Ruling out the expectation of housing all expertise in-house is important for flexibility, efficiency and specialisation.

### **4.1 Where could a Centre be best placed (for example, within a government agency, a university, or as a stand-alone institution)?**

A stand-alone institution deeply rooted in local communities ensures a focused, independent approach. Careful consideration of size, location, scope, and a defined review period is essential to test effectiveness and define success.

### **4.2 Are there any other implementation issues that should be considered?**

While balancing the Centre's focus on jobseeker needs is crucial, a careful balance between job seeker and employer requirements must be achieved. Equally, many community organisations have a significant stake in a successful employment service, e.g. allied health professionals, disability support organisations and cultural institutions.

### **4.3 What elements of the proposed role of the Centre or its functions should be prioritised?**

A full diagnostic to articulate the "why" for the Centre is paramount. This could be reflected in a Program Logic or Theory of Change co-designed with job seekers and employers. Identifying and aligning realistic goals and objectives will naturally guide the prioritisation of functions.

In conclusion, Prospert supports the commitment to establishing the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence and emphasises the importance of targeted learning and development, employer support, and collaboration across the sector. The proposed responses aim to contribute to this ongoing dialogue, ensuring the Centre's effectiveness in addressing the challenges faced by people with disability in the workforce.