

SUBMISSION TO THE “NEXT STEPS IN SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT” DISCUSSION PAPER

ImpactInstitute welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Government’s discussion paper on supported employment. As the organisation responsible for delivering the WorkAbility Expos Funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services, we have seen firsthand the growing momentum in connecting people with disability to open employment opportunities. Considered a major initiative designed to improve inclusive employment, we see an ongoing role for the expos given they are uniquely and practically positioned to enable choice and control at a relatively modest funding level.

Objectives of the expo program were that people with high support needs because of their disability, and their families and carers will have:

Objective	Status
A better understanding of the various pathways to employment, and the role that employment-related supports and services (including the NDIS and DES) can play; and	Met / Ongoing
An opportunity to connect with local employers, including mainstream employers, who are open to hiring people with disability, including those with high support needs	Met / Ongoing
The Expos, including the online Expo, are accessible to the target cohort, being people with disability with high support needs.	Met / Ongoing
Suitable employers who have demonstrated experience in hiring and supporting people with disability with high support needs are invited, and attend the Expos	Met / Ongoing

Over the past 12 months, WorkAbility Expos have been held in eight locations, with strong attendance and increasing exhibitor participation. To date almost 5,000 people with disability and their families have attended a WorkAbility Expo. These include:

Location	Exhibitors	Attendees
Brisbane	32	837
Melbourne	32	988
Wollongong	22	348
Geelong	15	688
Adelaide	42	748
Hunter	24	528
Gold Coast	20	395
Darwin	21	298
Sydney	TBC	TBC
Canberra	TBC	TBC
Virtual	TBC	TBC

These expos have seen gradually increasing engagement from mainstream open employers, with more organisations such as PwC, Amazon, Danone, Medibank, Nestlé, McDonald’s, and Transport for NSW amongst others booking in for Sydney WorkAbility Expo in August 2025. This is a significant shift, especially given the initial challenge of attracting mainstream employers, particularly in regional areas, who cite lack of readiness as a key reason for considering future participation rather than immediate sign-up.

A sample selection of WorkAbility open employers:



Some employers showed interest in attending in order to learn more before exhibiting.

"As an employer, I wanted to connect with disability employment services to learn how we can work together to get more people with disability into our organisation." – Melbourne open employer in the transport sector.

The WorkAbility expo program was activated effectively under tight timeframes as a pilot program and shows promise given growing momentum. An interim evaluation is underway, and early findings suggest that families and people with disability value the program highly for provision of employment pathway options and information.

"WorkAbility gave us the opportunity to meet with many facilitators and supporters involved in supporting people with disabilities in employment in the one venue. GREAT EXPERIENCE." – Adelaide attendee

"I loved hearing about less traditional employment options for people with disability like microenterprise." – Adelaide attendee

Survey data supports these sentiments. Across locations, participants consistently rated the expos as helpful or very helpful, particularly in improving their knowledge of employment options, support services, and advocacy. Workshops delivered by people with lived expertise and professional practitioners were well-received, with high levels of engagement and positive feedback on their practical value. These included topics such as preparing for interviews, writing CVs, work ready skills, information about types of employment, employee rights and responsibilities, inclusive hiring and work practices including reasonable adjustments. Participants reported gaining confidence, learning about their rights, and understanding the supports available to them.

"This was a lifesaver for us. I went thinking I would get something out of it and I got so much more. I feel more positive and able to guide my 17 year old ASD/ ADHD." – Newcastle attendee

The expos operate at the top of the employment funnel, creating a space for awareness, exploration, and connection. They bring together people with disability, families, carers, employment service providers, government agencies, and employers in a non-judgemental, accessible environment. This ecosystem approach

allows people to explore their options, ask questions, and build confidence in a way that is not always possible in traditional employment settings.

While the demand side of employment is strong, the supply side, particularly employer participation, requires targeted support and incentives. Feedback from attendees consistently highlights the need for more open employers to be present and actively engaging. This is particularly true in regional areas, where employer readiness and capacity are more limited. Continued government investment is essential to support employer engagement and readiness, and to sustain the momentum that has been built.

“Love to see more employment providers next time for job seekers like myself.” – Geelong attendee

“I would like to see many more businesses prepared to offer training, internships etc in their businesses to people with a disability.” – Adelaide attendee

WorkAbility Expos are the most immediately practical expression of inclusive employment initiatives mentioned in the discussion paper. They provide a comfortable, accessible environment for people with disability to engage with employers and explore employment options.

Our response to specific discussion paper questions below:

Q2. What is your ideal future state for the supported employment sector and employment of people with disability with high support needs?

We see a role for a national program of inclusive expos that connect people with disability to open employers, embedded in local communities and supported by policy, funding, and evaluation. These expos should be integrated with broader employment and inclusion strategies and provide a platform for co-design between employers and people with disability.

Q3. What additional actions do you consider are necessary to increase employment of people with high support needs in open/inclusive settings?

To build on lessons learned within a national program of inclusive employment expos we recommend:

- Incentivising open employer participation through targeted funding and support;
- Supporting regional outreach and partnerships to ensure equity of access;
- Integrating best practice and resources that come out of other initiatives such as Inclusive Employment Australia and the Centre for Inclusive Employment;
- Providing employer readiness support through partnerships with organisations that specialise in this area; and
- Encouraging employers to attend expos even if they are not fully “ready,” to hear directly from people with disability about workplace needs.

Q4. The Royal Commission recommended the development of a Plan or Roadmap to guide further reform in the supported employment sector. What would you like to see included in such a plan?

The roadmap should prioritise:

- Practical initiatives like WorkAbility Expos that deliver immediate impact
- Employer readiness and engagement strategies
- Regional equity and outreach
- Evaluation and continuous improvement mechanisms
- Integration with policy and best practice dissemination through the Centre for Inclusive Employment

Q6. Do you see a role for workplaces which provide specialised employment opportunities for people with disability in the future? If so, what should these workplaces look like?

Supported employment settings can coexist with open employment pathways. WorkAbility Expos help bridge the gap by introducing open employers in a supported environment. They provide a space where people with disability can explore options and make informed choices, and where employers can learn and build confidence in inclusive hiring practices.

Q7. How could the benefits of supported employment settings be reflected in open employment settings?

Genuine choice and control can be supported by providing accessible, inclusive environments like the WorkAbility Expos, where people with disability can meet a range of employers and explore diverse employment options. Leveraging resources and practices developed through the Centre for Inclusive Employment ensures access to up-to-date information and best practice. Likewise, practical, on-the-ground experience and insights gathered at employment expos can be fed into the Centre's input gathering activity.

Consideration of intersectional policy, such as gender and regional disadvantage, should also be embedded in future event program design.

We thank the Department for the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion and welcome the chance to continue supporting inclusive employment through the WorkAbility program.

Paula Cowan
Managing Director

And

Kathryn Carey
Head of Events

On behalf of ImpactInstitute.