



Growing intellectual disability employment in NSW government

Final report

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Acknowledgement of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, who are the Traditional Owners of the land on which the Centre for Social Impact Swinburne is located on in Melbourne's east, and pay our respect to their Elders past and present. We are honoured to recognise our connection to Wurundjeri Country, history, culture, and spirituality through these locations, and strive to ensure that we operate in a manner that respects and honours the Elders and Ancestors of these lands. We also respectfully acknowledge Swinburne's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students, alumni, partners and visitors.

We also acknowledge and respect the Traditional Owners of lands across Australia, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures, and heritage, and recognise the continuing sovereignties of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

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Disclaimer

The opinions in this report reflect the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NSW Department of Communities and Justice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is increasing focus on the role governments can play in lifting employment rates for people with disability. In particular, people with intellectual disability are underrepresented in all levels of government, including the New South Wales state government, and without explicit strategies to employ them, employment rates will not improve.

This report details the barriers people with intellectual disability face in accessing employment opportunities within the public sector. In addition to stigma and discrimination experienced by many people with disability in the workforce, people with intellectual disability face additional barriers to employment due to education gaps, a lack of appropriate support services, and inflexible recruitment practices. A culture of low expectations around what people with intellectual disability can achieve often sees them miss out on meaningful career guidance and work experience while at school, resulting in an absence of employment opportunities, or in pathways to low-paying jobs that don't lead to better options. The report details the lack of experience of people with disability amongst public sector employees, and a lack of awareness of existing good practice in the employment of people with intellectual disability.

Despite the barriers identified, there is interest in employing people with intellectual disability and an awareness of the benefits it would bring. Furthermore, the NSW Government is considered uniquely positioned to promote the economic inclusion of people with intellectual disability by 'setting the tone' as inclusive employers, leading by example and encouraging other organisations to follow suit.

The way forward

This report demonstrates that structured, high-quality work experience, work integrated learning and supported employment approaches are the most effective pathways to employment for people with intellectual disability. These well-established strategies are strongly supported by existing literature and affirmed by leading disability employment support providers interviewed for this project.

These models have common requirements underpinning their use:

- Intentionality – that is, the workplace/employer is explicit in an intention to employ the target cohort in that worksite/workplace
- High expectations – a belief that people with intellectual disability can be employed with the right supports (including work environment)
- In situ training – where it is recognised that people with intellectual disability learn best in situ and this strategy is planned and supported

- Planned support in the workplace, possibly through new roles such as ‘work coach’ or ‘trainer’ either as embedded public service roles or externally contracted, or through intentionally skilling co-workers to provide levels of support.

The report identifies two approaches that the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) could adopt to explicitly create employment pathways for people with intellectual disabilities, including an internship program and the development of dedicated roles based on lived experience expertise.

Both approaches require intentional work and the development of strong relationships to co-design the programs for this cohort. In addition, they must be based on identifying business needs inside each department so that new roles bring value to the department, its personnel and clients.

INTRODUCTION

People with disability and employment

People with disability have skills, ideas and knowledge to contribute to work environments and the broader economy. Yet, due to systemic barriers, the rate of employment among people with disability in Australia over the past two decades has been 30 per cent lower than people without disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). People with disability are less likely to participate in the labour force than people without disability, while employment opportunities vary depending on the level of support that people with disability require in the workplace. In 2022, for people aged 15–64, 60.5 per cent of people with disability were in the labour force (working or looking for work), compared with 84.9 per cent of those without disability. Among people with severe or profound disability, 37.2 per cent were in the labour force (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

It is difficult to estimate the population of people with intellectual disability in NSW (due to varying definitions used in data capture). In 2014, the Mental Health Commission of New South Wales (2014) estimated a population of 150,000 people with intellectual disability in NSW, whereas analysis of various datasets by Local Government Area in 2014/15 found a total population of people with intellectual disability in NSW to be 80,960 (Carnemolla et al., 2020). The National Disability Insurance Agency identifies 29,101 participants with intellectual disability in NSW (as at Q4 2024). Using the national data, it can be estimated that 78 per cent of NDIS participants with intellectual disability are of working age (15–64). People with intellectual disability have lower employment rates than many other cohorts of disability and those without disability. In Q4 of 2024, National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants with intellectual disability of working age (15–64) had an employment rate of only 26 per cent (National Disability Insurance Scheme, 2024).

The international and Australian literature identify a range of barriers to employment for people with disability broadly. These are often discussed as ‘biopsychosocial’ barriers and are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Barriers to work participation for people with disability (adapted from Wilson et al., 2021, p. 126)

Factor	Examples of barriers
Personal	Age, gender, biopsychosocial health factors (including diagnosis, psychological dispositions such as motivation, recovery expectations, coping ability, beliefs about own ability to work, adjustment to injury, confidence), family and carer responsibilities, literacy and numeracy levels, socio-economic status, financial difficulties/debt, cultural factors, homelessness/housing; experiences of violence and abuse, lack of family or informal help or assistance
Service	Timely access to quality health and employment services, access to services and supports, timely and quality communication about services and entitlements, continuity of supports, design and culture of services/systems, administrative requirements, the work capacity certificate, engagement and coordination between stakeholders
Social	Personal/family support, social networks
Vocational	Appropriate skills and qualifications, level of education and training, access to training, level of prior work experience/history, job search skills, pre-injury employment status, length of unemployment
Job-related	Type of occupation, availability of work customisation including modifications to tasks/duties, hours, duties and conditions, flexible working arrangements, range of suitable duties available
Workplace / employer	Employer size/industry, attitudes or employer (e.g. unconscious bias, perception of incapacity/disability), employer track record, attitudes of colleagues, relationship with colleagues, skills/knowledge/resources of employer to support employment, inclusivity of workplace, availability of graduated return to work, availability of resources to support development of inclusive practice, relationship between worker and employer, organisational policies and procedures
Environmental	Accessible infrastructure (transport) and communication, accessibility of the workplace
Societal	Norms and attitudes, stigma, discrimination, cultural factors
Economic	Market supply, financial incentives, labour market demand, income support policy and access; insufficient resourcing for people with disability to meet disability-related needs

(Cameron et al., 2020; Collie et al., 2020; Crosbie et al., 2019; Devine et al., 2021; Iles et al., 2018; Immervoll et al., 2019; Sampson et al., 2015)

As explained by Wilson et al. (2022, p. 3):

For people with intellectual disability, the interaction of intellectual disability with each of these barriers adds complexity. Given that people with intellectual disability have lifelong deficits in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) alongside individual strengths, addressing the above barriers in the context of intellectual disability requires the dual focus on ‘the fit between the individual’s capacities and the context within which the individual is to function’ (Wehmeyer & Craig, 2013, p. 9).

Joyce et al. (2025) summarised barriers experienced by people with intellectual disability in the Australian context, especially when seeking to move into open or mainstream employment settings:

- People with an intellectual disability not feeling supported in an open employment workplace
- Open employers lacking the knowledge and experience in being able to successfully recruit and retain workers with an intellectual disability
- Insufficient career preparation for young people with an intellectual disability while they are still at school such that they lack an understanding of different careers options
- Inflexible funding models and supports that make it more difficult to transition between supported and open employment opportunities.

Project background

People with disability are currently underrepresented in the NSW government sector workforce, following a long-term trend of decreasing representation (NSW Public Service Commission, 2022)

The current NSW Government has a commitment to increase the representation of employees with disability to 5.6 per cent by 2026 (NSW Public Service Commission, 2021). People with intellectual disability are specifically called out in this commitment, however without a numerical target and no means of tracking progress, as the nature of one’s disability is not currently recorded in government sector human resource systems. The NSW Council for Intellectual Disability has publicly called on government to:

Develop a strategy so that at least 1 per cent of public sector roles are held by people with intellectual disability in 2025. This strategy should focus on both school leavers and adults with intellectual disability (NSW Council for Intellectual Disability, n.d.-a).

In its final report released in September 2023, the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation made a number of recommendations relating to targets for disability employment in Commonwealth, state and territory government departments. Specifically, the Royal Commission recommended that at least 7 per cent of new public service hires are people with disability by 2025 and 9 per cent by 2030 (Disability Royal Commission, 2023, Recommendation 7.19). They focused on three cohorts, one of which was employees with cognitive disability. The Royal Commission made further recommendations about the measures needed to support these targets including:

- Clear employment pathways for target cohorts
- Measures and programs to support their recruitment and progression through the public service
- Provision of appropriate supports (Disability Royal Commission, 2023, Recommendation 7.18).

Further, the Royal Commission noted that ‘the public sector should take active measures to increase the employment of people with intellectual disability or cognitive impairment’ (Disability Royal Commission, 2023, Vol 7, p. 424). Some commissioners proposed a sub-target for the employment of people with intellectual disability.

In this context, the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) is leading work on enhancing employment pathways and opportunities for people with intellectual disability across the NSW government sector. While there have been efforts to support individual instances of employment in pockets of the sector, there is currently limited activity at scale in relation to intellectual disability.

The Centre for Social Impact Swinburne (CSI Swinburne) was engaged to support this work in May 2024 through the **Growing Intellectual Disability Employment in NSW Government project** (the project). A particular focus of the project is identifying an approach to the employment of people with intellectual disability that can be scaled in support of the NSW Government’s disability employment targets.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Research aims

The project is focused on:

1. Exploring the current state of employment of people with intellectual disability in the NSW government sector, including barriers to entry and examples of enablers and good practice where these exist
2. Supporting the creation of new employment opportunities and pathways for people with intellectual disability across the NSW government by proposing an initial approach the NSW Department of Communities and Justice could design and pilot in 2025.

In this context, key research focuses for this project are:

- Understanding sector-side challenges to the employment of people with intellectual disability
- Identifying pathways that have been used to date and examining where these are changing
- Designing and developing workforce entry pathways at scale (rather than the reactive and labour-intensive process currently used internally).

Research methods

The project was executed in three key stages:

1. Review of evidence of 'what works' in supporting the employment of people with intellectual disability

To support this stage, a review of the evidence on good practice in supporting the mainstream employment of people with intellectual disability was conducted by the research team and a summary report was provided to DCJ in September 2024 (Macali et al., 2024). The review considered barriers and enablers to the employment of people with intellectual disability, as well as evidence-based practice approaches that might be transferrable to a public sector environment.

2. Interviews with key stakeholders to understand barriers to employment of people with intellectual disability in the NSW government sector, and successful strategies that have been used

To support this stage, 17 stakeholders across the NSW government sector had the option to either be interviewed individually or to participate in one of two focus groups hosted by the research team. In addition, a small, targeted set of nine interviews were conducted to explore their experience and views of key disability support services and sector leaders that deliver pathway and placement initiatives for this cohort.

3. Development of an implementation approach and consultation with key stakeholders in DCJ.

CSI researchers analysed the existing evidence and interview data to develop two potential approaches to scaling the employment of people with intellectual disability across the department. This preliminary ideation was done in conjunction with key personnel from DCJ's Inclusion and Diversity team. Consideration of the operating context for any proposed approach was key here, as informed by the views, experience and advice from both NSW public sector employees and disability support services gathered through Stage 2 of the project. To further test the suitability of each approach, a broader range of key personnel from DCJ were invited to participate in a dedicated program design workshop in March 2025. Workshop participants identified strategies to address implementation barriers and considered the key steps required to implement the proposed approaches.

The primary output for this project is the design of an approach to employment for people with intellectual disability by the NSW Government, which is discussed later in this report.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: WHAT WORKS

This section brings together research and practice evidence to identify the key ingredients and program design elements of ‘what works’ to support the increased employment of people with intellectual disability.

Drawing on the literature

The research team found that the literature is clear and well-established when it comes to supporting people with intellectual disability into work. Structured, high-quality work experience, supported employment approaches, and work integrated learning (where learning occurs on-the-job) are the most effective strategies. In addition, inclusive organisational design produces the workplace conditions necessary for inclusion. As will become evident in this report, these strategies are not mutually exclusive, but rather, are often used in combination to create inclusive employment opportunities for people with intellectual disability. These key elements are summarised below, drawing on both literature and practice examples. A fuller explanation of the literature can be found in the literature synthesis report produced for this project (Macali et al., 2024).

Good practice in action

Data collected through the project found that little is known about the number of existing staff with intellectual disability across the NSW government sector. There appeared to be a lack of awareness of existing good practice, and limited visibility of existing public sector employees with intellectual disability. Additionally, a recurring theme in government sector interviews and focus groups was a lack of understanding of what intellectual disability is, with frequent conflation with autism. Despite these challenges, the research team identified pockets of emerging good practice in the employment of people with intellectual disability across the NSW government sector which aligns with the literature, as outlined below. Where available, examples from other Australian and broader jurisdictions are also included to further illustrate how evidence-based practice is being applied in real workplace settings. Finally, examples of initiatives established for people with other disability types are also featured to showcase the NSW Government’s existing leadership and flexibility, which could be leveraged to create employment pathways for people with intellectual disability.

Structured, high quality work experience

Well-designed and well-supported work experience provides opportunities for people with intellectual disability to learn about work and develop skills such as communication and problem solving. It also offers an opportunity to identify a prospective employee's strengths as well as any workplace adjustments that may be required.

Work experience includes interventions such as:

- Job-tasters
- Internships
- Work sampling
- Work integrated learning
- Paid and unpaid work opportunities
- After school jobs.

There is substantial evidence that work experience is a strong predictor of further employment for people with intellectual disability (see Crosbie et al., 2024). Ingredients that heighten efficacy include the offering of early opportunities for work experience, provision of structured and well-supported placements, along with tailored support (Crosbie et al., 2024). A number of practice examples that include a work experience component can be found below

Practice example: Employ-My-Ability Program, Sydney Local Health District

Commencing in 2008, Sydney Local Health District (SLHD) was the first workplace in Australia to implement an immersive work experience program for people with significant intellectual disability aiming to get a paid job in open employment. Run through a long-standing partnership with local disability employment support service, Jobsupport, the program has worked with a range of departments at Concord Hospital, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and Sydney Dental Hospital including Environmental Services, Food Production and Distribution, Education, Linen, Medical Records, Physiotherapy, Theatre Stores, and Volunteer Services (Sydney Local Health District, n.d.).

As of November 2021, 44 people had graduated from the program, with 89 per cent of trainees getting a job.

SLHD has found that not only is the program successful in supporting people with intellectual disability to do valued and necessary work, there have also been significant benefits for the broader staff teams involved in the program (NSW Health, n.d.).

Key program elements:

- **Long-term work experience** placements set up to be as much like paid jobs as possible
 - **Job matching** based on an understanding of the participant's skills and interests
 - **In situ training and support** that is individualised and delivered by skilled and experienced staff on the job.
-

Practice example: Municipal Association of Victoria Work Experience Project

In 2019 the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) received an Information Linkages and Capacity-building grant through the National Disability Insurance Agency to implement a work experience project for people with disability in Victorian councils (Municipal Association of Victoria, 2022). The project funded ten councils \$20,000 each to plan, implement and pilot work experience programs for people with disability with an overall aim of building disability-confidence in councils, while at the same time providing people with disability work exposure opportunities.

Some councils partnered with local disability employment services for recruitment and support, either as ongoing or new partnerships. Although the project was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, 34 people with disability secured work experience placements, with reported program benefits including: increased self-confidence, skill development, work preparedness and supporting pathways for career aspirations.

For participating council staff, benefits included 'learning by doing' inclusive employment practice in their own workplace. They were able to address structural barriers as they arose and foster confidence and understanding through direct interactions with work experience participants. Overall, offering work experience was reported as extremely beneficial for developing disability confidence and achieving practical results.

When someone is placed in an organisation, people working with people, that is when people start to engage. There is nothing like learning from actually implementing something. You just 'have to' do it. (Wositzky, 2021, p. 5).

Key program elements:

- **Resourcing** a dedicated project coordinator to manage and promote the pilot, support participants and address challenges.
 - **Formal recruitment process** with applications and interviews
 - **Part-time, paid** work experience (up to 3 days per week for at least four weeks) for an immersive experience, with remuneration typically at the student/graduate entry-level.
 - **Assigned mentor**, host, or supervisor to guide and support participants, with some councils using a 'buddy system.'
 - **Careful job matching** based on recruitment and interview outcomes (Wositzky, 2021).
-

Supported employment

Supported employment is an evidence-based practice widely used in the United States to support individuals with significant disability into mainstream employment (Drake et al., 2012; Verdugo et al., 2006; Wehman et al., 2014). Underpinning this approach is the understanding that most people can succeed in work if provided with appropriate workplace and family supports (Wehman et al., 2018). Over time, it has become accepted as best practice in the employment of people with intellectual and other disabilities (Lysaght et al., 2017).

The four key elements of supported employment have been identified as:

- **Personalised assessment** – to develop a deep understanding of an individual's goals, skills, and support needs in real job settings to build confidence and refine preferences. This is sometimes referred to as 'Discovery', a feature of Customised Employment which is a model that falls within Supported Employment as a whole
- **Job development and placement** – individualised job search plans match people with roles that suit their interests and strengths
- **On-site training** – using structured learning methods ensures employees learn the tasks needed for their job and that they meet workplace expectations
- **Ongoing support** – for as long as required is provided to employees and employers to ensure long-term success.

Supported Employment is also an approach used in the United Kingdom. Following, similar steps as the above, the UK Supported Employment model is a five-stage model, often summarised as 'place, train and maintain' (see British Association for Supported Employment, n.d.).

Practice example: Jobsupport

A high-performing NSW-based disability employment support service, Jobsupport delivers supported employment services with what Kregel et al. (2020) describe as ‘rigorous fidelity’ to the evidence-based components of the supported employment model.

Jobsupport deploys key elements of the supported employment approach in its Employ-My-Ability Program transition to work program as outlined previously in this report.

Key program elements:

- **An alternative entry point** to employment opportunities, bypassing the standard recruitment process
 - **Client assessments** tailored to each individual, following a personalised assessment plan and primarily conducted in community settings
 - **Customised job development** activities grounded in effective marketing strategies and that align with each client's employment goals and work preferences
 - **Job site customisation** and training based on established learning theory principles, delivered by highly trained staff
 - **Ongoing support** services provided proactively and designed to meet the needs of both the client and the employer.
-

Practice example: Work Readiness Project, Sydney Opera House

To date, the Work Readiness Project has created eight entry-level jobs for people with intellectual disability across the Sydney Opera House, with the goal of 10 people to be employed by September 2025. The roles are ongoing in nature and embedded into the organisation's operations. Private funding has facilitated the program's design and implementation, apart from wages.

Key program elements:

- **An alternative entry point** to employment opportunities, bypassing the standard recruitment process
- **Partnership** with a suitably equipped NSW-based disability support organisation (Jigsaw Australia) to identify job opportunities and provide ongoing support to both employees and employer
- **Customised job development** that aligns with each client's employment goals and work preferences

- **Workplace Disability Awareness Training** created for and delivered to managers, supervisors, and co-workers where the new roles have been created (developed in partnership with the Centre for Disability Studies, University of Sydney)
 - **Staff volunteer Social Mentorship Program** to support the new employees in the first months of their employment (also created in partnership with the Centre for Disability Studies)
 - **Resourcing** for project coordination, training and resource development.
-

Practice example: 'Inclusive Communication' program, Down Syndrome Australia

When I understand it makes me feel more comfortable and I can answer your questions better. This will help any health care worker who is treating me to find the right problem and do their job better (Kimberley Adams, DSA Health Ambassador).

The 'Inclusive Communication: Improving Health Outcomes for People with Down syndrome' program is funded by the Department of Social Services. The Inclusive Communication program aims to educate health care workers and students about Down syndrome, intellectual disability, and inclusive communication. It has a novel design in that it employs a team of people with Down syndrome, known as 'Health Ambassadors', as part-time trainers and advisors to build the capacity of the health sector workforce. Based across all States and Territories (including working from home), this group delivers training to tertiary students studying in diverse health fields and health professionals already employed in the health sector and undertakes a range of broader advocacy focused activities. The team is supported by a professional nurse-educator. While not employed as public servants, the Health Ambassadors deliver training to health service workers across sectors (Wilson, Crosbie, et al., 2023). In a six-month period, Health Ambassadors trained 1736 health practitioners, with a resultant increase in practitioner understanding of how to practice inclusive communication with patients with Down syndrome. The results are consistent with other research about the use of lived experience educators in professional and tertiary education settings.

Program elements include:

- **Customised job development** that aligns with each client's employment goals and work preferences
 - **Resourcing** for project coordination, training and resource development
 - **Meeting business needs**, in this case, capability building of health professional to better meet the health needs of people with patients with Down syndrome, through drawing on the lived experience of people with Down syndrome.
-

Work integrated (in situ) learning

I was part of a two-year transition to work program with one of our service providers that Ageing Disability and Homecare were funded to do. Then ... towards [the end of] that two years, this job came up ... and I got through which was good ... (NSW government sector employee with lived experience of intellectual disability and autism).

Work integrated learning combines high-quality structured education and learning with real work opportunities that support learning through activities such as internships and work placements. For people with intellectual disability, work integrated learning might include school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, as well as internships during school years. This approach is critical for people with intellectual disability as they often face significant challenges in transferring training from one setting (e.g. classroom) to another (e.g. workplace) due to the difficulties they can often face in generalising skills (Lewis et al., 2011).

Practice example: Supported internships, United Kingdom

Supported internships provide young people with learning disability the opportunity to gain long-term, paid employment by developing essential workplace skills through hands-on experience over a 6- to 12-month period. Participants are enrolled with a learning provider and spend approximately 70 per cent of their time in an extended work placement. On the job support is provided by a suitably qualified education provider. Alongside their work experience, participants follow a personalised study program that may include working towards relevant qualifications, as well as English and maths.

Support for interns is funded through individualised education health and care (EHC) plans. Job coaches also collaborate with employers to enhance their confidence in hiring people with learning disability, fostering an inclusive and diverse workforce (Department for Education, 2025).

Sustained employment is the primary goal for supported interns. At the end of their internship (2023-2024 cohort, n=84):

- 26 interns (31 per cent) had secured a job.
- 27 interns (32 per cent) were awaiting job outcomes.
- 23 interns (27 per cent) were unemployed, and of those, 13 (48 per cent) intended to apply for jobs.

Around 6 months after completing the internship (2022-2023 cohort, n=49):

- 23 interns (47 per cent) were employed, with 18 (78 per cent) working 16+ hours per week.
- 3 interns (6 per cent) were still awaiting job outcomes.
- 21 interns (43 per cent) were unemployed, and of those, 14 (67 per cent) were actively job-seeking.

The provision of ongoing support in the workplace was common, with 63 per cent of job coaches providing ongoing assistance, and 19 per cent offering occasional support, typically lasting 6 months or more (61 per cent) (CooperGibson Research & St. Mary's University, 2024).

Key program elements:

- **Individualised job development**
- **Structured, accredited training** offered through partnership with a training organisation
- **Program partners** provide on-site training during the internship and job search support following its completion
- **Resourcing** for project coordination, including a job coach role.

Practice example: Project SEARCH

Project SEARCH is a workplace-based internship program for young people with developmental disability, usually in their final year of high school. It provides real-world job training within a host organisation, focusing on practical skills through hands-on experience and job rotations. With minimal classroom time, interns receive structured support, including behaviour support plans and guidance from a job coach, to help them develop workplace and social skills. The goal is to prepare participants for competitive, integrated employment.

Established in the United States in 1996 to fill high-turnover, entry-level positions at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Centre, the program has also operated in the UK and was launched in 2020 in Queensland by Uniting and as of March 2025. It is now being rolled out across NSW, Victoria and South Australia by WISE Employment, in partnership with local disability employment services (WISE Employment, n.d.). A key source of funding in the Australian context is interns' NDIS plans, provided they include core or capacity building supports that can be used for the achievement of employment-related goals.

In the Australian context, internships comprise three rounds of 12-week unpaid internships, with two weeks' break in between each round, at the same host employer.

Key program elements:

- **Participant assessments** tailored to each individual, following a personalised assessment plan
 - **Tailored job matching**, with interns placed within functions and roles matched to their skills and long-term employment ambition
 - **Structured training** offered on-site by employment coaches over the course of the internship, with a focus on soft-skills training and foundation skills development in areas such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving
 - **Partnerships** with disability employment support services to provide on-site training during the internship and job search support following its completion.
-

Practice example: Integrated Practical Placement Program, Victoria

Modelled on Project SEARCH, the Integrated Practical Placement (IPP) Program was a supported internship pilot program for young people with disability which commenced in 2018 through a partnership between the Royal Children's Hospital and Holmesglen TAFE in Melbourne.

Research undertaken on the initiative compared two groups of students with intellectual disability completing a Certificate I in Work Education. Intervention students (n = 10) participated in three 9-week job rotations with personalised support from employment coaches, while comparison students (n = 38) had three 2-week placements without additional support. Intervention students showed significantly greater improvements in work skills, communication, and self-organisation. Notably, 70 per cent secured employment after the program, compared to 15.4 per cent of the comparison group, highlighting the effectiveness of the approach (Kiegaldie et al., 2023).

In addition to the benefits enjoyed by students through participating in the program, researchers also noted benefits experienced by employing organisations:

Organisations and supervisors can directly benefit from initiatives like this with opportunities for staff to learn about people with disability, to engage with a social equity activity and to develop pride in being involved with students who visibly develop critical social, workplace and everyday life skills (Kiegaldie et al., 2023, p. 1009).

Key features of the program included:

- **Individualised job development**
- **Structured, accredited training** offered through partnership with a training organisation

- **Partnership** with a disability employment support service to provide on-site training and ongoing support
 - **Resourcing** for project coordination.
-

Practice example: Youth Employment Scheme, State Government of Victoria

A long-standing program which acts as a pathway to public sector careers for young people without a tertiary qualification, the Youth Employment Scheme (YES) provides young people aged 15 to 29 with a 12-month, entry-level opportunity to work in the Victorian Public Service. Traineeships are undertaken while completing accredited training through a participating Group Training Organisation. A sub-element of the program is the YES Disability Stream, focused on supporting sustainable employment for young people with disability (Department of Families, n.d.).

The Victorian government provides funding to support 100 traineeships each year (State of Victoria, 2024), however information on what percentage of these is dedicated to trainees with disability is not publicly available.

Key program elements:

- **Individualised job development**
 - **Structured, accredited training** offered through partnership with training organisation
 - **Resourcing** for centralised project coordination and a YES coordinator in each participating department to offer support at a local level to trainees and their hosts
 - **Wage subsidies** paid to host department (at a higher rate for the disability stream).
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Practice example: *Stepping Into* internship program, Australia-wide

While not necessarily inclusive of people with intellectual disability, the *Stepping Into* internship program, delivered by the Australian Disability Network (AusDN), was raised by informants. The program is run every year by DCJ and offers a minimum of hours of paid, practical work experience to up to 10 current university students or recent graduates with disability per year. AusDN supports DCJ by offering candidate attraction, matching and recruitment processing on a fee for service basis. Importantly, this internship is accompanied by a level of internal training and development for local DCJ teams who opt in to host interns. This can include training offered by AusDN, as well as DCJ-run sessions (before and after the intern's arrival), and access to training via the internal Thrive Learning Management System.

Key program elements:

- **Partnership** with a disability employment support service (in this case, AusDN) to provide recruitment and retention support, including advice on any reasonable adjustments that may be required to facilitate successful business outcomes
 - **Support** provided on a fee for service basis by AusDN
 - **Resourcing** for centralised project coordination by DCJ's Inclusion and diversity team, which also covers recruitment costs, base salary (up to 210 hours) and any equipment that may be required to support the intern
 - **Assigned mentor**, host, or supervisor to guide and support interns.
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Inclusive organisational design

A key consideration in growing government sector employment for people with intellectual disability is what is required to make employers more receptive to hiring employees with intellectual disability, including what works to drive positive change to, for example, workplace attitudes and culture, job design and recruitment practices that will facilitate opportunities. Cheng et al. (2017) identify the need for interventions at 'the organisational level', including those that target tailored job design and better fit between employer needs and the abilities of job seekers with intellectual disability (Cheng et al., 2017, p. 325). Additionally, research undertaken by Kantar Public (2017) for the Department of Social Services identified leadership and organisational support as key to inclusive workplace culture, particularly through encouraging and implementing inclusive policies and practices, facilitating access to barrier free and assistive technology and workplace adjustments, dispelling myths and misconceptions, and navigating and interpreting relevant laws and guidelines (Department of Social Services, 2017).

Within the workplace, Joyce et al. (2024) identified the elements of organisational design that were likely to support workplace wellbeing for people with intellectual disability. These include: 'offering a diversity of roles and opportunities, customised training and task matching, a flexible approach to work rosters, offering a range of workplace environments (e.g., busy versus calm environments), and providing holistic and tailored support' (p.1). Similarly, Campbell et al. (2024) offer detailed explanations of eight organisational design elements, tested in Australian Disability Enterprise settings (that are large employers of people with intellectual disability). A 'Training Guide' for these elements is available in Appendix 2 of Campbell et al. (2024) which includes a focus on practical strategies like providing a 'buddy' in the workplace, clear lines of communication for the employee (including a mechanism for them to communicate their views), and guidance for work colleagues and staff about how best to support the person.

Learning from other public service initiatives

Interviews with NSW and Commonwealth public servants, and the information provided by workshop participants, identified a number of programs aimed at increasing representation of people with disability in the public service. Most of these programs are in pilot, or recently extended, and/or there is little publicly available information about them. These programs included:

1. *Tailored Talent program*, NSW Public Service Commission, aims to provide an avenue to bring neurodiverse and autistic talent into the NSW Government sector. NSW Transport for NSW participated in the pilot in 2021 and has since recruited 16 candidates from the program (Transport for NSW, n.d.).
2. *Everyone at Work*, NSW Revenue, targeting people with intellectual disability, in response to recommendations emerging from the Disability Royal Commission. Established in 2024, this project aims to address the challenges people with intellectual disability face when navigating traditional recruitment, task allocation and workplace support processes. The program uses a mix of:
 - **partnerships** with suitably qualified disability employment support services (secured through an expression of interest process)
 - **enhancing the accessibility of existing recruitment practices** through co-design with program partners (for example, modified application, assessment and referee processes)
 - **disability awareness training** delivered to host work areas
 - **centralised funding** to support program implementation and take up
 - **filling existing vacancies** (with four positions initially available).
3. *Inclusion Works – Inclusive Employment for Councils*, NSW Council for Intellectual Disability. The project worked with local government associations in NSW to support employment for people with intellectual disability. Multiple councils employed people with intellectual disability including in project administrator roles supporting volunteers, events, community projects, pest control, Easy Read testing, and library support. A detailed resource to aid inclusive practices for employers is available that offers significant practical guidance including recruitment, work scheduling and communication practices (NSW Council for Intellectual Disability, n.d.-b).

Other jurisdictions around Australia have also established initiatives aimed at increasing representation of people with disability in their public service workforces. Examples of this are included below.

Practice example: Rise program, Victorian government, targeting neurodiverse candidates

Established in 2017 by the former Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Rise program bypasses the conventional recruitment process, including interviews. Instead, it uses half-day Discovery Days to recruit individuals with autism, allowing them to showcase their strengths and job-related skills (Department of Health, n.d.). Discovery Days serve as an introduction to the department while also offering practical experience of the tasks candidates might be asked to perform if selected for an internship.

Since 2019, the program has expanded beyond the former Department of Health and Human Services (now Department of Health) and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (now Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action) into the Department of Education and the Department of Justice and Community Safety (Department of Families, 2023).

Key program elements:

- **An alternative entry point** to employment opportunities, bypassing the standard recruitment process, that offers candidates full exposure to the role.
 - **Counselling and coaching support** for all neurodiverse staff members (and their manager and team) through the Neurodiverse Confidence Services (NCS) panel.
 - **Ongoing support** as an extension of the support offered during the internship stage, available to both employees and their management teams throughout the employment lifecycle (Department of Health, n.d.).
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Practice example: Disability Employment Program, Northern Territory, all disability types

The Disability Employment Program (DEP) provides a pathway for people with disability to gain experience, develop skills, and explore career opportunities in the Northern Territory Public Sector. Operating in partnership with local disability employment services providers, the program offers temporary entry-level employment for up to two years to people with disability who are unable to compete for a job on the basis of merit, with government agencies encouraged to consider ongoing roles beyond the contract period (Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, 2023).

Approximately 150 people have participated in the DEP since it commenced in 1994 although a break down by disability types does not appear to be publicly available. A total of 38 participants (25 per cent) gained further employment in the Northern Territory Public Sector at the end of their program and of this group, 26 people remained public sector employees as of June 2022 (Disability Royal Commission, 2021).

Key program elements:

- **An alternative entry point** to employment opportunities, bypassing the standard recruitment process
 - **Partnerships** with suitably qualified disability employment support services to provide on-site training over the life of the appointment and job search support following its completion
 - **Resourcing** for program participants' wages through a sector-wide levy. (Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, 2023)
-

Practice example: Defence Administrative Assistance Program (DAAP)

Established in 2014, the Defence Administrative Assistance Program (DAAP) is a Commonwealth-funded program that provides employment opportunities for people with disability across ten Australian Defence Force bases nationwide. In October 2022, the Endeavour Foundation was awarded the program's overall management through a competitive Defence-led tender process valued at \$23.7 million (Department of Defence, 2022). This funding supports full-time onsite staff and overall program administration.

The program aims to employ 105 individuals with disability on Defence sites over three years, engaging them in a range of tasks, including digitisation, general administration, packaging, maintenance, and hospitality. These activities are seen as contributing to Defence's overall productivity by allowing other employees to focus on higher-priority responsibilities. Endeavour views participation in the program as an opportunity for individual capacity building and a pathway to mainstream employment (Endeavour Foundation, n.d.).

Key program elements:

- **Centralised funding** to support program implementation and take up
 - **Ongoing support** services to meet the needs of both the employee and employer.
-

Common characteristics

Across these examples, some characteristics recur. These can be summarised as:

- Careful job matching
- Individualised job development
- An alternative or customised entry point for recruitment, bypassing the standard recruitment process
- In-situ training and support
- Resourcing for a centralised and dedicated project coordinator to manage and promote the pilot, support participants and address challenges.
- Resourcing for disability awareness training and development of resources
- Partnership with disability employment support services
- Ongoing support designed to meet the needs of both person with disability and employer.

THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

As indicated previously, the research team identified limited data on existing practice in relation to employees with intellectual disability across the NSW government sector. Very few government sector informants reported direct experience of employing or working alongside colleagues with intellectual disability and disability support organisations indicated they had struggled to gain access to NSW government sector roles on behalf of their clients over an extended period of time.

Where the data collection process did prove fruitful was in relation to questions canvassing views on potential challenges and barriers to the NSW public sector in employing people with intellectual disability and how these could be addressed

The following sections of this report will summarise key insights gained from stakeholders from both the demand (NSW government sector) and supply (disability employment support services) sides of the inclusive employment process. Additionally, perspectives are drawn from disability inclusion thought leaders and a Victorian government program lead, given the relevance of their experience and perspectives to this project.

Barriers to employment for people with intellectual disability in the NSW government sector

Inaccessible entry points and recruitment processes

One of the biggest barriers to boosting the number of people with intellectual disability in the NSW government sector identified by all stakeholders was the inflexibility of current job design and recruitment processes, effectively denying people with intellectual disability access to the entry points and supports that might facilitate their access to government sector careers. Research informants described a lack of will or flexibility to modify current recruitment approaches to better facilitate pathways for people with intellectual disability.

... internally, [a barrier is] absolutely job design, and people within the organisation not being open to thinking about how someone with an intellectual disability might be able to perform those specific roles or the tasks within that role (Focus group 2 member).

There was a perception among disability support organisations that engaging with government departments to try to place people with intellectual disability was more difficult than in the

private sector. This perception was in part due to the systems and procedures that need to be met, as well as the work that needs to be put in to create roles that work for both parties.

The government sector's policy of merit-based recruitment was also seen as an impediment to employing people with intellectual disability. In its final report, the Disability Royal Commission made a recommendation about the need to provide clearer guidance on applying the merit principle (Disability Royal Commission, 2023, Recommendation 7.20), and the NSW Public Service Commission has done so in its guidance regarding Employing people with disability using rule 26 of the Government Sector Employment (General) Rules 2014 (NSW Public Service Commission, 2020). Despite this, stakeholders remained concerned about the extent to which inaccessible recruitment processes remained an issue.

Limited career pathways for employees with intellectual disability

A lack of entry level roles was identified by stakeholders as another major barrier to employment for people with intellectual disability. Roles traditionally considered a good match for many employees with intellectual disability were seen to have gradually been phased out over the years. This has been exacerbated by more work moving to an online environment, as well as an increased emphasis on automated services reducing the need for face-to-face roles and a growth in the proportion of the workforce working from home. Participants in the program design workshop from DCJ also noted that current Level 1/2 roles were constructed in ways that required the capacity to perform a range of tasks, some of which they thought people with intellectual disability may struggle to complete. For example, an employee working in the courts would be required to be present in court, interact with clients and assist the magistrates. Participants felt that this would make it difficult to 'carve' roles to match the strengths of employees with intellectual disability. However, participants also recognised that public services, such as the courts, 'need to reflect the public we serve'. Given the importance of this, one suggestion for overcoming this barrier was to 'ring fence' some level 1/2 roles for people with intellectual disability and to preserve these roles into the future.

Informants with disability emphasised the lack of career progression for existing public sector employees with disability, including intellectual disability. Informants felt this was, in part, driven by negative workplace attitudes and a lack of awareness of the work capacity of people with intellectual disability, leading to people being overlooked for development opportunities or not receiving the right mix of reasonable adjustments or support to access them. The loss of tailored staff development opportunities over time was also reported as a barrier by one informant.

Resourcing, capacity and commitment

Securing adequate resourcing for the employment of people with intellectual disability is seen as a significant barrier by many in the NSW government sector. Program design workshop participants from DCJ highlighted the issue of a lack of available budget to allocate to supporting inclusion initiatives, as did many other research informants. They offered their experience of other diversity and inclusion initiatives in DCJ whereby any requirement for departments to 'pay' or incur costs to participate in programs, such as internships, led to reduced interest and ability to participate. In response, workshop participants suggested a centralised approach to resourcing would encourage uptake by departments, as has been the case in the *Stepping Into* internship program, which is centrally coordinated by DCJ.

In addition to budget constraints, program design workshop participants also raised concerns about the capacity of existing staff to provide a suitable level and modality of support for employees with intellectual disability. This capacity was impacted by work from home and hybrid work arrangements, and participants noted the need for guidance for supervisors on how to deliver supervision and support in this context. Disability support organisations affirmed these concerns, reporting a lack of confidence in relation to supporting staff with intellectual disability as a barrier they had experienced when engaging with the government sector.

Disability support organisations identified that the structure of government departments and the nature of the work that they do does not always create an environment that positions employees with intellectual disability for success. For example, frequent organisational changes such as restructures accompanying change of government, adjustments to funding or changes in personnel can negatively impact the roles that employees with intellectual disability perform and the consistency of support available to them. Program design workshop participants and other government sector informants confirmed that mobility of personnel within the government sector poses challenges for building and maintaining a suitable skills base to support inclusion initiatives and, specifically, individuals with disability. This poses particular difficulties in relation to preparedness for specific programs, such as internships, where designated personnel (including management staff) may have opted into the program and completed disability confidence training in preparation for the internship but then move to a new position, leaving a new manager to support an internship for which they have not received training, or indeed signed up for.

Disability support organisations also considered that insufficient resourcing served to limit opportunities to build capacity of government sector human resource teams and hiring managers to adopt inclusive recruitment practices and to grow demand for employees that required any significant level of workplace adjustments or tailoring.

Of major concern for some program design workshop participants was the poor state of the local workplace environment in relation to inclusivity and capacity to support wellbeing. Localised employee data highlights ongoing issues with burnout, as well as inability to offer positive and productive experiences for existing employees with disability, and the need to build a workplace that is safe and supportive for employees with diverse disability types. This issue may be compounded by many public servants' low levels of understanding about the work capacity of people with intellectual disability. Particularly in some departments, managers feel ill-equipped to adequately support employees or interns with intellectual disability:

One of the biggest things for us is there's certainly an appetite there to be involved in a program like this, but the barrier is our managers not feeling like they have the supports, the knowledge, the necessary planning to be able to support these employees (Program design workshop participant 1).

... when it comes down to it, the answer is going to be we don't have the time (Program design workshop participant 2).

Finally, one informant, a human resources officer who had worked in both public and private settings, considered the public sector's approach to recruitment as more transactional in nature compared to the private sector, more focused on day-to-day issue management and not as strategic as the private sector – all of which was not conducive to building internal capability around inclusion.

In this context, program design workshop participants identified the need to start the change process in a grounded way, with 'baby steps' in recognition of the significant issues in the workplace, building knowledge of and confidence around disability among front line staff, graduating slowly to engagement with more targeted programs.

Enablers to help grow employment of people with intellectual disability in the NSW government sector

Taking a programmatic approach

Research informants that had been directly involved in public sector disability employment program design spoke to the benefits of a programmatic approach to scaling employment pathways.

One of the things that I would conclude over the years is ... when you don't have the maturity, you need to have a programmatic approach. You hope that, as your capability matures and you build more expertise, you don't have to; but a programmatic approach gives you data, it helps you to manage risks, it helps you to

do good stakeholder engagement and get a good, comprehensive understanding
(Disability sector member).

Resourcing

Informants were almost unanimous in their call for adequate resourcing to underpin any employment program for people with intellectual disability. Dedicated funding and roles were seen as key to reducing barriers for managers, making it easier for them to engage.

... within our talent acquisition team, we've got a lead from a gender perspective, from a CALD perspective. We've got a separate Aboriginal employment unit as well, which is quite large. So, we try and look at it from that way and put in place different programs and sourcing strategies ... we want to be representative of the community that we serve
(Focus group 2 member, describing this department's internal resource responsible for liaison with disability employment services).

Positive mindset

Informants spoke about the importance of shifting away from a deficit mindset and focusing on what people can contribute. Challenging assumptions, recognising diverse skill sets, and making hiring decisions based on actual abilities rather than stereotypes were all seen as key to creating inclusive employment opportunities.

I want everyone to work, because I come from a world where everyone works (Focus group 1 member).

... we need to start incorporating these diverse perspectives ... I think there's a real need to create a shift in those biases and perspectives to see the value that they can actually bring to the workforce, and to the work that we do (NSW public servant).

Communication

Informants also spoke about the crucial role good internal communication – especially through storytelling and case studies – can play in driving awareness, engagement and action when it comes to the employment of people with intellectual disability. Having clear goals and success stories may help shift mindsets, making change feel achievable and motivating others to follow suit.

... people only know what they only know, so how do you get them over that hump, to know and then participate actively in that, I think is absolutely key (Focus group 2 member).

... once we get a few success stories happening, then that will start ... kind of a tipping point where people are seeing it work, and they're like, 'Well, you know what, maybe – I want to do the right thing, but I can see now that I can do the right thing as well, and make it work.' (NSW public servant).

One thing we haven't looked at is intellectual disability, at all. It only came to my attention a couple of weeks ago in a cross-sector discussion, where it was brought up by someone from DCJ, that there was a particular focus from the government. That was the first that we heard about it (Focus group 1 member).

Communicating government's commitment to employing people with intellectual disability externally could also help drive change.

... now and then I have a look on 'I work for New South Wales's [website] ... but it doesn't mention anything [about] a disability position or disability target and I think that's why we are not employing intellectual disability. If I ... go on there, look for a position, I don't know if it's a disability target or not (NSW public servant with lived experience of intellectual disability and autism).

Additional enablers identified by informants included engaging human resource advisors and strong support from leadership.

I think programs are good. But I think it needs Secretary buy-in to commit to it as well as having that filtered down the line to the ground staff who are actually doing the recruitment (NSW public servant).

De-risking the process through support

Taking an intentional, targeted approach, building on learnings from other inclusive employment initiatives was also seen as key, as was making the process as easy and 'risk free' as possible for hiring managers, including through ensuring ready access to specialist support as required.

... if you can show a manager that if you just give up one position and I can design it in a way that maybe gives you multiple people, or one person that will have that support, then it's just about how is it going to make their life easier, because everyone will tell you how busy they are ... I just think taking away the 'too hard basket' elements from [hiring managers] would go a long way, in my opinion ... we have these shared corporate services and central agencies et cetera; why don't we just invest in a team to execute across the public sector? (Focus group 1 member).

Because people will go to HR but they want to know that you're going to be there holding their hand. And they always want to know: 'What's my out? Is it temporary? What happens if it doesn't work?' I think really driving the fact that they could have support and

specialist support ... because every person's going to need something different (NSW public servant).

Other enablers

A range of other valuable suggestions were raised by informants which DCJ may wish to consider in its deliberations on the best way forward:

- Strong partnerships with trusted, quality employment support providers
- Capacity building and awareness training for work colleagues and line managers
- The role of public sector procurement in creating employment opportunities for people with intellectual disability.

The research team also considers understanding what intellectual disability is (and is not) as being critical to the implementation of any employment program and that this should underpin workforce awareness training or capacity building efforts.

A CAREER ACCESS PROGRAM FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY IN THE NSW GOVERNMENT SECTOR

Overview

The key focus for this project was to utilise existing evidence presented above to design an approach to increasing the employment of people with intellectual disability in the NSW government sector. This section outlines the proposed program.

The Career Access Program takes a two-stream approach to scaling employment for people with intellectual disability in the NSW government sector. Each stream takes into account both the research and real-world experience. Both streams are designed to align with the NSW government sector's current operating context, with a strong focus on meeting departmental business needs to ensure a sustainable approach.

Both streams share key ingredients for success which are described below, as are their distinct elements. Interviews for this project conducted with government sector employees with cognitive disability highlighted the significant benefits the support features of each stream would have provided if consistently in place from the start of their government sector career.

There is no doubt that launching any new recruitment initiative can have its challenges, but fortunately participants in the program design workshop were able to draw on existing programs for under-represented cohorts across government that provide insights and strategies to support an implementation approach.

In considering both streams, it is important to consider that employment in the NSW government sector is only one desirable outcome. As the evidence attests, opportunities for paid work experience and in situ learning are critical for the lifetime employment outcomes of people with intellectual disability. In this context, the NSW Career Access Program can provide access to opportunities along a vocational pathway that extends both into and beyond the government sector. These opportunities are currently absent for people with intellectual disability and therefore represent important outcomes in themselves. In this role, the NSW Government can play an important role as a first employer and in providing opportunities for new learning.

Stream 1: Paid internships

Description

This program of paid internships offers time-limited, part-time work experience designed to provide in-depth learning experiences for interns, in what will often be their first job. Internships offer an in situ learning experience for the intern where, unlike *Stepping Into* interns, they may not come with an established base of vocational skills that are well-matched to the internship role.

Features

- Roles are offered on a part-time basis over 6 to 9 months (potentially in line with the school year)
- Interns are exposed to a range of learning opportunities through two to three rotations across the host department / work area
- In many cases, offers a 'first opportunity' for employment, which is a key to future career outcomes for people with intellectual disability
- A set of roles are identified upfront that meet department needs which can then be further customised to suit each intern's strengths, capabilities and aspirations to acquire new skills
- Centrally funded and coordinated, with a dedicated internal resource responsible for program oversight
- Delivered in partnership with one or more suitably qualified, specialist organisations that provide support to both the employer and intern.

Target group

- School leavers, young people, TAFE students/graduates (for example, Certificate I in Work Education) and adults with intellectual disability.

Approach

Program implementation – Year 1

- Identify one department / work area to pilot the program
- Partner with one or more suitably qualified employment support provider/s with expertise in supporting people with intellectual disability to act as an intermediary – identifying job tasks / roles, sourcing and supporting interns onsite
- Define and agree with the intermediary key support features required by departments / work areas to sustain internships

- Identify at least one talent pipeline partner (which may be the same employment support provider / intermediary as above)
- Agree with intermediary what is to take place in the final stages of the internship, namely a 'warm referral' to a specialist disability employment support service to support the intern in securing an ongoing position, either in the NSW government sector or elsewhere
- Train and resource host department / work area to welcome and support interns, including for example, resources co-designed with key public sector representatives (including from the DCJ Disability Employment Network).

Program implementation – Year 2 and onwards

Expand the program to two departments / work areas per annum or offer a second rotation of interns in the same work area.

Key ingredients for success

The following four key ingredients for success are common across both streams in the Career Access Program and are detailed further in the 'Key ingredients for success in both streams' sub section.

- Talent pipeline for recruitment
- Building an inclusive environment
- Ongoing support for individual with intellectual disability
- Ongoing support for host department / work area.

In addition, two further ingredients are important for this stream.

Employment support provider to support post-internship employment placement

A distinct element of the paid internship program is its time-limited nature, making what happens for the intern at the conclusion of their placement a critical feature of program design.

In this context, a critical role for the intermediary is to support the intern to find and gain paid employment following on from the internship – work that should commence by the last trimester of the internship. One source of employment support that the intermediary may wish to draw on is the *Inclusive Employment Australia* program, which will replace the current Disability Employment Service system from 1 November 2025. The new program is expected to have increased flexibility and resourcing to support pre-placement activities such as work experience, in addition to having increased capacity to provide more tailored support to people with intellectual disability than has arguably been possible previously.

While the *Inclusive Employment Australia* program offers the largest suite of providers across geographic regions, other intermediaries can also support post-internship employment

placement. Some intermediaries such as social enterprises e.g. Jigsaw, some Australian Disability Enterprises and other specialised employment initiatives e.g. Down Syndrome Australia Employment Connections Service, may have capacity to support the intern from pre-internship through to post internship placement.

Central budget

Utilising a similar model to the *Stepping Into* internships would involve allocating budget to fund an intermediary (this is the Australian Disability Network in the case of the *Stepping Into* program), and the interns' salaries. Intermediary costs might be allocated across multiple providers to perform key tasks:

- Provide access to a curated talent pool which may include initial matching and preparation of intern candidates, as well as onboarding support for interns
- Provide training and support to the departments / work areas hosting the interns. This may include identifying and supporting workplace adjustments, training in effective communication, targeted instruction and support to interns, as well as ongoing support to the host department /work area to address any issues arising.

Outcomes and Impacts

Program outcomes for people with intellectual disability

- Interns with intellectual disability gain vocational skills
 - Interns might also participate in comparative assessment against NSW Government Capability framework at end of placement
 - If the internship was designed to align with/incorporate formal vocational training, then it would contribute to attainment of VET recognition
- Interns with intellectual disability gain experience of work
 - Work experience aids understanding of vocational interests, suitability and effective workplace adjustments and supports
 - Evidence of work experience supports future employment opportunities
- Increased work expectations of interns, their families and carers.

Reach

The scale of the program is yet to be established, However, a reasonable scale would be:

- Year 1: 4–6 interns with intellectual disability
- Subsequent years: 8 interns with intellectual disability per annum
- Total interns in 5-year period: 36 interns with intellectual disability

- Expected retention in NSW government sector roles is 25 per cent: 9 employees with intellectual disability (noting that retention is not the aim of the stream).

Organisational benefits

As described in the literature review and interviews for the project, while the primary outcomes are those for people with intellectual disability, outcomes inevitably accrue for the employer and employing organisation. Organisational benefits are likely to include:

- NSW government sector personnel gaining skills, confidence and experience in working with people with intellectual disability
- As described by program design workshop participants, internships offer a clear location or program within the NSW government sector, with the additional potential value of ‘ring fencing’ level 1/2 positions. Pitched at this level, the Career Access Program’s internships sit at a different level to the *Stepping Into* internship program, which typically includes Level 3/4 roles
- Over time, common job descriptions or task clusters can be identified and documented, allowing for a mix of standardised position descriptions with customisation for individual interns as part of each program round. This structured approach would also support the development of procedures for tracking workplace learning and assessing competencies aligned with the NSW Capability Framework for government sector roles. This is particularly important for people with intellectual disability where the intention is to build competencies through the internship, rather than requiring pre-existing competencies before placement
- On completion, interns could choose to undergo a comparative assessment against the NSW Capability Framework and enter NSW government sector talent pool for future roles. This allows the accrual of skills through workplace learning and experience, and assessment at suitable time points relevant to acquisition. Such an approach also highlights how a programmatic focus can evolve procedures that can later be utilised beyond the program. Simultaneously, it offers a mechanism to build the NSW government sector talent pool with a more diverse cohort that better reflects its client base
- It is likely that the level of support required by both interns and department hosts will be higher than that provided within the *Stepping Into* program. A program with clear boundaries and timeframes enables the establishment of dedicated relationships with specialised talent providers, including specialist schools, Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs), work integrated social enterprises, specialised employment initiatives, and *Inclusive Employment Australia* providers, building the foundation for a sustainable approach in the longer term

- Unlike ongoing positions, internships offer ‘flexibility and agility’ and can move across departmental areas more easily if supported by a central pool of funding and dedicated personnel to drive and support the program.

Considerations

Remuneration for interns

While the bulk of internship programs in Australia and internationally that have been discussed in this report are unpaid, there is a precedent for paying interns in the *Stepping Into* internship program. This is a paid approach already in place across the NSW government sector.

Engagement with public sector unions may provide input on the most suitable way forward.

Insourcing as a form of task or role creation

An opportunity to create a broader range of tasks for interns could be through the ‘insourcing’ of work previously outsourced to disability enterprises (i.e. returning some activities to the public service along with the employees with intellectual disability to do them). The approach taken by the Department of Defence through its Defence Administrative Assistance Program may be instructive here (noting, however, the significant cost outlay by the agency).

Stream 2: Creation of dedicated lived experience roles

Description

This stream involves paid, part-time government sector roles created specifically for people with intellectual disability. These roles draw on the lived experience of intellectual disability to inform more inclusive government policies, plans and practices (such as inclusive communication) in work areas that service people with intellectual disability, such as health, education and justice. In addition, these roles can support upskilling of government sector personnel and commissioned service providers through activities such as training / professional development, and development of targeted guidance.

Lived experience roles are created in contexts where personal experience is considered a valuable asset. These roles can enhance engagement with clients who share similar characteristics or contribute to workplace knowledge, improving service delivery. Program design workshop participants identified specific business areas with high numbers of clients with intellectual disability, such as the courts and child protection. Beyond creating career pathways for people with intellectual disability, this approach also strengthens disability confidence and competence in the government sector by fostering learning from colleagues with lived experience.

Features

- Roles are offered on a fixed-term basis, offering flexibility
- A set of roles are identified upfront that meet department needs which can then be further customised to suit each lived experience advisor's strengths, capabilities and aspirations to acquire new skills
- Centrally funded and coordinated, with a dedicated internal resource responsible for program promotion and oversight
- Delivered in partnership with a suitably qualified, specialist organisation that would be responsible for supporting the identification of job tasks, sourcing and supporting lived experience personnel.

Target group

- Adults with intellectual disability (targeting those with suitable lived experience relevant to the role features).

Approach

Program implementation – Year 1

- Identify one department / work area to pilot the program
- Partner with one or more suitably qualified employment support provider/s with expertise in supporting people with intellectual disability to act as an intermediary – identifying job tasks / roles, sourcing and supporting the employee onsite
- Identify at least one talent pipeline partner (which may be the same employment support provider / intermediary as above)
- Define and agree with the intermediary key support features required by departments / work areas to sustain the employee /s
- Train and resource host department / work area to welcome and support the employee /s, including for example, resources co-designed with key public sector representatives (including from the DCJ Disability Employment Network).

Program implementation – Year 2 and onwards

Expand the program to one or two departments / work areas per annum.

Key ingredients for success

The following four key ingredients for success are common across both streams in the Career Access Program. and are detailed further in the 'Key ingredients for success in both streams' sub section.

- Talent pipeline for recruitment
- Building an inclusive environment
- Ongoing support for individual with intellectual disability
- Ongoing support for host department / work area.

In addition, one further ingredient is important for this stream.

Identifying program implementation partner

A critical element for this stream is the shaping of lived experience roles in ways that will succeed. Similar roles can be found in other settings, including some public service and many community service and advocacy settings. To support this, the program should form a partnership with one or two disability support organisations to assist in creating the roles and recruiting appropriate personnel. An ideal program partner would be an organisation with strong links to people with intellectual disability (for example, a cohort advocacy organisation) which has both a network of potential candidates, as well as experience in designing and managing lived experience roles.

The program partner will undertake activities to enhance some of the other ingredients for success, such as the talent pipeline, as well as offering ongoing support for the new employee. Ongoing support will include providing or sourcing training relevant to the role, for example public speaking.

Outcomes and Impact

Program outcomes for people with intellectual disability

- People with intellectual disability gain experience of work
 - Work experience aids understanding of vocational interests, suitability and effective workplace adjustments and supports
 - Evidence of work experience supports future employment opportunities
- Increased work expectations of people with intellectual disability, their families and carers.

Reach

The scale of the program is yet to be established though it is likely that the scale would be modest given the roles are bespoke and targeted. In this context, it could be expected to create up to five roles within a five-year period.

One model that could be considered is a group approach, where a group of individuals is recruited and trained into a single role and then the role shared. For example, the Down Syndrome Australia Health Ambassador program (discussed earlier) created a total of ten roles

where the part-time work was rostered across the individuals to suit availability. The collegial nature of the way role and the group approach was seen to be a strength of its design in this instance (Wilson, Crosbie, et al., 2023).

Organisational benefits

As anticipated in the first stream, NSW government sector personnel are likely to gain skills, confidence and experience in working directly with people with intellectual disability as colleagues as well as from targeted professional development delivered by lived experience roles.

A focus on the integration of lived experience and expertise into DCJ activities is not new. One example mentioned by program design workshop participants is the involvement of the First Peoples Disability Network in the Koori Court. This project brought expertise around disability systems and services into connection with stakeholders in the justice system. Given the over-representation of people with intellectual disability in the justice system, workshop participants felt this was a valuable context for lived experience roles, for example point of client contact, reception and wayfinding roles in the court precinct.

The creation of lived experience roles was also seen as a way to address the need to uplift the accessibility of government systems and communications, as identified in the response to the Disability Royal Commission (Department of Communities and Justice, 2024). In particular, these roles would demonstrate value in implementing the government's election commitment in relation to improving Easy Read access across DCJ.

Further, the use of lived experience roles is consistent with the intentions of the Disability Royal Commission and the NSW Government's response to it. Lived experience roles for people with intellectual disability can be a mechanism to advance the actions outlined in the NSW Government's Implementation plan, including directly supporting engagement with people with intellectual disability as part of this response. Lived experience roles can be used to build inclusive mainstream services, a key response to the Disability Royal Commission (Department of Communities and Justice, 2024).

Considerations

As discussed earlier, there is a need for high-level executive champion for disability inclusion initiatives. Consistent with evidence (Department of Social Services, 2017), this has been a key ingredient of the Australian Human Rights Commission IncludeAbility project (Crosbie & Wilson, 2023). In the DCJ context, this could be at the level of Department Secretary.

Also discussed earlier was the need to create and maintain clear communication about the roles and their availability. This would include updating the 'I work for NSW' website to both advertise

the roles and the pathways for people with intellectual disability. In turn, such communication functions to make the commitment of government clear.

Key ingredients for success in both streams

Talent pipeline / pools for recruitment

The Career Access Program should use specialist organisations, preferably ones that know the individual candidates well, to facilitate employment pathways at scale. These might include:

- Specialist and mainstream schools with vocational pathway students
- Australian Disability Enterprises (as featured in the IncludeAbility project, Crosbie & Wilson, 2023)
- Work integrated social enterprises that recruit, train and employ people with intellectual disability
- Other specialist disability organisations such as Down Syndrome Australia (responsible for the Employment Connections program (Wilson, Crosbie, et al., 2023)
- Specialist disability employment support services (such as Job Support), to be called *Inclusive Employment Australia* services from November 2025
- Vocational education and training providers (TAFE) with expertise in supporting students with intellectual disability.

Australian Disability Enterprises are the largest employers of people with intellectual disability in Australia, with the largest proportion of disability enterprises situated in NSW (around 189 sites in NSW in 2022 (Wilson, Qian-Khoo, et al., 2023). As jobs-focused organisations, they have built deep knowledge of how to support employees with disability and the conditions for their success in the workplace, though not all have well-established mechanisms to support transition of employees into other employment.

Other organisations are already operating at scale in the provision of employment support for people with intellectual disability. One potential approach may be to partner with a single provider like WISE Employment (currently scaling Project SEARCH) or Down Syndrome Australia (currently operating the Employment Connections Service) and work with them to customise or replicate the program to fit the requirements of DCJ.

Building an inclusive environment

A strong, inclusive and supportive team environment is essential for candidates' success. This requires pre-placement and ongoing training for staff and managers covering disability confidence, effective communication, workplace adjustments and necessary support strategies.

Ongoing support for host department / work area

The host department / work area will benefit from ready access to support and information during the placement, a key success factor identified in both the literature and the program design workshop. To ensure this, a specialist organisation will support both the individual and the workplace, which may be the same or a different organisation that facilitated recruitment. However, the individual's day-to-day support, onboarding, and ongoing development remain the responsibility of their line manager, who can access the additional expertise as needed to address any disability-related requirements. Examples of support required can be found in Appendix A.

Ongoing support for the intern / employee

A range of supports may be beneficial for interns / employees with intellectual disability depending on their workplace needs. The nature of support offered would be determined by the Career Access Program intermediary, the individual and the organisation.

It is recommended that all new starters be allocated a 'buddy', i.e. a member of staff with experience in the organisational unit and / or a mentor with lived experience of disability to offer an alternative mechanism for advice and support outside of the immediate team environment. Beyond this, the dedicated internal program coordination role would be responsible for checking in with the new starter about the suitability of any adjustments and the workplace more broadly. Examples of support required can be found in Appendix A.

Some interns / employees with intellectual disability may also have NDIS funding to purchase on-the-job training support from other service providers. In these instances, the individual may be supported at work for some of the time by a skilled workplace trainer or support worker. Not all individuals would have this funding or choose to use it in this way.

Internal resource requirements in both approaches

Dedicated personnel

Across the evidence (both research and applied) there is a common ingredient of dedicated internal program coordination personnel. As identified earlier, the current workplace environment is one where a range of barriers prevent the successful employment of people with intellectual disability. These barriers need to be addressed in the context of introducing and managing the Career Access Program in order for it to be successful. A core mechanism for this is dedicated program personnel. These personnel also offer training and support to host department / work areas.

Inclusive onboarding and development

An audit of human resource systems is required to identify their suitability for use by people with intellectual disability. Modifications (or workarounds) are likely to be required to onboarding activities, such as completing learning management system activities, as well as employment contracts and payroll instructions. Examples of modifications may be available from the specialist organisations selected as program partners. Some further examples are available in the Council for Intellectual Disability (n.d.-b) resource.

NEXT STEPS

The initial design of the Career Access Program offers two streams to further develop in line with the evidence. It has the potential to significantly advance the employment outcomes of people with intellectual disability and the role of the NSW Government in these.

Although they recognised the barriers, stakeholders were unanimous about the benefits of employing people with intellectual disability for the state of NSW. The NSW Government has already advanced towards this goal and has relevant experience to draw on.

The following captures both some of these opportunities to capitalise on as well as highlights important initial steps.

Drawing on the lived experience already in DCJ

There is already expertise within DCJ which can be mobilised. It is important to connect to the existing expertise, initiative and advocacy of employees with disability in DCJ and the NSW public service through the DCJ Disability Employment Network. This group has expertise and skills in building the inclusivity of DCJ that can be immediately harnessed in support of this initiative.

In addition, DCJ supports disability mentoring and disability leadership programs, each running in alternate years, which may also be useful to connect alumni and supporters to the Career Access Program initiative. DCJ has substantial experience in delivering internship programs for people with disability and other identified groups and has substantial intelligence about the program design elements necessary for successful implementation.

Low hanging fruit

There are already organisations that specialise in providing in employment and / or vocational training support for people with intellectual disability. These offer an immediate opportunity to leverage their activities and resources to support the program. Unfortunately, the disability employment ecosystem is unnecessarily fragmented, so explicit work is required by NSW Government to 'join the dots' across diverse organisations. This includes:

- Connecting to existing talent pipelines as new ways to source talent. For some of the organisations with these talent pools, they are likewise seeking ways to better connect people with intellectual disability with potential employers
- Connecting to other aligned initiatives, such as the Australian Human Rights Commission IncludeAbility – Equality at Work project, which have also had a focus on people with intellectual disability and offer resources to employers to aid inclusive practice. This project also offers a series of pilots where support is provided to large employers to

implement new approaches. The NSW Government could seek to become a pilot employer to build and implement the new Careers Access program

- From November 2025, the new *Inclusive Employment Australia* program (formerly Disability Employment Services) will commence with a new specialist focus including people with intellectual disability more explicitly. The program includes a focus on supporting work experience and early preparation activities, as well as wage subsidies and other supports. It is likely that new and additional specialist organisations, focusing on jobseekers with intellectual disability, will be part of this program, thus offering clear partnership opportunities and choice for the NSW Government.

Towards a pilot

There is a need to dedicate resources to building better intelligence of key potential partners across the disability employment ecosystem (for example, understand preferred partners within the disability enterprise sector). This requires identifying the personnel responsible for this activity.

The design of the Career Access Program requires further work to concretise its implementation. This includes building a list of potential roles and associated tasks (i.e. role descriptions) that are likely to suit people with intellectual disability, and a list of suitable host departments and work areas. This aids in building awareness internally within the department about opportunities to host an intern and can also be used as a broad guide to recruit (noting that roles can be further customised and that interns will acquire skills through being in roles). This would also involve a 'wish list' of activities that need to be done within teams, but for which there is currently insufficient bandwidth. Role evaluations would then need to occur to identify the appropriate grade for the role. Additionally, there is likely to be a need to formalise the targeted recruitment approach as the most effective mechanism to support the Career Access Program.

While there is already professional development available in relation to disability awareness and confidence, further professional development will need to target the context of intellectual disability. Front-end development of suitable learning resources for DCJ personnel related to effectively supporting people with intellectual disability in employment and in workplace learning will be needed. In addition, DCJ will need to commence the adaptation of contracting and onboarding processes to ensure they are accessible for people with intellectual disability.

A critical element is the allocation of a central pool of funding for the initiative, additional to existing programs, that supports it regardless of location within DCJ. As with the other internship programs, the programs should be supported by dedicated personnel (discussed above).

The adoption of a phased approach may be the most viable mechanism to action these activities, all of which serve to support the long term sustainability of the Career Access Program. For

example, the Department could commence with the internship program for people with intellectual disability. This could be the mechanism to build disability awareness and confidence across work areas. This in turn creates a momentum for the creation of dedicated lived experience roles for people with intellectual disability.

Broader structural change

Many drivers are in place to exclude people with intellectual disability from the public service as employees. However, there remains opportunity at other levels of government (such as Treasury) to reinvestigate investment decisions. While a strong focus on social procurement provides a mechanism to invest in creating social value, this investment risks pushing employment opportunities for particular cohorts of NSW citizens to employers outside the public service and leaving few, if any, suitable opportunities within it. Alongside the development of specific programs and initiatives, there is a need to constantly monitor decisions for their impact on the employment opportunities of those under-represented within the NSW public service proportionate to their population size within NSW.

With the goal to employ people with intellectual disability within the public service, further investment is also needed in changing systems to be accessible to this group. This will necessarily entail translation of many key documents into Easy Read or Easy English and allocating sufficient budget for these kinds of structural changes likely to benefit diverse employees.

Finally, foundational change is needed in NSW government sector workplaces to raise the standard to one of accessibility and inclusivity where even existing employees with disability feel safe and supported.

CONCLUSION

People with intellectual disability are members of the NSW community but remain significantly marginalised from the labour market. This reflects decades of policy and societal attitudes that frame people with intellectual disability as being ‘non-workers’ (Crosbie, 2023). Because of this, people with intellectual disability have been offered few opportunities for employment and a very narrow range of employment supports. This situation, and its negative consequences, were highlighted in the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, & Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023) with recommendations for all public services to increase their employment of people with disability.

In alignment with this intent, the NSW Government has endorsed the goal of increasing employment of people with intellectual disability. However, to do so requires intentional and bespoke employment strategies that will enable successful outcomes. Generic solutions, policies and practices will not result in the increased employment of people with intellectual disability in the NSW government sector. It is clear that substantial barriers to their employment remain in the NSW government sector (as with many open employment settings), and there is a need for well-designed strategies informed by a strong evidence base. Fortunately, the evidence is available to inform such design.

Having identified the design features to support the employment of people with intellectual disability at scale, the next step is investment in implementation. As with any significant initiative that challenges long-standing views and systems, a sustained, long-term commitment is essential. While each phase of program implementation will generate actual results for the individuals involved, attaining embedded, ongoing employment of people with intellectual disability across government will require commitment in the longer term. The design proposed in this report lays the foundation for lasting impact by initiating meaningful and sustainable change.

The call to action is clear from the Disability Royal Commission:

‘the public sector, as a major employer in Australia, should lead the way in employing people with disability and should model best practice inclusion for other workplaces’
(Disability Royal Commission, 2023, Vol 7, p. 419).

Real change is possible and in sight.

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APPENDIX A – EXAMPLE OF 'JOB COACH' ROLE OF INTERMEDIARY

The following is an edited excerpt from the guidance for the Supported Internship program, UK. It provides a useful explanation of the required activities to support people with intellectual disability in internships. Full information can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supported-internships-for-young-people-with-learning-difficulties/supported-internships#staffing-and-job-coaching>

The job coach

The core role of the job coach is to provide tailored support to both the supported intern and employers so that the young person can make a positive progression to paid employment. It is a distinct role within the team that requires specialised training. Job coaches should be trained in supported employment and systematic instruction, a structured approach to teaching decision-making and new skills to people with intellectual disabilities

The job coach will support the intern to learn from, develop in and maintain their supported internship work placement.

The job coach will support the employer to offer meaningful work placements that match the skills and needs of interns, adapting roles and tasks where possible and appropriate. They will also help employers to develop their confidence in employing people with a disability.

Pre-work placement activity

The pre-work placement activity is best delivered by job coaches, given their training. This work falls under the following categories:

- [vocational profiling](#) and assessment
- sourcing potential employers and identifying possible internship placements
- creating productive links between the intern and employer through job analysis, job matches, negotiating and 'carving' job roles
- practical support such as sourcing and gathering relevant documentation for work, understanding the dress code and workplace culture
- helping interns to sort out travel arrangements (for example, planning routes or getting bus passes) and accompanying them on visits to the workplace prior to starting a job

Workplace support

The support a job coach provides for a supported intern in the workplace includes:

- learning the job role in readiness for training the supported intern, and attending workplace inductions
- training the supported intern to master tasks by breaking them down and applying systematic instruction techniques
- checking supported interns' understanding of tasks and re-phrasing or repeating employer instructions when necessary
- producing visual or written aids (for example, a step-by-step task list) and ensuring any assistive technology is provided
- encouraging supported intern self-assessment and reflection as part of target-setting, monitoring and reviewing progress
- modelling workplace behaviours
- mentoring and confidence-building, including supporting interns to try out new ways to do things if they are not successful at first
- negotiating an increase in responsibilities or new activities
- troubleshooting or advocating for supported interns when things go wrong
- identifying skills development needs and either addressing them or referring to other staff
- if the need for support tapers off, regular workplace visits and observation of supported interns

Support for employers

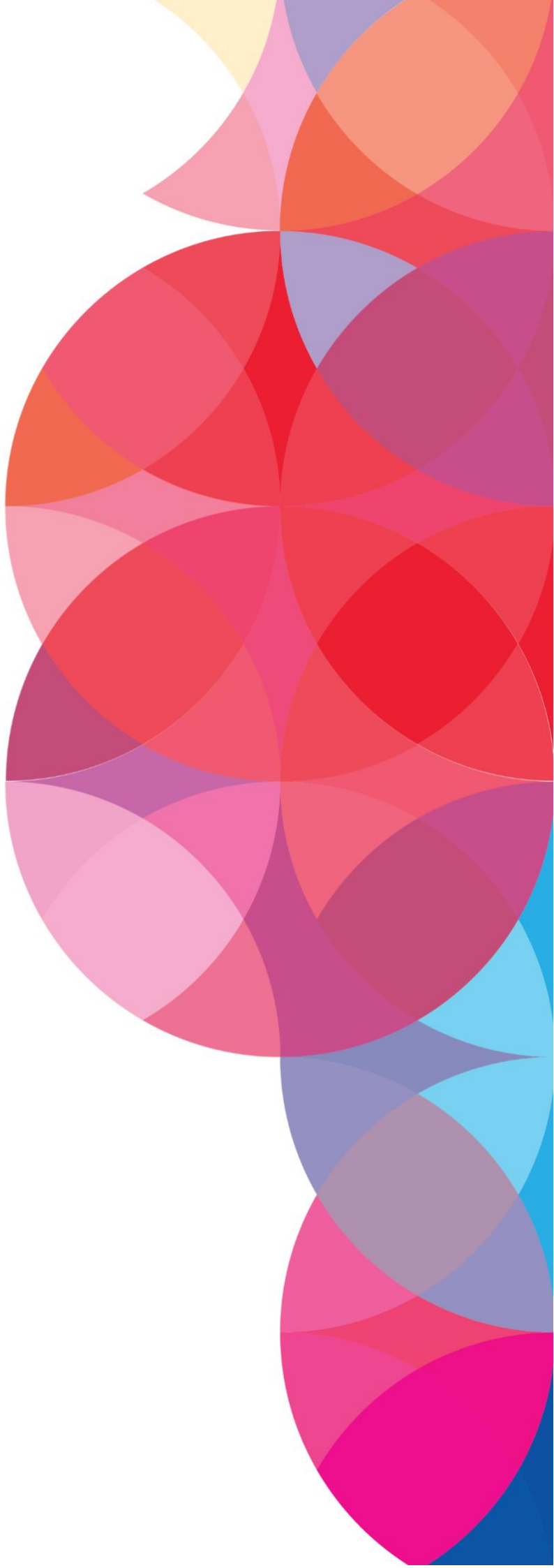
A job coach can support an employer by:

- explaining a supported intern's strengths, support needs and successful communication strategies
- providing information about a particular condition or impairment and advising on reasonable adjustments
- suggesting appropriate ways to explain tasks, developing supporting accessible resources of use to the wider workforce
- introducing the supported intern to their colleagues and offering colleagues advice on how to best support and include the intern
- being a first point of call if issues or problems arise and negotiating solutions
- identifying additional or more challenging tasks or roles that a supported intern could take on
- ensuring supported interns are on task and meeting workplace standards and expectations (for example, timekeeping and attendance)

Supporting positive progression

During the course of the supported internship, the job coach plays an important role in helping the supported intern to secure paid employment or meaningful progression by:

- negotiating opportunities for paid employment with the employer providing internship
- where that is not possible, supporting interns with job searches and signposting to other work opportunities
- supporting job applications, including CV development and revisions
- helping interns prepare for and accompanying them to job interviews
- signposting interns to other services (for example, local supported employment services) and if necessary, liaising with these agencies



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