

ARTICLES

The Emerging Role of Employment Counsellors: Bridging Vocational Support and Counselling in Australia's Evolving Disability Employment Landscape

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Traditional models of employment support in Australia have long prioritised job placement metrics over personal meaning, psychological safety, and sustainable engagement. In this paper, we examine the evolving role of employment counsellors within the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), distinguishing their contributions from those of conventional career and rehabilitation counselling. Grounded in the Psychologically Informed Employment Counselling Framework (PIE-CF), this role integrates trauma-informed care, neurodiversity-affirming approaches, and relational practice into the Customised Employment (CE) process. Drawing from counselling psychology, disability studies, and systems design, the PIE-CF maps relational micro-skills to vocational outcomes, aligning directly with the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia's (PACFA's) Certified Practising Counsellor competencies (2025). Employment counsellors, equipped with the PIE-CF and embedded within NDIS-supported CE services, constitute a distinct emerging profession. We outline the framework, competency mapping, implementation insights, and implications for recognition, fidelity, and long-term reform.

Traditional employment-related counselling has been guided by three main approaches: rehabilitation counselling, career counselling, and mental health counselling (Chan et al., 2015). Rehabilitation counselling assists individuals to return to work following an injury or illness and to adjust to disability (Peterson & Arick, 2019). Career counselling focuses on exploring vocational interests, identifying occupational options, and planning career pathways

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(Blustein et al., 2019; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2017; Parsons, 1909). Mental health counselling, meanwhile, addresses psychological issues that affect emotional wellbeing and functioning (Chan et al., 2015). However, these traditional methods often operate in isolation, targeting either vocational outcomes or mental health needs without acknowledging the complex interplay between the two domains, particularly for individuals with disabilities who require integrated and person-centred support (Chan et al., 2009; P. Smith, 2023).

In this paper, we introduce the Psychologically Informed Employment Counselling Framework (PIE-CF; P. Smith, 2025c) as a practice model embedded within the discovery phase of Customised Employment (CE). In CE, discovery functions as the gateway to personalised employment design. The PIE-CF provides the counselling architecture that makes this process psychologically informed and relationally safe, supporting identity exploration and vocational action within a person-centred context. Mapped to the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia's (PACFA's) Certified Practising Counsellor competencies (2025), the PIE-CF promotes ethical and evidence-based practice while embedding trauma-informed, neurodiversity-affirming, and culturally responsive approaches within employment counselling. The PIE-CF comprises three core domains: presence, inquiry, and empathic engagement, which guide the establishment of psychological safety, vocational sense-making, and the integration of mental health considerations into employment decision-making.

The framework operates within CE, a structured approach encompassing four phases: discovery, job development, negotiated hiring, and post-employment support. The PIE-CF is particularly well suited to discovery, where vocational identity exploration and mental health supports are integrated to enable employment pathways grounded in lived experience rather than assessment-driven matching (Blustein, 2013; Duffy et al., 2012; P. Smith, 2023). The discovery process introduces a person-centred, holistic approach that integrates employment and mental health counselling (Butterworth et al., 2023; Inge et al., 2023). Unlike conventional vocational rehabilitation and career counselling, which focus on assessment and placement within structured service systems (Winsor et al., 2023), the discovery process involves a comprehensive evaluation of an individual's vocational skills, career aspirations, employment barriers, and mental health status. It emphasises collaborative planning to align vocational and mental health goals, often using reflective and mindfulness-based strategies within counselling sessions (Chan et al., 2015; P. Smith, 2023).

The process engages with families and social networks, leveraging these connections to identify meaningful employment opportunities (Inge et al., 2023; Winsor et al., 2023). Moreover, the discovery process addresses the complex intersections between disabilities and mental health conditions (Schall et al., 2024; P. Smith, 2023). Through the process, practitioners aim to reduce stigma, enhance self-esteem, and support individuals in becoming

self-advocates within the employment setting (Butterworth et al., 2024; Inge et al., 2023). Through advocacy for workplace accommodations, trauma-informed care, and cultural competence, this community-based approach fosters environments that support both employment and mental health goals (Butterworth et al., 2023; Chan et al., 2015).

Purpose

In this paper, we examine the emerging integration of employment and mental health counselling within the discovery process, with attention to its distinct role in supporting individuals with disabilities. By contrasting this approach with traditional vocational rehabilitation and career counselling, we aim to underscore the significance of holistic, community-based strategies in achieving sustainable employment outcomes and enhancing overall wellbeing. The integration of mental health strategies, such as coping mechanisms and psychoeducation, into vocational counselling sessions represents a shift in practice that caters to the complex needs of individuals with concurrent disabilities and mental health conditions.

The purpose of this paper is also to explore the distinctive contributions of the discovery process in advocating for workplace accommodations, promoting self-determination, and fostering inclusive employment practices. We address the significance of these practices within the context of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and its funding provisions, which emphasise building client and employer capacity for sustainable employment outcomes.

In this paper, we highlight the emerging role of employment counsellors within a psychologically informed CE model. While discovery has always been integral to CE, its alignment with psychologically informed practice reframes the process as both vocational and therapeutic. Traditionally, employment counsellors have emphasised job placement, career exploration, and skill development within vocational rehabilitation frameworks (Winsor et al., 2023). In the integrated model, they assume a broader role as facilitators of holistic support, bridging psychological insight with customised job development to enhance sustainable employment outcomes (Butterworth et al., 2023; Inge et al., 2023).

The New Role of Employment Counsellors

The emerging role of employment counsellors within a psychologically informed CE model comprises multiple functions and elements:

Holistic Assessment and Planning

In the context of discovery, holistic assessment refers to an in-depth, relational process that explores a participant's lived experience, identity, and environment rather than simply evaluating job readiness or matching skills to vacancies (P. Smith et al., 2018). Within the PIE-CF domain of inquiry, employment counsellors use open dialogue, naturalistic observation, and reflective listening to identify meaningful insights that connect experience,

emotion, and context. Genuine insights are distinguished from incidental observations through structured reflection, considering whether a theme recurs across settings, carries emotional weight, is confirmed by others, or links to environmental factors affecting participation. Drawing on narrative therapy, strengths-based counselling, and psychodynamic-informed practice, counsellors triangulate information from the participant, family, and environment to test the reliability of emerging themes. Each insight is validated through collaborative reflection to ensure accuracy and shared meaning (Gelso & Hayes, 2007; E. J. Smith, 2006; White & Epston, 1990). The resulting discovery profile or vocational blueprint integrates psychological and contextual data into actionable CE strategies grounded in ethical, person-centred practice.

Integration of Mental Health Strategies

The engagement domain of the PIE-CF translates reflection into action through collaborative goal setting, pacing, and graded exposure to work environments. Within this process, the employment counsellor applies therapeutic and vocational techniques to help participants build confidence and resilience in real work settings. Motivational interviewing supports engagement by fostering intrinsic motivation and resolving ambivalence about employment change through guided dialogue (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Cognitive behavioural coaching provides structured problem-solving and cognitive reframing strategies that assist participants to manage anxiety, executive functioning challenges, and negative self-talk during job development or workplace adjustment (Neenan & Palmer, 2001). Behavioural activation reinforces engagement through incremental, mastery-oriented activities that link participation in real-world tasks to improvements in mood and self-efficacy (Martell et al., 2010). Together, these modalities equip employment counsellors to implement the engagement domain's focus on self-determination, agency, and psychological pacing within employment contexts.

Advocacy and Capacity Building

The discovery process frequently reveals not only individual strengths but also systemic barriers such as discriminatory recruitment practices or sensory-unfriendly environments. Employment counsellors play a critical role in translating discovery insights into tailored workplace advocacy. Guided by the engagement domain of the PIE-CF, employment counsellors collaborate with employers, families, and CE specialists to co-design reasonable accommodations, communication strategies, and onboarding plans. Drawing on principles from the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Lewis et al., 2010) and ecological counselling models based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Swanson & Fouad, 2019), employment counsellors educate employers on inclusive practices and advocate for systemic change, such as role restructuring or the creation of inclusive tasks. This advocacy is relational because inclusion

depends on trust-based collaboration among counsellors, employers, and participants, and it is evidence-informed through research demonstrating that sustained employer partnerships and customised job design lead to improved and enduring employment outcomes for people with disability (Luecking, 2011).

Trauma-Informed and Culturally Competent Practice

Many individuals entering discovery have lived experience of trauma, stigma, or cultural dislocation (O'Sullivan et al., 2019). The presence domain of the PIE-CF ensures that employment counsellors prioritise safety, trust, and attunement from the first point of contact. Culturally responsive and trauma-informed practice is embedded throughout the discovery process, supported by person-centred therapy (Rogers, 1951), acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes et al., 2012), and attachment-based approaches, each of which promote relational safety, empathy, and values-driven change in ways consistent with trauma-informed and culturally responsive counselling (Hook et al., 2016). This lens informs how observations are made, how preferences are elicited, and how job exploration is scaffolded, ensuring that participants are not retraumatised by abrupt assessments or unsupported transitions. In discovery, this may involve adapting communication styles, incorporating family or community authority figures, or pacing exposure to new environments. The result is a discovery process that affirms identity, honours cultural frameworks, and supports emotional regulation, laying the foundation for meaningful and safe employment engagement.

Community Engagement and Social Capital

Discovery is not only about identifying individual interests; it also maps the relational and community assets that can be mobilised to support employment. Employment counsellors apply PIE-CF principles to assess and engage the participant's social networks, natural supports, and local organisations that align with vocational goals. This includes mapping informal support systems, exploring connections within interest-based communities, and identifying potential allies within faith groups, cultural associations, or neighbourhood projects. Using eco-systemic thinking and community psychology principles, employment counsellors foster the conditions for social inclusion, not just job placement. This work strengthens the participant's social capital and embeds employment within a web of sustainable, community-based support (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

Navigating Policy and Funding Frameworks

Employment counsellors are increasingly required to act as navigators of policy, funding, and service systems, translating discovery outcomes into fundable supports under the NDIS. Their understanding of NDIS item codes, planning terminology, and functional-impact language ensures that discovery insights are not only therapeutically valuable but administratively

actionable (G. Carey et al., 2021). Using the PIE-CF's inquiry and engagement domains, employment counsellors frame employment aspirations within the language of reasonable and necessary supports, assist in linking discovery findings to capacity-building line items within the NDIS price guide, and advocate for appropriate funding for job development and counselling. This dual role as practitioner and systems interpreter ensures that psychologically informed employment planning is both financially sustainable and aligned with broader NDIS outcomes such as increased independence, social participation, and economic inclusion (G. Carey et al., 2018; NDIA, 2024). This multifaceted role ultimately positions employment counsellors as pivotal players in promoting both employment success and overall wellbeing for individuals with disabilities.

In this paper, we explore how the PIE-CF aligns with PACFA's professional competencies to strengthen the emerging professional identity of employment counsellors in Australia. Alignment with an established national framework provides ethical and theoretical grounding while distinguishing employment counselling as a specialised practice that integrates psychological insight with vocational and policy expertise. In doing so, the PIE-CF contributes to the professional self-clarification of counselling in Australia and reinforces legitimacy, accountability, and public trust within the evolving human services landscape (McLeod 2019; O'Hara, 2023; PACFA, 2025).

Literature Review

Traditional Counselling Approaches and Their Limits

Conventional counselling roles relevant to employment typically fall into three categories: rehabilitation counselling, career counselling, and mental health counselling. Rehabilitation counselling, rooted in the medical model, emphasises vocational restoration post-injury or illness, often through assessments, job readiness, and functional capacity evaluations (Chan et al., 2015). Career counselling often relies on trait-factor theories, such as Holland's typologies (Holland, 2013), which match skills and interests to predetermined roles within the labour market. Meanwhile, mental health counselling focuses on emotional wellbeing, utilising psychotherapeutic techniques to manage trauma, anxiety, and stress, but traditionally excludes vocational planning as a therapeutic focus (T. A. Carey, 2014).

Scholars such as Cridland et al. (2013) and Wilton and Schuer (2006) emphasise the need for integrated models that recognise work as both a psychosocial and socio-economic determinant of wellbeing. While each discipline contributes valuable insights, none adequately captures the complex interplay of disability, identity, systemic marginalisation, and work (Shakespeare, 2013). People with disabilities frequently encounter psychological and structural barriers such as stigma, executive functioning challenges, and trauma related to exclusion that siloed vocational or therapeutic supports fail to address (G. Carey, Malbon, et al., 2018; Hedley et al., 2018).

Importantly, neither rehabilitation counselling nor career counselling is well integrated within the NDIS service environment. Rehabilitation counselling, while highly valuable in injury management and return-to-work schemes, remains predominantly situated within insurance and workers' compensation systems, with limited intersection with developmental disability or mental health recovery models (Australian Society of Rehabilitation Counsellors [ASORC], 2019, 2024). Career counselling, although increasingly adopting reflective and narrative approaches, often assumes a baseline level of career capital and life stability not available to many NDIS participants navigating complex disability-related and psychosocial needs (Kavanagh et al., 2021; National Disability Insurance Agency [NDIA], 2024; National Disability Insurance Scheme Research and Evaluation Branch, n.d.). These limitations underscore the need for integrated, psychologically informed approaches that bridge vocational and therapeutic domains within disability employment practice.

Employment counselling, as conceptualised through the PIE-CF, addresses these limitations by integrating vocational and psychological domains within a disability-specific context. Rooted in Rogers' (1957, 1961) person-centred principles of empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard, the PIE-CF situates relational presence as fundamental to the counselling process. Evidence from supported employment research, particularly the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model, demonstrates that embedding employment services within mental health systems produces superior job attainment and retention outcomes compared with traditional vocational or rehabilitation approaches (Frederick & VanderWeele, 2019; Modini et al., 2016). Accordingly, the PIE-CF extends this evidence base by positioning employment counsellors not merely as brokers of opportunity but as relational guides who integrate therapeutic attunement, trauma-informed practice, and vocational facilitation into their roles—approaches rarely encompassed within traditional career or rehabilitation counselling.

Disability Employment Systems: Fragmentation and Reform

Australia's disability employment system has undergone significant reforms over the past 3 decades, transitioning from sheltered workshops to Disability Employment Services (DES), and more recently, to individualised supports under the NDIS (G. Carey, Malbon, et al., 2018). However, these systems often function in isolation, with DES focused on job placement outcomes and the NDIS prioritising capacity building, but without clear interfaces between employment and psychosocial support (P. Smith, 2018). Mental health services, meanwhile, operate under health portfolios and may not engage with employment-related concerns at all.

This fragmentation contributes to poor employment retention, participant disengagement, and under-utilisation of NDIS supports for employment preparation (NDIS, 2025). In contrast, international models, such as IPS in the United Kingdom (Bond et al., 2012) and the United States'

implementation of CE through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (Butterworth & Migliore, 2015), have begun to explore ways to integrate therapeutic and employment services.

However, many employment models emphasise functionality and rapid placement without sufficient attention to psychological readiness, identity formation, or healing. As a result, participants may be moved into work before underlying conditions or past traumas are addressed, which can undermine sustainability and wellbeing. The literature underscores the need for a truly psychologically informed model of employment counselling, especially within disability-specific frameworks like the NDIS (McDowell et al., 2021).

The Development and Appropriateness of the PIE-CF

The PIE-CF (P. Smith, 2025c) was developed to bridge the gap between traditional employment supports and the psychological realities faced in work by people with disabilities. Its design emerged from extensive practice-based research and consultation involving CE practitioners, allied health professionals, and people with lived experience of disability. Grounded in a synthesis of psychological theory, counselling practice, and disability advocacy principles, the PIE-CF was created through applied research at the Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice (CDERP). The framework evolved from reflective supervision data, case analyses, and practitioner consultations conducted between 2021 and 2025. The PIE-CF therefore represents an original contribution that integrates established psychological theories with field-tested employment practice.

At its core, the PIE-CF is a response to the absence of relational depth in many employment interventions. It builds on the relational ethos of person-centred therapy (Rogers, 1951), the autonomy-supporting tenets of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and the safety principles of trauma-informed practice (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Informed by the neurodiversity movement (Kapp et al., 2013) and strengths-based counselling (Saleebey, 1996), the PIE-CF explicitly affirms cognitive diversity and participant agency.

Functionally, the PIE-CF provides a structured model of practice through three domains: presence, inquiry, and engagement (Rogers, 1961; P. Smith, 2025c). These domains reflect relational depth, reflective exploration, and collaborative action; elements essential to building trust and agency in participants navigating complex barriers. The framework does not replace vocational development tools; instead, it provides the psychological and ethical scaffolding required to ensure that discovery, job development, and employment planning are genuinely person-led, culturally attuned, and developmentally paced.

The appropriateness of the PIE-CF within the NDIS context is twofold. First, it directly aligns with the NDIS Quality and Safeguarding Framework's emphasis on participant voice, dignity of risk, and trauma-informed

engagement. Second, it is operationalisable within existing line items within the framework for capacity building and support coordination, making it a viable and fundable intervention model.

The PIE-CF was also explicitly designed to align with PACFA's Certified Practising Counsellor competencies (PACFA, 2025), underscoring that employment counselling is not a generic support task but a distinct and advanced therapeutic practice. This mapping has enabled service providers to structure supervision, documentation, and quality assurance practices in a manner consistent with recognised counselling standards.

Ultimately, the PIE-CF functions as both a practice guide and a systems reform tool. It invites a shift from transactional service delivery toward ethical, inclusive, and psychologically resonant pathways into employment, particularly for people with disability whose histories with education, services, and work have often been marked by exclusion, coercion, or neglect (G. Carey, Malbon, et al., 2018; P. Smith, 2025b).

Method

Research Question

How does the PIE-CF define and support the emerging professional role of employment counsellors within the NDIS, and how does it align with national counselling competencies and disability employment reform goals?

Design

This paper employs a conceptual and framework analysis approach to articulate and evaluate the PIE-CF as a model of psychologically informed employment counselling. Two interconnected methods were used:

Theoretical Integration and Framework Construction

Drawing from counselling psychology, disability studies, and neurodiversity-affirming practice, the PIE-CF was developed to address gaps in traditional career, rehabilitation, and mental health counselling models. The framework emerged through iterative analysis of client casework, reflective practitioner input, and alignment with established psychological theories.

Competency Mapping and Systems Alignment

A structured crosswalk was conducted between the PIE-CF domains (presence, inquiry, engagement) and PACFA's Certified Practising Counsellor competencies (PACFA, 2025). This systematic mapping compared each PIE-CF domain with corresponding PACFA elements to identify convergence, divergence, and enhancement opportunities (see Appendix). A complementary narrative compliance analysis assessed the depth of alignment and highlighted areas where the PIE-CF introduces employment-specific ethical and relational practices.

To further substantiate the competency base of the emerging employment counsellor role, we also examined the framework against NDIS funding mechanisms, quality and safeguarding guidelines, and policy objectives related to capacity building, choice and control, and employment participation. This analysis evaluated the feasibility of implementing the PIE-CF within relevant NDIS line items and its integration with fidelity tools such as the Customised Employment Quality Assurance Framework (CEQAF) and the Customised Employment Organisational Fidelity and Elevating Capacity Tool (CEOFACT) (see Appendix).

Results

As outlined earlier, the PIE-CF comprises three relational domains: presence, inquiry, and engagement. Each reflects progressive stages of psychological attunement, reflective exploration, and vocational action. The following section examines how these domains align with PACFA's competencies and contribute to ethical, sustainable employment counselling within the NDIS context. Through conceptual and competency mapping, it becomes evident that the PIE-CF not only addresses existing gaps in service delivery but also offers a structured and ethically grounded approach to achieving meaningful employment outcomes for people with disability.

Each domain of the PIE-CF plays a vital role in embedding therapeutic quality within the employment process. Presence enables employment counsellors to create a safe and affirming relational space. Grounded in person-centred therapy (Rogers, 1951) and aligned with PACFA's ethical and relational competencies (PACFA, 2025), this domain focuses on the emotional landscape of employment engagement. For many participants, employment planning is fraught with previous failures, stigma, or institutional trauma (Barrow et al., 2019). The counsellor's ability to foster psychological safety through attunement, empathy, and strengths-based validation becomes the foundation for sustainable vocational development.

The second domain, inquiry, shifts the conversation from deficit-based assessment to narrative discovery. Drawing on narrative therapy (Rice, 2015), motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), and career development theory (McMahon & Patton, 2018), employment counsellors support participants in articulating their vocational identity. This process honours both lived experience and aspirational goals, recognising that for many participants, the concept of "work" is inseparable from histories of exclusion or misrecognition. Within this domain, the PIE-CF provides a structure for counsellors to collaboratively explore routines, sensory preferences, community connections, and interpersonal values, elements that are often overlooked in traditional vocational assessments (Griffin et al., 2008).

The final domain, engagement, reflects the transition from internal reflection to external action. The PIE-CF scaffolds this shift with a strong ethical lens, ensuring participants are not rushed into placements or trials that compromise their autonomy or wellbeing. Drawing on principles from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), counsellors support participants

through pacing, choice architecture, and scaffolded exposure. Activities such as informational interviews, workplace visits, and collaborative job development are carefully aligned with the participant's comfort and readiness. This domain also aligns with PACFA's requirements for client-centred planning and the ethical use of power in decision-making (PACFA, 2025).

Importantly, the PIE-CF embeds neurodiversity-affirming practices as a core competency for practitioners rather than a specialist add-on. Influenced by the neurodiversity paradigm (Kapp et al., 2013), employment counsellors are trained to accommodate diverse communication styles, executive functioning profiles, and sensory needs. These practices fulfil PACFA's cultural responsiveness competency (2.19), extending it to cognitive and neurological difference (PACFA, 2025). Similarly, trauma-informed ethics are woven throughout the framework, informed by SAMHSA's (2014) guidance and developed for vocational contexts where retraumatisation risk is high. Whether through offering choices about timing and location of activities, pausing engagement when signs of distress emerge, or using reflective supervision, the PIE-CF equips practitioners to maintain client safety without disengagement.

The distinctiveness of the employment counsellor role becomes clear when compared with neighbouring disciplines. Rehabilitation counsellors typically support return-to-work post-injury and are often embedded in medico-legal systems (Chan et al., 2015). Their primary focus is on functional restoration and legal compliance, which limits their relevance in contexts involving developmental or psychosocial disabilities (Leahy et al., 2003). Career counsellors, while often person-centred, frequently rely on psychometric assessments and job-matching models that may fail to address structural exclusion or internalised stigma (McIlveen & Patton, 2006). Mental health therapists, by contrast, offer vital emotional support but often lack the training or mandate to engage in employment-related planning (Blustein, 2019).

The employment counsellor role, situated within the PIE-CF, addresses these gaps by integrating the psychological, vocational, relational, and systemic dimensions of employment. It is not simply a hybrid of existing roles, but a distinct profession that reflects the complexity of work, encompassing both the outcome and the therapeutic process.

In addition to its clinical grounding, the PIE-CF aligns with current NDIS service structures and reform agendas. It supports the NDIS Commission's emphasis on participant-led planning, choice and control, dignity of risk, and cultural responsiveness (NDIS, 2025). Employment counsellors can operate under capacity-building line items, making the model both scalable and fundable. Furthermore, the PIE-CF has been integrated into fidelity assurance tools such as CEQAF and CEOFECT (P. Smith, 2025b), enabling providers to monitor consistency, ethical safeguards, and participant experience as key indicators of quality.

Preliminary unpublished PIE-CF trial implementation data highlight its practical utility (P. Smith, 2025a). Participants report increased trust in services, greater clarity regarding employment preferences, and improved emotional regulation during the job exploration process. Counsellors describe more precise professional boundaries, reduced ethical dissonance, and stronger supervision cultures. Organisations note the emergence of coherent service models that can be articulated to participants, funders, and auditors alike. The ability to differentiate employment counselling from generic support coordination or job placement functions contributes to sector-wide clarity and professional legitimacy.

Taken together, these results suggest that the PIE-CF is not merely a helpful tool, but a necessary scaffold for embedding ethical, relational, and psychologically attuned practices in disability employment. Employment counsellors, as defined by this framework, are well-positioned to lead reform in an evolving NDIS landscape that demands both effectiveness and humanity.

Discussion

The integration of the PIE-CF into NDIS-funded employment services reframes counselling from an ancillary support to a central and necessary mechanism for ethical, sustainable, and person-led vocational outcomes. Within the Australian disability employment landscape, the emergence of employment counsellors represents a paradigm shift that moves beyond standard placement models toward practices grounded in psychological safety, identity formation, and healing. While the PIE-CF operates primarily within the discovery phase of CE, its implications extend well beyond that context. The focus of this paper is therefore the framework itself, including its professionalisation potential, theoretical coherence, and system-level relevance, rather than discovery as a standalone practice.

Through the PIE-CF, counselling becomes embedded in the vocational journey, not as pre-employment remediation or post-placement crisis support, but as an ongoing relational process that scaffolds exploration, readiness, and decision-making. The core therapeutic modalities supported by the PIE-CF—motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), mindfulness-based strategies (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990), and trauma-informed practice (SAMHSA, 2014)—map directly onto its foundational domains of presence, inquiry, and engagement. These evidence-informed approaches equip employment counsellors to address the psychological barriers that frequently inhibit sustained employment, including anxiety, low self-concept, disconnection from community, and ambivalence around identity as a worker.

Unlike traditional employment services that may prioritise rapid outcomes or compliance with funding targets (G. Carey, Dickinson, et al., 2018), the PIE-CF embeds deliberate pacing, choice architecture, and neurodiversity-affirming practice at every stage of the CE process. This allows participants to experience autonomy and dignity in risk-taking environments that are

attuned to their relational, cognitive, and sensory needs. The framework thereby mitigates ethical risks documented in standard employment models, including coercive placement practices, poor role–capacity alignment, and continued reliance on segregated or non-competitive wage arrangements (Wehman et al., 2018). Instead, the PIE-CF reframes employment not simply as a goal, but as a context for recovery, agency, and social participation.

Embedding the PIE-CF into organisational quality tools such as CEQAF and CEOFECT (P. Smith, 2025b) ensures that its implementation is not left to chance or individual discretion. These fidelity instruments offer structured reflection points around supervision, documentation, practitioner values, and participant experience, making person-centred practice observable, measurable, and repeatable. As a result, employment counsellors are not only supported in their work but are embedded within systems that prioritise ethical integrity and outcome relevance. This systems-level alignment bolsters the case for employment counsellors as a distinct professional role, governed by recognised standards such as those articulated by PACFA (2025).

The functional versatility of employment counsellors enhances service delivery across multiple phases of employment support. In collaboration with CE specialists, employment counsellors support discovery activities, capacity-building interventions, and post-placement coaching. Equally, they can work independently, particularly in contexts where participants require stabilisation or exploration before progressing to job development. Their ability to integrate emotional, relational, and vocational dimensions ensures that employment pathways are pursued without compromising mental health or identity erosion but instead promoting sustainable and personally meaningful work.

For the NDIS and broader employment policy architecture, these developments carry important implications. Recognising and formally funding employment counsellors as a distinct service category would close a long-standing gap between psychosocial support and vocational development, two domains that have too often operated in silos within the NDIS. Embedding the PIE-CF as a standard model within this role would ensure consistency of practice, scalability across provider types, and compatibility with PACFA-endorsed training and supervision pathways. Furthermore, it would support system reform by grounding employment policy in therapeutic relationships, rights-based practice, and individual aspiration.

In sum, the PIE-CF elevates counselling within disability employment from a reactive support to a proactive driver of change. Employment counsellors are not simply advisors or therapists but relational strategists working at the intersection of identity, support, and opportunity. Their formal recognition and integration into NDIS systems would represent a timely and necessary step toward a more inclusive, ethical, and effective employment landscape for people with disability.

Conclusion

Employment counsellors are emerging as a critical new professional group within Australia's disability employment landscape. Their practice, grounded in the PIE-CF, integrates therapeutic insight with vocational strategy, offering a structured and ethically robust model that addresses long-standing gaps between mental health support and employment services. Unlike traditional models that separate psychological wellbeing from workforce participation, employment counsellors provide a unified, relationally attuned approach that aligns deeply with participant goals, aspirations, and challenges.

The alignment of the PIE-CF with PACFA's competencies reinforces the credibility of this role and strengthens the case for its formal recognition as a distinct category within the NDIS. As the framework embeds values such as trauma-informed care, neurodiversity affirmation, and ethical pacing, it enables employment counsellors to support the complex needs of participants across the discovery process, vocational planning, and post-placement adjustment. Their presence ensures that employment is pursued not only as a policy objective, but also as a site of meaning, autonomy, and sustainable life change.

The inclusion of employment counsellors within NDIS service delivery structures represents a timely and necessary response to policy challenges around service fragmentation, poor employment outcomes, and the lack of psychological scaffolding in vocational pathways. By embedding the PIE-CF in training programs, reflective supervision, and quality assurance tools like CEQAF and CEOFECT, the sector can ensure that this emerging profession is both scalable and governed by standards of ethical and relational integrity.

Looking ahead, targeted research is needed to examine the long-term impact of employment counsellor engagement on employment sustainability, psychological wellbeing, identity development, and service fidelity. Such evidence will be instrumental in shaping funding models, practice guidelines, and workforce development strategies. As a preliminary conceptual study, this paper establishes a foundation for empirical validation of the PIE-CF. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method designs to evaluate the outcomes of PIE-CF-trained employment counsellors in real-world practice. Ultimately, the formal recognition and resourcing of employment counsellors have the potential to transform disability employment in Australia by anchoring it in values of inclusion, relationship, and recovery.

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Appendix

Table A1. The PIE-CF's Alignments with PACFA's Competencies

PIE-CF Domain	Alignments with PACFA's CPC Competencies	Notes
Presence	4.4-4.7, 4.14-4.16	Establishes psychological safety before interventions
Inquiry	2.1-2.7, 3.1-3.5	Vocational identity, life story, assessment
Engagement	2.16, 3.2, 4.5	Explicit pacing & scaffolding for employment steps
Trauma-Informed	2.9, 3.5-3.10	Includes pacing to avoid retraumatisation
Neurodiversity Affirmation	2.19, 4.8, 4.9	Beyond sensitivity-explicit employer planning
Reflective Practice	5.1-5.11	Tied to CE-specific ethics (wages, undue placement)
Multidisciplinary	1.12-1.13	Integration with CEQAF, allied health, and families

Note. PACFA = Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia; PIE-CF = Psychologically Informed Employment Counselling Framework; CPC = Certified Practising Counsellor; CE = Customised Employment; CEQAF = Customised Employment Quality Assurance Framework.