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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

The Organisational Characteristics That Enable Successful Employment Transition for People With Intellectual Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Background: Social enterprises have the potential to address some of the current barriers that people with an intellectual disability experience in transitioning to open employment opportunities. However, it is unknown in detail how social enterprises are able to facilitate this transition, which limits ability to scale-up these organisational characteristics and strategies.
Method: Twenty-seven in-depth interviews were conducted with staff, supported employees and partner organisations of a social enterprise to understand the organisational characteristics that enables successful transitions.
Results: The organisational characteristics of the social enterprise that enabled transitions included offering a variety of roles and workplace environments for people with intellectual disabilities. Organisational characteristics also included having dedicated staff roles to support people with intellectual disabilities to develop skills to transition and for these support staff to network with open employers to facilitate the transition.
Conclusions: The results provide an adaptable model for other social enterprises in how to structure their organisation to facilitate transition to open employment opportunities.

1 | Introduction

Both in Australia and internationally, there are very low transition rates between supported and open employment opportunities for people with an intellectual disability. This is part of a broader problem of lower employment rates for people with an intellectual disability compared with those without disability (AIHW 2022; Cheng et al. 2018; Meltzer, Robinson, and Fisher 2020). In Australia, participation rates for people with an intellectual disability have been shaped by the historical exclusion and segregation from the mainstream labour market. From the 1950s to the 1980s, *sheltered workshops* were the common form of employment opportunity for people with an intellectual disability. From mid 1980s, this became termed as supported employment services but it was still a segregated model. From 2008, these supported employment services were given the name of Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs). As of 2021, ADEs was discontinued as a government funded program (Productivity Commission 2021), and many have attempted to repositions themselves as social enterprises. However, the Disability Royal Commission concluded that these former ADE workplaces, now self-identifying as social enterprises, are still a risk setting for exploitation, violence and abuse (Commonwealth of Australia 2023). Further, it was concluded that school leavers with an intellectual disability are still directed into ADEs as the first option and transition out of an ADE is very unlikely

(Commonwealth of Australia 2023). To what extent these former ADEs have changed their business model and are more community focused in operation is unclear. Given the term ADEs is no longer being used, we will use the term 'disability enterprise' to refer to a workplace setting that more resembles a sheltered workshop experience as opposed to a social enterprise that is community facing in operation.

People with an intellectual disability have expressed a preference for social enterprise and open employment/community focused opportunities (Meltzer, Kayess, and Bates 2018; Meltzer, Robinson, and Fisher 2020; Taubner, Magnus, and Carin 2023). The opportunity to work is vital for health and well-being and securing employment in the open labour market is associated with a 'range of positive outcomes' (Meltzer, Robinson, and Fisher 2020). Yet, transition between employment opportunities is extremely low with available data revealing only 1% of people aged over 25 years moving from ADEs to open employment (NDIA 2020), which is similar to international transition rates (Park 2022). Potentially, social enterprises could help to increase transition rates to open employment for people with an intellectual disability. Social enterprises are particularly popular amongst policy makers who see opportunities and benefits in a commercially viable offering of employment to people with intellectual disabilities in ways that are more community integrated and more economically productive (Lysaght et al. 2022). One of the key goals of many social enterprises involves offering 'transitional employment or traineeships' (Defourny and Nyssens 2006).

A current research and policy gap are social enterprise organisational standards/guidelines for enabling successful transition employment outcomes for people with an intellectual disability (Lysaght et al. 2022). Much of the research on explaining successful employment outcomes for people with an intellectual disability has focused on individual factors with a gap in understanding organisational factors (Cheng et al. 2018). The challenge in articulating organisational standards is the large variety of social enterprise purposes and activities, and the complex interaction of policy, organisational and individual factors that could explain success (Lysaght et al. 2022). It was suggested that learning from broader social enterprise research offers potential (Lysaght et al. 2022). While many social enterprises have community inclusion and community facing roles located within the business operation, we were most interested in social enterprises that offer a transition model where the goal is to transition people into open employment opportunities (Elmes 2019). Given the very low rate of movement in the labour market for people with an intellectual disability, our focus was on how a social enterprise could potentially improve transition opportunities into open employment. While there are some people with intellectual disabilities that prefer social enterprise rather than open employment opportunities (Meltzer, Kayess, and Bates 2018), there is still the need to consider how transition to open employment can be made easier so that people an intellectual disability have greater choice in employment options (Commonwealth of Australia 2023).

Previous research has uncovered the organisational factors that enable Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE) to support the health and wellbeing of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds previously excluded from the job market and support their transition into open employment opportunities (Joyce, Elmes, et al. 2022; Joyce, Moussa, et al. 2022). These organisational elements include operational structure and roles that enable varied employment and training opportunities, variable use of space that can accommodate people's variable needs for social connection or solitude and an organisational culture that prioritised caring for people's well-being. It also involved orienting the social enterprise to suit the local industry together with a high emphasis on networking with other local businesses to actively create transition opportunities (Joyce, Moussa, et al. 2022). This research focused on organisations employing young people with mental health issues and other forms of vulnerability but it did not include people with an intellectual disability.

The purpose of this study was to ascertain what organisational features could characterise a social enterprise that sought to transition people with an intellectual disability into open employment. If these organisational features could be described, then this could assist other social enterprises and disability enterprises to adopt some of these characteristics for the purpose of trying to improve transition rates between supported and open employment, and lift the open employment rate of people with an intellectual disability, which is currently very low both in Australia and internationally (Cheng et al. 2018; Taubner, Magnus, and Carin 2023). Through a case study approach, we worked closely with a social enterprise with a track record of transitioning people to open employment to understand the organisational features that enabled these transitions to occur.

2 | Method

The data analysed for this paper comes from a 12 month research project funded by the Department of Social Services through its Information Linkages and Capacity Building Scheme. This research project had an aim of understanding the specific features of social enterprise workplace design and structure that enabled transition to open employment for people with an intellectual disability. Given the depth of analysis required of the culture, structure and operation of an organisation it was determined that a case study approach would be the most suitable method (Stake 2008; Yin 2013). A case study approach also enabled rich description of the strategies being employed, which is a gap in the current research on successful employment for people with an intellectual disability (Cheng et al. 2018).

The social enterprise selected was located in Geelong, Victoria and operates across multiple sites with over 200 supported employees. As part of their business, they have an Employee Assistance Group (EAG) that builds the capacity of employees to work across a range of job roles and assists in the transition to open employment opportunities. The organisation provides a variety of workplace models including more traditional supported employment typical of disability enterprises and more community facing social enterprises that trade goods and services in the open market. This is typical of many social enterprises in this sector where they are run by an organisation that provide a variety of services and employment models for people with intellectual disabilities (Meltzer, Kayess, and Bates 2018). Most support staff work across both the social enterprise and the

more traditional disability enterprise set up. These interviews focused on the operation of the social enterprise and how that potentially facilitates transition to open employment.

Twenty-seven semi-structured interviews were undertaken with participants to understand how the organisation provides supported employment opportunities at the social enterprise, and pathways to open employment in the labour market (10 supported employees, 12 staff and managers; and 5 people from partner organisations). Supported employees that were considered suitable for this project given their employment experience were told about the research project and interview opportunity via team meetings and were told to contact their manager if they were interested in participating. The research team was not told their official diagnosis but most of the clients of the social enterprise do have intellectual disability and neuro diverse characteristics. The group were chosen because of their experiences in attempting open employment and also having a history of working in disability enterprises and social enterprises. They were selected so that they could reflect on the challenges of open employment and their experiences in both open employment and disability enterprises.

The process that was followed for interviews began during the recruitment phase. Staff made an announcement to potential supported employees about the research project and invited people to participate in an interview. Staff then identified people who they thought would like to participate in an interview. A plain language and consent form were provided in easy read format and the support worker sat down to discuss the project and interview process with the supported employee. The interview questions were shared ahead of time with the supported employees and participants were invited to provide responses in a range of formats. During interviews, supported employees were invited to have their support worker present. Interviews took place either face-to-face or online and all participants could communicate verbally.

The questions for people with a disability included activities involved in work and experience of work, what skills they developed, what support was involved, where they would like to work, what support they would like, if they noticed any challenges or barriers to working within or outside the social enterprise and any previous positive or negative experiences working in open employment. The interview questions for staff and other stakeholders were similar but they also included broader reflections on the transition process to open employment. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

The research team also hosted four 90 min Action Learning workshops with staff and managers. Action Learning involved a process of observation, reflection and planning/action that can be used by a range of actors to support an emerging organisational change process and model (Fricke 2011; Ollerton 2012; Rosenbaum, More, and Steane 2012). Thus, the workshops had a twin purpose of enabling data to be gathered for the research purpose of understanding organisational structures that can facilitate employment transition and also an opportunity for the organisation to reflect on current strengths and areas to improve on with respect to this topic. The workshops were recorded and minutes taken. They were held at regular intervals during the research process. Similar to the interview questions, the first two workshops initially explored the organisational design elements of the social enterprise that enabled transition and what they thought as an organisation were current strengths and areas that they could improve on. The latter two workshops provided the organisation and its stakeholders with insight into early findings and provided the research team with feedback about how to refine the model as part of a validity check. This step ensured that the findings reflected the perceptions of participants and meant that multiple data sources were used for the analysis (Levitt et al. 2018; Nutbeam and Bauman 2006).

Interview and meeting data were coded in NVivo 11 using both a deductive and inductive approach (Patton 2002). The initial coding framework was structured by the social enterprise organisational structures that had been found to support health and wellbeing and facilitate transition for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Joyce, Moussa, et al. 2022). The first stage involved identifying which elements of this model fitted the existing data through the coding process. Where data did not fit the existing elements from this previous research a process of thematic analysis took place (Corbin and Strauss 1990), new themes and subcategories were created and then cross-checked with the Action Learning Group workshops. This analysis approach helped identify new structural and organisational elements helping to contribute to the transition to open employment for people with intellectual disabilities (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). The final model was again checked with the Action Learning Group as an important check to strengthen the credibility and integrity of the findings (Levitt et al. 2018). Each participant provided informed consent and the study was approved by the Human Research Ethics committee of Swinburne University of Technology.

3 | Results

The following sections present the main organisational characteristics that enable transition from supported to open employment. Many disability enterprises have a history of operating as workplaces where no transition to other workplaces occurs. As such, the structure and operation of the organisation is not focused on enabling transition. As mentioned in Section 1, some disability enterprises have taken on the form of a social enterprise with a focus on enabling transition to open employment for some of their supported employees. The research focus was the organisational structure and operation of an organisation that does support transition for people with an intellectual disability.

The previous research on organisational structures of social enterprises that support health and wellbeing and enable employment transitions for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, had six major elements (Joyce, Moussa, et al. 2022). These were structure and space; funding, finance and industry orientation; organisational culture; policy and process; fostering local service networks. From the analysis of this data, the model was adapted to three major themes/elements and 12 sub-themes, which are presented in Table 1.

For each section, the core element and sub-themes are described and then examples provided of how this element is operationalised within the case study organisation. While some of the examples provided could also be found in social enterprises and

TABLE 1 | Major themes and sub-themes of the analysis.

Major theme	Sub-theme
Structure and operations	Diverse work opportunities and roles
	Task matching
	Providing tailored support
	Customised training and development
	Modifying work practices, layout and accessible equipment
	Flexible workspaces: busy versus calm environments
Culture	Healthy work-life balance
	Holistic approach to well-being
	Creating respectful and trusting relationships with supported employees
Partnerships and pathways	Creating trusting relationships and building capacity of open employers
	Hybrid employment opportunities
	Partnerships with service providers, industry partners and funders

disability enterprises that do not seek to transition people to open employment, the important consideration is the totality and integration of these elements, which enables transition.

4 | Structure and Operation

The structure and operation of the organisation were agile and flexible and able to adapt to the changing needs of individuals.

4.1 | Diverse Work Opportunities and Roles

The first sub-theme relates to having a variety of experiences and skills developed. Variety and choice enable supported employees to try different roles to understand their own interests and skills. Skills and tasks need to be slowly introduced over time so that people are prepared for the change. This change could involve different job roles, working with different people and working with different types of equipment across the diverse enterprises. The need for variety was recognised and valued by supported employees:

> The variety is probably right up there. But also being front of house, that's my main role. And the reason why I like front of house is because you're dealing with the customers, and you feel like you're actually helping customers, like you're doing a service. And the customers are great. They're polite, they'll have a joke with you – yeah, they're just really good, and very respectful.
>
> (Supported Employee 2)

The variety is important in being able to find particular skills and tasks that people can perform well so that they have confidence they can perform that task in an open employment setting. To offer such a large diversity in roles requires a business that has diverse funding and industry exposure. Staff and managers discussed the need for securing a combination of long-term grant funding, multi-year contracts and/or repeat customers and/or being an identified part of a supply chain within an industry. The challenge was balancing social and business goals, part of which was determined by the industry fit. Having this diverse business and funding balance makes possible a diverse array of roles and tasks for supported employees.

4.2 | Task Matching

The process of task matching involves staff working closely with supported employees to understand their interests and skills and to find tasks and industries that align with their strengths. For some supported employees, this may involve a task with a very specific focus. Some supported employees find social environments challenging and they prefer to work in environments where there is less social interaction such as a laundry or nursery (greenhouse). Related to the first theme, having a large organisation with different types of opportunities was very important in being able to task match. It means that supported employees can work in areas that match their interests and abilities, while also developing skills that are necessary to succeed in their preferred vocation. As an example, one supported employee had a particular interest in hairdressing but also required some specific training to develop the communication requirements of this role:

> She could do the hairdressing and makeup, but she had a lot of barriers around her interactions, communication skills and managing that side of things due to her autism. So she practised in some of our groups to begin with and learnt some skills.
>
> (Staff 10)

While providing customised tasks was seen as pivotal, it was also mentioned that a strong sense of purpose of the role itself was important. That is, the task itself was not merely used as a training exercise or to occupy time, there needed to be some work related purpose intrinsic to business operations.

4.3 | Providing Tailored Support

'Tailored support' refers to the bespoke matching of personal supports to the unique needs of each individual. Rather than providing a generic support approach, the bespoke approach means that the support provided to each supported employee is tailored to their specific circumstances and needs. Understanding each individual means that staff are better equipped to address challenges that may be encountered during the workday. There are a number of different examples of the tailored support, which can include individual communication tools for people with autism, providing information about individualised funding available or changing work settings so that individuals can work alongside a friend.

And absolutely having those special tools, and not everyone's good at the soft skills. We might have a memory impairment, or we might have somebody that - maybe a technical disconnect or something like that, they're not great at using their phone or iPad or what have you, so to set up a visual tool to help them through that process to make sure that they're empowered, they can actually turn up to the interview on time, and I think that's really important to do that.

(Staff 6)

Another form of tailored supports is offering emotional support if an employee becomes upset, often supported employees benefit from assistance with managing their feelings and emotions during the workday. It was noted that all staff, including managers and trainers, have an important role in providing emotional support as required. Staff commented on the importance of 'checking-in' with supported employees to ascertain if they were feeling comfortable about conditions inside and outside work. This level of support was seen as valuable, as one supported employee explains:

... I talk to the supervisor. I've had incidents and I just tell [Name] and she just said, "Don't worry about him." And she worked it out and I was working with someone else, because I said that I'm not very happy. And she said, "No, you don't have to. [I'll] put you somewhere else ... You need to work as a team and people have got to feel safe."

(Supported Employee 7)

All these support strategies have the purpose of increasing the confidence of the supported employee that they are in a safe and caring environment and that their needs will be accommodated in the workplace. This will also be covered in the section on culture. This is important for transition in two ways. First, it increases their confidence broadly within a workplace setting. Second, it enables support staff to understand the particular types of supports that an individual supported employee requires in the workplace. These needs are then communicated to the open employer, which is covered in the last theme of 'partnerships and pathways'.

4.4 | Customised Training and Development

Providing customised training and development involves certified training opportunities, hands-on learning for specific work tasks and development of soft skills such as interacting with peers. Management and staff work together on tasks with supported employees to provide job coaching. Staff describe using a 'skills matrix', which highlights which skills employees currently have and which ones need to be developed further. This helps direct which work tasks and training opportunities need to be provided. This tailored and collegial approach to job training was seen as another important element of the workplace for staff and employees:

... He's a great supervisor; he's basically taught me everything about the job, what areas are what and how to do it properly, which I guess would vary from supervisor to supervisor probably. He's taught me in a way that I understand, and I appreciate, and I agree with as well.

(Supported Employee 8)

Thus, the social enterprise is viewing itself both as a highly accessible workplace but also as a training venue and supporting supported employees to develop skills that they can use in an open employment context.

4.5 | Modifying Work Practices, Layout and Accessible Equipment

Modifying work practices, layouts and having accessible equipment is another key element of the operation of the organisation. The organisation has several areas and rooms where the layout can be modified to suit different jobs and different teams of employees. This can involve moving furniture and machinery. Some of the 'reasonable adjustments' that supported employees require can be very simple such as the example of laminated instruction cards attached to machinery and equipment. An example of a simple modification was using coloured stickers on a cash register to help a supported employee:

She's put sheets out for me to know the basic stuff to read which is a café sandwich, or a basic sandwich or a wrap that comes to the till. With the coffees, there's buttons to press, she's put a sticker on the buttons for small and large ... And it does make it more enjoyable, and more of a happier workplace. But it also makes it an efficient workplace as well.

(Supported Employee 2)

4.6 | Flexible Workspaces: Busy Versus Calm Environments

Closely related to the modifying the layout is providing flexible workspaces. This refers to providing a range of spaces that can accommodate both social activity and times for solitude. Again, the advantage of having a diverse organisation is that some areas can be socially active and busy (i.e., the café) and others (i.e., the laundry) provide a calmer pace. It was considered important that supported employees have the choice of experiencing a calm or busier workplace environment and that these needs can change over time or even each day.

Quiet rooms designed for rest and breaks were made available to supported employees. The purpose of these available/free rooms was to enable areas where people can rest, have some privacy, and also a place for personal conversations. The rooms were an important empowerment strategy where people felt able to choose how they spent their time:

> When we have break, any free room, any free function room, we just go in. Sometimes I go to the reception if there's some people in those ones. I'll just go, well, what rooms are free, and there'll be a room, and it's great because they're dead quiet and you just sit in there.
>
> (Supported Employee 3)

> When I'm on lunch break, I just put my headphones on, watch my laptop and just veg out. You probably need to just have that time where you're just doing that.
>
> (Supported Employee 5)

Similar to each of the themes to date, the purpose again is two-fold. One, to create an accommodating and highly agile workplace environment that is inclusive and provides confidence to the supported employee in the workplace. Second, to understand in-depth the particular workplace environment in which the supported employee was able to thrive including the types of modifications required and then communicate this information to the potential open employer.

5 | Culture

This section articulates how the organisation provides an inclusive approach to well-being and promotes a culture of respect in valuing employees and having them work with a range of people.

5.1 | Healthy Work-Life Balance

Balancing work and social commitments was one of the key themes to emerge through the data. There are a range of activities that supported employees participate in outside of work which help to build social connections, increase their confidence and contribute to their quality of life. The task for the staff of the organisation was to ensure that work duties are balanced against these external programs so that supported employees have a sense of balance in their lives:

> So I don't know how they do it sometimes, really. They'll do a day's work here, then they'll go out ... They'll go bowling with a group of a night time and they'll do leisure networks. They're just so busy, they have majorly better social lives than any of us!
>
> (Staff 3)

Staff needed to work in conjunction with the supported employee and other key stakeholders (family or service providers for instance) to determine work tasks and hours. Supported employees were provided autonomy in choosing their work allocation:

> I chose how many days I would like to do... if you've got back problems or something that you're finding it hard to do a full day, some people can do a half day.
>
> (Supported Employee 9)

Similar to previous themes, a flexible approach to work hours and tasks meant the person felt secure and comfortable in the workplace and this information was conveyed to potential open employers and those responsible for organising funding plans.

5.2 | Holistic Approach to Well-Being

Staff mentioned the need to be cognisant of the health and social issues that may be present in people's lives. This included being conscious of several issues that could impact on work attendance and performance such as physical health issues, challenging living environments, safety and security and mental health:

> It's about problem shooting and seeing what's involved in their life, not just their workspace.
>
> (Staff 11)

Staffs are able to recommend additional external support services that they think may be helpful:

> ... if someone comes in late every day, there could be other issues. We try and look at everything. It could be an issue where they've run out of NDIS [National Disability Insurance Scheme] funding, and they're walking to work ... Everything can lead into something else.
>
> (Staff 3)

This holistic approach to well-being can be illustrated in small examples that show how the organisation was able to provide a caring health environment:

> When I have a migraine, they just put me in the office and give me a banana if I have a low [blood sugar] ... and just say, "Get up when you feel like getting up. Just take your time." And they're really good.
>
> (Supported Employee 7)

Managing the change required to develop new skills and confidence with new tasks also needs to be balanced with security and support in unfamiliar environments. Supported Employees describe being made aware ahead of time of any potential changes like increasing work hours:

> They do start you on two days when you work at [organisation] and then, if you're capable of working more, they'll say, "You can work more", and stuff like that, which is good. They're very flexible.
>
> (Supported Employee 1)

All this work is underpinned by clear processes and policies that provide guidance on supported employee well-being. These 'check-ins' on well-being and mental health support continued when the person started at the new open employer. Support staff from the social enterprise would continue the relationship and

make sure that the person was feeling comfortable and secure in the new workplace and that their overall well-being was still positive.

5.3 | Creating Respectful and Trusting Relationships With Supported Employees

Creating respectful and trusting relationships with supported employees is another core element from the data. Supported employees can be anxious in trying new tasks and work roles so it is important that staff have created a trusting relationship to build confidence that employees will be looked after as they attempt something new. This supportive culture was highly valued by supported employees and it was reflected that unfortunately this is not the same for all workplaces:

> Well, they've got that good culture where they understand that everyone has different needs and other workplaces, they need to learn that. They've got to get on board with that I reckon.
>
> (Supported Employee 9)

> They're excellent here ... You're not looked at or judged like you have a disability here.
>
> (Supported Employee 2)

This feeling of being valued as employees for their contribution to the work and being respected as equals within the workplace was highly valued. Supported employees felt their accomplishments were acknowledged and that they were able to have a voice in how their workplace should operate. This helped to create a sense of empowerment and mutual respect.

> Staff and crew are working side by side ... yes, we support them and everything, but we're becoming more like an Open Employment style business because we're getting more Staff and they're working side by side, rather than, "Let me train you and here's a job and I'll just supervise and watch."
>
> (Staff 5)

This provided a sense of confidence that they were able to manage tasks in an open environment work setting.

6 | Partnerships and Pathways

This section articulates how support staff from the social enterprise work diligently with potential partners to convey information on the unique work context that suits each supported employee. Having established a working context that enables people to succeed within the social enterprise, support staff try to build the capacity of open employers to create a work setting as similar as possible. The other interesting theme to emerge from the data were the cases of hybrid employment opportunities where people move to and from open employment and the social enterprise. Often the transition is seen as one directional but there were examples provided of people moving back and forth between the social enterprise and open employment. Thus, maintaining relationships with both employers (social enterprise and open employer) simultaneously to enable ease of transition.

The social enterprise has formed relationships with open employers whereby a person can move in an interconnected manner between the social enterprise to open employment and then back again to the social enterprise, if desired. This requires strong relationships between the organisations and a capacity building role for the social enterprise that may continue when the previously supported employee is working in open employment. It also requires strong coordination and flexibility of funding. The policy environment supports aspects of this employment experience and pathways but has some limitations as well.

6.1 | Creating Trusting Relationships and Building Capacity of Open Employers

As well as creating trusting relationships with supported employees being critical, it is also very important to establish a trusting relationship with open employers. Staff from the social enterprise commented that establishing these relationships was one of the key factors in whether the supported employee could transition successfully to an open employer. In conversations with employers, a number of topics are discussed including the supported employees' needs and strengths, any issues that may arise around social stigma, and how to create an appropriate workplace environment when employees first commence (and longer term as well). All this information about the context in which supported employees thrive were gathered through the flexible and inclusive approach detailed in the previous themes. The relationships with open employers took some time to develop and required the staff member to be sensitive to the needs of the open employer, hence, it was a process of trying to align what the employer needed with the needs of the supported employee. Once these relationships are established, it does provide the opportunity to dispel some of the misconceptions about the skills and abilities of people with a disability. One staff member was able to recall a conversation where they were able to increase the possibilities for open employment by describing the skill set of the supported employees:

> They [open employer] said "So what? Someone with disability can jump on a ride-on mower?"... I said, "Well, they can actually - they can chop trees, they can use brush cutters, they can use petrol hedgers," and they're going, "Well, can they just start coming to mow our lawn ... ?" Absolutely.
>
> (Staff 9)

Once the relationships have been established, the staff of the social enterprise can help to build the capacity of the open employer to provide the appropriate working environment. Staff provide open employers ongoing advice and coaching as a mechanism to maintain communication in the medium term:

> … it's about [organisation] building those relationships with the employers so that if there's a hiccup, they can come to us.
>
> (Staff 11)

What is interesting about this, capacity building endeavour is the bespoke approach taken with each supported employee and open employer in a match making type initiative.

6.2 | Hybrid Employment Opportunities

Establishing those strong relationships with the open employer also facilitates transition both ways. There were a few supported employees that expressed some interested in attempting work in open employment but they were hesitant to leave the social enterprise.

> They get comfortable here, they're really good, they love their job, then they go to open employment and there is no support there … There are different expectations of them.
>
> (Staff 4)

> … people don't want to leave [organisation] because it's a safe, supported environment and I get that.
>
> (Staff 12)

What we are terming 'hybrid employment' in this context means being able to work at both a social enterprise and in open employment simultaneously. This could either refer to doing two part-time roles at the same time or continually moving to and from open employment and social enterprise employment. This enables an individual to develop work skills, confidence, networks and relationships within the open workplace environment at a pace that suits their needs and abilities. It also provides the confidence that they can move between the two organisations depending on their needs:

> She would work two days a week and her job was just to put paper onto the conveyor belt. That was it. I would go over there to say, "Hi," and she wouldn't make eye contact at all. Very shy and very timid. I could tell that she was more capable than what the job they had her doing. So, I started rotating. She started doing some jobs there, got to know people more … Now she's gone to open employment for three months and she came back and she's got some other skills now. Now she's gone into open employment again for another few months.
>
> (Staff 6)

Having established the pathway from the social enterprise to the open employer, the pathway also worked in the reverse direction. From a historical perspective in disability employment policy in Australia, this is a novel approach to supported employment whereby individual pathways between a social enterprise

and an open employer are created that can be 'traversed' in both directions.

6.3 | Partnerships With Service Providers, Industry Partners and Funders

There are a number of policy barriers and challenges that prevent transition from supported to open employment work settings. In the Australian policy context, a NDIS Support Coordinator or Local Area Coordinator (LAC) may advise individuals looking for employment. Whether or not a person is able to access NDIS funding to maintain employment with a social enterprise or open employer depends on the recommendations of a Support Coordinator. There is potential for the funding to be flexible and used for open employment purposes, however, the feedback from supported employees and staff is that the assessment process for NDIS funding is often inadequate. The assessment and hence funding does not often consider the level of supports that are required for someone to successfully work in an open environment workplace and is often not flexible enough to accommodate those working across both a social enterprise and open employer. What this means is that staff from the social enterprise need to form very good working relationships with the Support Coordinators and other service providers to ensure that people's employment needs are being met. Staff from the social enterprise often have an advocacy role with respect to ensuring the supported employees receive the level of funding support required to meet their employment goals. This is an important factor in the transition process.

Working in an open employment context also has implications for other government support payments. There could be a financial cost to working with an open employer as the increase in salary is offset by the loss of other income support payments and increases the risk of financial insecurity. There needs to be very careful management so that individuals are not placed at risk of financial distress and a breakdown of the new employment arrangement. Staff are acutely aware of these issues and work as closely as possible with service providers and open employers to manage these risks:

> There would be so many more people who feel comfortable going to Open Employment if there was something in place for that, because it is … a security thing. Some people are frightened. … I'm just thinking of the Staff we have here and I can think of a few people that if they wanted to go into Open Employment, I'd be so happy for them. But I'd be so worried.
>
> (Staff 6)

Support staff work closely with other service providers to manage these risks. While it is not meant to be their responsibility, support staff from the social enterprise are ensuring these other services and supports are in place as the person transitions from the social enterprise to the open employment setting.

7 | Discussion

The results are consistent with previous research on factors related to successful employment outcomes for people with an intellectual disability such as co-worker support, job coaching and personalised approach to planning (Cheng et al. 2018). The additional findings of this study relate to the broader organisational characteristics of a social enterprise that potentially can enable people with an intellectual disability to transition to open employment. These features include having dedicated staff support roles; offering a variety of roles and workplace environments (e.g., quiet vs. more social spaces); a culture of learning from mistakes; networking with open employers to facilitate the transition. These are all features consistent with previous research on the operation of a WISE that enables successful outcomes for employees from disadvantaged backgrounds (Butterworth et al. 2011; Chandler 2016; Hazenberg, Seddon, and Denny 2014; Roy, Baker, and Kerr 2017). What was more pronounced in this study was the degree of personalisation in creating those pathways from the social enterprise to the open employer and the amount of coaching required of the new open employer in relation to the individual's workplace needs.

This study also illustrates the very important factor of a workplace that encourages skill development and tolerates mistakes, which made supported employees feel secure in trying new tasks. This is a critical component in providing a psychologically safe work environment (Edmondson 1999; Weinzimmer and Esken 2017; Zeng, Zhao, and Zhao 2020) and relates to perceived organisational support (POS) where employees have a sense that the people in the organisation care about their well-being (Kurtessis et al. 2017; Neves and Eisenberger 2014). Supported employees were not confident that they would receive this level of care and support in an open employment environment. Hence, support staff from the social enterprise spent considerable time outside of their allocated roles meeting with potential employers and building their understanding of the particular workplace environment that is required for the person they are hoping to transition.

This is similar to past research that highlights how social enterprises can be deliberately designed to be inclusive and provide a caring environment that is difficult to replicate in an open environment workplace (Joyce, Moussa, et al. 2022). Similar to other studies of social enterprises where the attempt was to transition to open employment, the managers and support staff of the social enterprise felt apprehension that the experience in the social enterprise would not be replicated in an open employment workplace. What this meant is the transition to a very different workplace culture would be difficult for the employee and this study echoes those findings. At the moment, staff are individually meeting with potential employers and providing bespoke capacity building efforts to match an individuals' employment needs together with the needs of an individual employer. This intensity of effort where staff from the social enterprise are matching an individual employer and individual employee is not a sustainable transition model without appropriate resourcing. It highlights the further work required to ensure that all workplaces provide an inclusive workplace environment for people with an intellectual disability.

This research extends the previous descriptions of a WISE by adding the notion of hybrid working arrangements. Previous research has conceptualised transitional WISE as a one-way path from the social enterprise to open employment opportunities (Joyce, Elmes, et al. 2022). The findings of this research suggest the transition to open employment is not one directional and that movement to and from a social enterprise and open employer needs to be supported by policy and funding arrangements. The data from this study highlight how social enterprise staff and open employers were working closely to enable supported employees to transition to and from open employment in such a way that their confidence and skills were developed at a pace that they could successfully manage. It has also been suggested that a combination of working in open employment for some hours together with supported employment hours would suit some people. For some, an ongoing combination of open and supported employment settings may best support employee well-being and policy and funding need to be able to support this arrangement. Evidence from the United States shows that the 'blending and braiding' of funding and employment supports, across systems, is a key element in increasing the employment ratio of people with disability (Murphy et al. 2014). Likewise, a wide body of research over several decades and countries has identified 'inter-agency collaboration' as a key element of successful employment support, particularly for young people with disability moving from school to work (Kohler, Gothberg, and Coyle 2017).

Further research could explore funding policies and mechanisms that can support hybrid/flexible employment options and the different ways in which people can transition to open employment opportunities. Ideally, policy and funding flexibility could result in having simultaneous roles across two organisations and/or being able to transition easily to and from an open employer and social enterprise. This could enable people with an intellectual disability to benefit from open employment and social enterprise benefits and avoid any trade-offs between more supported versus more community integrated employment (Meltzer, Kayess, and Bates 2018). At the moment, there are a number of policy disincentives to move to open employment as they can put at risk individuals' current funding plans and support. Furthermore, there was a lack of funding to provide the open employer the level of support required to enable a meaningful employment opportunity. Staff from the social enterprise were currently addressing the support needs while the person was transitioning to an open employment, and sometimes providing levels of ongoing support to the employer as well, but this was not sustainable for the organisation as it was often done with no underpinning funding. There is more work required to ensure that the NDIS is able to support the types of employment journeys witnessed in this study and a need to fund the utilisation of the social enterprise staff skill set to support open employment outcomes.

The strength of this study was the use of a case study approach to examine in detail the organisational structures and processes that enable a social enterprise to transition some supported employees to open employment experiences. The limitation is the single case study design and whether these organisational features would be found in other social enterprises where they have managed to transition people to open employment. The

challenge at the moment is being able to find these examples given the very low rate of movement between supported and open employment. Further research is required to examine other case study examples and also whether disability enterprises and social enterprises that currently lack transition pathways are able to make the organisational change required to enable these transitions to occur. Further research could also ascertain which of these factors could be considered core elements and which could vary between organisations while still obtaining successful outcomes (Joyce, Elmes, et al. 2022). This relates to the challenge of evaluation standards for a social enterprise (Lysaght et al. 2022) and what exactly should be replicated (Joyce, Elmes, et al. 2022). The study was also limited to the organisational design elements and staff roles that enabled transition to open employment. The particular funding and policy structure that enabled this case study to operate could not be covered in-depth in this paper and also would require further research.

8 | Conclusion

This study has highlighted the organisational features and practices necessary to support people with an intellectual disability to acquire skills in a social enterprise and transition to open employment. These features also foster employee well-being. The challenge will be to distil these factors into a guide or set of standards that can help direct other disability enterprises and social enterprises in providing the necessary structures and processes to enable successful employment transitions for people with an intellectual disability should that be a goal of the organisation. Further research can explore the development of such a guide or change process and whether it is effective in building this organisational capacity. The current approach to transition is resource intensive from a staff capacity perspective and further research is required on how to scale such a model. While more work is required to verify this set of organisational features in relation to other social enterprise and transition success, there is also the opportunity to use these features to assist employers in the wider labour market to reconfigure their own organisations to foster both inclusion of people with an intellectual disability and well-being of employees.

Author Contributions

Andrew Joyce: conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, writing – original draft preparation. **Perri Campbell:** conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, writing – reviewing and editing. **Jenny Crosbie:** conceptualization, writing – reviewing and editing. **Erin Wilson:** conceptualization, writing – reviewing and editing.

Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the Swinburne University of Technology Human Ethics Committee.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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