



JOB NETWORK FRONTLINE STAFF SURVEY

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Introduction

Jobs Australia (JA) and the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) commissioned AC Nielsen to undertake a survey of frontline staff working in the Job Network (JN). We wished to collect staff views in a systematic manner which would provide information useful for providers and policy makers about the current operation of the system.

The survey aimed to determine frontline staff members’:

- Experience in the employment services industry and level of education
- Opinions about overall effectiveness of the current Job Network Active Participation Model
- Ratings of the effectiveness of different activities undertaken by or for jobseekers
- Understandings about major barriers to employment for jobseekers
- Views about JN administration and performance measurement
- Satisfaction with employment conditions and roles

Method

A letter was sent from JA/BSL to head of all JN providers outlining the purpose of the study followed by a telephone call from AC Nielsen. An email was sent to CEOs asking for their participation and information of the number of offices and staff in their organisation in order to gain a picture of the total possible number of participants and their locations. Those who agreed to participate sent contact email details for relevant staff. AC Nielsen sent an email to each of these staff members in February 2005 with a link to the website where the questionnaire could be completed on-line.

Sample

The total possible sample from participating organisations was 3,200. Of these 1,111 employees completed the survey, a response rate of about 35 per cent. The response rate from nonprofit organisations was considerably higher than for-profit organisations. Eighty per cent of respondents worked in a not for profit agency.

Results

Who works for Job Network providers?

Half of the staff who responded said their main role was advice and support. Another third specialised in job placement and ten per cent mainly conducted job search training . There was also a lot of cross-over in functions and most staff said they took on other activities during their work. Over ninety per cent were permanent full-time employees.

Two thirds of staff were female, and the average age was 39 years of age. Eighty per cent of staff were aged between 25 and 54. Approximately a third of respondents (37 per cent) had worked in the JN for two years or less. Sixty per cent of respondents had spent less than five years in the employment services industry overall and 40 per cent had less than three years experience. Staff had been in the industry for an average (median) of 3.5 years.

Level of education is shown in Table 1. Thirty per cent had a highest qualification of Year 12 of secondary education or less, another 40 per cent had a vocational qualification or diploma and 30 per cent had a degree or higher.

Table 1 Highest qualification of Job Network staff

	Number	Percent
Less than Year 12	162	14.6
Year 12	172	15.5
Vocational Certificate (up to Cert IV)	292	26.3
Vocational Diploma	90	8.1
Undergraduate Diploma	59	5.3
Degree	212	19.1
Post-Graduate	124	11.2
Total	1111	100.0

For-profit providers tended to employ more staff with degrees or higher qualifications (36 per cent) compared to not-for profit agencies (29 per cent), and they had a higher proportion of staff who had been in the industry for more than 10 years (24 compared to 16 per cent).

We were interested in whether the level of qualification of staff had changed in recent times. However, there was no evidence of a change in the make-up of staff, with more recent entrants having the same mix of qualifications as those who have been around for longer.

How effective is Job Network?

While 85 per cent of staff think the Job Network is ‘good to excellent’ in assisting people into employment, a third think it is only ‘poor to fair’ in getting people into sustainable employment (ie longer than 26 weeks). Staff generally believed the current system was an improvement on the previous system (ESC2). Staff from for-profit agencies rated the JN in slightly less favourable terms than those from the not-for-profit sector, felt they were less able to help people get into employment and were more likely to believe the current contract was worse or much worse than the previous contract.

Despite positive views about the Job Network overall, respondents consistently indicated little faith in the capacity of JN providers to support the specific needs of people who are disadvantaged or long-term unemployed. In terms of the effectiveness in getting specific target groups into employment:

- **People with disabilities:** 62 per cent thought the JN was poor to fair
- **NESB background:** 52 per cent poor to fair
- **Parenting Payments:** 47 per cent poor to fair
- **Mature Age unemployed people:** 59 per cent poor to fair
- **Indigenous people:** 43 per cent poor to fair
- **For highly disadvantaged jobseekers:** 40 per cent poor to fair

Staff with higher levels of education generally had less positive views about the effectiveness of the system and were more likely to think the JN was poor to fair in getting people into sustainable employment. They also believed the system was less effective for mature age clients.

We asked staff whether the JN system adapts to meet the needs of the job seeker or whether job seekers had to adapt to fulfil the requirements of the system. There was a spread of responses from 1 (adapts to jobseeker) to 10 (job seeker must adapt) with a mean rating of 6.4, closer to the less adaptive end of the scale. In response to a separate question, 87 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that an individual's circumstances should determine their requirement to look for work, suggesting that they believed that the system should be able to adapt more to individuals than it does.

Effectiveness for people with disabilities

62 per cent thought there would need to be a different program altogether to provide effective employment services for people with disabilities capable of working more than 15 hours a week. Only 38 per cent thought JN could provide an effective service to this group.

Three broad themes emerged from a general question about what features would be required of a program to provide effective employment services for people with disabilities. First many commented on the need for the provision of either specialist service or injection of more specialist training and additional resources into JN, or both. Second many staff believed that more needed to be done to overcome negative employer attitudes to people with disabilities. Suggestions included programs to raise awareness, incentives for employers, and the creation of supported employment options. Third, staff believed that there would be a need to provide intensive 'reverse marketing' for people with disabilities.

Effectiveness for sole parents

Staff were more confident of the JN ability to work with parents: 55 per cent thought JN could provide an effective service to sole parents although 41 per cent still thought there would need to be a different service for this group. Staff believed that more needed to be done about childcare availability and affordability. They also felt that employment conditions would need to allow for flexible working hours and that many parents would require retraining, and in some cases, pre-vocational programs aimed at confidence building.

What activities are most helpful in getting people into work?

The activities that were thought to be the most effective in achieving employment outcomes for long term unemployed and disadvantaged jobseekers were:

- Job seeker account (JSKA)
- Employee wage subsidies
- Personal support and motivation from employment consultant
- Post placement support and
- Vocational training.

These are activities in which both client and staff have some discretion (JSKA, post placement support, vocational training). The JSKA (prior to recent changes) in particular was considered to be the most effective measure with 88 per cent of staff feeling that that it was 'good to excellent' in achieving employment outcomes for people unemployed for more than 12 months.

In comparison, those activities which were considered to be the least effective for disadvantaged jobseekers were:

- Auto-matching to vacancies
- Vocational profile interview and resume
- two-monthly interviews
- self-help using Australian Job Search
- Work for the Dole and Community Work placements

These activities are mainly automated and system-driven mechanisms and considered much less helpful. They may have been introduced in order to gain efficiencies from more effective use of technology, but their impact in the eyes of frontline staff is questionable.

Across a number of statements staff responses to the value of Work for the Dole (WfD) were uniformly poor or muted. For example, only 18 per cent believed that WfD enhances the job prospects of most or all jobseekers. There are clear indications that WfD is held in low standing among frontline staff and hence, is unlikely to be promoted by them to their clients. For profit staff saw WfD as less helpful than not-for-profit staff.

Barriers to employment

Staff were asked to nominate what they considered to be the most significant barriers to employment. The most common responses were:

- Poor jobseeker attitudes and lack of motivation
- Poor health or disadvantaged personal circumstances
- Perceived insufficient financial gains from employment
- A lack of suitable vacancies
- Levels of administration and reporting for JN

Motivation of jobseekers was a key issue raised in both closed questions and open-ended comments. There seemed to be two themes to comments about motivation. On one hand, some staff felt that jobseekers were simply not trying hard enough to find work, and that a

more 'compliance-oriented' approach was needed. These staff felt that tighter breaching or suspension arrangements were necessary. On the other hand, staff felt that low motivation was an understandable feature of the process of long-term unemployment, that jobseekers who had been trying to find work for months or years without success would lose confidence and hope. This group felt that an 'engagement-oriented' approach was necessary which focussed on a supportive relationship, confidence building and better support, exemplified by one comment:

... trying to force people into work only compounds peoples problems. I feel motivating people, trying to increase their self esteem and make them feel valued as human beings would be a huge leap towards moving people into sustainable employment ... my greatest concern is the general lack of self esteem and motivation in people. Make it worthwhile to go off benefits, give transport cards/health care cards for a period of six months, an extra payment or two after work has commenced.

There was also a clear message from staff that personal characteristics such as poor health, mental illness and insecure housing were also major barriers for jobseekers. Open-ended comments suggested that some staff felt very frustrated at not having the time to adequately deal with these issues, even though doing so was necessary to assist these jobseekers into work.

Staff in not-for-profits thought that insufficient JSKA funds, and a lack of complementary programs and places were greater barriers for the long-term unemployed than those from for-profit agencies.

Priorities of staff against perceived priorities of DEWR

There was a marked discrepancy between the expectations that frontline staff have of the JN and their perception of DEWR's expectations.

Sixty three per cent considered that DEWR's primary emphasis is ensuring that people are active in looking for work, with the emphasis on a job that lasts 13 weeks. In contrast staff stated that helping with motivation and finding people a job that lasts longer than 26 weeks were their highest priorities for assistance.

Job Network administration and performance measurement

Both open-ended questions and specific responses indicated that the level of administration in JN was excessive and counter-productive. For example, 80 per cent of staff considered the administrative demands of their work were excessive. Specific examples of unnecessary and time consuming red tape include paperwork surrounding the JSKA, the on-line vocational profile (which was seen to be of little use), and some aspects of the EA3000 computer system (mainly the time taken to refresh screens).

There was also considerable frustration with Centrelink. Although some respondents indicated a very good relationship with their local office, many felt that communication between DEWR, Centrelink and JN was inadequate or confused, that Centrelink often fails to follow correct procedures about participation reports and does not action participation reports or overturns them. A majority of staff would like to see a better interface between EA3000 and the Centrelink computer system so that staff in both agencies had access to the same

information. Three quarters also indicated they would like to get more information about the outcome of participation reports from Centrelink.

Staff also expressed great scepticism about measures of performance such as the 'star ratings' system, with 43 per cent stating that they did not believe these were a valid measure of performance. Almost nine in ten believed that other aspects of client service experience should be incorporated into the star ratings in addition to job outcomes. Only about a third agreed that job outcomes are the best single measure of the achievements of JN members. While we did not explore this question in depth, responses to the open ended questions suggested that some staff believed that measuring progress of jobseekers towards employment was important, particularly for those jobseekers with significant personal problems like homelessness or mental health problems.

Employment circumstances of Job Network staff

Approximately 60 per cent of staff had worked with their current employer for two years or less. Overall, staff had worked in employment services for an average (median) of 3.5 years, and almost two thirds had worked for only one JN member.

While most staff expressed satisfaction with their jobs, some data and qualitative comments suggested that staff felt under a great deal of stress. They reported a range of stressors:

- 80 per cent consider the administrative demands of their work are excessive.
- Prior to the recent changes to the Job Seeker Account, 71 per cent considered that they had adequate discretion in using those funds.
- 61 per cent agree that they increasingly have to deal with angry or challenging clients.
- 41 per cent believe they cannot spend enough time with their clients to make a positive difference.
- 29 per cent agree that they often think of quitting their job.

Staff were employed (not including overtime) for an average of 36 hours per week. Some indication of the stresses of the work is shown by the fact that 80 per cent of respondents said they needed to work additional hours to complete their job properly. About three quarters of these indicated that additional hours worked were unpaid. For those who worked additional hours, the average was 6.3 hours per week.

Staff in for-profit agencies were much more likely to work unpaid additional hours (71 per cent) compared to their colleagues in not-for-profit agencies (55 per cent). Those in for-profits who did work extra hours worked about 6.4 hours unpaid per week compared to 5.5 hours in not-for-profit agencies. Not surprisingly, those who worked unpaid overtime were less satisfied with their work overall.

Taking into account the proportion who worked additional hours unpaid, there was an average of 3.4 hours of unpaid work per week for every JN staff member. Or in other words, the government is getting around 10 per cent more than it pays for, courtesy of the unpaid work of staff.

Suggestions for improvement

Staff were asked what would be the most effective way to improve the JN system. Responses fell into three broad categories. Reducing administrative burden was seen to be the most important change: reducing paperwork which was also replicated on the EA3000 system; reducing the red tape around JSKA, improving the EA3000 system and limiting changes initiated by DEWR to systems and processes.

Related to this, many staff commented on the emphasis in the present system on 13 week job outcomes as opposed to longer-term and more sustainable outcomes and expressed negative views about some providers' pursuit of star ratings through the use of short term wage subsidies and perhaps at the expense of longer-term and more sustainable outcomes. Many staff expressed frustration at the limitations on their discretion imposed by the EA3000 system and the requirements of the Job Network continuum and wanted more time to personally engage and interact with their jobseekers rather than simply processing them.

Improving the linkages and communication between DEWR, Centrelink and the Job Network system was also seen as important, particularly consistency of decision making, better assessment before referral to JN, and greater transparency and timelines in actioning participation reports.

Conclusions

On the basis of opinions of staff, we can summarise the main findings of this survey:

- JN works reasonably well in getting mainstream and less disadvantaged jobseekers into 13 week jobs
- JN is much less effective at placing people into sustainable employment and for people with disabilities, sole parents and the long-term unemployed
- JSKA, wage subsidies, direct personal support and training are seen as the most effective interventions
- Automated mechanisms and Work for the Dole are seen as generally ineffective
- Excessive administration reduces direct contact time and overall effectiveness
- Relationships with Centrelink needs to be improved
- Unpaid work amounts to an extra 10 per cent of total staff time
- Two-thirds of staff have less than degree level of education
- Staff overall are relatively inexperienced.

Effectiveness

The emphasis on 13 week outcomes means pressure is on staff to get people into jobs which may not necessarily last long term. It is true that getting a job for 13 weeks probably increases someone's chances of getting longer term work, but the opinions of staff suggested that this is often not the case, and that many jobseekers may be cycled through a series of short term jobs and social security payments.

Frontline workers reported that they expected the present Job Network system would be less effective in assisting and securing employment outcomes for new groups coming in – people with disabilities and sole parents, in particular. They emphasised the need for higher levels of positive interventions like wage subsidies, other JSKA investments, direct contact and engagement between jobseekers and employment consultants and more vocational training.

The most positive initiatives in JN were seen as those which gave some discretion to consultants and jobseekers, acted to overcome immediate barriers (JSKA), and provided some form of investment in improving the capacity or employability of jobseekers (wage subsidies, personal support, vocational training). In contrast automated systems which merely schedule requirements or activities were regarded as of little use. These results suggest that future contracts could do well to focus more attention on investment activities. The introduction of the 'Wage Assist' programme is a useful step in this direction.

Interestingly, there was little support for the Work for the Dole programme. It was described by some as a 'Mickey Mouse' program which provided activities which were not relevant to the broader labour market, and was also seen mainly as a compliance program. This latter view seems consistent with the government's view, evidenced by the introduction of full-time WfD for those considered not to be making serious attempts to find work.

Continuum and IT system frustration/limitation

A great deal of frustration was expressed at the amount of time spent on administrative activities and this was highlighted as the most important area for reform. Limits on the discretion of individual consultants to decide what is to be done with and for individual jobseekers and which are perceived to be imposed by the EA3000 system and the Job Network continuum were also a major source of frustration and a barrier to effective engagement of jobseekers. While the survey did not explore the details of the types of administrative requirements of JN, this could be followed up with a more detailed examination by DEWR with the assistance of providers and other stakeholders. Reducing administrative burdens and providing more flexibility about what is done with individual jobseekers and when it is done, would have the twin results of improving the efficiency of the system (since staff could spend more time on work with jobseekers) and of improving staff morale (since this was one of the greatest sources of frustration).

Centrelink

The relationship between the Job Network and Centrelink clearly needs to be improved. One useful step would be to provide a better interface between EA3000 and the Centrelink computer system so that staff in both agencies have appropriate access to the same information, where privacy and social security legislation permits. Other strategies need to be developed to improve personal communication and understanding of respective roles and functions in Centrelink and Job Network agencies. Improving feedback about decision making processes within Centrelink about action on participation reports would also be useful.

Employment conditions

Staff were reasonably positive about their jobs and employment conditions, with the exception of hours of work. Most worked additional hours, and the majority of these were unpaid. Indeed unpaid hours represented an average of 10 per cent of paid staff time. At the same time, there were often comments about inadequate levels of pay (perhaps not surprisingly given the previous result). These are clear signs of workplace stress, and potential problems for being able to retain staff in future.

Staff skills

Staff overall are not getting less skilled. There is a general consensus that as unemployment has declined over recent years, those remaining unemployed tend to be people with greater barriers to employment. If this is the case, employment services staff are now dealing with a greater proportion of clients with more complex needs, such as long-term health problems, substance abuse, disabilities or mental illness. This may require staff to have a higher level of skill than in the past, but the evidence from this study is that this is not the case.

Barriers to employment

The two most commonly mentioned barriers to employment were the motivation of jobseekers and poor health or disadvantaged personal circumstances. Solutions to the motivation issue fell into two groups – ‘compliance-oriented’ staff wanted more breaching and suspension and faster action from Centrelink on these, while ‘engagement-oriented’ staff wanted more ability to work with individuals on self-esteem, confidence building and setting personal goals. Research on work-related motivation¹ suggests that motivation is improved when people have:

- Have specific, difficult but reachable goals
- Have a single goal or a small number which do not conflict
- Are able to set their own goals
- Are committed to these goals and feel they have the capacity to reach them
- Receive positive feedback about their progress in meeting these goals, especially if the feedback is specific and practical
- Receive some valued reward upon achieving their goals
- Believe that rewards for their efforts are fair compared with the rewards received by others
- Receive positive reinforcement for their efforts
- Feel that their behaviour and rewards are consistent with their intrinsic goals and needs

These findings support the approach proposed by the ‘engagers’.

Personal problems such as health problems, mental illness, insecure housing, family conflict were also seen as major barriers. Some JN staff felt they should be able to spend more time working with people to help resolve these issues. The Personal Support Programme was established to deal with such difficulties, but there are inadequate links between JN, PSP and health and housing services. Since it is likely that (as the overall level of unemployment falls) an increasing proportion of jobseekers will have such characteristics, better integration of a variety of types of support will be necessary.

One approach would be to extend the ‘overlap’ period of 6 months to enable clients to use both services for as long as they need to (perhaps up to the 2 year limit of PSP). However this in itself may do little unless some changes are made to JN funding and monitoring. In particular, this client group will take longer to get into employment, and will require more flexibility for staff to be able to spend time engaging with clients and taking a more developmental approach.

The approach taken by the BSL recommended by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations and Workplace Participation (‘Working for Australia’s future’ p. 184) provides some useful policy directions. This approach provided:

¹ Ziguras S 2004 ‘Australian social security policy and job-seekers’ motivation’, *Journal of Economic and Social Policy*, vol 9. no.1 pp. 1-25.

- Pre-employment training to assist people manage their transition from often long term unemployment to sustainable employment.
- Work experience to help people learn on the job and reacquaint themselves with routine and the workplace
- Traineeships which provide a transferable recognised qualification, support for both the trainee and employer and career development.
- Post placement support which assists people to manage both work requirements and personal issues which enhance employment sustainability.

Funding specialist JN providers for long-term unemployed people in order to provide the range of assistance described above would, we believe, result in far better employment outcomes.