Inclusion Australia

What Works

Making Disability Employment Services (DES) work for people with an intellectual disability

December 2021

Acknowledgments

Inclusion Australia acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which this publication was produced. We acknowledge the deep spiritual connection to this land of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We extend our respects to community members and Elders past and present.

Inclusion Australia recognises the efforts of self-advocates who have courageously told their stories and worked tirelessly over the years for equality and human rights for all.

The What Works workshops that informed this report were developed in partnership with the What Works Steering Group.

- Ben Alexander, Council for Intellectual Disability (NSW)
- Catherine McAlpine, Inclusion Australia
- Jamie Bannister, Inclusion Australia
- Jenny Dixon, Speak Out Tasmania
- Laynie Dunne-Heynis, South Australian Council on Intellectual Disability
- Liz Collier, Inclusion Australia
- Lizzie Spasich, Council for Intellectual Disability (NSW)
- Sarah Forbes, VALID (VIC)
- Sue Robertson, Developmental Disability WA
- William Ward-Boas, VALID (VIC)

We are also grateful to the guest speakers at the workshops, and thank them for sharing their lived experiences:

- Ella Darling, Council for Intellectual Disability (NSW)
- Gavin Burner, SACID
- Heather Forsyth, VALID
- Jessica Toster, Developmental Disability WA
- Mary Butterworth, Developmental Disability WA
- Phil Tuckerman, Jobsupport
- Rob MacFarlane, MACCESS

Contact

Inclusion Australia (NCID) Limited
ABN: 60 084 254 809
Catherine McAlpine
Chief Executive Officer
PO BOX 336 Nunawading, Victoria, 3131 Australia

P: 1300 312 343
E: catherine.mcalpine@inclusionaustralia.org.au
E: admin@inclusionaustralia.org.au
W: www.inclusionaustralia.org.au

Table of Contents

About Inclusion Australia

Inclusion Australia is the national voice for Australians with intellectual disability. We bring together groups across Australia who are connected to people with an intellectual disability and who share the vision of inclusion in all parts of Australian life. Our strength comes from our diverse state members who use their combined experience and expertise to increase the inclusion of people with intellectual disability in all levels of the community.

As a well-respected Disability Representative Organisation, all of IA's work is guided and informed by people with an intellectual disability. Our members are:

- The Council for Intellectual Disability (New South Wales),
- The Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with Disability (Victoria),
- Parent to Parent (Queensland),
- Speak Out (Tasmania),
- South Australian Council on Intellectual Disability (South Australia),
- Developmental Disability WA (Western Australia).

Background

The current Disability Employment Services (DES) program will end in June 2023. It will be replaced by the new disability employment support model designed with people with disability.

Building on feedback about employment supports for people with a disability including through consultations into the National Disability Strategy, the Disability Employment Strategy and the Disability Royal Commission, the Australian Government has been working with a series of reference and working groups to explore issues with and experiences of the DES system for people with disability at different life stages and with different support needs. Members of these groups include disability employment organisations, DES providers and Disability Representative Organisations. PricewaterhouseCoopers was also engaged to run workshops with people with disability and carers across Australia to assist in designing the new model.

Inclusion Australia has been an active contributor to these reference groups. Open employment is a critical area of expertise and concern to us, with employment fundamental to an independent life. We want the Government to achieve its key objective in DES service delivery of increasing the employment of people with disability. This will only be achieved for people with an intellectual disability through targeted, specialist and appropriate delivery of employment supports.

We held concerns that the real voice and lived experience of people with an intellectual disability and their families in relation to DES is not being adequately heard or considered in the planning for a new disability employment service. People with an intellectual disability have few ways of having their views and interests known by government. As people with an intellectual disability are most likely to be interacting with multiple systems, including specialist services, governments need to hear

the expertise of the people that use those systems, to help ensure these activities are responsive and fit for purpose.

Consequently, we approached the Department of Social Services (DSS) in August 2021 with a proposal for a series of workshops on 'What Works' for people with an intellectual disability with regards to employment supports. The workshops would be targeted towards policy makers and key teams within the Australian Government and National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) with connections to employment outcomes.

It was proposed that each session would explore a specific barrier faced by people with an intellectual disability in using the DES system and offer alternatives to current practice. Each workshop would be co-facilitated by people with an intellectual disability and families who have experienced the DES system firsthand. This proposal was approved by DSS in September 2021.

About the What Works workshops

Inclusion Australia held four 'What Works' workshops online via Microsoft Teams between October 14, 21 and 28, and November 4. Each workshop was held at the same time on Thursday afternoon.

Workshop	Date and Time
1. The way in: getting started on the employment pathway	14 October, 3pm - 4.30pm
2. The right workforce for the job	21 October, 3pm - 4.30pm
3. Jobs are everywhere – if you are looking for them	28 October, 3pm - 4.30pm
4. Keeping it going: ongoing support for people and employers	4 November, 3pm - 4.30pm

Cumulatively, the workshops had 143 participants. Attendees included staff from the Department of Social Services, NDIA, the Department of Health and the Department of Education, Skills and Employment amongst others.

Each session was hosted by William Ward-Boas, a young man who works for the Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with Disability (VALID). William identifies as a man on the autism spectrum with an intellectual disability. He also has significant relevant personal experience of the DES system. William introduced different speakers including Inclusion Australia CEO Catherine McAlpine, DES providers and other people with an intellectual disability with experiences of DES.

This document is informed by those workshops. It reflects the views of people with intellectual disability who participated, as well as drawing on the contemporary evidence and experience from those who work in the current system. Together they tell the story of 'What Works' for people with an intellectual disability and make recommendations for the future.

Inclusion Australia hopes that the evidence and expertise-based measures that we have put forward in these workshops will be considered in the current reforms of the disability employment system.

Introduction

People with disability have the right to work, including the right to work in an environment that is open, inclusive, and accessible.

Article 27. United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The right to open, inclusive and accessible employment for people with disability is included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN Convention), which the Australian Government ratified in 2007.

The *National Disability Strategy 2010-2020* included the policy principle to:

> 'Increase access to employment opportunities as a key to improving economic security and personal wellbeing for people with disability, their families and carers.'

The UN Convention and *National Disability Strategy* commitments are broadly in line with the findings of the Commonwealth's 1985 review of disability services, *New Directions*, which recommended the phasing out of Assisted Disability Enterprises (ADEs) and the transition of people with an intellectual disability into open employment.

They are also in line with the Disability Services Act (DSA) – which, in 1986, established the legal principle that people with disability had a right to increased independence and open employment opportunities.

Despite this, the most recent statics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare[1] reports 48% of working age (aged 15-64) people with disability are employed, compared with 80% without disability.

In addition, the 2019 Concluding Observations from the UN Report on Australia's Review of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability expressed specific concerns that the practice of segregated employment through ADEs with sub-minimum wage payment remains ongoing, and that labour force participation of persons with disabilities remains low.

People with intellectual disability have been talking about open employment for a long time and have a great deal of expertise in how to make this work.

[1] *People with disability in Australia 2020: in brief* Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Open Employment is good for everyone.

Open Employment is when people with and without disability work together in regular jobs, in the same workplaces, and everyone is paid a fair wage for the work they do.

Being paid a proper fair wage is essential, as explained at the first workshop by Heather Forsyth, the outgoing Chair of Inclusion Australia Our Voice Committee.

An experienced self-advocate, Heather spoke of the importance of being paid a real wage as a way to gain independence. She said through working for VALID she had been able to take herself off the Disability Support Pension (DSP), own a car and support herself and her husband. Heather said that it took time, support, and a good job to become independent. She said that many people on the DSP don't have as much freedom, especially around having a choice about where to live.

The benefits of properly paid employment to people are myriad, with some more obvious than others. There are clear social benefits from being around others, and having a sense of connection, belonging, purpose and meaning. However, we caution against focussing squarely on these soft benefits – many of which could arguably be achieved through an ADE or even volunteer work or other unpaid activities.

More people with disability in the workforce in real work rather than ADEs was always part of the aims of, and the original arguments for the NDIS. A 2015 discussion paper by the Department of Social Services reported that only 0.8 per cent of 20,000 people in ADEs achieved open employment.

By comparison, Jobsupport – a NSW-based DES provider which specialises in supporting people with a moderate intellectual disability - has a 62.3% success rate in finding open employment for people with intellectual disability. Analysis of 837 Jobsupport clients who were NDIS participants found that people in open employment had smaller NDIS packages than people not in open employment.

Speaking at the second workshop, Jobsupport CEO Phil Tuckerman referred to an independent report which found that open employment created an 'implied saving' of $16,994 per person. The report concluded 'If Jobsupport's outcomes could be reproduced across Australia, there would be substantial savings in terms of avoided cost from other post school pathways. … Total savings Australia-wide amount to $59.4 million per year.'[2]

It is clear that paying people $2 an hour to work in an ADE leaves people with intellectual disability living in poverty and needing more support from the NDIS. More importantly, it reduces options and independence for people with an intellectual disability. Speakers at all our workshops who had experiences the DES system firsthand demanded more.

[2] *Securing open employment*, The Centre for International Economics, 2020. P6.

Disability Employment Services

Disability Employment Services (DES), the Australian Government's program to support people with disability to find and keep employment,'[3] is an important part of Australia's approach to fulfill the obligations of the UN Convention, the National Disability Strategy, and DSA and make the right of open employment a reality.

DES is a Commonwealth program of significant size and scope. As of September 2021, more than 100 DES providers were supporting more than 310,000 people across more than 3700 sites and 6500 outlets in Australia – costing taxpayers $1.4 billion per annum.[4]

According to the Department of Social Services, the purpose of DES is to help people with disability prepare for employment, find a job and keep the job.

By the DSS's stated measure, DES is failing. A little more than 1 out of 10 people entering the DES program get a job and stay in the job for at least 12 months.[5] Less than 10,000 people (3.1% of the DES caseload) supported by DES are people with an intellectual disability.[6]

In 2020 the NDIS released a detailed data report on people with an intellectual disability in the NDIS.[7] This report revealed that, while 31% of people with an intellectual disability aged 25 or over, who have been in the Scheme for at least three years have a paid job – only 15% of these are in open employment at full award wages. People with an intellectual disability are most likely (70%) to work in an ADE, while a smaller group (13%) are in open employment earning less than an award wage.

This data shows less than 5% of NDIS participants with an intellectual disability achieve the aim of UN CRPD Article 27. This failure carries significant social and economic costs.

Socially, it shuts out people with disability – making these citizens more likely to be unemployed, live below the poverty line and be excluded from community life. Economically, the failure to secure open employment for people with disability costs taxpayers at least $59 million a year.[8]

But this policy failure can be fixed. After all, people with an intellectual disability want to work.

They want to do work that is meaningful. They want to learn skills that are useful. And they want to be paid a wage that is fair.

DES needs to be fixed, and people with intellectual disability know what needs to be done to make it work for them.

[3] 'Inclusive. Accessible. Diverse. Shaping your new disability employment support program: Consultation Paper,' Department of Social Services, 2021. P5.
[4] ibid.
[5] *Opposition to DES Funding Cuts for participants with higher support needs*, DPO Australia and IA, 2018.
[6] Labour Market Information Portal DES Data 30 November 2021
[7] *People with an intellectual disability in the NDIS*, NDIS data insights and reports
[8] *Securing open employment*, The Centre for International Economics, 2020. P1.

1. Pathways to work – understanding the current system

1.1 Systemic exclusion

To understand the current issues with DES for people with an intellectual disability, it is helpful to explore how the current system has evolved over the past 40 years.

Sue Robertson, an advocate from Western Australia who has supported people with an intellectual disability in open employment since the 1980s, told participants at the first workshop:

> *'We did a lot of talking with people with an intellectual disability and they were very, very clear in what they wanted from us as providers and of the government. They clearly told us that people with an intellectual disability wanted to work alongside those without disabilities and contribute to the economic mainstream.'*

In 1997, Job Network was established and open employment for people with an intellectual disability became the responsibility of the Commonwealth Department of Employment.

Since then, participation in open employment for people with an intellectual disability has plummeted – with the proportion of people with an intellectual disability, autism and people with specific learning disabilities in Employment Support Services (ESS) falling from 83% in 1991 to 15% in 2021.

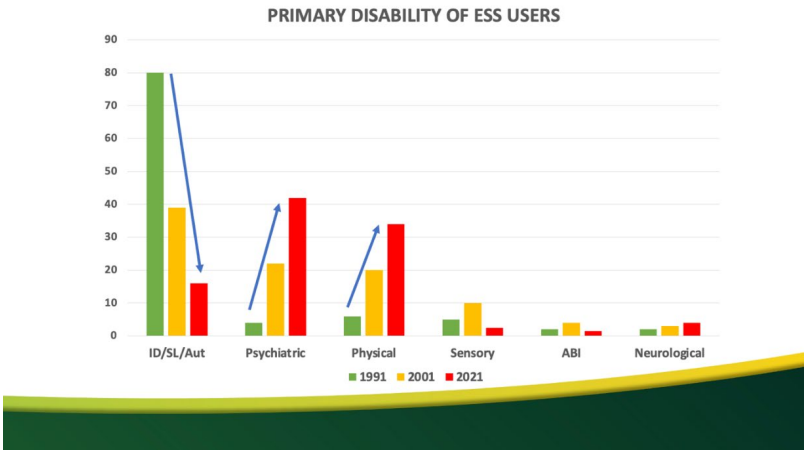


Figure 1: comparison of DES participation by disability cohort

This decline in DES participation for people with an intellectual disability is not caused by a reluctance to work. People with intellectual disability have always wanted to work in open employment.

Instead, people with intellectual disability are being systemically excluded from open employment – a system originally designed to support people with an intellectual disability.

Reflecting on the current DES system, Sue said '*a system which was designed to get people with intellectual disability into open employment no longer includes people with intellectual disability.*'

1.2 Hurdles, barriers and the polished pathway

Although everyone's journey from school to work is different, there are some common stages that most of us experience. Casual or holiday work whilst at school can help young people learn the basics of employment: working with others, learning tasks and routines, timekeeping, completing required paperwork and getting paid.

Formally arranged work experience through school can also help young people understand what it means to work in different environments.

Post school, there are choices about further education (with more opportunity for casual work) or vocational training, followed by looking for work and onto a career.

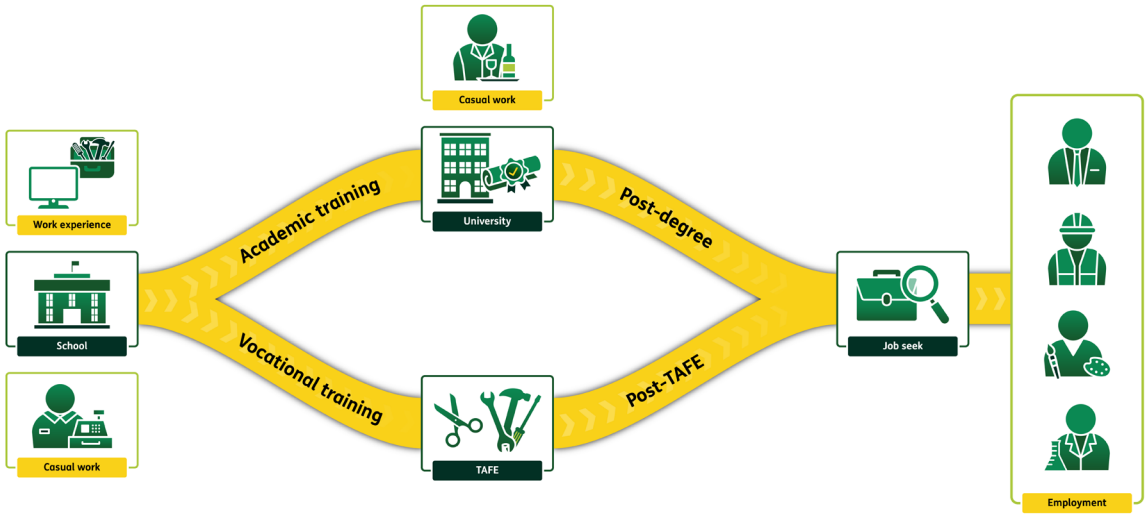


Figure 2: Typical pathways from school to work for the broader community

For people with an intellectual disability, the pathway to open and self-employment for people with an intellectual disability are far less clear. They are not linear or obvious, overly complicated, and bureaucratic.

People with intellectual disability and families face a series of unique hurdles or barriers on the pathways to open and/or self-employment. In contrast, the pathways to working in ADEs or going to day programs are easy, smooth and have very few hurdles or barriers. We call this the 'polished pathway' to segregation.

Workshop 1 explored these hurdles and heard from people with an intellectual disability about their impact, including how experiences at each of these hurdles can lead back to the polished pathway.

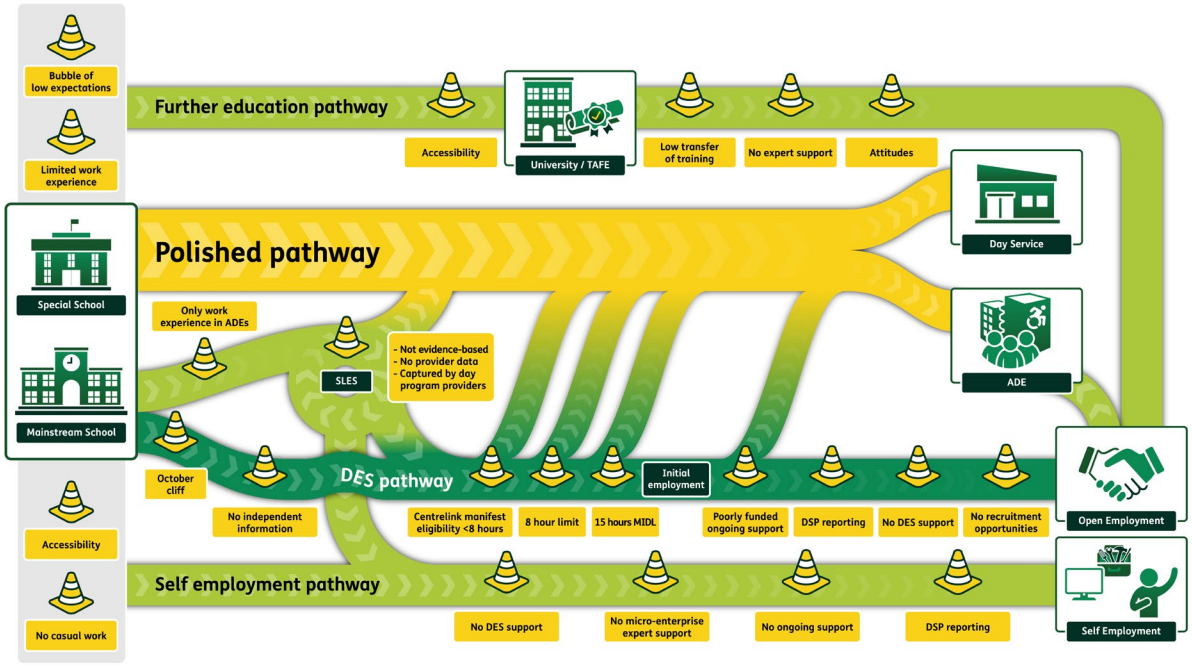


Figure 3: Pathways from school to open employment for people with an intellectual disability.

1.3 Pathways from school

For many young people, the hurdles begin before the end of school; in particular, for those in special schools for whom there is less expectation around employment. Students with an intellectual disability are also less likely to undertake work experience in open employment.

Similarly, there are fewer opportunities for young people with an intellectual disability in casual or weekend jobs. As well as missing out on the opportunity to explore interests and learn about work environments, casual work also leads to development of other skills such as using public transport and managing money, both of which help with maintaining paid work.

Speaking at the first workshop, William Ward-Boas, said:

> *'I came out of a special school. The only options presented to us were ADEs and Day Services. It was the Yellow Brick Road. It's not easy to navigate outside of the Yellow Brick Road. It was extremely complex … before even stepping in through the TAFE doors you were basically exhausted and overwhelmed with what you had to overcome to get to that place that you wanted to get to.'*

William also said navigating Centrelink was a maze:

> *'If I didn't have my guidance and support with me to get through to Centrelink process alone, I would have been extremely, like, stressed out and I think I wouldn't have made the effort to get through it because I didn't know what I was doing. That's the honest answer.'*

Responsibility for managing this complexity, and helping people understand options lies with the Government and services and not people with an intellectual disability and families.

Recommendation 1

The DES program to have a specific goal to reduce the complexity of the pathway to open employment for people with an intellectual disability, including improving the interface with other programs and supports including NDIS and Centrelink.

Recommendation 2

The DES program to take responsibility for supporting people with an intellectual disability to navigate the multiple frameworks and programs related to achieving open employment.

1.4 Availability of information

Poor communication and lack of independent information around available options is a significant barrier. This includes clear guidance on how to navigate pathways out of school. Families are more likely to find a glossy brochure for a day service provider or ADE than clear information about open employment pathways. People with an intellectual disability and families are not automatically referred to the DES program and are often unaware that they able to self-refer.

We believe that independent accessible information on employment pathways needs to be provided to people with an intellectual disability and their families, both online and at critical points of contact like Centrelink, school and via the NDIS.

Looking at more contemporary approaches, no information or support on self-employment, such as microenterprises, is available to families. Given this flexible, person-centred response has the potential to change the way we think about open employment, this gap must be addressed.

Recommendation 3

Information about how to access open and self-employment supports, and employment options should be co-designed with people with an intellectual disability and their families, and made available at all key points in the employment journey.

1.5 The October Cliff

The first hurdle post-school occurs because most students with intellectual disabilities finish school in October when other students begin their year 12 exams, long before the start of School Leaver Employment Supports (SLES) or DES in the following January. This so-called 'October cliff' cuts students adrift from routines and supports. It also has the potential to disrupt family routines built around the reliability of standard school hours. Parents are placed in a situation where they need to rearrange their own working arrangements to be available. This can result in loss of income, with the pressure most often placed on female parents. This sudden and unexpected pressure can lead parents to choose a more familiar, immediately available, and reliable routine through an Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE) or Day Program.

Recommendation 4

Specialist school leaver supports from October to December of the final year at school should be designed (whether through DES or the NDIS) and include using public transport, work experience with support, and the commencement of a strengths-based discovery process. Systems also need to work together to support young people and families in this period. Any NDIS plans must note the timing issue and have a plan for these important months.

1.6 School Leaver Employment Supports (SLES)

Other hurdles quickly follow. For instance, in the NDIS funded School Leaver Employment Supports (SLES), a type of employment support intended to help young people to get ready for work.

SLES is offered by providers as a program instead of as individual support, which means that it can be hard to tailor for individual circumstances. Ultimately, SLES is not working as a pathway to open employment. Provider specific data is not available, but it is clear that most are classroom based, when evidence shows that on-the-job training works best for people with intellectual disability. Currently, SLES is more likely to lead to transition to an ADE or Day Program instead of open employment.

Recommendation 5

- SLES supports should only be used for individualised programs
- SLES should be available for longer after the end of school.
- ADEs and day program providers should be ineligible to deliver SLES
- Evidence-based practice should be used to fund what works, such as on-the-job training.

1.7 DES eligibility and the interface with DSP manifest eligibility

When a person with an intellectual disability is approved to receive the Disability Support Pension (DSP) they are, under 'manifest eligibility' criteria, automatically assumed to be capable of working seven hours or less a week. However, while people are permitted to self-refer to DES, a person is only automatically referred to a DES provider if they have been assessed as capable of working at least eight hours a week. Consequently, the majority of people with an intellectual disability are only offered work in an ADE. The routine employment support offered by Centrelink is for access to ADEs only.

Recommendation 6

All people with an intellectual disability should be eligible for DES support regardless of their income support or NDIS participant status. The 8 hour / week job capacity requirement for access to DES should be removed, noting the payment system should not open a door for DES providers to decrease the expected employment hours a week for workers.

Recommendation 7

DES job capacity assessments should be replaced with a strengths-based job preference process, that includes work placement in open employment

1.8 Moderate Intellectual Disability Payment

The Moderate Intellectual Disability Payment (MIDP) is designed to achieve more substantial employment for members of a target group with a history of extremely low labour force participation - people with a moderate to severe intellectual disability. It is intended to ensure that eligible participants achieve employment for at least 15 hours per week.

However, the disparity between the DES eligibility requirement of 8 hours / week employment and the MIDP acts as a barrier to DES access for some people with a moderate or severe intellectual disability. Inclusion Australia is aware of people who have been unable to access support from a DES provider because the employment they have achieved (especially for young people transitioning from school) is less than 15 hours per week. DES providers are reluctant to take on people who are likely to have more intensive support requirements but are not yet ready to work 15 or more hours per week.

Recommendation 8

The 15 hour / week job requirement for access to MIDP should be aligned with the threshold employment outcome requirements.

Recommendation 9

The ongoing 15 hour / week job requirement for access to MIDP should be recalibrated to enable people with a moderate or severe intellectual disability time to build capacity, noting that this should not open a door for DES providers to decrease the expected longer term employment hours a week for workers.

2. The right workforce for the job

The second What Works workshop heard strong evidence and expertise that another barrier is the varied quality of the DES workforce across Australia.

We heard from people with an intellectual disability who have used DES and from DES providers about why the skills and experience of workers is important.

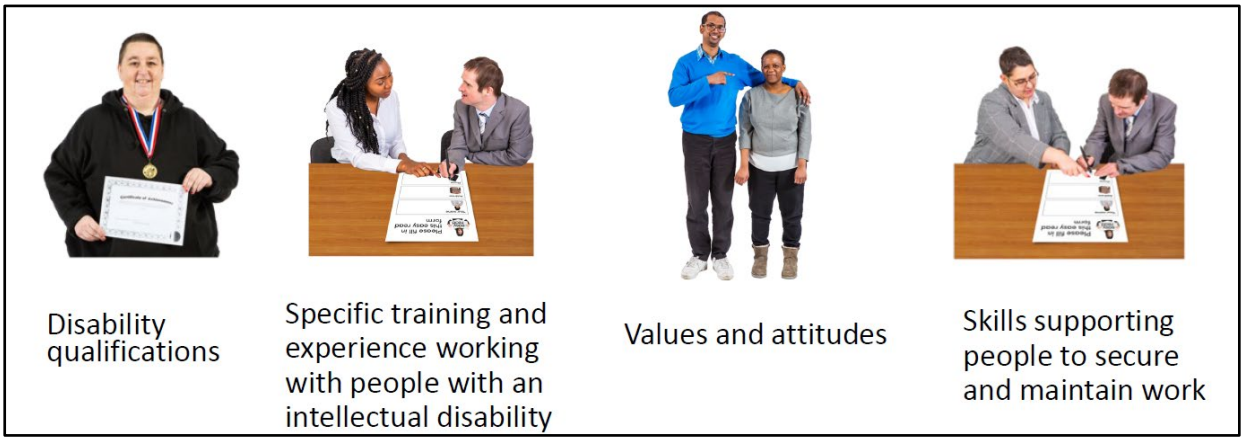
A common thread expressed was that the current workforce – with some notable exceptions - is not trained with evidence-based strategies about what works for people with an intellectual disability in open employment.

2.1 The right skills for the job

People working in the DES system do not currently need to hold a qualification related to disability. Most do not receive specific training about working with people with an intellectual disability on the job, nor training on the specific approaches and practices to help people with an intellectual disability find and keep a job.

One speaker with over 20 years' experience working in the sector, said he frequently met DES staff not understanding the difference between a learning disability and an intellectual disability.

At the second workshop we considered the appropriate level of qualifications, skills and values that workers need to provide good support to people with an intellectual disability.



A balance of these is clearly the best. However, it helps to understand what attributes are valued by people with an intellectual disability themselves. Reflecting on DES workers who had supported him well whilst in roles, Ben Alexander from the Council for Intellectual Disability (CID) identified attitudes he felt workers need to give good ongoing support someone at work. They included:

- be friendly
- be patient and keep trying
- be open-minded and flexible
- let people try new things

- let people make mistakes and learn from them
- set high expectations and let them have a go
- be creative when coming up with solutions
- be willing to work things out together.

Recommendation 10

The system needs to increase the capacity of providers to work with people with intellectual disability.

- Providers supporting people with an intellectual disability must have appropriate induction and training and be required to use evidence-based practice.

2.2 Experiences of good and bad workers

Ella Darling, an inclusion project worker for CID spoke at the second workshop about her experience working in a range of workplaces, including McDonalds, a hairdresser's salon and an RSL club.

Ella said her experiences at work were influenced by the capabilities of her DES support workers. She had two competent DES workers who knew how to find workplaces with a supporting environment and, consequently, she had positive work experiences.

However, she felt abandoned when she was placed with an unsuitable DES worker. Ella said the unsupportive worker refused to help when she was bullied at work – yelling at her and telling her to leave her office and not come back.

Ella said it was important for her to feel welcome, included and needed when dealing with DES workers and workplaces. She said that it was easier to pick up new skills – such as taking a barista course – when she was happy at work.

2.3 Induction and Training

Other workforce issues raised by speakers included poor induction practice, insufficient staff training, as well as high caseloads for DES staff.

Jobsupport CEO Phil Tuckerman AM told the second workshop:

> '*Without information on what works, services don't know how to improve, and failed approaches are repeated. Workforce training needs to be based on what works, not popular ideas*.'

In relation to efforts to secure employment for people with an intellectual disability, Mr Tuckerman that Jobsupport makes an average of 160 phone calls to employers to find jobs. He explained that placements take seven weeks of intensive training with the person, for which his staff are also specifically trained.

This reinforces the need for adequate funding within the system so people with an intellectual disability have the time and support to be successful.

It was noted that the decline in knowledge and expertise among DES staff is undermining efforts to get people with intellectual disability into open employment.

Recommendation 11

DES and NDIS providers should be required to (and sufficiently funded) to implement person-centred, evidence-based practice which will lead to real outcomes.

Recommendation 12

A Centre of Excellence on the employment of people with an intellectual disability to be established to develop evidence-based mandatory training and practice.

- People with an intellectual disability should be part of the paid staff in the Centre.

Recommendation 13

Specialist intellectual disability providers should be established in each state and territory – with a remit to mentor and build expertise of generalist providers.

2.4 Information about the quality of DES providers

Speakers mentioned it was not easy to get a sense of how skilled workers were at delivering outcomes for people with an intellectual disability.

Jobsupport has had notable success working with people with moderate intellectual disability. However, more is needed to ensure that their methodologies are understood, funded and replicable in other jurisdictions – including outside of major cities.

The current DES Star Rating system is clearly insufficient for monitoring this level of detail. It does not focus on quality as a priority and overemphasises the wrong metrics, rewarding providers for maintaining the system rather than encouraging real sustainable outcomes.

Recommendation 14

We recommend a new system for monitoring and public reporting of the performance of providers that includes reporting on a range of specific employment outcomes – not just placement.

- Data should include clear information on different disability cohorts.
- Reporting should be accessible and understandable by people with an intellectual disability and families to help make informed choices.

3. What Works – a look at the evidence

A common theme across the four workshops was correlation between what those who have experienced the DES system wanted, and the research evidence about 'what works' regarding open employment. Both were very clear that we already know 'what works'.

Speaking at the first workshop, Sue Robertson drew on her 40-year experience both as a DES provider, a leader in academic research on open employment and her current role as an advocate working with young people and families to identify key elements that lead to the best open employment outcomes for people with an intellectual disability. These included:

- **Assessment -** identifying the strengths, abilities, and job aspirations of workers.
- **Job development -** finding jobs that match the abilities and aspirations of workers; engaging with potential employers; and identifying barriers to employment.
- **On-the-job training -** teaching workers the specific tasks they need to do in their job.
- **Ongoing support and review -** supporting worker progress and employer satisfaction.

Sue was clear these elements were present from the start in systems set up as a precursor to DES.

Fast forward 40 years and these elements correlate almost directly with a 2020 literature review by University of Sydney Centre for Disability Studies and Virginia Commonwealth University to identify successful approaches to open employment. The report states '*not only are individuals with more severe intellectual disabilities able and willing to work, but if they are ever going to become less dependent on government disability benefits then successfully achieving competitive employment positions via evidenced-based practices … are necessary.*' [9]

It identifies four key steps to open employment:

1. A strengths-based assessment, focusing on what people with intellectual disability *can* do.
2. An extensive job search that seeks to find a job that fits the strengths of the person
3. Invest in systemic support, instruction, and job training for the person
4. Commit to ongoing support for the person with intellectual disability, obtaining feedback directly from the employer and employee.

Speaking at the fourth workshop, Phil Tuckerman reinforced that each of these four elements is vital to success, and that they are interdependent.

Best practice already exists there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Using international best practice models allows the Australian Government the opportunity to use programs already tried and tested with proof of success. We will refer to these four elements in the next sections of the report, which look toward a new system.

[9] *Supported Employment: Evidence of Success for Adults with Intellectual Disabilities,* P. Wehman, L. Avellone, J. Taylor, J. Kregel, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, 2020. P4.

3.1 Jobs are everywhere – if you look

Former Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes has spoken about the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' faced by people with disability.

The low expectations about the capacity of people with an intellectual disability can be held by family members, employers, teachers, and careers advisors, and even people with disability.

As a consequence, people with an intellectual disability are less likely to be given the same opportunities as others to engage with, train for and work in open employment – and these poor work outcomes reinforce low expectations.

William Ward-Boas told participants at the third workshop that the comment 'jobs are everywhere' referred to the belief that everyone can work if attitudes and practices change.

William confirmed the reality of the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' – saying that DES had a narrow view of the capabilities of people with an intellectual disability and that that narrow view limited opportunities for open employment.

'*A lot of [DES] places do judge the book by its cover*,' William said.

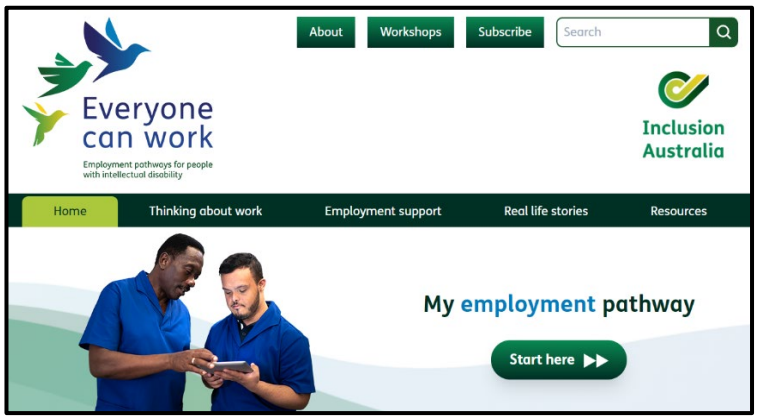
There is an urgent need to raise expectations of the work ability of people with an intellectual disability. As Ella Darling, a self-advocate and inclusion project worker at the Council for Intellectual Disability, told IA, there is a need for expectations to change:

'Please be open minded. Let the people you're supporting talk and have their say. Support participants well and believe in people – in them – that they can work.'

Ella Darling, inclusion project worker, Council for Intellectual Disability

---

That change in expectations needs to be supported by an increased focus on the transition from school to the workforce. For instance, the transition to work currently takes place in the final year of school. There is evidence that the transition to work should start earlier – at the age of 14 years – and include in-depth transition planning, work experience and training opportunities such as school-based apprenticeships and traineeships.



Inclusion Australia's Everyone Can Work website was developed to assist young people and families to navigate this transition from school and the proactive steps they can take.

However, there is still a significant role for DES providers in this journey.

Recommendation 15

The Australian Government reinforce a clear message that 'everyone can work' to raise community and employer expectations about what is possible

- This should be tied to existing campaigns including those led by Disability Representative Organisations and the Australian Human Rights Commission

3.2 Focus on what people can do, not what they can't do

"Find out the person's skills and strengths so you get to know them better"

Ben Alexander, Council for Intellectual Disability, NSW

Speaking with Inclusion Australia members with expertise in employment for people with an intellectual disability, most felt that the current DES system is overly focused on specific numbers. There is too much emphasis on short term placements by providers in order to meet targets.

This emphasis is driving DES providers to focus away from people with intellectual disabilities and towards supporting people with other disabilities and mental health conditions. This in turn is contributing to the loss of expertise on intellectual disability in DES, and directly impacting on the personal experiences of people with an intellectual disability looking for work – starting with the first meeting.

A typical first experience for many people seeking work with support from DES is undertaking an Employment Services Assessment (ESAt) or Job Capacity Assessment (JCA). These IQ and functional assessment tests are used by DES providers to assess a person's ability work.

We believe that the time and resources used to undertake these assessments are wasteful. People are almost always diagnosed with an intellectual disability prior to working age and are not subject to change. Most people between the ages of 20-64 in Australia have already had to prove to Centrelink at least once the validity of their disability and should not have to go through additional assessment processes or tests to measure the level of their disability because they are seeking employment support.

This funding allocated to measure disability or to assess someone could instead be allocated toward additional assistance in the post-employment stage. As we shall outline later, this 'ongoing support' is often significantly underfunded. We believe the right starting point is a process which focusses on getting to know the person and their reasons for engaging with the DES system.

"Ask the people with intellectual disability what they want, what sort of jobs they like."

Jessica Toster - Office Worker, Western Australia

This requires understanding and training on how to work with and listen to people with an intellectual disability. Many of our guest speakers spoke about the need for patience and for workers to properly listen. Other elements include:

- Take time to get to know the person
- Use the person's preferred communication style
- Explore people's passions and interests
- Identify strengths – what people are good at and what they enjoy doing.
- Think creatively – are there ordinary, everyday life options and choices that will help people get the work they want.

This focus on strengths was seen as a key difference to current approaches in DES for people with intellectual disability.

One example that could be explored and adopted is the Discovery model, developed by Marc Gold & Associates in the United States.

Described as "*a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand who the employment seeker is in as many aspects of life as necessary … as an alternative strategy to a comparative assessment*" it involves the development of a one-page profile about the person seeking work. This is used to help develop a customised plan highlighting a person's employment strengths, interests, and experience. This includes a visual resume for job seekers, agreed to by the person and any supporters including family members as desired.

Overall, the message was clear from our speakers: focus on what people can do, not what they can't.

Recommendation 16

A strengths-based assessment process should be the foundation point for any future disability employment supports for people with an intellectual disability

- Providers must develop the skills and experience to support people with an intellectual disability through this process, supporting preferred communication styles and allowing sufficient time for the process to identify a person's skills and interests and any long-term goals.

3.3 Job customisation

Speaking at the third workshop, Sue Robertson identified job customisation as a core element of changing people's understanding of open employment and embedding successful approaches.

Noting that people with an intellectual disability do not find jobs via the usual recruitment methods open to people without a disability or indeed people with other disabilities, Sue outlined two critical components covered in depth at the third workshop; job customisation and the need to place and train.

The current approach of DES providers is relatively passive and involves looking for existing job vacancies and supporting a person with an intellectual disability to apply.

Job customisation is about increasing the success rate of open employment by designing a job around the capabilities and interests of the person. Job customisation is more proactive. Instead of waiting for vacancies, providers initiate conversations with employers and ask questions such as: what are tasks are not getting done that you'd like to see done? This proactive approach builds relationships with employers, identifies needs that can be matched to the aspirations of people with an intellectual disability, and creates opportunities for negotiation that can lead to open employment opportunities.

At the third workshop, Sue cited the case of Scott, a young man with an intellectual disability who loves books. Scott had work experience at BigW, and gravitated to the store's book section, which was often messy. The employer said the untidy book section was losing sales. Sue suggested Scott could keep the book section organised and tidy, and this led to a job being created for Scott.

Creating a job - Jessica's Story

Jessica Toster is a woman with Down syndrome whose career goal was to work in an office. She has worked at Development Disability Western Australia (DDWA) for six years.

Jessica's job was created after Sue spoke to DDWA CEO Mary Butterworth and asked if the organisation needed help around the office. Mary listed jobs that were not getting done in the office, including cleaning the kitchen, collecting mail, sorting recycling, shredding documents, buying supplies and making drinks.

The task list was used to customise a job for Jessica. After a few months, Mary said that Jessica no longer needed a DES support worker to support her at her job at DDWA. Instead, she was trained and supported like any other member of staff and kept learning new skills.

Sue said that Jessica's story shows how 'natural supports' in a workplace occur when people with an intellectual disability are accepted and included: '*natural supports unlock the potential of people with intellectual disability*'.

Sue observed that under DES there is a pressure to place people with an intellectual disability in jobs as soon as possible. However, job customisation takes time: 'It's going to be a longer journey as people discover their skills: 'You've got to understand what the interests of your job seeker are, what their skills are, what they aspire to do in the world of work … and then you've got to go out and actually locate the employers. It takes time to build up that relationship with an employer, and it's the role of [DES] to do that, Sue said

It should be noted that customised employment can be resource intensive. One US study found that the mean duration of the customised employment process was 128 days (Luecking & Luecking, 2006). The resource-intensive approach required for job customisation is not currently adequately funded under DES, where there are financial incentives to place people with an intellectual disability in jobs as soon as possible. However, job customisation is more likely to lead to long-term employment. These long-term outcomes need to be recognised in the DES funding model.

Recommendation 17

Job customisation should be a key component of the future employment support model for people with an intellectual disability

- Approaches should be based on the evidence, with opportunity for providers to learn the skills and processes to implement job customisation successfully
- Providers must be adequately resourced to implement job customisation processes and in a manner that can be replicated nationally, not just in large cities

3.4 On-the-Job Training

Jessica's story reinforces the importance of on-the-job training as the evidence-based way that many people with intellectual disabilities learn new skills. As with any training, it is easier to apply learned skills in the environment in which they are meant to be used. No number of diagrams of a coffee machine for would-be baristas can substitute for the experience of handling and working with a real coffee machine.

Ben Alexander agrees. Ben said that he had learned how to be an advocate on the job at CID and had been supported by colleagues in this. He said that people with an intellectual disability need the same supports as other people when starting a new job, just for longer. Ben said DES should help people with fit in with and work alongside their workmates rather than separate them from other workers.

Ben recalled that CID had given him tech support, training for public speaking, data entry and to use software such as Zoom. They also assessed his workstation and installed a screen magnifier. '*On the job support made me feel more comfortable to do my job*,' he said. '*I also felt more confident to learn new things and extend my skills*.'

Many people with an intellectual disability are not offered on the job training through DES or other employment supports, such as SLES. They are also not supported to have enough time to learn on the job.

Recommendation 18

Embed on-the-job learning as a core principle of employment supports for people with an intellectual disability so people have a chance to develop and embed skills in situ in real life environments. This is not to be confused with short-term work experience placements.

4. Ongoing support

4.1 People with intellectual disability need long-term support at work

The fourth component of successful open employment identified in the literature is ongoing support.

This was the theme of our fourth workshop, with host William Ward-Boas stating that the need for support didn't stop with a person with an intellectual disability found a job. Ongoing support is needed whenever there are changes in the workplace or changes in the personal circumstances of the person with intellectual disability.

On the importance of ongoing support, a 2020 study found that:

> *'Long-term support is a critical feature … that ensures successful employment outcomes are sustained over time. Research has shown that fading initial support to a continued level of ongoing support produces better outcomes for supported employees. While natural supports provided by co-workers or supervisors are sometimes included in an overall support plan, there is no evidence supporting it as an alternative to robust training and support from a qualified employment specialist. In fact, rather than interfering with a client's integration in a workplace, customer-centred long-term support can enhance an employee's position by providing extended assistance as they take on additional duties, adjust to changes in protocol, and seek out advancement within the organization'.*[10]

Reflecting on current provision of ongoing support within DES, the Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health's submission to the 2021 *National Disability Employment Strategy* stated that:

> '*Critically, DES was often reported as not being able to provide the level of on-the job support that participants required. This is reflective of a broader issue of a limited supply of employment support practitioners … that have the skills, expertise and resources to provide effective on-the-job supports*.'

Returning for our fourth workshop, Phil Tuckerman, CEO of Jobsupport, echoed this view, and shared experiences of the limitations of the current structure and funding of ongoing support. Phil noted that the current approach to ongoing support within DES is too inflexible, emphasizing the need to provide ongoing support as needed and not based on a pre-determined program or schedule.

[10] *Supported Employment: Evidence of Success for Adults with Intellectual Disabilities,* P. Wehman, L. Avellone, J. Taylor, J. Kregel, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, 2020. P13.

Anna's Story

Phil shared the story of Anna, a person with an intellectual disability who has been supported by Jobsupport for a long time. Anna had been in the same job with a childcare centre since 1984.

However, her ongoing support needs had gone up and down according to the changing circumstances in her life and her workplace. This included the childcare centre changing hands, co-workers leaving and new ones arriving, new tasks and routines, and even the centre changing location. Anna's parents passed away during her time working at the childcare centre and she had moved into a group home.

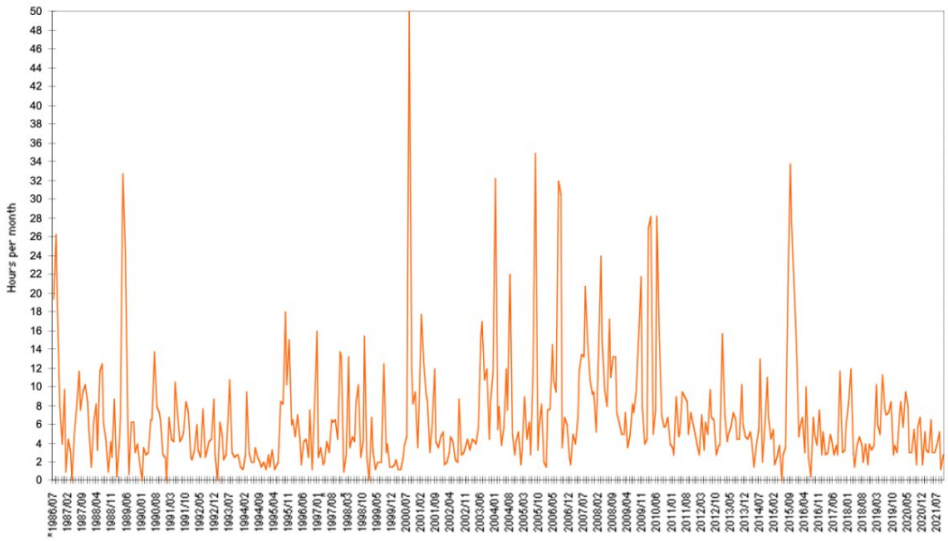


Figure 4: Anna's ongoing support needs between 1984 and 2021

Phil said this is typical of how real lives work and the importance of having support that is flexible to meet people's needs. When people aren't adequately supported, they can lose confidence and even their jobs.

Recommendation 19

Ongoing support should be recognised as a critical component of success for people with an intellectual disability seeking open employment and built into all planning. The lack of ongoing support leads to failures in jobs that would otherwise be successful.

4.2 Funding and auditing of ongoing support

As demonstrated by Anna's story, funding settings for ongoing support must be able to change – allowing services to use ongoing support flexibly over time as the needs of people fluctuate.

Typically, supports are currently reduced over time for each worker as a matter of course, rather than having the flexibility to be scaled up and down as needed.

The funding levels of ongoing support are currently set annually, but this approach cannot predict unexpected support needs. The funding model needs to take into account that some workers require more support than predicted and others require less.

Phil Tuckerman also told participants that the current audit-based approach to ongoing support is inflexible, unrealistic and counterproductive. Instead of focusing on the needs of the individual worker and their personal outcomes, the current system is based on an on-site monitoring regime. This sets expectations around and monitors the number of visits for ongoing support in a set period, rather than using the funding to undertake visits as needed or as part of planning to reduce the likelihood of placements breaking down.

Phil cited an employment support service in Madison, Wisconsin in the United States who have the best job-retention data. Jobsupport has adopted their model which keeps on-site monitoring visits to a minimum, focussing instead on identifying and addressing problems faced by workers.

Instead of funding being tagged to on-site monitoring it should focus on outcomes from ongoing support which promote and hold services accountable for job retention.

Recommendation 20

Funding for ongoing support for people with an intellectual disability should be at a level that recognises the time and complexity of support needed.

The current ongoing support assessment process to be recalibrated to increase flexibility so people can get the support they need when they need it. Funding must allow services to use ongoing support flexibly as ongoing support needs cannot always be predicted. Funding for ongoing support should also hold services accountable for job retention.

4.3 The importance of ongoing support through a person's career

Gavin Burner is an Inclusion Worker at the South Australian Council on Intellectual Disability (SACID). He shared his story of trying to find meaningful paid employment throughout his life. Gavin is in his mid-50s and has had many different jobs in his life including working on his family farm, in various factory roles, time with an ADE and lots of volunteer roles. It took almost 20 years for Gavin to find roles that he was interested in based on his skills.

In one role, Gavin had been paid $10 an hour. After he completed a Certificate III course his wage was increased to $24 an hour. However, after a change in managers, Gavin's pay was cut from $23 to $14 an hour because they said he couldn't do all the tasks in his job. Gavin's DES worker told him that if he fought the decision to cut his pay, he could lose his job. Consequently, Gavin stayed in the job on the lower wage. This advice, and a lack of understanding by his DES provider about his circumstances led Gavin to feel unappreciated and undervalued.

"I'm a 50 something year old man who should be able to better myself and learn new things and change careers."

Gavin Burner, South Australia Council on Intellectual Disability (SACID)

Fortunately, Gavin found his current role and is now a valued member of his team, with wages to match. However, this is not the case for far too many people with an intellectual disability.

Ben Alexander also spoke about the importance of ongoing support at the fourth workshop, identifying things can DES providers do. These include:

- Role modelling good support in the workplace including having a positive attitude and good body language when giving someone ongoing support.
- Make a checklist of tasks for an employee.
- Make a daily schedule for an employee.
- Help set up a support system for someone in their workplace, for example a buddy system or mentor.
- Have regular check-ins with the employer ***and*** the employee.

Recommendation 21

Establish benchmarks for DES providers by investigating, documenting, and distributing the practices used by services with the best job retention rates.

Recommendation 22

Employers need ongoing support and advice from trained experts. Provide information and support to small businesses and organisations in rural and remote areas to help them understand the benefits of employing people with an intellectual disability.

4.4 Looking to the future - lessons from the response to COVID-19

The shortcomings of the current approach to ongoing support in DES have been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is now clear that jobs held by people with an intellectual disability have been particularly impacted by COVID, with hospitality work and offices jobs far more limited by restrictions. The move from office environments to online working has left many people with an intellectual disability without work. As a result, many people have been stuck at home, unable to maintain their skills. With the on-off slow return to work in some states, many people are also often confronted by changed work requirements.

At the workshop, Phil Tuckerman described how ongoing support has never been more vital, helping people respond to this changing work environment in the face of the pandemic. This includes ongoing support to:

- Monitor employers' vaccine and other COVID requirements.
- Negotiate task changes and a return-to-work attendance.
- Monitor staff changes and contact new supervisors.
- Analyse new tasks.
- Arrange Zoom meetings with workers anxious about their jobs and employers.
- Encourage walking to maintain fitness.
- Convey employers' vaccine requirements and encourage workers to see a doctor.
- Identify worker return to work concerns, such as using public transport, and apply appropriate safeguard measures.

Although we are in a new phase of the pandemic, as we approach vaccination targets in each state and territory, there is still uncertainty. This is disproportionately affecting workers with an intellectual disability; whether in terms of access to work and fewer opportunities, losing previously held roles, or managing the constant changes demanded by the response to the pandemic. It is possible that some industries will never return to pre-pandemic levels and create gaps.

Recommendation 23

The Australian Government to engage with people with an intellectual disability, their families and representative organisations, and DES providers to explore and analyse the impact of COVID on employment opportunities and supports as part of future planning.

Conclusion

Wrapping up the final workshop, host William Ward-Boas was clear:

"The current approach to Disability Employment Services is not working for people with an intellectual disability."

William reinforced the need for policy makers to follow the four policy points set out in the evidence and to not 'reinvent the wheel' when we already know what works.

Inviting speakers from across the workshops to reflect on their own experiences, William asked each speaker "what can DES do to make it easier for people with an intellectual disability to get proper paid jobs?"

- **Ella:** "Please be open minded. Let the people you're supporting talk and have their say. Support participants well and believe in people - in them - that they can work."
- **Heather:** "Having staff members that understand people with an intellectual disability and that they may need a bit more time and understanding and support."
- **Jessica:** "ask the people with intellectual disability what they want, what sort of jobs they like."
- **Gavin:** We are all individuals and need individual support. Get to know us. Help us to aim higher and realise our potential
- **Ben:** "You need to believe in the person, and that they can work. Find out the person's skills and strengths so you get to know them better"

Concluding the session, William had this advice about his own journey through the DES system:

'We are just we're not just a box to tick. We are people who are coming to you for support and want to actually progress - as people - for our own reasons. Whether that's personal or professional, we're looking for work because we actually want to work.

Get to know us - and enjoy it - because we are putting our trust in you.'

William Ward-Boas, What Works host, November 2021
