



# DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE



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## INTRODUCTION

VERTO is an award winning, not for profit organisation with 40 years' experience in transforming lives through pathways to employment. Our extensive suite of programs includes employment services, apprenticeship programs, training services, and labour market community initiatives to address the unique employment barriers faced by diverse sections of Australian society.

As a Disability Employment Services (DES) provider, VERTO acknowledges the immense potential and resilience of people with disabilities. Participants within DES bring a unique set of competencies, expertise, and perspectives that significantly enrich our communities, including the employment sector. VERTO DES services are tailored to the individual needs of participants, taking into account their personal circumstances, skills, and the nature of their disability to help them find and maintain sustainable employment. This includes job readiness training, matching suitable job vacancies, and supporting participants and their employers in the workplace to ensure sustainable employment outcomes.

The establishment of the proposed Disability Employment Centre of Excellence (Centre) aligns with VERTO's commitment to transformational change, ensuring that individuals with disabilities have access to the necessary supports and opportunities to succeed in the workforce. VERTO is pleased to provide the following submission to the Department of Social Services advocating that the formation of a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence would have practical impacts on inclusive employment in the Australian workplace.

## WHY DO WE NEED A CENTRE?

VERTO supports practical steps to simplify the complex and nuanced employment landscape experienced by people with disabilities. The establishment of a Centre, as a central resource hub, would help address the multifaceted challenges in the disability employment sector. By centralising key resources and information, the Centre should aim to foster a more informed community that understands the intricacies and needs of people with disabilities. This not only benefits those with disabilities but also provides valuable guidance to better equip and support employers and local communities in creating systemic change. Furthermore, an integral component of the Centre's role would be to enhance the professionalisation of the sector through targeted training and professional development (PD) for provider staff. This focus on professional growth is anticipated to be one of the key benefits for providers, ensuring that staff are well prepared to meet the evolving demands of the sector and deliver the highest standard of support to their clients.

In addition, fragmentation between NDIS and DES providers can lead to gaps and inefficiencies in service delivery. VERTO sees the Centre as an important mechanism in bridging these gaps, facilitating better communication, and fostering collaboration between these entities, to provide a more streamlined and efficient employment service delivery framework for people with disabilities.

The Centre would operate as a hub for best practices, research, innovation, and capacity-building in the field of disability employment. To ensure it remains practical and impactful, rather than merely an information repository, VERTO propose that its core functions should target tangible outcomes in disability employment. VERTO supports actionable and practical functions that help the Centre provide positive change in the disability employment sector including:

- **Practical accessibility in regional and remote areas:** The Centre's goal should be more than just sharing information; it should actively facilitate access to “on-the-ground” resources and support across employment regions. Its mandate should ensure services and initiatives have similar impacts in both urban and non-urban regions.
- **Hands-on support for Small to Medium-sized Employers (SMEs):** Recognising the distinct challenges DES participants face, the Centre should go beyond consultation with “big business”. Instead, it should provide direct, actionable tools, training, and resources that SMEs can immediately implement to foster inclusivity and provide opportunities for employees with disabilities.
- **Active community engagement and partnerships:** Building relationships is more than just outreach. The Centre should immerse itself in local communities, initiating practical collaborative projects and partnering with grassroots organisations to drive real change in disability employment practices.
- **Applied training and adaptive solutions:** Training offerings should be pragmatic and directly applicable. The Centre should develop programs that translate to immediate skills and capacities, tailored for various needs and regions, ensuring accessibility and relevance.
- **Result-oriented localised research and data collection:** Research is only as useful as its application. The Centre should focus on collecting data that leads to discernible improvements in disability employment strategies. It should aim to understand local needs and then use this data to shape interventions that lead to concrete employability benefits for people with disabilities.

## WHO CAN THE CENTRE ASSIST? ARE THERE ANY GROUPS MISSING?

Practical and active engagement with a broad range of stakeholders is fundamental to achieving systemic change and improved employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. This includes creating an ecosystem where all stakeholders can benefit from a cohesive, integrated, and effective disability employment framework. The Centre’s framework should be designed to assist a wide range of stakeholders in the disability employment landscape ensuring that the following key groups are supported:

- **Individuals with disabilities:**
  - Providing practical tools and resources to navigate the employment landscape effectively, with a particular focus on actionable strategies for securing and sustaining meaningful employment across various sectors.
- **Employers (SMEs to large corporations):**
  - Offering actionable insights and tailored solutions that foster inclusivity and support the recruitment and retention of individuals with disabilities. A particular focus should be on SMEs to help workplaces become more conducive and adaptable.

- Local community organisations:
  - People with disabilities represent a broad spectrum within communities. Collaborating closely to devise and implement strategies that reflect community needs would help the Centre establish a “grassroots” approach to achieving a culture of inclusivity and opportunity.
- Disability service providers (NDIS and DES providers included):
  - Facilitating enhanced collaboration and coordination, focusing on streamlining processes and improving the delivery of essential services to individuals with disabilities.

Considering the Centre’s practical approach and commitment to comprehensive support, additional consideration might also be given to providing specialist support to:

- Families, caregivers and advocates: Incorporating practical resources and support mechanisms that acknowledge and enhance their support role in the disability employment ecosystem.
- Indigenous, migrant, and refugee communities: People with disability are not limited to a specific demographic and in many cases experience additional barriers to employment. Ensuring the Centre’s resources and strategies are inclusively designed and adaptable for those with multiple barriers to employment would help provide specific guidance and support for the unique challenges these communities may face.
- Sporting organisations:
  - With approximately 20 per cent of adults with disability playing sport (source: Sport Australia’s AusPlay survey, 2022), Australia has an exceptional sporting participation rate. Collaborating to enhance inclusivity in sports provides practical strategies that promote participation from individuals with disabilities, whether as athletes, coaches, or in other capacities, that help build a wide-range of skills applicable to improving employability.

## HOW CAN THE CENTRE WORK WITH STAKEHOLDERS TO INCREASE THE EMPLOYMENT RATE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY?

From VERTO's perspective, a foundational step towards increasing employment rates for people with disabilities lies in establishing localised resource and knowledge hubs in regional areas. These hubs form an extension of the Centre to support regional disability employment service delivery through tailored resources, networking opportunities, and specialised support. For example, VERTO's extensive collaboration with SMEs suggests the Centre should design initiatives particularly targeted towards this business sector. Providing SMEs with relevant access to incentives, resources, and training support will directly increase employment rates for people with disabilities.

To increase the employment rate for people with disability, VERTO suggests the Centre collaborates with stakeholders using these key strategies:

- Engagement with employers:
  - Conduct workshops and seminars to educate employers on the benefits of a diverse workforce, dispelling myths and misconceptions about hiring people with disabilities.
  - Provide consultation services to assist employers in creating inclusive and accessible workplace environments conducive to productivity and integration.



- Collaboration with DES providers:
  - Facilitate regular forums for DES and National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) providers to share insights, best practices, and discuss challenges.
  - Collaborate to design and implement employment support programs that are aligned with the current job market demands and trends.
  - Provide professional development opportunities and encourage communities of best practice.
  - Consider piloting new technologies to streamline and improve disability employment services delivery.
- Partnerships with educational institutions:
  - Work with educational institutions to design training programs that equip individuals with disabilities and support employers with relevant skills and knowledge to enhance inclusivity and success in the workplace.
  - Encourage the development of vocational training programs tailored to the specific needs and abilities of people with disabilities.
- Involvement with community and sporting organisations:
  - Foster partnerships with community and sporting organisations to create diverse opportunities, from employment roles to active participation in sports to enhance employability skills and outcomes.
  - Develop programs with sporting organisations that focus on identifying, nurturing, and promoting the talents of individuals with disabilities.
- Advisory and guidance services:
  - Establish a helpline and online platforms where all stakeholders can seek advice, guidance, and information on disability employment.
  - Offer practical tools, resources, and advice to facilitate the job search process for individuals with disabilities, and guide employers in implementing inclusive hiring practices.
- Data collection and analysis:
  - Conduct research to identify successful employment strategies, barriers to employment, and areas where improvements are needed.
  - Use this data to inform the development of policies, programs, and initiatives aimed at enhancing employment rates among people with disabilities.

## WHAT CAN THE CENTRE DO TO INCREASE THE CAPABILITY AND CAPACITY OF EMPLOYMENT SERVICE PROVIDERS?

From VERTO's perspective as an employment service provider, there are several mechanisms the Centre can pursue to enhance the capability and capacity in the delivery of disability employment services:

- Capacity-building and training: One of the core needs is continuous professional development. The Centre can facilitate specialised training modules tailored for specific DES teams. These modules should focus on the latest trends in disability employment, understanding and accommodating different disabilities, and developing strategies for inclusive work environments. It is essential that training is adapted to cater to the unique challenges and opportunities in regional and remote areas.

- **Resource provision:** Given the diversity of disabilities, improved access to a comprehensive repository of resources is required. The Centre should play a pivotal role in developing and sharing tools, guides, and best practices, specifically designed for employment service providers. This can range from assistive technologies to innovative strategies that can be implemented in job matching and post-employment support.
- **Networking and collaboration:** VERTO suggests the Centre has a critical function as a “connector”. By organising regular networking events and/or forums, greater engagement with industry experts and cross-sector partnerships can be fostered to deliver more effective and tailored employment solutions.
- **Research partnerships:** In collaboration with academic institutions and researchers, the Centre can sponsor or facilitate research projects into the specific challenges faced by service providers. Such research can offer actionable insights, drive innovation, and refine strategies in disability employment.
- **Technological advancements:** In today's digital economy, leveraging technology can significantly improve the reach and effectiveness of disability employment services. The Centre can assist providers in exploring and adopting the latest digital tools and platforms to streamline processes, enhance accessibility, and provide a more personalised service.
- **Feedback and continuous improvement:** To ensure that services remain effective and relevant, it is essential for the Centre to have a practical mechanism for regular feedback. The Centre should develop an evaluation framework that measure the effectiveness of its programs and services to inform improvements.
- **Advocacy and policy influence:** Through the Centre's advocacy efforts, the specific needs and challenges faced by DES providers can positively impact service delivery.
- **Cultural and regional adaptability:** Given VERTO's emphasis on regional and remote services, specialised resources and training should take into account the unique cultural and regional dynamics in local communities.

## WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON THE MODELS PRESENTED?

While the models presented have unique strengths and opportunities, they also come with their respective challenges. A brief review is presented below on each of the suggested models:

- The research centre model is notably collaborative, offering a chance to pool knowledge and resources across sectors. Being a focal point for disability employment research, it promises practical tools and a diversified approach to funding. However, there are concerns that its potentially academic orientation might not always align with immediate service delivery needs for DES providers. If the location of the Centre is within a university setting, it may impose accessibility constraints for some stakeholders, and its diverse funding could sometimes complicate research independence and outcomes.
- The clearinghouse model seems similar to the successful National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) model and, if so, would provide an efficient hub for information gathering and dissemination. However, its scope seems limited, potentially acting more as a passive repository than an active Centre for engagement.

- The evidence-informed training hub stands out to VERTO for its actionable, real-world training potential, offering possibly nationally recognised courses. Leveraging structures like JobAccess could ensure its efficiency. The main challenge here might be maintaining the quality and relevance of training, especially in a rapidly evolving industry. There is also the potential risk of becoming overly focused on training to the detriment of other essential areas like research.
- The statutory agency model is counter-intuitive. A more effective approach should focus on leveraging existing structures like the proposed DES Quality Assurance Framework to strengthen accountability and drive systemic improvement without the complications and delays often associated with increased bureaucracy. VERTO supports a hybrid model that integrates aspects from the suggested models to prioritise the following:
  - Capacity building that focuses on the provision of training based on best practices and evidence. By equipping DES providers with the latest techniques, strategies, and tools, the Centre can more effectively support employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Both accredited and non-accredited training should be offered flexibility and align with staff goals as either recognised qualifications or upskilling modules in specific disability employment service areas.
  - Practical tools and best practices: The emphasis on 'evidence-informed' means that disability employment services would benefit from practical strategies that are proven to be effective. Distilling these into tailored tools, methods, and interventions that specifically meet the needs of people with disabilities would position the Centre's relevance within the sector.
  - Collaboration with stakeholders: Extending the Centre's exposure through regional "hubs" would naturally engage a variety of stakeholders including community-based allied health professionals, researchers, and other support organisations. DES providers would benefit from this network, gaining insights, sharing challenges, and collectively implementing localised solutions.
  - Local engagement: The hub's potential to engage at a local level with employers and service providers fosters grassroots interactions that lead to more tailored and region-specific interventions to support the diverse needs of people with disabilities.
  - Integration with existing infrastructure: The Centre's model should focus on working with or leveraging existing services, like JobAccess, to build upon established structures and networks, rather than starting from scratch.

## WHAT CAN THE GOVERNMENT TAKE FROM EXISTING MODELS OF CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE? WHAT SHOULD BE RULED OUT?

The Government can take several strategic insights from existing models of Centres of Excellence to enhance the disability employment sector:

- Emphasising practical engagement: By encouraging direct involvement with employers, disability employment service (DES) providers, and participants, a more practical understanding of the employment landscape can be developed. This focus on active collaboration and firsthand perspectives will help to bridge the gap between theory and application, ensuring that the strategies and solutions devised are grounded in the actual needs and challenges faced by all stakeholders.
- Distributing practical tools and training modules: this critical function ensures service providers are equipped with the latest knowledge and best practices in disability employment.

- Information hubs: Streamlining a centralised repository to regional hubs provides access to essential data and guidelines to ensure cohesion of service and a well-informed community irrespective of location.
- Targeted training programs: Delivered by experts, along with promoting public-private collaborations, targeted training with a focus on innovative practice would significantly improve the Centre's impact, longevity, and resource availability.
- Accountability measures: Through independent oversight mechanisms, the Government can maintain operational transparency and ethical alignment with the sector's objectives.
- Overemphasising a single function, such as becoming solely a centralised repository, would limit the Centre's broader proactive impact. The Government should also mitigate any risk associated with structures overlapping with existing mechanisms already working effectively in the disability employment sector such as DES Providers and JobAccess (Complaints Resolution and Referral Service (CRRS)).

### **WHERE COULD A CENTRE BE BEST PLACED (FOR EXAMPLE, WITHIN A GOVERNMENT AGENCY, A UNIVERSITY, OR AS A STAND-ALONE INSTITUTION)?**

Central to VERTO's position on the Centre's model are strategic partnerships that promote direct application of actionable strategies and tools to facilitate real-world impact in improving employment rates among people with disabilities. To achieve this, VERTO recommends that the Centre be established as a stand-alone institution with strong affiliations to key stakeholders such as Disability Employment Services, employers, Government agencies, universities, and industry partners. Being a stand-alone entity, with regional support hubs, allows the Centre the agility to innovate and quickly respond to the dynamic challenges and opportunities in the disability employment sector.

### **ARE THERE ANY OTHER IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES THAT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED?**

For the successful implementation of a Centre of Excellence, it is critical to align with existing service initiatives in the sector. Disability Employment Services providers, like VERTO, must maintain the continuity of our existing services. A phased introduction of the Centre and any new initiatives will allow VERTO to deliver its current service standards while progressively integrating novel strategies. Regular consultations between the Centre and DES providers will ensure that the “baby is not thrown out with the bathwater” as the Centre transitions to its support function.

Clear communication with all stakeholders will be required to address any potential confusion or reservations about new initiatives. Importantly, the introduction of new strategies may also demand fresh expertise in disability employment service delivery. Comprehensive training programs and consistent collaboration processes offered by the Centre can provide staff with the required skills and knowledge. Hosting regular information sessions and creating feedback channels will also assist the Centre's transition and improve acceptance of new strategies.



## **WHAT ELEMENTS OF THE PROPOSED ROLE OF THE CENTRE OR ITS FUNCTIONS SHOULD BE PRIORITISED?**

VERTO acknowledges that a key priority of the Centre is to establish a solid research foundation to identify barriers and opportunities within disability employment. However, this research base should inform communities of practice with pragmatic strategies and provide a blueprint for stakeholders to ensure its functions are relevant and impactful. To do this, enhancing the capability of DES providers and other stakeholders is critical. Accordingly, VERTO recommends that the Centre prioritise the development of comprehensive training programs and resources to assist service providers and employers with effective support for people with disabilities.

Partnerships should be cultivated within local communities to diversify exposure and maximise the Centre's reach and impact. Community engagement is essential. A genuine understanding of the challenges faced by those with disabilities can only be achieved through broad engagement. To start, direct connections with the disabled community will ensure strategies are tailored to meet actual needs and challenges, fostering a more inclusive and understanding environment.