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Brokering Employment Pathways from Supported Employment Settings to the Mainstream Labour Market

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Abstract: In Australia, many people with a disability work in Supported Employment Settings (previously known as Australian Disability Enterprises or ADEs). SESs are in a unique position to provide training and support to people with a disability as a transition step to employment in the mainstream labour market. This paper examines how one case study SES facilitates pathways to open employment for supported employees. We explore three key questions: what do these pathways look like, what role can Supported Employment Settings play in facilitating these transitions, and what are the challenges in doing so? We argue that successful pathways involve SESs and employers working together to create bespoke opportunities tailored to individuals. Through a detailed picture of the actors and relationships that are involved in setting up employment pathways, our findings demonstrate the need for both employee and employer preparation and how this can be carried out through purposeful planning.

Keywords: Australian disability enterprises; supported employment settings; brokering employment; disability; customised employment; employment pathways; WISE; WISE-ability

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1. Introduction

In Australia, people with a disability face complex and intersecting employment barriers that inhibit their participation in the labour market. Those who have a disability and are 'working-age' are at a higher risk of being unemployed compared to those without a disability [1]. These challenges are reflected in employment rates for people with a disability, which have remained stagnant in Australia despite changes to funding structures; only 53% of people living with a disability (aged 15–64) are participating in the labour force [1]. These participation rates have been shaped by the exclusion and segregation of people with a disability from the broader work force [2]. The added challenge is that potential employers require assistance to offer work environments that support the assets and wellbeing of people with disability [3,4]. The risk of marginalisation from employment is compounded by poverty, discrimination, and health risks, particularly in current labour market conditions, as they are impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic [5] (p. 164). Given these challenges, it is imperative to generate appropriate pathways to decent employment and career options.

Supported Employment Settings (SESs) are accessible and receive funding for activities such as training and support. SESs (previously known as Australian Disability Enterprises or ADEs) provide supports to many people with a disability, including skill development and supported employment. Some SESs are now undertaking changes to adopt a Work Integration Social Enterprise Model approach to employment [6] and have become known as social enterprise or social firms with a focus on employment pathways. For many young people, SESs are one of few employment options available when transitioning out of school [7,8]; however, there are limited pathways out of SESs, and many remain in

this environment for a long period of time [9]. For the most part, SESs have not been set up to use a model that facilitates transitions into the mainstream labour market, and this perpetuates a cycle of exclusion from mainstream employment.

SESs are, and have been for some time, in a unique position to provide training and support to people with a disability as a transition step to employment in the mainstream labour market [10]. There is a significant opportunity for SESs to build exit pathways into their organisational models to enhance the employment skills and outcomes of this cohort [11]. In this paper, we explore three key questions: what do these pathways/transitions look like, what role can SESs feasibly play in facilitating these transitions, and why are they not already doing so?

The research presented in the paper is drawn from a two-year project that examined the ways in which SESs can develop sustainable and supportive pathways out into open employment. The project was able to develop an organisational design model that supports employment pathways [12]. This model was based on the Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE) approach, which is utilised by some social enterprises in Australia. This paper describes how one case study SES aligned with the WISE model facilitates transitions to open employment for their current employees. We describe the transition process and success factors for the whole journey. We argue that successful pathways involve SESs and employers working together to create bespoke opportunities tailored to individuals. In the sections that follow, we explore the process of collaboration between the client and the SES as they scope potential open employment options, and the open employer (employer in the open labour market) once the new employee begins work. We suggest that a customised, individualised approach is useful in matching employers and individuals and allocating support and skill development opportunities to ensure the match is successful [13]. This match can be negotiated by the SES or Disability Employment Service provider taking on a role as a broker or trusted intermediary and via the SES's deep understanding of the interests and needs of both the individual (i.e., client) and the employer. Through a more detailed picture of the actors and relationships that are involved in setting up employment pathways, our findings demonstrate the need for both employee and employer preparation and how this can be carried out via different steps and purposeful planning.

2. The Role of Australian Disability Enterprises, WISE, and Employers in Employment Pathways

SESs have not traditionally focused on training and open employment pathways but have offered in-house supported employment and on-the-job learning [14,15]. SESs are currently facing the emergence of a need for cross-sector collaboration that was not previously present to generate mainstream employment opportunities outside the doors of the SES. The sector is recognising that a sheltered employment model is not what many people want, at least not in the long term. Moreover, segregated work environments have generated unfair working conditions and, in some cases, have led to the abuse of human rights [2]. These changes and growing awareness of the negative impact of segregated settings are raising the need for organisations to work with private employers. Private employers have different needs and different logics, and they also have different domains of knowledge. Many private employers do not have the same knowledge base as SESs about working with people with a disability. In this section, we explore challenges to these open employment pathways, the role of SESs, Customised Employment, and the role of employers.

Recent research in Australia and the UK found that barriers to employment for people with a disability working in SESs include a lack of employer confidence and knowledge and negative client experiences of open employment [16,17]. Essentially, there are obstacles that impact employer willingness and employee willingness to take on open employment. Bridging the gap between people with a disability and mainstream employers, therefore, requires addressing these issues on both sides of the equation. Research in the UK has also identified that a lack of accessible employment conditions has a significant effect

on employment opportunities and experiences. Molyneux [17] (p. 723) argues that in the UK employers are unable to offer the kind of flexibility that would support job retention and career progression of people with a disability because of the paucity of knowledge about how to strike the right balance between an inclusive and caring workplace and how roles and workplaces can be customised to meet individual needs. Similarly, in Australia, employers are less familiar with the process of customising or altering workplace conditions to meet the needs of individuals with a disability [6,18]. However, there are resources available for employers in Australia to assist employers in developing inclusive workplace settings (i.e., Job Access).

Blonk et al. [19] (p. 972) argue that the typical 'welfare state policies' privilege certain forms of employment over others. The outcome of this is a fetishising of so-called 'regular employment' and 'stigmatising and segregating' associated with forms of employment involving support and care through, for instance, job shadowing, reduced hours, or reasonable alterations to work processes. Molyneux [17] (p. 723) suggests that employers are unable to offer flexibility 'in terms of where, when, and how work can be performed', and this places 'additional barriers in the way of disabled people's recruitment, job retention, and career progression'. This inflexibility is perpetuated by policy approaches in the UK, which encourage individuals to work on their job readiness while ignoring the employer-side issue. 'This has discursively and structurally positioned disabled people as less productive, economically burdensome and therefore strategically placed on the side-lines of the labour market as part of the reserve army of labour' [17] (p. 723).

Murfitt et al. [20] (p. 217) note that 'the broad business case argument alone for employing people with disability, is not enough to change attitudes and organizational cultures that are at the root of the workforce exclusion of people with disability'. Blonk et al. [19] argue that what is needed is 'a more nuanced understanding' of the 'intersection' where the 'benefits of employment' meet the provision of support structures and arrangements. There needs to be a balance between 'work logic' (productivity based) and 'care logic' (care based) that recognises both the strengths of individuals in performing meaningful work and the need for the provision of support when appropriate [19] (p. 990). Here, 'positive "work logic" aspects such as a sense of craftsmanship are successfully balanced with 'care logic' aspects, such as an adapted workplace and tolerance for mistakes' [19] (p. 989). This, in part, can be achieved through forms of recognition that bring awareness to different forms of bodily capital and their potential for societal contribution. For instance, in the world of entrepreneurialism, people with disabilities are leveraging and enhancing their 'bodily capital' through start-up businesses. Jammaers and Williams [21] (p. 1) have explored the methods for enhancing 'bodily capital' among entrepreneurs living with disabilities. They explore 'the existence of certain bodily and mental schemata that lead to a body habituated to run a business centred around one's impairment and experience of living as a disabled person in an ableist world' [21] (p. 1).

Recognition-based approaches stand in opposition to some *care*-based approaches, where 'care needs' serve as a metaphor for a problematic dependence that should be overcome with increased 'independence' [19,22]. Recognition is deployed by Blonk et al. [19] (p. 975) to highlight the relational nature of work and care:

Similar to a rope-walker who keeps his balance by flexibly moving between left and right, the employers move flexibly between the logics of work and care. They stress the ideas of employees doing proper work, working hard and gaining recognition for their contributions. However, simultaneously, they act in a caring way. They adjust this balancing act per person, for instance, by providing a degree of work pressure, but not too much.

SES can balance care and work logics via a Customised Employment approach. Customised Employment centres the individual person with a disability and involves a broker as a go-between who manages the flow of information and mediates the needs of both employer and individual [23]. This is similar to what Moore et al. [24] call a dual (i.e., client-employer) customer approach to addressing the challenge of developing employment pathways in the open labour market. Moore et al. [24] (p. 149) identify both people with

disabilities and employers as customers to be engaged by the service provider. The idea of duality is useful in imagining the employment pathway; however, the limitation of this approach is that the employer's needs are centred rather than those of the client [24] (p. 157).

Customised Employment involves person/client-centred planning to work towards the goal of employment [25,26]. Customised Employment is defined as 'a process for achieving competitive integrated employment or self-employment through a relationship between employee and employer that is personalized to meet the needs of both' [27]. It is 'designed to meet the specific needs and interests of individuals with disabilities as well as the needs of the employer by using flexible strategies at every stage of employment' [28] (p. 2). Customised Employment boosts confidence, wellbeing, and skills and improves productivity and output.

Customised Employment is practised in a range of different ways on the ground but actually involves particular steps and the use of a fidelity scale to ensure accuracy in approach. Inge et al. [28] (p. 2) identify twelve core practices of Customised Employment, which range from support staff initially meeting a client to understand their interests and abilities to conducing in-depth interviews with family and friends and observing the clients in job-related tasks or in work experience. The final steps involve informational interviewing, collaboration with the client networks, and the negotiation of a customised job description.

These core practices are useful; however, many of these steps focus on the individual client rather than the employer or the relationship that is to be negotiated. Employer engagement enters the picture via the use of informational interviewing, which is a strategy used 'to engage with employers on a more personal level'. Informational interviews involve a meeting between the client, employer, and potentially the support worker. In this setting, the client can ask questions to find out about the business and share information about their skills. Smith et al. [23] (p. 270) argue that informational interviews are like a 'conversation with a purpose . . . to discover information about the business such as what happens here, what sort of skills do staff need to get into this industry and general information. It is not about looking for a job, but about building a relationship' [23] (p. 270).

Customised Employment involves a Discovery process. The Discovery process includes interviews, observations, documentation review, and interactions with the job seeker. The process uses observations of the job seeker engaged in activities and requires interviews with family members and other influential people in the job seeker's life. This information is used to develop well-coordinated customised job development activities [28] (p. 2). The output of the Discovery process is a 'vocational profile' that describes the individual job seeker, their vocational area or theme, and 'ideal working conditions for the individual' [29] (p. 187). The profile can include pictures of the job seeker performing tasks in a variety of settings [30].

SESs are uniquely positioned to offer a Customised Employment approach, as they work with clients over time in a supported environment and can better understand individual skills and strengths. SESs and other actors outside of the SES and DES systems, have facilities in which they can train people for specific roles and often in different industries. In this environment, there is a chance for staff and support workers to understand individualised conditions for success in a work-first environment. Simultaneously, SESs can work with employers to develop the employers' understanding of an individual client, share knowledge, co-create appropriate workplace conditions and also support for employers to generate employer confidence and skills. This process enacts the Customised Employment approach over time to find the right fit between client, employment type, and employer. The challenge ahead of SESs in implementing Customised Employment is described by Smith et al. [23] as one of resourcing, time management, and organisational development. Smith et al. [23] argue that the process can be quite complex, as it requires organisations to work to a fidelity scale to test that correct procedures are being followed to achieve outcomes. In some SESs, 'Customised Employment was viewed as something to be done after all the staff regular duties had been completed. This was also clouded in the issue

around who would pay for the staff time allotted to undertaking employment work with clients' [23] (p. 265).

What is not identified in the Australian SES literature are evidenced techniques and practices of employment brokerage that rely on relationships and recognition throughout the planning stage, support in open employment, and preparation of employer and employee. Moreover, there is little reflection on the cultural shift in mainstream employment settings that these practices could lead over the long term. In the sections that follow, we explore the bridging work that SESs undertake to generate employment pathways. SESs have the potential to hold in place the space and time needed to develop employment options that are customised, carved, bespoke, and individualised. There are a range of strategies and actors involved in this work. We explore how one SES was able to facilitate employment options by presenting key steps involved in the employment pathway.

3. Methods

This paper draws on data collected during a 12-month research project funded by the Department of Social Services through its Information Linkages and Capacity Building Scheme: Connecting Pathways to Employment with the Work Integration Social Enterprise Ability model. The project aimed to (a) identify how the organisational features and workplace design of an SES supported the employment pathways of people with a disability, and (b) develop a Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE) organisational model to capture this information. A case study organisation was selected to understand employment pathway facilitators and barriers and to test and develop the WISE model. This model includes a Pathways to Employment organisational design element [6]). The case study SES has been running for 7 years and operates several sites that provide supported employment to over 200 people with a disability. This organisation represented well-known characteristics and challenges that one study aimed to explore [31]. It is a key service provider in a regional area in Victoria. The research team examined how clients experienced the support offered by the SES and how organisational features impacted client employment pathways. To understand the unique contextual factors, social processes, and dynamics at play in the SES, the workplace structure was examined over a period of 12 months [32,33].

People with intellectual, social, and physical disabilities aged 18 or over participated in training or working at the SES. All participants had NDIS funding and entered the WISE either via referral from a Local Area Coordinator or Support Worker, or directly from local schools. The research problem being examined called for rich analysis of organisational elements and their effects; as such, ethnographic data collection methods were used. This approach can develop rich insights through 'thick description' [34] and help reveal both intended and unintended effects of practice [35]. This is consistent with disability scholars' calls for greater understanding of the organisational barriers and facilitators to employment pathways for people with a disability.

A range of methods consistent with an ethnographic approach was undertaken, including the following: 4 Action Learning workshops with staff, managers, and clients on their perception of the organisational design of the SES and outcomes; 27 semi-structured interviews with people with a disability, SES staff, and managers; and 5 Steering Committee meetings to share and make sense of the findings. To ensure qualitative research rigour, each of the steps in the process of sampling, data collection, and sequencing of analysis are explained according to best practice guidelines and recommendations [36]. Each participant provided informed consent, and this study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Swinburne University of Technology.

Action Learning Workshops provided WISE staff and managers with the opportunity to reflect on organisational aims and goals and helped researchers to better understand the SES design and approach to supported employment pathways. Action learning meetings followed a cycle of observe, reflect, plan, and act [37]. Participants were guided in the discussion of the WISE model and how it aligned to, for example, training in the SES. Participants discussed the importance of hands-on learning and the challenge of losing

skilled individuals who transition out of the SES. Steering Committee Meetings included SES clients and employers who partnered with the SES and were used to test the suitability of the Action Learning groups' ideas for supporting pathways from the SES to open employment. All participants—staff/managers, stakeholders, and clients—were asked to consider how having different physical spaces to work in would assist people with a disability to learn hard and soft skills and maintain a job in open employment. For instance, the Committee discussed the question, 'if a client required support on-the-job how would employers generate the appropriate supports in the workplace and what would employers require from disability employment service providers?' Participants were able to identify a range of employment barriers, supports, and tools.

Twenty-seven semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, staff, and clients (people with a disability) were undertaken to identify how the organisation provides supported employment opportunities within the SES, how it generates pathways to open employment, and what the barriers are. Overall, the sample comprised 12 SES staff members/managers; 10 clients; and 5 stakeholders. Semi-structured interviews were used to ensure consistency across interviews and adherence to areas of interest while allowing for sufficient flexibility for the participant to respond [38]. People with a disability were asked questions about activities involved in work, their experience of work, skills they developed, on-the-job supports, employment and support goals, and challenges or barriers to working at the SES and in open employment. The interview questions for staff and other stakeholders were similar; they were asked to reflect on challenges related to support in the workplace, the industry specifically (i.e., fast paced environments), productivity, the extent to which organisational structures and processes supported people with a disability in employment, and areas requiring organisational change and improvement. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

All data were coded in NVivo 11 (Lumivero: Denver, CO, USA) using a selective and inductive coding approach [39]. All the data sources were included in this coding process inclusive of interview data and workshops. To increase confidence that the findings accurately reflected the views of participants, triangulation approaches were used—data source triangulation (using more than one method and data source) [40]. The initial coding framework was structured by the WISE model elements and sub-elements [6] with the aim of capturing the ways in which the SES provided client employment pathways. The coding was used to adapt an organisational 'WISE' model for the disability sector to guide SESs and their development of external employment pathways. The elements of the WISE-Ability model show the facilitators of employment pathways. Inductive coding was used to identify additional barriers to supported employment pathways that were discussed by participants. Following analysis, themes were presented back to the respondents through the workshops to ensure no bias in the project outcomes. The key facilitators of employment pathways are explored in this paper in the sections that follow. We present these facilitators as steps in the journey towards employment.

4. Results

The results are presented under the two key themes of *employee preparation* and *open employer preparation*. Before these sections, a brief background is provided on the legislated planning stage, which frames the employment pathway. The main theme of employer preparation and support is examined, in which SES staff find a suitable organisation for the transition and build the capacity of the open employer to address the needs of the client. As will be highlighted, this support continues once the employee has commenced at the open employer and people can transition to and from the SES and open employment. The other main theme is building the capacity of the client with respect to the skills and the psychological support required for the transition. The results highlight the key role that SES staff play in providing a bespoke, customised matching process for each individual with an open employer.

4.1. The Planning Stage with Individuals

Several actors are involved in the initial planning process with the individual to work out employment goals and how individuals want to use their NDIS funding package to support their goals. People involved in this process include their nominee (i.e., family member or guardian), a Local Area Coordinator (LAC), and/or the NDIA. An LAC helps individuals access the NDIS to create a NDIS plan. Individuals working in an SES have a NDIS plan, which provides funding for supports in the home and in the workplace. This funding is often required in supported work settings. However, it can also be used in any other work setting, including open employment. Clients reflect on the importance of NDIS funding for employment in the following way:

> *I don't know when NDIS got involved in my life, I'm not too sure, but I'm glad they did because without them I couldn't work here. I enjoy working here.* (Client 10)

Outside the formal planning process, staff in SESs can work with clients on an everyday basis and, during this time together, identify interests, work style, training, and employment goals. This information helps when matching a person with a job and can be captured in a document like an Employment Plan.

During the planning phase, individuals complete a Discovery process, which documents the steps towards employment pathway goals. This is one of the first significant steps of customising employment. The average number of support hours for the Discovery phase alone is 50 hours [22]. At this planning stage, individuals who would like to work in open employment may identify their transition preference for pure open employment or, alternatively, for *hybrid* employment, which means working in both the SES and open employment.

> *I hear feedback that the supported employees don't want to leave because it's a safe, supported environment and I get that, we don't want to leave something that we love and that our friends are there and we've built relationships. So it's about having those conversations but it doesn't necessarily mean you have to leave [the SES], maybe you could be doing something at [the SES] and in open employment. Whatever that looks like.* (Staff 12)

This hybrid approach allows the individual to transition to open employment at their own pace and move back and forward between open employment and the SES [6] (p. 63).

4.2. Identifying and Then Supporting a Suitable Open Employer

Both SES staff and clients identified the importance of finding an appropriate employer that could provide an inclusive workplace culture. SES staff were able to screen potential employers to make sure that such a culture existed in the workplace by discussing requirements like an understanding and flexible approach towards the needs of employees. This was easier to identify in a smaller organisation. In larger organisations, staff noted that such inclusivity must be filtered from the top down to every facet of the organisation:

> *. . .if it's a bigger company—it really needs to be embedded into the culture that they're supporting people with a disability in their workplace. It can't just be the philosophy of that one manager.* (Staff 12)

To have a successful customised experience, staff at the SES suggest that employers need to show empathy, attempt to understand the individual they are supporting, and commit the time required to support workers with a disability:

> *If you've got an employer that's taking on one person and giving them a role within their organisation, they can actually be specific and very tailored around what that person needs. And so then, they just need to have the tools and the toolbox . . . and they've got to be willing to invest in that to set up the environment.* (Staff 1)

Beyond tapping into natural supports that already exist in the workplace, the SES was also able to provide employers with information and resources developed through the

research project in the form of an Employer Toolkit [6]. The Toolkit explains the funding that employers can access to make a work environment accessible, the language that builds an inclusive culture, and the roles and responsibilities of the employer and the SES. The type of industry also impacts the workplace culture, pace, and stress levels on the job. For instance, external/open employment hospitality settings are identified as 'high pressure' and may pose challenges to some clients. As one staff member says, not all industries allow for regular break times and support:

> *They get their lunch on time, they get things that they understand. And they might not feel like that sometimes outside—not saying every place is like that—but there'd be a few places that are a bit of a harsh environment.* (Staff 7)

Once an employer has been identified, there is an important role that the SES undertakes in preparing the employer to ensure a successful transition. SES staff support the new employer to create a secure and friendly environment for learning new skills. In many cases, support workers or the service provider can assist in this set up phase—if there is appropriate NDIS funding in the individual plan. As clients and employers told us, having a support worker present can be a 'game changer':

> *That would make a world of difference. I think that would be a real game changer to the point we'd go, 'Yeah we would definitely employ someone if they had someone that could help out, could supervise, could make sure that they were safe'.* (Stakeholder 4)

> *'Standing by me and explaining how to do it and giving me a week to explain so then at least I'll be comfortable'.* (Client 1)

> *'If I'm feeling really sad or something or angry or depressed or something, I can contact them. Or if I had some issue about or something, I can even call them.* (Client 6)

The open employer may not be aware of the types of funding supports that could be provided. The staff from the SES have an important role in providing that information in a way that is specifically relevant to the individual client. The SES staff understand what suits the client, which they can communicate to the new open employer.

> *So it's generally all about getting to know the person, discovering their strengths, discovering their needs of support, understanding their interests, having that conversation, going out having a conversation . . . I do that work behind the scenes to visualise a workspace and show that participant what that team looks like, how long that organisation's been in place for, what they do. So using those resources that are out there are really good aides for people that want to visualise that workspace.* (Staff 11)

Staff report that relationship development with clients and employers is crucial to support employers, build shared goals and knowledge, break down barriers around social stigma, and facilitate the transition to open employment. The case study organisation shows that relationships are developed over time and require site visits or informational interviews to introduce clients to a work setting and allow them to ask the employer questions. This is an informal mode of interviewing used to open a conversation about the needs of the employer and client and how they might align. To help further identify and refine dual needs, the case study SES offered job trials, which enabled all partners to work on the right match between work tasks, individuals, and organisations. Job trails involve individuals working in the new mainstream employment setting (i.e., retail store or café) with an SES staff member present. The purpose of the trial is to test the job match and working environment. This also allows employers to test the work environment for suitability and make any necessary adjustments:

> *We'll do a little trial day, whether it's two hours, three hours, four hours, we'll bring our clients to you. We'll trial the work, which means our guys can feel it, touch it, see if it meets our scope of work, and then from there we can present quotes.* (Staff 9)

Trials open up conversation about how the SES can fulfil the unique needs of the employer and client, as well as its own needs. Developing these professional relationships can

lead to further employment opportunities as the SES's industry/training (i.e., Warehouse, Hospitality, Nursery) areas become known to the employer.

Alternatively, SES staff can approach clients and employers with strategies for engaging clients for tasks off-site. This is the next step in an employment pathway:

> *. . . if we're going into an employer, we don't want to be ambiguous . . . So, if I was going to go into a factory, I would've already thought about what tasks would happen in this factory . . . you just be very specific about some ideas of things that our participants could do to generate those conversations in the beginning.* (Staff 10)

Once the client commences with the open employer, the SES staff would keep in contact to provide ongoing advice and support and address issues as they arise in the workplace. This supported is funded under the individual NDIS plan.

4.3. Employee Preparation and Support

The SES provides specific in-house work opportunities that help develop client skills, which can then benefit open employers. SES staff had extensive experience 'customising' and 'carving off' employment positions in-house to capitalise on the strengths of individual clients through repeated tasks and standardised sectioned-off tasks. This helped clients hone splinter skills that could be applied in other employment settings. This kind of employment worked well for many case study clients, and the SES was able to implement it across different industries. For instance, their Landcare jobs were carved into watering or pruning trees or mowing, and because these jobs do not vary or change too often, clients were able to be trained over time and progress to other carved jobs at their own pace. This requires staff to understand and identify how a client works best so they can adapt the job and put strategies in place for mastering and using the equipment, tools, or work setting that the job requires. Employers that had worked with the SES reflect on the process as follows:

> *I think it's a step-by-step process of having someone understand where they want to go, how they might do it, and the confidence to be able to take those steps without being burnt along the way, I think is important.* (Stakeholder 1)

To create this understanding, SES staff note the importance of preparation in the actual workspace or in spaces that replicate the open work environment:

> *We could practise some of those things in a secure environment, only for the ones who need it. We'd still have all the ones going out to do placements straight away, but for some, that would be so beneficial and just give us so many more options, but they would have to be quite a large space.* (Staff 2)

Employers note that trialling work with clients takes time but allows for the best fit:

> *. . . you need the time and the resource to be able to go—"that didn't work there" or . . . "Ah, you've got this—you can spot these defects." One good example is just, one [Client] was poor-sighted, so it was hard to get him into manufacturing, but the feel when he touched a finished part, he could feel any defect straight away because it just spoke to him . . . and it just showed, there's the job for him.* (Stakeholder 3)

The transition to open employment can be stressful for clients; as such, preparation often focused on providing a combination of mental and physical support for wellbeing, real workplace conditions, and learning on the job. For example, one client summarises the key challenge of a lack of physical and wellbeing support when in mainstream employment leading to a negative overall experience:

> *Like I would mow half the lawn and the catch wasn't down. So no-one helped me. And then I was doing all that, and they go, "You didn't put the catch down, so you have to do it all over again." And then you have to pack it into this little tight shed thing. I mean, trailer. And yeah, they just weren't very good. It was horrible. I didn't like it. And when I had lows, they didn't look after me that well.* (Client 7)

Wellbeing support included keeping clients and family/support networks informed of any potential changes to their workplace conditions or payments based on their employment trajectory. Sharing payslips and ensuring clients and family understood any changes was a crucial step in preparation. As clients explain, wellbeing support can be offered face to face or via online applications:

> *Yes, they're good. If there's anything wrong, I'll just go to the supervisor and say, "Something's wrong". They know I'm just honest, I'll just come up and say something straight away.* (Client 4)

> *You can get an app on your phone, it's called Lifeworks and you can listen to songs. If you can't sleep properly, you can listen to these relaxing songs. I've listened to them a couple of times because it does—it was helping me sleep.* (Client 1)

Some clients were in a position where their current role in the SES did not suit their ability level, and they could benefit from open employment with tasks that better match their ability levels. However, it was noted that there is a very large gap in the workplace environment between a traditional supported and open employment environment. Staff reflect on clients feeling overwhelmed by this transition:

> *For a lot of the guys that do go into open employment, they are between open employment and us . . . And so was the girl I was talking about with the anxiety. She was at that level where she's probably at the top of our guys, but not quite at the level to go into open employment. Which must be super frustrating for them, because they're probably at a level where the job's now easy for them and they don't have much challenge with us, but it's such a big step between us and open employment that it is super overwhelming.* (Staff 4)

It is important that these feelings are recognised and that time is spent preparing people physically and mentally for the transition to ensure that they feel confident and ready for the change in workplace environment. The level of preparation for the transition is critical in ensuring that clients have all the possible skills required before they make the change to open employment. It is insufficient to think that clients can develop important skills once they commence open employment. They need to have these skills in place before they commence so that confidence is high, and they can make a successful start. Personal development courses can help:

> *She's just done a course called "I have confidence in me" with the ADE. It gives her a bit more confidence within herself, and maybe how to deal with some of her anxiety, and some of her triggers.* (Staff 4)

These courses, combined with training on the job in different areas at the SES, help clients to develop social skills, work skills, self-confidence, and, finally, working with reduced supports.

5. Discussion

This study shows that the preparation of both employers and clients is key in building sustainable and inclusive pathways to employment. This process includes working in tandem with the individual, their networks, and the employer to form a common understanding of the goals of all. In some cases, staff intuitively develop ways of carrying out this work as they interface with employers and the labour market. In other cases, staff deploy customised techniques such as *informational interviewing* to meet shared goals [24]. Staff are often under-resourced to complete this time-intensive work.

Our results also show that developing an employment opportunity involves matching the right person for the right role with an employer. When the right role does not exist, it is the negotiation skills of the staff member that generate the new tailored position. Staff who are trained in customising tasks and roles are more confident brokering roles and the steps involved. Our findings are reaffirmed by the Customised Employment literature and specialists in this field who identify relationship building and negotiation with employers as a central practice [25,26]. The work is challenging because there are different logics that

SESs need to understand and negotiate in order to make dual employment relationships work. Primarily, the balance between work and care logics is something that the SES must routinely communicate to external employers to put in place. In practice, the case study SES appears to operate as a bridge between clients, employers, supported employment logics, private business logics, and education or training providers [6]. This bridging work requires action and interaction between the SES, support services or networks, RTOs, the employer, and the individual to create bespoke opportunities tailored to individuals [26]. The highly individualised and matched nature of this approach is what creates the conditions for successful employment pathways.

Our findings contribute a detailed picture of the actors and relationships that are involved in brokering employment pathways and the different steps required at different points in time to generate a successful transition. Our study also highlights the significant time investment required from staff and clients in planning and negotiating an employment pathway. This time investment appears to be greater than the 50 hours recommended for the Discovery phase alone. We suggest that intentional brokerage (leading to effective negotiation with employers) is exactly what is required for micro institutional change in the disability and mainstream employment space. The question for SESs is whether they wish to play an ongoing brokerage role. At stake is the potential institutional change that SESs can instigate via a process of cultural and organisational negotiation occurring from the ground up to customise employment for people with a disability.

With adequate resourcing and funding, Customised Employment approaches show promise as an open employment practice. But, as Smith et al. [25] (p. 3) ask, what role can the NDIS play in enabling this approach?

> *'What role does the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) have in supporting the development of the evidence base to meet Australia's UNCRPD Article 27 obligations? . . . Customised Employment, in particular the Discovery element is recorded in NDIS documentation as a billable item. This provides a clear link to the potential for the NDIS to influence the use of Customised Employment'.* [26] (p. 3)

This research project was able to identify key elements that facilitate employment pathways and develop an organisational design model that organisations could adopt more broadly to build pathways into open employment. The limitation of this study was the single case study design, which means that further research is needed to test the replicability of the pathway to employment we have identified in this paper. The challenge is in finding and following pathways to employment to verify these results across a range of organisations.

Further research is also required with additional case study organisations to understand how customised pathways can be funded appropriately to ensure sustainable transitions to employment from SES settings. Techniques like 'Blending and Braiding' [41] funding to ensure adequate resources for employment pathways have proven successful but rely heavily on staff knowledge of the funding landscape and their ability to combine funding types. Research into funding for Customised Employment should include an understanding of the early stages of engagement, which require consultation and planning with the individual and their networks. This framework generates a bespoke approach with significant potential, but lays bare the limitations of capacity building in the disability sector.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates how pathways from SESs to open employment can be facilitated by customised and tailored roles, client–employer matching, and job negotiation. Key to this process is matching the right person for the right role with an employer. In the absence of suitable roles, staff members' negotiation skills in generating a new tailored position become all the more important. The approach we have outlined in this paper supports individual wellbeing and sustainable employment options for people with a disability. The challenge is in matching funding to customised approaches which are

time-intensive, involving one-on-one consultation and relationship building work. Further research could explore how the pathway can be guided and funded to increase employment choices and opportunities for individuals, SESs, and employers alike. More work is needed to identify the level of funding required for customised pathways, staff resourcing, and the preparation period that is involved specifically when individuals are transitioning from an SES setting to mainstream employment. Adequate support for customised pathways has the potential to generate community-facing employment options and broaden relationships in the community, which in turn strengthen the employment chances and choices of individuals.

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