Environmental Scan (Part 2)

Views of experts on effective employment interventions for people with a disability

Brotherhood
of St Laurence

The **Economic Participation and Employment project** is funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The program aims to better understand the best available evidence regarding the effectiveness of different disability employment interventions and also provide insight into the best current evidence and practice relating to these programs. The research is a collaborative project between researchers at the Disability and Health Unit within the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health at the University of Melbourne, the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the University of New South Wales Public Service Research Group.

Disability and Health Unit (DHU), Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, The University of Melbourne
DHU aims to improve the health of people with disabilities, their families and communities through rigorous research and knowledge exchange. DHU brings expertise in complex data analysis, mental health, employment, gender studies, and public health. They lead a range of large interdisciplinary projects on employment programs for people with disability with a focus on youth. Other projects focus on violence, abuse and neglect; experiences of NDIS participants and utilisation of NDIS plans; young people with disability and young carers; monitoring disability-related health inequalities; and simulations of policy interventions to improve health outcomes for people with disability. DHU works collaboratively with governments, advocacy groups, services and other stakeholders to generate evidence about how to enhance the health and wellbeing of people with disability. The Unit hosts the NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health.

Public Service Research Group (PSRG), The University of New South Wales
PSRG was established to partner with organisational clients to produce new insights into effective public service implementation and evaluation. They perform timely, high-quality and reliable research into public policy implementation. PSRG takes an inter-disciplinary and inter-methodological approach that recognises the complexity of contexts and plurality of interests involved in any policy implementation. The research projects build local practice while advancing global knowledge. PSRG takes a systems-based approach, engage with partners to build mutually beneficial relationships, adopting an assets-based approach. The Group's thought-leadership and quality research contributes to both local practice and global knowledge of public service delivery, implementation and evaluation.

Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL)
BSL has a long history of research and evaluation in the thematic areas of inclusive employment, economic security and labour market disadvantage, including mature age workers, women, refugees and new migrants, young jobseekers, employer engagement, people with disability and the VET/TAFE sector and transitions from education to employment. The BSL's deep understanding of the supports and conditions that enable people to transition to employment is drawn from our unique position at the nexus of research, policy and practice. The BSL have long experience in developing, delivering and evaluating innovative employment support models to those who, for both structural and individual reasons, struggle to adjust to significant social and economic change. It also convenes and enables the national Transitions to Work Community of Practice and the National Youth Employment Body.

Authors:
Professor Shelley Mallett, Diane Brown and James Finnis (BSL).

Contents

Executive summary

This report details findings from Part 2 of an Environmental Scan of current practice of employment interventions and research for people with autism, intellectual disability and/or psychosocial disability. The Environmental Scan includes:

1. A desktop scan of current and recent Australian research; and current models, practices, and innovations within Australia and internationally (2015-2021 inclusive) (Environmental Scan Part 1: desktop review of current research and interventions to promote economic participation of people with a disability).
2. Interviews and focus groups with experts in the disability employment policy and program field (presented in this report).

This Environmental Scan is one component of a broader project commissioned by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) designed to examine the scope and evidence for different interventions that improve the economic participation and employment of people with autism, intellectual disability and/or psychosocial disabilities. The project will help provide the NDIA with the best available evidence regarding the effectiveness of different employment interventions. Alongside the Environmental Scan, the full project also includes a Systematic Review, including a review of the theoretical evidence (see Systematic Review Technical Report and Summary Report).

Scope of the Environmental Scan Part 2

This report addresses the third question proposed by the NDIA for the Environmental Scan: what are the views of experts in the field on effective employment interventions for people with a disability (with a focus on people with autism, intellectual disability and/or psychosocial disability)?

The report details findings from a series of focus groups and interviews with academics and senior government and non-government executives who hold deep expertise in disability employment policy and programs. Interviews and focus groups were conducted over a one-month period at the end of 2020.

Participating experts were invited to provide insight into the critical aspects of effective employment programs and practices based on

their knowledge and experience. Focus group and interview discussions centred around three key sub-questions in relation to the disability employment intervention field:

- What is working?
- What is not working?
- What is missing?

Key findings

Participants identified a range of barriers and enablers of effective disability employment interventions at the program and practice level, and at the systems-level. They highlighted the importance of program and practice level interventions that build the capabilities of people with disability to secure employment, as well as the practices that build the capabilities of employers to match or create employment opportunities for these populations. Structural and systemic barriers and enablers for effective employment interventions focused on funding/commissioning, boundaries between service systems and workforce issues.

While many specified program design and practice elements of employment interventions for the disability groups of interest in this study – people with autism, intellectual disability or psychosocial disability – most focused on the specific characteristics of successful disability employment interventions with diverse groups of people with disability. This reflected their shared view that many elements of disability employment interventions are applicable to all disability populations. Most described approaches that fit within the supply, demand and bridging employment program typology (specified in the report for Part 1 of this Environmental Scan, and in the Summary Report for the project), however they did not routinely employ this typology in their discussions.

Program and practice level barriers and enablers to effective disability employment interventions

Collectively interviewees pointed to five principles and associated practices for effective employment service interventions to build individual capability of jobseekers. Interviewees also noted that the development of individual capabilities of jobseekers is not sufficient to create employment (at scale) for people with disability. People need access to work experience and real jobs. This is contingent on employer demand and employment opportunities that match employer need with job-seeker capability, and conducive workplace

environments. Six principles and associated practices to build employer capability to employ people with a disability were identified.

Principles and practices for building the capability of jobseekers:

1. **Build capability by implementing person-centered approaches.** Practices that underpin person-centred approaches include: aligning employment related opportunities with people's goals interests and choices; focusing on individual needs and capabilities; tailoring support to where the jobseeker is at in their journey to work; and engaging other (non-employment) support as required to indirectly facilitate successful employment outcomes.

2. **Design disability employment interventions to inspire and achieve high expectations of jobseekers and employers.** Interviewees stressed that a mindset shift about the capability of jobseekers with disability is a critical first step to effective practice and sustainable employment outcomes. By holding high expectations of and for jobseekers with a disability, employers, families and providers communicate that the jobseeker has the capability to make a valued contribution to the workplace.

3. **Apply a life course perspective.** The adoption of a life course perspective enables disability employment organisations, families and employers to plan and tailor age and stage-appropriate education, training and employment opportunities to people, particularly for young people in the transition from school to work.

4. **Intervene as early as possible.** Early intervention activities equip individuals and families with the necessary information to navigate transition into employment. To implement this approach at scale, the connections between schools, specialist disability employment services (e.g. SLES, DES, ADEs), universal employment services (e.g. jobactive, Transitions to Work) and the VET sector need to be more flexible, intentional and collaborative.

5. **Create a line of sight to a job at all points on jobseekers' employment pathway.** Skill and talent development should be geared towards an identified industry, workplace or actual job opportunity. In practice, interventions should set people up to succeed by creating authentic real-world opportunities for them to incrementally gain confidence, skills and readiness for employment.

Principles and practices for building employer capability to employ people with a disability:

1. **Advance the social and economic inclusion of people with disability by working to shift employer attitudes and expectations.** Interviewees underlined the important role employers play in creating a disability employment system that values the contribution of people with disability in the workforce and facilitates, supports and rewards success. Employers need to hold high expectations about the types of jobs people with disability can perform, as well as the forms of support that businesses provide for employees with disability.

2. **Resource employers with knowledge and information about disability employment to develop their capability to provide real employment opportunities for people with disability**. Knowledge around disability and available disability employment supports and functional adjustments is critical to inspire and motivate prospective employers to employ a person or people with disability. This information must be practical, addressing the identified concerns of employers including the impact on the business bottom line, as well as the capabilities, needs and available support and benefits of employing people with disability within their workplaces.

3. **Build trusting, supportive and constructive relationships with employers to create real employment opportunities in workplaces.** Strong, trusting and mutually beneficial relationships with employers underpin successful interventions with good outcomes. Practices which underpin these relationships include: understanding where providers can best help the employer; identifying shared responsibility for good employment outcomes; providing flexible and purposeful pre-and post-placement support; and tracking and celebrating successful outcomes.

4. **Co-produce mutually beneficial employment opportunities for people with disability in the workplace.** Interviewees stressed the need to leverage these trusting relationships to match and shape roles in workplaces to meet employer and jobseeker needs and capabilities. They highlighted that successful work experience and employment placements are demand-led, based on the business case for disability employment, and developed in collaboration.

5. **Co-design inclusive workplaces with employers.** Some workplaces require an upfront investment in time and effort to

become inclusive environments. Examples of the kind of support required from providers include: reducing barriers to uptake/retention in both recruitment and human resources processes; instituting inclusive platforms for cross-team communication; and accessing equipment and/or other enablers necessary for successful employment outcomes.

6. **Work with employers to design and provide commercially viable employment for people with disability.** Almost all interviewees stressed that disability employer organisations, including social enterprises, need to secure 'real' commercially viable jobs for people with disability rather than paternalistic or patronising, 'pseudo' employment opportunities that are constructed by employers/organisation to fulfil corporate social responsibility goals.

Systems-level barriers and enablers to effective employment interventions

Interviewees emphasised four key interconnected system-level areas that impact on the capacity of the disability employment ecosystem to achieve employment outcomes at scale for people with disability:

- Siloes which result in hard boundaries within and across service systems.
- Approaches to commissioning and funding of services which do not enable and incentivise good practice.
- De-skilling and poor conditions in the disability employment services workforce.
- Issues with program design, the paucity of evidence and codified best practice.

In the context of these barriers, a range of high-level and specific solutions were posited to address the barriers identified in these four areas. In the course of this discussion four key principles for system and structural level reform were evident:

1. **Enable person-centred rather than system-centred practices in the employment intervention ecosystem.** Do this by: commissioning disability employment interventions with the capacity to tailor support to people's needs; commissioning disability employment interventions to enable integrated systems, rather than hard boundaries; and ensuring funding and performance frameworks enable and incentivise good practice.

2. **Design and implement evidence informed disability employment interventions.** Interviewees identified the need across all programs for greater collaboration, flexibility and mechanisms for co-producing 'codified', evidence informed practices, processes, tools and resources. Some stressed the need for investment in the development of the data and evidence about 'what works'.

3. **Value and invest in the disability employment workforce to maximise effectiveness and employment outcomes.** Effective employment services are dependent on the quality, skills and conditions of the workforce. Interviewees identified two key issues within the workforce: de-skilling that has occurred over several decades; and high staff turnover and churn due to poor conditions. Interviewees suggested investing in quality standards and training, and addressing the combination of low pay, high caseloads, and high compliance and administrative burdens have eroded job quality and job satisfaction for many in this workforce.

4. **Clarify, implement and communicate system level roles and accountabilities.** Interviewees indicated that there are interface issues between the systems that support people with a disability to gain and retain employment. Program and system level boundaries create and compound significant information, service and resourcing gaps for people with disability. They also result in duplication of services across systems.

The role of the NDIA in the disability employment ecosystem

Participating experts were also asked to comment on the role of the NDIS and more specifically the role of the NDIA in enabling employment for people with disability, including the target groups.

All noted that the NDIS, including the NDIA, can and must play a strong role in enabling employment pathways for people with disability. The scheme has an enduring relationship with people over their life course, with the potential to have positive impact on employment pathways as people transition from childhood through to retirement age.

However, the particular role of the NDIA in the disability employment ecosystem currently remains unclear, particularly where its' work intersects with other programs, organisations or actors in the system. Interviewees identified a range of ways to address this and specified some practices and actions that will assist the NDIA to positively support and facilitate people's employment pathways (outlined below). These

suggestions centered on the planning and community capacity building aspects of the scheme. Some stressed the need to design and develop interventions embedded in place – responsive to real employment opportunities in local labour markets.

Several interviewees also suggested a role for the NDIS and NDIA in funding or supporting the development of data and evidence about 'what works', alongside a national strategy designed to develop, share and evolve evidence informed practices that promote effective employment pathways for people with disability.

Structure of this report

The report is structured to reflect interviewees emphasis on system wide and program to practice level capabilities. It comprises three sections: the methodology; findings; and discussion and conclusions. The findings chapter comprises three sub-sections:

- Effective program and practice interventions for building individual jobseekers' capabilities to get and keep employment.
- Effective employment interventions for building employers' capabilities to provide opportunities and support jobseekers' capabilities to get and keep employment.
- Effective system level changes to enable providers to deliver effective employment interventions

Each of these sub-sections leads with a summary box of the guiding principles identified by the experts for effective interventions.

Section 1: Methodology

Semi-structured focus groups and interviews were used to gather information. Six focus group were conducted via an online platform by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) and University of New South Wales (UNSW) research team. An additional ten individual or small group interviews were conducted by the BSL with experts who were unable to make focus group times.

1.1.   Sample

A non-probalistic, purposive sample was derived using both convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Fifty prospective participants were identified by the research team through existing knowledge of the disability employment sector; a desktop search of Australian university websites for academic experts, including relevant published literature; identification of high performing and innovative service providers through publicly available outcomes data and good practice awards; and recommendations from the NDIA, DSS, disability employment providers, academics working in the field and disability peaks and people with disability.

In total, thirty-six people participated: 23 in focus groups and the remainder in one-on-one or small group interviews.

1.1.1.   Selection Criteria

Participants were primarily selected based on their knowledge of disability employment issues, arising from their professional expertise, experience and/or leadership role. People representing organisations working with people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), psychosocial disability (PD) and/or intellectual disability (ID) were specifically targeted. Most occupied senior executive or management roles within their organisations. Representatives of employment service agencies, in particular, were selected on the basis of their organisation's demonstrated excellence in provision of disability employment support. Their performance on the National Disability Services (NDS) Disability Employment Excellence Awards 2019 and DES star ratings were used as a guide to determine quality of performance.

1.1.2.   Sample characteristics

The non-representative sample included a diverse range of experts spanning representatives from: specialist and generalist Disability Employment Services (DES) providers, National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) providers, Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs), researchers, community organisations, disability advocacy groups, businesses and State and Commonwealth government agencies. Just over half (56 per cent) held specific expertise in one of the three priority groups; the remainder held more general expertise in disability employment. While some interviewees have lived experience of disability, they were not selected due to this reason as interviews and focus groups with people with disability was beyond the scope of this research. Considerable effort was expended to ensure the sample included representation of organisations and individuals from each of the States and Territories. The final sample included participants from the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria. There was no representation from Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

1.2.   Recruitment

The fifty prospective participants were identified by the project team and contacted by email or telephone in late-November 2020 and asked to participate in focus groups at nominated times between late November and mid-December 2020. Participant contact details were secured by contacting organisations directly or through publicly available websites. Participant information and informed consent documents were sent to prospective participants in advance of their participation.

1.3.   Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus groups ran for ninety minutes, while interviews varied between sixty and ninety minutes. Focus group numbers were limited to six people per session. Participants were provided with questions beforehand. Focus groups and interviews focused on the following topics:

- What is working?

    – what are the key features of best practice in the sector?
    – what conditions/factors need to be in place to achieve this?
    – do you know of any current innovations?

- What is not working?

    – what are the ongoing barriers and/or implementation challenges?
    – what impedes employment outcomes for people with disability?
    – what are some of the common barriers/mistakes you have seen?

- What is missing?

- what can government do to improve employment for people with disability?
- what role could the NDIA play?

Detailed notes were taken during the sessions and each session was audio- recorded to assist with analysis.

1.3.1. Analysis

Researchers employed categorical and iterative thematic analysis to interpret findings, drawing out key details and examples to illustrate good practice in each category. The categorical themes applied to the research data were informed by Part 1 of the Environmental Scan which reviewed national and international programs and evaluations. Iterative themes were developed through a process of familiarisation with the notes and recordings and data coding. Code checking was conducted internally between members of the research team who were involved with different aspects of the project. The organising structure and frame for the findings reflect the emphasis by experts on identifying those policies and practices that will address key barriers and gaps across the disability employment system and enable system wide capability.

1.4. Research limitations

Time, timing and resource constraints contributed to several key gaps in the sample, including providers working in regional and remote areas, larger businesses and educational institutions (including secondary schools). Engaging people with lived experience of disability (experts by experience) was out of scope of the project and have been addressed through a separate internal NDIA research project. While experts working in the Northern Territory and Western Australia were contacted during recruitment, none attended the final focus groups or took part in an interview. The scope of research and COVID-19 necessitated the use of online platforms to undertake interviews and focus groups. Online focus groups came with their own limitations, both technological and individual. These were partially addressed by capping participant numbers. On balance, the breadth of people and organisations who did participate outweighs the limitations. The sample includes people with longstanding and deep expertise in the disability employment policy, program and practice field.

1.5. Ethics

The project was approved by the BSL's Human Research Ethics Committee, a National Health and Medical Research Centre (NHMRC) registered body, on 18 November 2020.

Section 2: Findings

Across the interviews and focus groups experts identified a number of important principles and program/practice elements to effective employment interventions. They underlined the critical importance of interventions that build the capabilities of jobseekers, as well as families, employment program providers, employers and policy level actors. Analysis of interview and focus group data revealed three primary areas of focus:

1. Effective program and practice interventions for building individual jobseekers' capabilities to get and keep employment.
2. Building the capability of employers to create mutually beneficial employment outcomes.
3. Effective system level changes to enable providers to deliver effective employment interventions.

This section of the report unpacks the findings across those three focus areas.

2.1. Effective program and practice interventions for building individual jobseekers' capabilities to get and keep employment

Much of the discussion in the focus groups and interviews centred on the critical importance of identifying and building on the talents and capabilities of jobseekers with a disability. The experts identified the importance of not only what to do to build capability (program or intervention features), but how to do it (practice approaches). Analysis distilled five principles and associated practices for effective employment service interventions that build individual capability of jobseekers. These principles and practices were distilled from the analysis of the focus groups and interviews and are explored in depth below. Interviewees described the importance of these in the context of discussion about enablers and/or barriers to program and practice reform.

Collectively interviewees pointed to five principles for effective employment service interventions to build individual capability of jobseekers:

- Build capability by implementing person-centered approaches
- Design disability employment interventions to inspire and achieve high expectations of jobseekers and employers
- Apply a life course perspective
- Intervene as early as possible
- Create a line of sight to a job at all points on jobseekers' employment pathway

These principles need to be embedded in the mindsets and conceptual frameworks that underpin the sector as well as the practices employed by programs and workers. Interviewees pointed to some of the necessary mindset and practice level changes under each of these principles.

2.1.1. Build capability by implementing person-centered approaches

All interviewees emphasised the importance of person-centred practices for all employment interventions. Across the focus groups and interviews four elements to implementing this principle in practice were identified: 1) align employment related opportunities with people's goals interests and choices; 2) focus on individual needs and capabilities; 3) tailor support to where the jobseeker is at in their journey to work; 4) engage other (non-employment) support as required to indirectly facilitate successful employment outcomes.

Align employment opportunities with people's goals, interests and choices to improve the likelihood of successful employment outcomes

Employment opportunities (whether placements or paid work) need to be meaningful, matched to the jobseeker and aligned as closely as possible with their interests and goals. Some experts underlined that this is true of jobseekers with and without a disability. When employment opportunities are

meaningful to people with disability their motivation and engagement increases, and typically behavioural issues disappear or reduce. For example, one interviewee stated:

> "our organisation's work with people with intellectual disability 'starts with identifying and understanding people's gifts, abilities, skills, passions interests and goals".

Once determined, it is the service providers' role to secure opportunities for work experience and employment consistent with these interests and goals. This work relies upon providers developing diverse networks with employers to secure opportunities for jobseekers that align with their interests and goals.

For people with autism, interviewees recognised that their needs and capabilities are diverse. Some also have intellectual disabilities. Notwithstanding this diversity, they noted that people with autism spectrum disorder require active support to gain jobs. Matching people to a suitable job is critical and this relies on employment support providers with strong, trusting partnerships with employers and expertise in matching the jobseeker to a role or workplace. Providers need both the time and opportunities to understand the interests and talents of the individual prior to placement in workplaces.

Design disability employment service interventions around jobseekers' capabilities (actual and potential) as well as their needs

Crucially, all interviewees noted successful employment interventions must clearly mobilise the capabilities of jobseekers as well as identifying and addressing their support needs. It is essential to tailor or create jobs around people's existing skills and abilities as well as their potential, investing in supports to address capability gaps. Interviewees identified specific practices and training that support development of people's capabilities for employment including: self-advocacy, generic and specific skills development and work preparedness, work experience, in-work training, career advice, task analysis, structured learning. As a researcher stated:

> "successful interventions need a variety of methodologies and tools, [that are also] developed with people with disability".

For people with intellectual disability, interviewees held clear views on 'what works' in building capabilities. They noted that many people with intellectual disability may not get a lot of benefit from a sole focus on classroom-based training

and skill building divorced from a real workplace setting. Instead, people with intellectual disability benefit from job customisation and structured learning components (to engage colleagues and meet soft skill requirements), including direct instruction and database decision making. All this should be underpinned by inclusive education methodologies. In short, interviewees stressed that in their experience the 'place and train' model has been demonstrated to work effectively and lead to better job retention.

Several interviewees noted that skills development, particularly employment-related skills, is one aspect of building people's capabilities for employment, however a focus on skills is unlikely to be as effective as a more holistic approach to capability building. It is important to also identify and build on people's potential skills, talents and aspirations as well as equipping them with foundational abilities for independence and self-advocacy. This relies on tools, resources and practices that seek to identify the interests and emergent talents or skills of jobseekers. Conversations with family members or other third parties with deep knowledge of the jobseeker can be critical to identifying emergent potential capabilities. Equally it can be critical to work with employers to identify and develop the emergent skills and broader capabilities of jobseekers in workplaces.

Tailor support to where the jobseeker is at in their journey to work

Person-centred support that is tailored to jobseekers' specific employment barriers and enablers at each point along their journey to employment creates the foundations for successful learning and working experiences. Several interviewees used 'work tasters' and experience as an example to illustrate this point. They noted that some jobseekers who have been disempowered by schools or employment services and who have little or no experience of employment may need carefully curated work experience/taster opportunities to build their self-belief in their capacity to get and keep a job. They stressed that if this 'self-belief' barrier exists and a tailored response is not provided it can be extremely challenging for providers, families and employers to support the jobseeker to participate in work opportunities.

Effective, tailored support also relies upon tools, processes and support techniques to assess and monitor impact of the jobseeker's individual level barriers and enablers to employment – such as self-belief, capacity to self-advocate and an understanding of workplace requirements. A

number of the organisations represented in the research have developed these tools and resources and codified support practices to advance this work.

Interviewees stressed that this is particularly important for people with psychosocial disability, due to the episodic nature and varying intensity of psychosocial disability. For example, the onset of poor mental health in young people can interrupt education and present a significant barrier to their successful transition from education to work. Yet, with the right supports and assuming people have developed skills/capabilities, most people can find work with few issues. The challenge then becomes retaining work.

Engage other (non-employment) support as required to achieve successful employment outcomes

Several interviewees highlighted that the success of work experience or employment opportunities can be impacted by non-employment issues, including access to accommodation, transport and other forms of personal support or participation. While employment service providers do not need to provide the targeted support to address these barriers, they do need to have established networks and partnerships in addition to referral pathways with relevant community organisations and universal services to ensure individuals have timely access to needed supports to address to manage these issues.

2.1.2. Design disability employment interventions to inspire and achieve high expectations of jobseekers

The second principle identified through the focus groups and interviews is underpinned by the belief that first and foremost, effective employment interventions value people with disability as both citizens and employees. Effective interventions demonstrate this by holding and specifying high expectations about the ambitions, capabilities and employability of jobseekers in all goal setting and planning activities, and through the pre- and post-placement support practices for work experience and employment. Interviewees stressed that the mindset shift about the capability of jobseekers with disability is a critical first step to effective practice and sustainable employment outcomes. This mindset needs to be evident in the goal setting and planning practices of LACs and support co-ordinators, as well as disability employment providers.

However, having high expectations is not sufficient to effect change. Exercising

accountability for these expectations in practice is essential. In relation to individual jobseekers with disability, interviewees stressed that employment support providers and employers must implement practice approaches that enable jobseekers to be accountable for meeting essential workplace standards. Among these practices, investment in building jobseekers' skills and self-belief, coupled with clear communication about workplace expectations, roles and activities is critical. Celebrating successes and progress was also highlighted as important.

By holding high expectations of and for jobseekers, employers, families and support providers communicate that the jobseeker has the capability to make a valued contribution to the workplace. For example, one interviewee explained:

> "there is a direct correlation between how hard [people with disability] worked and how engaged they were [in the workplace]".

Being highly engaged and invested in the work assists them in:

> "overcoming real issues in the workplace including challenging or problematic behaviours and other issues".

Ultimately 'less support is actually required' as a result of this. One specialist intellectual disability employment provider also noted that:

> "when people succeed [in work experience or a first job] this changes their perceptions and expectations"

increasing the likelihood of them achieving the next successful outcome.

The importance of high expectations was particularly emphasised for people with intellectual disability. Several high-performing employment service providers who specialise in working with people with intellectual disability emphasised the corrosive effect of system wide, low expectations for the employment outcomes people with this group, and especially those with moderate intellectual disability. For example, one emphasised that:

> "approximately 60 per cent of school leavers [with moderate intellectual disability] are unable to use public transport …
> Teachers, parents and school leavers do not consider employment as a realistic option without active intervention".

Conversely many interviewees with expertise working with this cohort stressed that when the key people in a jobseekers' life are aligned towards and intentional about achieving employment goals (as early in their pathway from secondary education to employment as possible) then successful employment outcomes can be achieved. It is also important for program providers to source real employment opportunities including work experience and job placements to motivate and inspire people with intellectual disability and provide them with the chance to experience success in the workplace.

Effective employment interventions build families' high expectations of the jobseeker

Many recognised that, no matter the age of the jobseeker, families can play a central role in the employment pathways of people with disability. Most importantly, families must also hold high expectations of the jobseeker by recognising and affirming the jobseeker's capabilities, believing they can secure work, and supporting the jobseeker to challenge themselves to attain and retain work. Families need to communicate this to the jobseeker repeatedly and as early as possible in their pathway from education to work.

Interviewees noted, however, that families often suffer from low expectations. A variety of explanations were offered for this, including that families feel they need to protect their child; that they have received little or no employment related guidance; feel 'locked out' of an opaque employment and training system; and have limited and/or poor experiences with specialist disability employment service providers.

While most experts noted that developing the capacity of families is vital to supporting individuals, they also highlighted this as a gap in the current employment ecosystem, with limited capacity for delivering this work within the individualised supports provided under virtually all supply side government-funded disability employment programs. Funding structures and governance needs to reward and incentivise interventions in this space.

2.1.3. Apply a life course perspective

Interviewees stressed the importance of developing employment pathways that take account of individual's life stage and life transition. Those interviewees working with young people in particular noted how important it is to hold high expectations about young people's capacity to engage in the work practices that are typical for their age and stage of life.

They noted the adoption of a life course perspective enables disability employment organisations, families and employers to plan and tailor age and stage-appropriate education, training and employment opportunities to these young people. One stated it is essential to facilitate 'normal' experiences that help people gain basic skills. For example,

> "supported and interesting afternoon jobs for young people"

provide a good opportunity to instil foundational work skills and habits early on in a 'natural' way. Another stated:

> "good transitions are natural transitions [… and] should follow natural patterns of employment".

2.1.4. Intervene as early as possible

Many interviewees emphasised how important it is to intervene early in people's pathway from education to work, ideally around the age of 12-13. Early intervention activities equip individuals and families with the necessary information to navigate transition into employment. This might also include person-centred goal setting and planning, personal and employment skill development, work experience during school, and career counselling. All noted the importance of fostering meaningful opportunities for people with disability for self-determined employment pathways.

To implement this approach at scale, the connections between schools, specialist disability employment services (e.g. SLES, DES, ADEs), universal employment services (e.g. jobActive, Transitions to Work) and the VET sector need to be more flexible, intentional and collaborative. In the view of one advocate, young people with disability (in addition to their families and carers) need to be at the table supporting governments to shape effective person-centred policies and programs.

2.1.5. Create a line of sight to a job at all points on jobseekers' employment pathway

Capability development, including skills development, should have a line of sight to a real employment opportunity. Interviewees were critical of 'skilling' initiatives seen as an end in themselves and not as leading to real prospects for employment; the sector was perceived to have record of 'preparing people forever'. This is de-motivating for jobseekers and can ultimately have a scarring effect. Person-centred approaches to

capability development should ideally direct generic, tailored and targeted skill and talent development towards an identified industry, workplace or actual job opportunity. This avoids cycling jobseekers in and out of multiple training courses which are de-coupled from an actual job opportunity and increases jobseekers' motivation while also offering the prospect of attaining and sustaining work.

Set people up to succeed by creating authentic real-world opportunities for them to incrementally gain confidence, skills and readiness for employment

Many interviewees stressed it is important to provide opportunities for people to test existing and emergent employment-related capabilities in real world settings. Most pointed to the importance of work experience as an effective mechanism for building and consolidating skills. However, they also stressed that work experience can in fact do harm, especially when it is tokenistic, poorly supported and lacking the follow-through essential to secure jobs. Poor experiences can have a scarring effect as they can reinforce negative self-worth and cultures of exclusion. They may also 'put off' employers and make it harder to secure opportunities for others in future.

Those organisations that have invested in the development of work experience noted it should be underpinned by the following elements: job customisation, with roles based around what people can do and that are tailored to individual aspirations and skills; training that relates directly to the role; and access to post-placement supports that can escalate or deescalate in intensity as required. Support provided to people on-the-job can vary from drop-ins to work shadowing. In the words of one provider:

"We try not to be there [on site] any more than we have to be".

2.2. Building the capability of employers to create mutually beneficial employment outcomes

Interviewees noted that the development of individual capabilities of jobseekers is not sufficient to create employment (at scale) for people with disability. People need access to work experience and real jobs. This is contingent on employer demand and employment opportunities that match employer need with job-seeker capability, and conducive workplace environments. In the words of one provider:

"It's all very well to have a participant who wants to work in a coffee shop, but you have to have those employers on board […] to call on for work placements [and provide a] real taste of a workplace and all those associated skills".

Shifting community attitudes to disability is essential to advancing this work with employers.

A range of interviewees' organisations have developed deep expertise in supply side work with employers developing pathways and matched employment opportunities for people with disability in either open or supported employment settings. Several have also advanced genuine demand side responses that create new jobs open to, or specifically developed for, people with disability, including Nundah Community Enterprises Co-operative and Jigsaw. Through this work interviewees identified a range of enablers and barriers for effective work with employers. In these discussions six broad principles for effective employment interventions that build employer capability to successfully employ people with a disability were evident. Interviewees also pointed to some of the necessary mindset and practice level changes required to give effect to each of these principles.

Collectively interviewees pointed to six broad principles build employer capability to employ people with a disability:

- Advance the social and economic inclusion of people with disability by working to shift employer attitudes and expectations

- Resource employers with knowledge and information about disability employment to develop their capability to provide real employment opportunities for people with disability

- Build trusting, supportive and constructive relationships with employers to create real employment opportunities in workplaces

- Co-produce mutually beneficial employment opportunities for people with disability in the workplace

- Co-design inclusive workplaces with employers

- Work with employers to design and provide commercially viable employment for people with disability

2.2.1. Advance the social and economic inclusion of people with disability by working to shift employer attitudes and expectations

Interviewees underlined the important role employers play in creating a disability employment system that values the contribution of people with disability in the workforce and facilitates, supports and rewards success. Employers need to hold high expectations about the types of jobs people with disability can perform, as well as the forms of support that businesses provide for employees with disability. For example, one interviewee with a long history of work in ADEs stated:

"employers need to understand that there is no job someone with disability cannot do; instead, it is about having high expectations, standards and the support structures in place to best enable people to work".

This interviewee noted their business had invested millions of dollars in high-tech equipment to enable workers with disability to fully participate. They said:

"Organisations and businesses need to understand the value people with disability bring to organisations, moving away from charity as the beginning of the employment relationship. This sets both parties up to fail".

Poor employer attitudes and low expectations of people with disability in the workplace can have unintended consequences for the success of the employment or work experience placement. Poor or negative attitudes about the capabilities of people with disability can reinforce low self-esteem of the jobseeker, diminish their contribution to the workplace and limit the success of the placement. It can also make employers disinclined to employ other people with a disability in their workplace

2.2.2. Resource employers with knowledge and information about disability employment to develop their capability to provide real employment opportunities for people with disability

Interviewees, including employers, noted that knowledge around disability and available disability employment supports and functional adjustments is critical to inspire and motivate prospective employers to employ a person or people with disability. This information must be

practical, addressing the identified concerns of employers including the impact on the business bottom line, as well as the capabilities, needs and available support and benefits of employing people with disability within their workplaces.

Several interviewees stressed they never discuss the nature of a person's disability with employers. Instead they talk about required workplace adjustments. They insist on this approach for two reasons: to ensure that people are not defined by their disability in the workplace; and to engender trust that the organisation has correctly matched the person's skills and interests to the available role(s). This demonstrates the importance of co-produced practical, supportive and enduring relationships with employers that is evidence informed.

However, for people with psychosocial disability, effective disability employment services design and implement their support with jobseekers and employers recognising the impacts of the episodic nature of psychosocial disability. People with psychosocial disability typically do not need assistance to learn, but they do require flexibility and control over their work and access to variable supports in the workplace. It is therefore critical that together employment support workers and jobseekers clearly identify the forms of flexibility and control in the workplace that will reinforce jobseekers' capabilities and self-confidence. This might include identifying how jobs, roles or tasks in the workplace can be customised for success.

2.2.3. Build trusting, supportive and constructive relationships with employers to create real employment opportunities in workplaces

All providers delivering successful interventions with good outcomes highlighted the importance of strong, trusting and mutually beneficial relationships with employers. As one noted, supportive relationships with employers takes them 'along the journey' rather than seeing them as a means to an end or a milestone.

Services with successful partnership with employers note they sit down regularly with employers, particularly managers, to understand where they can best help and identify how they can share responsibility for good employment outcomes. They also track and celebrate successful outcomes. These services understand they can accidently set jobseekers up to fail in employment placements if they have a poor understanding of employer needs, lack a systematic approach with employers and as a

consequence provide inadequate forms of support for placements.

Work with employers needs to be informed by evidence and a coherent conceptual framework

Organisations that have prioritised work with employers have drawn on and adapted the 'limited' international and national evidence informed approaches and frameworks to direct their activities with employers. For example, one organisation (Australian Network on Disability) assesses employers on a continuum spaning pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and confirmation in relation to disability employment. They tailor their practice with, and resourcing of, employers to reflect the stage that they are at on this continuum. For example,

"at the point of contemplation and preparation it's important to understand the employer's environment and concerns around risk and share their concerns around risk and help them understand how you create that partnership approach… The first step of engaging with employers is building relevance between roles and skills of jobseekers; got to link those before there can be a valuable conversation…. [You need to be able] to identify someone with disability who can do that work".

Flexible and purposeful pre-and post-placement support is essential to sustain work experience or employment opportunities

Post placement support is vital to successful, mutually beneficial employment outcomes for employers and people with disability. Some providers have codified their post placement support to ensure their support workers provide a comprehensive process that equips jobseekers to sustain and add value in their placements and addresses employer needs. For example, one SLES provider working with young people with ID provides 260 hours post-placement including training, and skills development. At the same time, they work with employers to transfer employee supervision from the support provider to the employer supervisor. During this process they provide flexible forms of support, adjusting according to need.

Consider developing an employer database to support successful matching or bridging relationships with employers

To refine and expedite work with employers and achieve greater effectiveness, one SLES provider working with people with ID has developed an extensive employer database that tracks location, size and focus of businesses/ organisations,

number of employees, tasks needed and travel times for jobseekers. The database is a tool that is used to maximise the provider's capacity to successfully match jobseekers with suitable jobs and employers. Employer attitudes are tracked as well as all interactions with the employer to maximise the likelihood of achieving successful, mutually beneficial outcomes for jobseekers and employers.

2.2.4.   Co-produce mutually beneficial employment opportunities for people with disability in the workplace

Matching and shaping roles in workplaces to meet employer and jobseeker needs and capabilities is important. For example, one interviewee highlighted the need to co-design work experience and employment roles with employers, as well as the forms of support they require to employ people with disability. They adhere to some key principles to drive this work: 'walking alongside the employers along the journey', sharing responsibility for making placements work and leaving nothing to chance. For example, they noted that:

"with student internships we coach the manager who'll interview [the prospective student], we coach the student to be their best, we coach the student about workplace adjustment, we coach the manager on providing adjustments. …We are in it together finding joint solutions rather than finding placements".

For people with intellectual disability, structured working environments were deemed particularly important. Employers need to be supported by disability employment providers to structure workplaces and customise roles and tasks. Additionally, support workers and job coaches need to be embedded in the employment setting, at least early on, to guide and support the jobseeker to learn and implement their role in situ.

For people with autism, workplace culture and communication with colleagues is critical. More job tailoring is required, but when people are placed in the right job, they experience good employment outcomes. For example, many participants gave the example of technology companies who, with some job tailoring, have given secure employment to people with autism and found a range of added benefits including quality, productivity and attention to detail.

2.2.5. Co-design inclusive workplaces with employers

Some workplaces require an upfront investment in time and effort to become inclusive environments. This can be cost effective over time, particularly if the employer is committed to diversifying their workplaces. For example, some of the participating organisations work with employers to:

- reduce barriers to uptake/retention in both recruitment and human resources processes (e.g. position descriptions)
- institute inclusive meeting practices and deliberate platforms for cross-team communication
- ensure demand-led job creation based on the business case for disability employment
- access equipment and/or other enablers necessary for successful employment outcomes.

Interviewees outlined the kind of supports that employers need from providers to be able to undertake some of this work in their workplaces, such as job coaches, pre-employment training or post-placement supports. For example, one DES provider working with people with intellectual disability outlined their process in great detail. On average, it takes around 140 hours to secure a job for their clients. Staff will make approximately 160 phone calls to identify a shortlist of three interested employers. Prioritising matching prospective employment opportunities with a client's interests and preferences, staff will then work with that employer to agree on a set of quality standards, tasks and roles for the individual, workplace and provider. The provider then delivers systematic one-on-one training, running seven weeks on average. Every task has a task analysis. Workplaces are also taught to use a hierarchy of prompts when working with the person. Service staff remain on site with the individual, intervening only to block errors and reinforce good performance.

For people with psychosocial disability, tailored support for the employer is particularly important. As interviewees noted, an employer who can offer flexibility and control allowing an employee to care for their mental health is crucial. Some employers will require assistance to implement functional adjustments in their workplaces including assistance to customises jobs in a way that builds capability and does not trigger or compound poor mental health. Workplace wellness recovery action plans that help identify when people are

becoming unwell and support them through an empowered, educative process have proven effective.

2.2.6. Work with employers to design and provide commercially viable employment for people with disability

Successful demand led or bridging/matching approaches employ people with disability in commercially viable employment. Almost all interviewees stressed that disability employer organisations, including social enterprises, need to secure 'real' commercially viable jobs for people with disability rather than paternalistic or patronising, 'pseudo' employment opportunities that are constructed by employers/organisation to fulfil corporate social responsibility goals.

Reflecting this attitude, one organisation stated they do not tender for contracts/jobs that are not commercially viable for themselves or funders. They also actively pursued large contracts/tenders that were a stretch for their workforce, investing in the skills training and technology that enable them to fulfil the contract. People with commercial skills are employed to manage the commercial aspects of the contracts and disability employment support workers support the employees with a disability to undertake the work. Profits from the business are put back into the social enterprise to develop career opportunities for the workforce.

One interviewee pointed to several case studies in United States in which disability social business/enterprises secured work from the government that matched the funder's needs with the skills of workers in the business. For example, the Pentagon procured one organisation with visually impaired employees to manage their document destruction. Further, US Army weapons programming was undertaken by people with ASD.

Assess intended and unintended consequences of wage subsidies for the disability employment sector, employers and people with disability

Several interviewees critiqued the use of wage subsidies, claiming that experiential evidence does not support their use. Wage subsidies can perpetuate the view that people with disability lack intrinsic value in the workplace and that employers need some form of compensation to employ them. People employed through wage subsidies may be discontinued once the subsidy has run out. Some noted that wage subsidies can also be used by poor performing disability

employment organisations to 'buy' rather than 'earn' an employment outcome. Use of wage subsidies needs to be mutually beneficial for the jobseeker and the employer.

Assess how the size of businesses can influence the likelihood of successful work experience or job outcomes for people with disability

Some noted that attention needs to be paid to the size of the business/organisation when matching jobseekers to these organisations. Some jobseekers, depending on their disability, are more likely to thrive in small business settings with fewer employees. Smaller to medium size businesses often require greater support due to their business needs and capabilities. For example, many interviewees noted that small to medium size businesses often rely on intense post-placement supports to enable successful employment outcomes. One SLES provider working with people with intellectual disability noted that:

"companies with more than 20 employees are the way to go because they have more routine codified roles suitable for people with intellectual disability]. Smaller companies need [employees with] multiple skills".

Larger businesses, on the other hand, have greater potential to employ people with disability. Businesses of this size benefit more from structural reforms to their recruitment and human resources processes. Recognising and facilitating inclusive structural change within organisations is crucial as more businesses begin to focus on diversity and inclusion.

2.3. Effective system level changes to enable providers to deliver effective employment interventions

Structural and system-level issues within the disability employment service ecosystem have a material impact on the capacity of providers to deliver the effective practices outlined above, and for people with a disability to access, attain and retain meaningful and sustainable employment opportunities. While discussions about working with jobseekers and employers centred on good practice (i.e. what does work), discussion of system level factors was heavily weighted towards issues and barriers.

Interviewees emphasised four key interconnected system-level areas that impact on the capacity of the disability employment ecosystem to achieve

employment outcomes at scale for people with disability:

- Hard boundaries within and across service systems.
- Approaches to commissioning and funding of services.
- Issues in the disability employment services workforce.
- Program design.

In the context of these barriers, a range of high-level and specific solutions were posited to address the barriers identified in these four areas. In the course of this discussion five four principles for system and structural level reform were evident.

Many of the experts pointed to specific system and structural level principles to frame system effective employment policy, program and practice level interventions:

- Enable person-centred rather than system-centred practices in the employment intervention ecosystem

- Design and implement evidence informed disability employment interventions

- Value and invest in the disability employment workforce to maximise effectiveness and employment outcomes

- Clarify, implement and communicate system level roles and accountabilities

2.3.1. Enable person-centred rather than system-centred practices in the employment intervention ecosystem

Across all focus groups and interviews, the disability employment ecosystem was described as fragmented, inflexible, and plagued by siloes which caused 'hard boundaries' within and across service systems that work with and support people with disability. The ecosystem was seen to function less as a system and more as a disparate set of program or policy-level siloes that includes the NDIS (School Leaver Employment Support (SLES) and supports in employment), Individual Linkages and Capacity Building(ILC) Grant projects and the NDIA and Local Area Coordination (LAC) planning, funding and capacity building functions; the Department of Social Services (DSS) funded Disability Employment Services (DES) and Disability Support Pension (DSP); universal employment

programs such as Jobactive and Transition to Work; state-based education and VET institutions; and non-government funded initiatives, such as the philanthropically funded Ticket to Work and corporate or fee-for-service models.

For people with disability and/or their families it can be difficult to secure good advice about employment pathways and discern who in these organisations or programs has accountability for what aspects of the pathway. In short, it is difficult, if not impossible, for people with disability to exercise informed choice and control in relation to their employment goals. Program and system level boundaries create and compound significant information, service and resourcing gaps for people with disability. They also result in duplication of services across systems.

A person-centred ecosystem was seen to be one that:

- tailors services to needs and aspirations of the person, while also being underpinned by codified best practice;
- facilitates integration across systems (e.g. employment services, education and training, NDIS) to get the best outcome for the person;
- is underpinned by funding and performance measurement frameworks that enable and incentivise these ways of working to achieve meaningful and sustainable employment outcomes.

Commission disability employment interventions with the capacity to tailor support to people's needs, but underpinned by codified best practice

The inflexibility of compliance driven funding models and commissioning for disability employment programs were raised as serious barriers to employment outcomes for people with disability, including those in the target groups. Interviewees stressed that the commissioning arrangements for disability employment interventions (including funding, specified program components, provider compliance and performance frameworks etc.) must recognise that person-centred programs are diverse by design; they must be tailored to the capabilities and needs of individuals with disability.

The generic nature of DES, and its narrow focus on job placements, was singled out for particular critique. The DES program was variously described as inflexible, homogenising and disconnected from community. Some stated that it

also stifles innovative responses to jobseeker's and employers' needs. Interviewees observed that DES is now structured as a 'one size fits all' program with funding centered around securing (short term) employment outcomes, rather than building more enduring capabilities of people with disability though engagement in formal or informal work experience and training (it was often described as a jobactive-like commissioning and compliance regime[1]). One interviewee noted:

"Guidelines around KPIs have changed so dramatically [with less emphasis on education outcomes]. DES is now for someone who is ready to work and who can work, apply, interview, etc. DES has moved away from capacity building. It's now about a job".

Despite, but more likely because, of these shifts, many interviewees believe DES remains ineffective for employers. Although this system may help the more work-ready people into jobs, for those struggling to gain or retain employment the lack of individual support, capacity building or links to employers can reinforce disadvantage.

Commission disability employment interventions to enable integrated systems, rather than hard boundaries

Many interviewees commented on the problems arising from hard boundaries between systems that support people with a disability, particularly education and training, the NDIS and mainstream employment services. Effective examples of services described by interviewees were characterised by working across boundaries based on what the person needs and fill gaps between systems which people fall through. This work was often unfunded.

These barriers were particularly pronounced for young people. For young people with a disability, integration between the education and training systems, SLES, DES and/or mainstream services like jobactive and Transition to Work are critical for seamless and productive transitions to work. Both SLES and DES providers who participated in the focus groups and interviews highlighted barriers to effectively engaging young people with disability while they are still at school.

One interviewee noted:

"the problem is DES can't be in school with someone. Can't register unless someone's in year 12. [Students] need more prep work"

---

[1] jobactive was also highlighted as ineffective and inadequate for people with disability. Despite this, increasing numbers of people with disability are stuck in the service system.

before it's too late. Most of our participants have no idea what they want to do".

Issues were identified at the intersection of the NDIS and disability employment services (and jobactive) as well. While SLES is intended to prepare young people with a disability for engagement with a DES, interviewees noted the effectiveness of this transfer between systems relied heavily on the nature of the relationship between the SLES and DES providers.

Some interviewees described DES programs that have developed strong collaborative relationships with SLES providers. Two examples of NDIS providers (delivering SLES or using funds for supports in employment) developing ongoing partnerships with a like-minded DES to achieve good employment outcomes for young people with a disability were identified; the SLES provider did the preparatory capacity building work with individuals and the DES helped secure the final placement and employment outcome through engaging with employers and brokering placements. This also helped both organisations meet their targets, an enrolment in DES for SLES and a smoother, more sustainable work placement for DES. More typically however, where SLES and DES services were able to work in this integrated way, the organisation delivered both services in house. Where these types of integration occurred, programs were reported to be effective with young people, enabling SLES to focus on the pre-employment capacity building activities and delivering 'warm handovers' to the DES team once young people leave school.

Interviewees stressed that it is essential to empower people to navigate the various systems which shape their journey to employment, equipped with the right information and advice, as well as access to networks and supports so they are able exercise choice and control in relation to their pathways.

Ensure funding and performance frameworks are fit-for purpose

Interviewees identified a range of barriers to good outcomes raised by the various funding models and performance frameworks used in in the disability employment ecosystem.

In both DES and SLES, it was noted that a range of costs of delivering the core elements of disability employment interventions are under-funded or unfunded. This is particularly true for small to medium size organisations that lack the economies of scale to mitigate back of house and other implementation costs. In particular, outreach work to people with a disability (typically in schools), and work with families and employers was reported to be underfunded or unfunded.

Interviewees also identified perverse incentives in the funding arrangements for both SLES and DES. Current funding rules in SLES were seen to create perverse incentives for providers to (sometimes) deliver programs that 'hang on to' people to maximise provider funding rather than facilitate independence. As a consequence, some people who have high barriers to employment may be cycled through endless activities, education and/or training without real prospect of work experience or employment. Interviewees noted that changes to funding rules and outcome frameworks, underpinned by established good practice frameworks, are essential to prevent this from occurring.

Within DES, some reported that policy changes associated with funding cuts to certain groups have negatively and disproportionately impacted their employment outcomes. For example, one interviewee highlighted that:

"in 2018 the Federal Government reduced employment support funding for people with intellectual disability and autism while increasing it for people with psychosocial disability and other groups with poorer employment outcomes".

Accordingly, this policy shift and funding trade-off:

"did not recognise the real costs of supports necessary to achieve employment outcomes for people with autism and/or intellectual disability".

Another described this policy change as nonsensical:

"[moving] away money from what is working to what's not working".

These cuts 'combined with a lack of indexation, represented a roughly 60% reduction in funding for intellectual disability".

Divergent views were expressed about the value of outcomes-based funding, as used in DES. Some argued that outcomes-based funding, if properly structured, will incentivise employment program providers to achieve sustainable employment outcomes.

Others argued that outcomes-based funding incentivises the wrong kinds of behaviours from disability program providers. For example, they noted that outcomes-based payment can incentivise providers to achieve low quality, short-term work placements over sustainable employment outcomes. One indicated that an alternative, billable hours approach:

"would better recognise the diverse work performed by providers and would provide an incentive to service under the NDIS. An hourly rate would thereby provide more money for providers doing 'the right work' rather than an outcomes payment that measures job placements alone".

Most interviewees recognised the need for a shift in the focus of the DES model as well as reduction in the heavy administration and compliance burden. Many interviewees noted that providers are straining under the administrative burden of the billing regime for the NDIS and DES. They noted:

"red tape… drives innovation out of the market because providers are so busy, they can't innovate".

When services have the right balance of flexibility and accountability for using funding to gain reasonable results, outcomes-based funding allows for productive cross-subsidisation within services. However, interviewees noted that getting this balance right is difficult; too little accountability and some providers may rort the system, too much and program effectiveness and innovation is stifled.

Performance measurement that incentivises best practice

Interviewees did not reject the need for mechanisms to assess the performance of disability employment organisations and their staff, however some commented that mechanisms like the DES star ratings can and do have unintended consequences for service quality and outcomes. They incentivise providers to invest their time in administration and compliance reporting while also meeting employment targets regardless of the quality of the employment or work experience opportunity they secure. For example, one interviewee commented that:

"Star ratings are not helpful, not useful. They don't help promote services and encourage providers to behave poorly. The ratings essentially record who can push a job the fastest. We need some rating system, but
what they currently have is not suitable" .

Some argued that the current star rating system could be reformed by re-weighting different assessment components (including capacity building, work placements and job continuity), and developing codified best practice standards. With regard to SLES, some interviewees noted that a more robust outcome framework, including employment related outcomes, would be

beneficial, although this could produce duplication between the NDIS and DES.

2.3.2. Design and implement evidence informed disability employment programs and practices

The views of the experts on 'what works' at the individual and program level for disability employment interventions has been outlined earlier in this report. At a systems level, much of the discussion centered on the strengths and weaknesses of current specialist disability employment services, particularly DES, SLES and ADEs.

The DES program was singled out for particular critique, with much of that critique already outlined above. SLES was repeatedly discussed as an initiative with potential. It was seen to be comparatively well funded for the types of supports delivered, and not constrained by some of the issues in DES associated with mutual obligation for income support. Despite this, participants highlighted that SLES needed to be underpinned by more robust guidelines for best practice, and improved recognition and support for providers to systematically develop the networks and relationships with schools, families, different services and employers that were seen to be enablers of success. Interviewees also noted that uptake of SLES needs to be improved; some thought that the program should be extended to all young people. To quote one participant:

"SLES is the program that needs to cover 80-90% of people. It's what we do – it's purpose-built for what we do".

Views on ADEs or supported (closed) employment varied. Many highlighted the poor performance of ADEs in developing workers' skills and talents to be able to transition into open employment. Interviewees also highlighted the lack of interest from young people and families in entering supported employment. In the words of a researcher:

"parents [now] want their kids to have a life in the community".

One interviewee blamed the 'set and forget' mentality of government that has led to dire circumstances in the sector. Others also highlighted differential treatment in commissioning between ADEs and Social Enterprises. They note that ADEs have exemptions in competitive tendering, giving them an unfair advantage against social enterprises.

Yet, some interviewees noted that supported employment can be effective for people with significant disability as a steppingstone to open employment. As noted by people with experience working in ADEs, these workplaces do not need to be poorly paid, repetitive or low-skilled.

Interviewees spoke of examples of ADEs that offer high-quality work with competitive wages and good professional development for staff over time. Indeed, many 'successful' ADEs are underpinned by commercially viable business models that enable supported employers to lift wages and create more interesting, varied and sustainable work by investing back into the business. Conversely, poor ADEs were defined by reliance on 'handouts' and poor conditions. Ultimately, ADEs do need to shift (as they have internationally) but we have yet to make this change in Australia.

Overall, interviewees identified the need across these programs, for greater collaboration, flexibility and mechanisms for co-producing 'codified', evidence informed practices, processes, tools and resources with individual jobseekers and employers. The unintended consequences of many of the commissioning issues outlined above could be avoided if the essential elements of evidence based good practice are identified, clearly specified, linked to performance measurement, and the real cost of their delivery is adequately funded.

However, some, especially policy makers and academics stressed the need for investment in the development of the data and evidence about 'what works'. This recommendation is echoed by the findings of the Systematic Review and the desktop component of this Environmental Scan.

2.3.3. Value and invest in the disability employment workforce to maximise effectiveness and employment outcomes

Effective employment services are dependent on the quality, skills and conditions of the workforce. Virtually all interviewees noted that to achieve good employment programs need quality staff with experience of individual assessments, customisation, training and support.

Interviewees identified two key issues within the workforce: de-skilling that has occurred over several decades; and high staff turnover and churn due to poor conditions. Many noted that the workforce is undervalued by government and the community. This is reflected in program design and funding; there is limited financial and non-material recognition of the hard work, high level knowledge and skills required by the consultant to be effective.

Across the focus groups and interviews a range of workforce barriers were identified and solutions suggested.

Address de-skilling of the disability employment workforce through investment in quality standards and training

Interviewees pointed to significant de-skilling of the disability employment workforce over the past 20 years. This was variously attributed to: the national push to rapidly professionalise the workforce resulting in poor quality training and accreditation; limited and declining access to ongoing professional development and reflexive practice in workplaces; loss of people in the workforce with longstanding professional and experiential expertise; and erosion of core theoretical conceptual frameworks to guide program design and person-centred practice. Financial constraints associated with compliance heavy contract delivery has also reduced time and resources to invest in on the-job training of staff.

A lack of investment in mechanisms for sharing or scaling good practice also impacts the disability employment workforce. Some indicated that low commitment and investment in development of evidence informed models compounds these issues leading to both direct and indirect effects on the quality of the workforce.

Interviewees highlighted that expertise is not necessarily attained through formal qualifications.

As one stated:

"a piece of paper does not make the employment consultant. Most of our support team come from diverse backgrounds, not many in disability or with formal qualifications".

Another commented:

"support workers need to be empowered and engaged to provide the supports the participant wants and needs. You don't need a qualification to be this person. The individualised targeted supports we run need a match between the support person and the participant".

Another stated that:

"expertise has changed. [Now] it is around the compliance and administration aspects of the job ...rather than delivering what people need to stay in the workplace".

One interviewee described a quality employment consultant as one who:

"understands the work; [has] high expectations of individual [jobseekers]; [provides] access to quality career advice and inclusion in mainstream career advice; builds self-determination skills; [and has] knowledge of what employers are looking for and support for employers".

In addition to the general skills required of the workforce, interviewees also identified two specific areas where they believe skills are lacking: cohort-specific expertise, and expertise working with employers.

Interviewees indicated that much of the disability employment workforce lacks the capability and capacity to work with diverse stakeholders, especially family members and employers. Some also highlighted the loss of particular expertise required for working with people with particular disabilities, particularly intellectual disability.

Several providers noted the loss of skills across the sector around applied behaviour analysis. This technique was routinely used with people with intellectual disability in the 1980s and 90s. Applied behaviour analysis combined with job customisation enabled the successful transition of people with an intellectual disability into employment. One provider has further developed this approach by investing in training in this technique as well as certificated workforce training in collaboration with a University. Some also noted the importance of training employees to use direct forms of communication with people with intellectual disability so that they can, in turn, train supervisors and managers in workplace in these communication approaches.

Many frontline and other staff in disability employment services do not have the skills to go into a workplace and negotiate with employers to secure opportunities for work experience or jobs. This requires a very different profile of skills that requires training or mentoring. Some organisations have real expertise in this, but it is not routinely developed across the workforce. Others emphasised the need to develop skills across the sector to promote discussion and development of demand side solutions to disability employment with business, industries and social enterprises.

Interviewees reported that accountability for workforce development sits at multiple levels: with the employee, employers/organisations, funders/governments and the education and training institutions. A range of formal and informal individual and group approaches were suggested to foster practice and skill development across the employment service workforce /sector including:

- Communities of practice where practitioners within and across teams and organisations can share learning and expertise
- Formal University and VET level education and training coupled with practical in-house training, coaching and mentoring
- Development and implementations of a range of standard tools and resources to drive practice
- Intentional use of service and non-service data to drive practice reform
- Intentional teamwork with routine sharing of what does and does not work complemented by regular 1:1 supervision/capability building and support

Reduce churn in the disability employment workforce by improving working conditions

A range of explanations were offered for churn in the employment service workforce, including working conditions that create poor quality training, and sector wide policy and program reform over a number of years. Interviewees indicated that working conditions across the sector are diverse and of variable quality depending on the service.

Many noted that the combination of low pay, high caseloads, and high compliance and administrative burdens have eroded job quality and job satisfaction for many in this workforce. Employees working in employment programs with these characteristics have low levels of autonomy and control. Multiple DES providers and advocates stressed that frontline staff, whatever their roles, are heavily invested in providing

person-centred responses to the people that they work with; however their own working conditions constrain the time they have to tailor responses to suit individuals.

Good practice and workforce satisfaction and workforce retention go hand in hand. Experts noted that this ultimately hinges on a funding and service structure that properly enables support workers to engage with and provide the person-centered supports that participants want and need. Good practice here is determined by time, patience, consistency of staff and good relationships with employers, individuals and other stakeholders.

Several interviewees from high performing disability employment organisations stressed that good business system and structures can mitigate the quality service risks associated with high staff turnover rates. Codification and structured implementation of basic skills makes it easier for providers to roll out effective interventions under pressure. Many providers noted they already do this well and, in many instances, it has underpinned their success. However, others also raised issues with applying generic models to individuals with complex needs. Relationships, communication, ongoing supports and cross-sectoral work remain foundational to good outcomes and good practice.

2.3.4. Clarify, implement and communicate system level roles and accountabilities, especially the NDIA

As highlighted elsewhere in this report, interviewees indicated that there are interface issues between the systems that support people with a disability to gain and retain employment.

All noted that the NDIS, including the NDIA, can and must play a strong role in enabling employment pathways for people with disability. The scheme has an enduring relationship with people over their life course, with the potential to have positive impact on employment pathways as people transition from childhood through to retirement age.

However, the particular role of the NDIA in the disability employment ecosystem currently remains unclear, particularly where its' work intersects with other programs, organisations or actors in the system. Interviewees identified a range of ways to address this and specified some practices and actions that will assist the NDIA to positively support and facilitate people's employment pathways (outlined below). These suggestions centered on the planning and community capacity building aspects of the scheme. Some stressed the need to design and develop interventions embedded in place – responsive to real employment opportunities in local labour markets.

Several interviewees also suggested a role for the NDIS and NDIA in funding or supporting the development of data and evidence about 'what works', alongside a national strategy designed to develop, share and evolve evidence informed practices that promote effective employment pathways for people with disability.

Refine plans and the planning process to support employment pathways

Interviewees saw a clear and critical role for the NDIS in building the employment aspirations of people with a disability (and their families and carers), and their understanding of the kinds of supports available to them to. However, some noted that employment was not being broached with enough consistency in planning conversations. For young people in particular, employment planning should be seeded long before young people leave school, identifying opportunities for funded support for employment mentoring, careers guidance, as well as soft and

generic skill development.[2] The planning process and the plans themselves should be designed to motivate and elicit aspirations.

Some interviewees recognised the role of LACs in assisting NDIS participants to develop the aspirations, motivation and goal setting in relation to employment. However, LACs require expertise and networks to undertake this work. While some LACs have strong expertise in the field practice is not routine across the sector. Some interviewees suggested that the NDIA have a role to play in developing system wide training to develop LACs expertise in coaching people to develop and enact employment goals.

Some interviewees also identified the need for greater emphasis on the community capacity building and ILC components of the LAC role, as a bridge between employers, jobseekers and employment support providers. One interviewee stated:

> "We think there is a need for a connector at the local level that can provide good information and connect the different bits. Role in building capacity and responding to gaps in this region. Working at the intersection between employers and individuals. Understanding of local labour markets, promoting good and inclusive practice and connect different bits and pieces, and retaining knowledge and skills. This could be LAC as in theory they look at mainstream and local issues and already have a remit".

Invest in shaping community attitudes and expectations about the capacities of people with disability to work through community capacity building

While not only the remit of the NDIS or NDIA, interviewees also noted that some of the work to shape community attitudes about disability employment could be achieved by refining and enhancing existing community capacity building mechanisms through both ILC and LAC.

Some noted that that ILC funding could be used more strategically to develop scaleable good practice across the disability employment ecosystem. This could include work designed to address the structural level barriers between the employment programs and the LAC planning functions.

Create and invest in opportunities, structures and processes to systematically share and develop good practice across the disability employment ecosystem

Some interviewees highlighted the need for a mechanism such as a clearinghouse or community of practice that can identify, facilitate and evaluate practical, evidence-based employment models and practices to develop employment pathways for people with disability.

Many interviewees also pointed to the need for strategic and robust program and practice evaluations (at scale) that build the evidence about the elements about effective employment programs for people with disability. They also identified the need for improved data collections and outcomes measurement in relation to disability employment.

As one interviewee stated:

"We think there needs to be a body or technical assistance centre that's practical, but research based that finds good practice and feeds it out. Capacity building for providers, employers, governments, individuals. The market will not prevail! The NDIA thinks putting it in people's plans is enough. It's not. There needs to be a body that can move the work on so that we can institutionalise the knowledge and look at the next thing – where's the gap, what's the evidence and where's the next steps. So, we know what works and can complement this in a systemic way, with tailoring for individuals and communities. Real need for that capacity building to make things work".

Section 3: Discussion and conclusions

Across focus groups and interviews the experts consistently identified some key barriers and enablers to disability employment at the program, practice, and policy/system levels. Participants highlighted the importance of program and practice level interventions that build the capabilities of people with disability to secure employment, as well as the practices that build the capabilities of employers to match or create employment opportunities for these populations. Most also emphasised the structural and systemic barriers and enablers for effective employment interventions with individuals, families and employers, focusing on: funding/commissioning of services, boundaries between service systems, and issues with the disability employment services workforce.

While many specified program design and practice elements of employment interventions for the disability groups of interest in this study - people with autism, intellectual disability or psychosocial disability - most focused on the specific characteristics of successful disability employment interventions with diverse groups of people with disability. This reflected their shared view that many elements of disability employment interventions are applicable to all disability populations. Most described approaches that fit within the supply, demand and bridging employment program typology (elsewhere specified in the Theoretical Review section of the project Synthesis Report for and the desktop component of the Environmental Scan Part: Desktop Review), however they did not routinely employ this typology in their discussions.

A key message from focus groups and interviews was being person-centred is central to good practice in the design and delivering of employment interventions for people with a disability. Person-centred approaches proceed from a mindset shaped by high expectations; that is, that people with a disability can and will gain meaningful work and careers, and that people with a disability are talented job candidates with valuable contributions to make in a workplace. Interviewees noted that across the disability employment ecosystem all key actors and organisations need to develop and advance a culture of high expectations for individual jobseekers and employers. This culture must be driven through investment in jobseeker, employer and system level capability and a commitment to developing individual jobseekers' self-advocacy

and self-determination capabilities, especially in relation to their employment pathways.

3.1. Key principles to guide the design of disability employment interventions across the supply-bridging- demand continuum

Collectively, focus group and interview data pointed to a set of core principles of effective employment interventions. The principles are broadly relevant to jobseekers, families, service providers, employers and system level actors. They are:

- Hold high expectations (of the jobseeker and the employer).
- Build capability by implementing person-centered approaches.
- Apply a life course perspective.
- Intervene as early as possible.
- Create a line of sight to a job at all points on jobseekers' employment pathway.
- Tailor interventions to particular cohorts and functional capabilities.

Experts noted that effective employment service interventions also work intentionally with employers to build their capability to employ people with a disability. The six key principles to guide effective work with employers include:

- Invest in developing employers' high expectations of jobseekers with disability.
- Listen to and resource employers needs for knowledge and information.
- Build trusting, supportive and constructive relationships with employers.
- Co-produce mutually beneficial employment opportunities for people with disability in the workplace.
- Co-design inclusive workplaces with employers.
- Prioritise commercially viable business opportunities and employment over short-term placements.

In workplaces, colleagues and supervisors continue to experience difficulties or discomfort around the way some people with disability learn and communicate. Addressing persistent negative employer and co-worker attitudes is of fundamental importance. Supportive and inclusive workplaces facilitate retention; with many workplaces changing rapidly to accommodate different economic factors, greater understanding of how to support and communicate with colleagues with different abilities is a crucial element that helps ensure people can learn, grow and adapt. Alternatively, breakdown of

communication and poor understanding of disability increases barriers to stable, decent employment.

3.2. Cohort-specific approaches

While the proposed principles and practices for effective employment interventions apply to all people with a disability, experts proposed some tailored approaches to address the needs and capabilities of people with autism, intellectual disability and/or psychosocial disability.

Experts stressed that the 'place and train' rather than 'train and place' model is considered best practice for people with intellectual disability. This strategy has been demonstrated to work effectively and lead to better job retention. Additionally, while support workers and job coaches are a crucial support they should be as closely embedded in a work or work-like environment as possible. People with intellectual disability benefit from job customisation and structured learning components (to engage colleagues and meet soft skill requirements), including direct instruction and database decision-making. Structured working environments are essential to helping people with intellectual disability master their new roles, build capability and confidence.

People with autism spectrum disorder require support to gain jobs, which often necessitate strong, trusting partnerships with employers. For people with autism, workplace culture and communication with colleagues plays a central role. So too, providers need time to understand the interests and talents of the individual. More job tailoring is required, but when people are placed in the right job, they experience good employment outcomes.

Employment interventions with people with psychosocial disability require approaches designed to respond to the episodic nature of these conditions. People with psychosocial disability require flexibility and control over their work and variable supports. Employers who offer flexibility and control, allowing employees with psychosocial disability to care for their mental health are more likely to enable and sustain successful employment outcomes with this cohort.

It was also noted that all three groups face an additional challenge in that they face exclusion, stigma and other disadvantages at school. This can mean that they start comparatively behind in a system that already has high barriers.

3.3. System level factors that impede good employment outcomes

A range of system level factors create and/or compound barriers and gaps in the disability employment sector. While experts noted the current work of the Federal Government on a National Disability Employment Strategy, they stressed that, at present, there is no coherent disability employment framework to guide and evolve a systematic approach to effective disability employment interventions. The roles and accountabilities of system level actors in facilitating employment outcomes, including the NDIA, the specialist disability employment programs as well as the universal employment programs and VET are opaque. This creates confusion and frustration among policy makers and program providers as well as individual jobseekers who are effectively caught in a system or program-centric rather than person-centered employment system.

Collaboration across and within these systems and/or programs is often driven and held by individual managers and workers, rather than systematised or codified within the design and practice of services. As the experts noted, this is ineffective, inefficient and creates gaps for jobseekers, families, employers and providers. It is most evident at the intersection between the NDIA, and the specialist and universal employment programs.

Many underlined the loss of critical expertise from the workforce over the past two decades, particularly in relation to tailored practice for key cohorts, including the target groups for this study. Workforce quality has also eroded due, in part, to the structure of program contracts such as DES that limits the nature and scope of work for providers as well as pay and conditions of staff.

3.4. Conclusions and key actions

This component of the Environmental Scan sought the views of disability employment experts on effective interventions. They were asked: what's working? What's not? What's missing?

Their responses to those questions demonstrate that Australia is a long way from having established best practice in disability employment interventions, including for the target groups. As the high-level experts engaged in this research note, there are many examples of highly effective program models and practices across the disability employment ecosystem, however they do not exist at scale and they are typically not supported by robust data, conceptual frameworks and empirical evidence about 'what works'. There

are also few mechanisms currently in place for developing, codifying, sharing, implementing and evolving good practice across the sector or in place(s).

At the system level many pointed to the need for a disability employment framework that specifies the ambitions goals and targets for disability employment, clarifies the roles and accountabilities of the key actors/organisations and provides clear directions for policy, program level reform. They also highlighted the importance of a principled approach to reform.

The need to build capability across the employment ecosystem was emphasised by the experts interviewed for this study. Some pointed to specific system level principles to guide programs and practice including:

- Create a person-centred and not system- or program-centred employment intervention eco-system.
- Value and invest in the disability employment workforce to maximise effectiveness and employment outcomes.
- Design, test and implement evidence informed disability employment interventions.
- Design and develop interventions embedded in place – responsive to real employment opportunities in local labour markets.
- Clarify, implement and communicate system level roles and accountabilities.

Finally, it is clear to all that the NDIA has a key role to play in the employment ecosystem, fostering job creation and including workforce training, employment planning and goal setting and individual funding for pre-employment and employment related supports. The NDIA also have a role in fostering place focused responses to employment through its community capacity building function and resourcing networks or a national level community of practice to foster collaboration, networking and evidence development.

Further information

Brotherhood of St Laurence
Professor Shelley Mallett
67 Brunswick St Fitzroy
SMallet@bsl.org.au
www.bls.org.au