

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

Reworking the Job Seeker Snapshot: Towards Trauma-Informed Design

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Welfare and Work Lab, based at the University of Melbourne's Parkville Campus, acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the unceded land on which we work, learn and live: the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people. We recognise the unique place held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of the lands and waterways across the Australian continent, with histories of continuous connection dating back more than 60,000 years. We acknowledge their enduring cultural practices of caring for Country. We pay respect to Elders past and present and acknowledge the importance of Indigenous knowledge in the Academy. As a community of researchers and educators we are privileged to work and learn every day with Indigenous colleagues and partners.

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About the Australian Welfare and Work Lab

The Australian Welfare and Work Lab pioneers collaborative research with industry partners on new ways of commissioning and delivering employment services to help some of the most disadvantaged people in Australia into sustainable employment. The Lab builds on a program of policy-engaged research that has been tracking the impacts of welfare reform on the frontline delivery of employment services in Australia and internationally for over 20 years.

The Lab is focused on developing collaborative research partnerships with industry and government to test practice innovations in welfare-to-work programs and to build the evidence base for 'best practice' models in the governance and delivery of employment services.

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1. Introduction

The need for Australia's employment services system 'to ensure people receive inclusive and *trauma informed* supports' (DEWR, 2026: 29, emphasis added) is now increasingly recognised by government, community organisations, and service providers. This follows wider adoption of trauma-informed practice frameworks within welfare and social services delivery, and the recognition that people with experiences of trauma are particularly likely to use social services (Yatchmenoff et al., 2017: 167; Mahon, 2022: 2). This includes welfare-to-work and employment services (Corbett et al., 2026). Moreover, as Maitra and colleagues observe, social service users are also 'more likely to have not sought therapeutic services after experiencing harm/abuse' (2024: 8) which may increase the likelihood that service interactions evoke distressing memories or reproduce aspects of earlier harm.

If not carefully designed, interactions with welfare systems and routine administrative processes may worsen pre-existing trauma symptoms, intensify mental health conditions, and inadvertently reproduce fear, shame and anxiety in participants (Roberts et al., 2022; Batty et al., 2015). This includes processes for assessing jobseekers' employability and capacity to work which, as a recent discussion paper on *Shaping the Future of Employment Services* acknowledges, 'do not always reliably and quickly refer people to the service that is right for them' (DEWR, 2026: 14). For instance, a UK study of veterans' experiences of accessing social security identified work capability assessments as having 'the potential for re-traumatisation' (Scullion and Curchin, 2022: 101). This was due to the anxiety that the assessment process caused many veterans, undermining their emotional safety, and people's experiences of mental health issues being inadequately considered through the process.

Trauma Informed Practice and Participant Assessment

Trauma-informed practice is an approach to designing and delivering health and social services so as 'to ensure services help rather than harm' (Maitra et al, 2024: 8). While trauma-informed practice is operationalised in different ways across sectors and countries, at the core of all trauma-informed practice frameworks is a commitment to six common principles: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, agency (or empowerment, voice, and choice), collaboration and mutuality, peer support, and intersectionality (SAMSHA, 2014). These principles initially emerged as practice frameworks in mental health settings. However, their scope has been extended to social and human services as recognition has grown that trauma is not only a health concern but a complex social phenomenon. Trauma intersects with various public policies (Bowen and Murshid 2016) and affects many life domains in long-lasting ways (Fallot and Harris, 2009: 1–2; Powers and Duys, 2020: 177). Recognising this, and the concerns raised in previous studies regarding the impact of jobseeker assessment processes on trauma survivors, the Australian Welfare and Work Lab and Joblink Plus conducted a 'hackathon' to rethink the Job Seeker Snapshot through a trauma-informed lens.

The Job Seeker Snapshot is a form of work capability assessment that is used within Australian employment services to gather information about participants' circumstances and the factors affecting their likelihood of experiencing long-term unemployment. The snapshot questionnaire is designed to capture information across domains such as employment history, education, health, caring responsibilities, housing, among other factors (DEWR, 2022a). It feeds data into a statistical model, known as the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI), which completes a quantitative risk assessment. This assessment uses a range of variables to calculate a score indicating a participants' likelihood of experiencing long term unemployment and determines their pathway through services.

While often framed as an administrative instrument, the tool is in practice a key site of interaction between frontline staff and participants. Although many jobseekers initially complete the snapshot online or by phone before meeting with providers, in practice providers frequently re-confirm (or update) the information captured by the snapshot during commencement appointments. Furthermore, because jobseekers in employment services experience complex and changing life circumstances, the snapshot may be frequently updated during participants' service period.

Although more experienced staff may adopt less formal approaches to administering the Job Seeker Snapshot, for those who are newer to the role, the tool can significantly guide how conversations are initiated, which questions are asked and when, as well as what kinds of information are elicited and prioritised. First appointments are a critical point of contact between participants and frontline staff. They often set the tone for the relationship, shape first impressions, the ability to build rapport and the extent to which participants feel comfortable continuing to engage and share their experiences. In this context the tool can play a powerful role. By structuring what information must be collected, it can actively shape how conversations unfold, how participants are understood and how their past experiences are framed from the outset.

Overview of Report

This report documents key findings from the Australian Welfare and Work Lab and Joblink Plus' hackathon of the Job Seeker Snapshot. Hackathons are short, intensive collaborative workshops where people with different expertise come together to solve a shared problem (Kangro and Lepik, 2022). The aim of the hackathon was not only to review the content of the questions, but to critically examine how the tool operates in practice as an engagement mechanism. Through collaborative, practice-based exploration, the hackathon sought to identify opportunities to reshape wording, sequencing, and use of the Snapshot to better align with trauma informed principles, ensuring that early interactions with participants promote safety, trust, collaboration, relevant and meaningful disclosure and above all, participant choice. The hackathon also sought to capture best practice from a frontline perspective in how to use the tool as a mechanism for facilitating relational practice.

The remainer of the report proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides a more detailed overview of the Job Seeker Snapshot and its historical context. This is followed, in Section 3, by a discussion of the hackathon that was conducted in February 2026. Following this, core findings from the hackathon are reviewed in Section 4. Overall, the findings highlight misalignment between the Job Seeker Snapshot and some of the principles of trauma informed engagement. Key issues identified by Joblink Plus staff participating in the hackathon revolve around the underlying deficit framing and judgemental tone of question wording, the minimal allowance for nuance and contextualised responses in available answer options, and concerns about a lack of transparency and informed choice in why questions were being asked. While experienced staff described adapting, reframing and pacing the Snapshot to prioritise conversation and contextual understanding, these positive practices often operate despite the design of the Snapshot rather than because of it. They rely on the expertise and discretion of individual workers rather than being systematically supported. Taken together, the findings suggest that meaningful reform of the participant assessment process must go beyond incremental changes to question wording. Repositioning the Snapshot as an engagement tool involves embedding transparency, informed choice, flexibility and participant agency at the heart of the process, and recognising the relational work required to elicit complex and sensitive information.

2. Historical Context of the Job Seeker Snapshot

The Job Seeker Snapshot (JSS) is the very 'first assessment an individual undertakes after they claim income support' (DEWR, 2026a). Prior to the Workforce Australia employment services reforms, this initial assessment was typically conducted via phone or in a face-to-face meeting with Services Australia or employment services provider staff (DESE, 2021: 4). Depending on the outcome of this initial assessment, participants would either be streamed directly into a low-intensity stream of employment services or referred for a more comprehensive assessment conducted by a Health or Allied Health Professional, known as an Employment Services Assessment (ESAt). This latter assessment is also used to determine whether participants may be eligible for disability employment services and to assess their capacity to work. However, the initial Job Seeker Snapshot functions as a critical gateway for identifying whether participants require a more comprehensive work capacity assessment or can be referred directly to either online or provider-delivered employment services.

In 2018, the Australian Government began trialling the use of an online assessment questionnaire and pivoting away from face-to-face assessments. Evaluation of the online trial of the JSS indicated that most participants had little difficulty completing the assessment online and found the process easy to navigate and understand (DESE, 2021: 2). However, it is important to note that half of the participants who were invited to complete the JSS online as part of the trial did not do so (DEWR, 2022b: 93). In particular, older jobseekers, Indigenous participants, people with disability, and jobseekers living in unstable accommodation were the groups least likely to complete the JSS online (DEWR, 2022b: 93). Moreover, about 10 per cent of those who attempted to complete the JSS online experienced difficulties doing so. These included encountering technical difficulties and glitches when trying to log into and use the online JSS but also 'low awareness and/or understanding of the purpose, benefits and process of completing the JSS' (DESE, 2021: 3). This was also a major concern expressed by the employment services staff that contributed to this research, as further discussed in Section 4.1: that the purpose of the questions being asked of participants in the JSS was often ambiguous, jeopardising participants' confidence, trust, and agency in the process.

Under the current employment services system model, the vast majority of participants complete the initial jobseeker assessment via a faceless process. Evidence presented by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations to the Select Committee Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services suggests that 66 per cent of jobseekers complete this initial assessment by phone, while 28 per cent complete the JSS online (Select Committee, 2023: 270). Nonetheless, observation of commencement appointments undertaken by the research team indicates that the JSS is often *revisited* when participants first begin engaging with providers. This is to either confirm or update the information that was provided by participants during the phone or online assessment. As such, people's experience of the JSS process can be highly influential in shaping their initial impressions of employment services, the degree to which they feel emotionally safe engaging with services and feel that staff can be trusted.

Altogether, the JSS comprises over 50 different questions across five key domains as summarised in Table 1. The questionnaire concludes by asking participants to rate how confident they feel they 'will get a job soon', on a scale from 1 to 7, and to declare their consent to 'the collection of my sensitive information, such as health information, in accordance with the form' (DEWR, 2025). In addition to collecting information for the purposes of targeting employment support, it is important to note that the Snapshoot is also used to identify if participants may have experienced 'domestic violence, family grief

or trauma and may need to be referred to a Services Australia Social Worker' (Select Committee, 2023: 270). This makes a trauma-informed approach to the JSS even more essential.

Table 1 Five domains of the Job Seeker Snapshot

Domain	Focus
Experience and Education	Eight questions designed to capture details of participant's education and work history, experience, and highest level of qualifications
Internet Skills	Five questions that are used to access participants' suitability for online services and ability to use digital devices to look for work
Ability to Work	Six questions that primarily focus on whether participants have any disabilities or medical conditions that might affect the work they can do. These questions are used to assess if participants need a more comprehensive assessment of their work capacity by an Allied Health Professional (known as an Employment Services Assessment).
Participant's Background	Ten questions that ask about participants' descent, cultural background, English language skills, and whether participants identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or arrived in Australia as refugees.
Personal Circumstances	Twenty-two questions that ask about participant's living arrangements, access to transport, whether they have any criminal convictions, and their self-assessment of their own job-search confidence.

Source: based on (DEWR, 2022a: DEWR, 2025)

The JSS sits within a longer history of welfare reform in Australia, particularly the shift toward activation, marketisation, and data driven governance in employment services. Since the introduction of Job Network in the late 1990s, successive reforms have sought to standardise how job seekers are assessed and streamed into services, with increasing reliance on statistical profiling and automated decision-making (Caswell et al., 2010; McDonald et al., 2003; O'Sullivan et al., 2019).

At the centre of this system is the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI), an algorithmic model that estimates a participant's likelihood of long-term unemployment based on a set of weighted risk factors. This classification then determines whether individuals will be referred to face-to-face employment services or deemed suitable for self-servicing through digital platforms such as Workforce Australia Online. As result, participants who attend provider delivered services are often those experiencing complex and entrenched challenges to employment, including intersecting social and economic disadvantages. This context underscores the significance of initial face-to-face interactions where frontline staff are engaging with participants who may have already had lengthy or negative service system experiences.

Scholars have argued that the processes of data collection and classification underpinning tools such as the JSCI and JSS are not neutral but rather reflect broader philosophical and political assumptions about the causes of unemployment and the type of interventions required to reduce reliance on welfare (Papadoloulos, 2025). What data is collected, how it is interpreted, and how it is operationalised within the system (and JSCI algorithm) are shaped by particular understandings of individual responsibility, risk and employability which are embedded within specific policy and institutional contexts.

There are also well-established limitations in how these tools function in practice. For example, the administration of the snapshot and JSCI through standardised questionaries, often completed online

or in constrained settings, can limit the extent to which complex and sensitive topics or experiences of disadvantage are fully captured. Notably, in a survey of provider sites undertaken during a trial of the new Workforce Australia employment services model, fewer than 17 per cent of provider sites agreed or strongly agreed that participants are allocated into the appropriate service stream. One in five of the sites surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed that the JSS/JSCI 'provides useful information' (DEWR, 2022b: 95-6).

Evidence suggests significant underreporting of mental health conditions within the JSCI. National survey data indicates a substantial proportion of income support recipients experience mental illness, but far fewer actually disclose this during the online assessment process (Productivity Commission, 2020). Likewise, prior research on jobseeker assessment processes during *Jobactive* found that service providers often contested JSCI assessments on the basis that jobseekers had not disclosed sensitive health issues or personal circumstances in phone-based assessments conducted by Centrelink (O'Sullivan et al., 2019). This issue was also identified in the Select Committee Inquiry into Workforce Australia and Employment Services, which observed 'that inaccuracies are often a result of the jobseeker's reluctance to disclose personal information and the use of aggregated and algorithm-based assessment tools' (Select Committee, 2023: 370).

These concerns highlight the challenges of relying on online, self-report standardised questionnaires for the collection of sensitive information and potentially traumatic experiences. Eliciting this kind of information often requires a sense of safety, trust, and relational rapport, as well as a clear understanding of how that information will be used. In the absence of 'a relationship of trust' (Select Committee, 2023: 371), this disclosure of personal and sensitive information will be very challenging and potentially harmful to participants.

More broadly, critics question the capacity for predictive models such as the JSCI to accurately forecast employment outcomes based on past behaviour and static indicators (Weber & Prietl, 2022). For instance, a recent comparative study of the accuracy of profiling tools observed that most statistical tools used in employment services targeting have an accuracy rate of 70-80 per cent (Gallagher and Griffin, 2025: 407). Such tools risk oversimplifying the dynamic and relational nature of labour market participation, reducing complex life circumstances into fixed categories of risk. Despite these concerns, until recently, there has been limited substantive reform underlying the logic of the JSS or the JSCI and their role in structuring employment services. This is beginning to change, with the recent discussion paper on *Shaping the Future of Employment Services* acknowledging the need for '[a] new approach to assessments' that 'will help people feel comfortable to share information about their circumstances and ensure those circumstances are better understood' (DEWR, 2026b: 23).

3. Hacking the JSS through Trauma-Informed Practice

To examine how the Job Seeker Snapshot operates in practice and to identify opportunities for better aligning it with trauma informed principles, this study adopted a qualitative, participatory approach modelled on a 'hackathon'. Hackathons are an emerging co-creation methodology that are increasingly being used to structure collaboration innovation in social and public services. This includes services supporting people that have experienced family violence, where mini-hackathons have been employed to identify priorities for family violence prevention and co-design solutions based on intersectional trauma-informed frameworks (Abdullah et al., 2025).

At their core, hackathons involve intensive groupwork over short periods of time, 'where people from different backgrounds and experiences come together to find a solution to a [shared] problem' (Kangro and Lepik, 2022: 341). They are particularly suited to de-constructing material products, service protocols, and programs through drawing on diverse forms of expertise and practical insights to identify design flaws, challenge assumptions about service uses, and co-develop timely solutions. Given the tangibility of the Job Seeker Snapshot for those in employment services, hackathons offer a valuable way of rapidly gathering practice-based insights on the fit between jobseeker assessment processes and principles of trauma-informed practice.

A hackathon was conducted with employment services staff experienced in principles of trauma-informed practice to draw on their expertise and lived experience of administering the JSS in real world settings. The hackathon was held in Newcastle in February 2026 and ran for two hours. Participants included frontline practitioners working directly with job seekers, health and wellbeing counsellors and site leaders, bringing practical insight into how the Snapshot is used during initial appointments and how participants respond to its questions.

Table 2 Hackathon contributors

Staff Role	Number
Job Placement Consultants	6
Health and Wellbeing Counsellors	2
Site Leaders / Executives	3

All workshop participants were highly familiar with principles of trauma-informed practice through internal organisational training and applying them in their daily work practices. Joblink Plus has embedded trauma-informed practice across its employment and training services for over five years and the participants included some of the organisation's most experienced staff. Moreover, the researchers facilitating the hackathon had also conducted extensive observational fieldwork at several of Joblink's sites, giving them a grounding in how the JSS was being used in frontline practice. This fieldwork was one motivation for the trauma-informed hackathon of the JSS, as it surfaced how often the JSS was discussed by staff and participants, especially during commencement appointments.

The hackathon was structured to create a collaborative space for critical reflection, enabling staff to assess the tool not as an abstract instrument, but as something enacted through everyday interactions with participants. Given that the overall JSS is very lengthy, the hackathon focused on a selection of questions from two key domains of the JSS: the questions on Ability to Work, and the questions on Personal Circumstances (see Appendix A). The questions on Personal Circumstances were in turn also broken up into two sub-domains: living circumstances, and personal factors.

Within each question block, participants worked in small groups to review and categorise individual questions according to their alignment with trauma informed principles. Specifically, questions were grouped into three categories by each small group: those that aligned well with trauma informed practice, those that partially aligned, and those that did not align. Following small group discussions, participants reconvened for facilitated whole group discussions, where they shared their assessments and collectively mapped questions across the three categories. These discussions focused not only on the content of the questions, but also on how they are asked in practice, how participants respond, and the potential impacts on safety, trust, collaboration, participant disclosure and choice. This process enabled the identification of specific elements of the tool that may undermine or support trauma informed engagement.

The hackathon design emphasised relational and practice-based knowledge, recognising frontline staff as key knowledge holders in understanding how policy tools operate in lived contexts. Data for this study consists of a voice recording of the 2-hour session which was transcribed and deidentified, facilitator notes and photos of collective mappings generated during the session. These materials were analysed thematically, with a focus on identifying patterns in how staff understood the interaction between the JSS, participant engagement, and trauma informed practice. This approach aligns with a broader commitment to collaborative and reflexive research, positioning practitioners as active contributors to the redesign of service tools and practices. Direct quotes from staff members are highlighted in blue and have been de-identified in this report.

4. Findings

The findings highlight aspects of misalignment between the Job Seeker Snapshot and principles of trauma informed engagement. While designed as a standardised assessment instrument, frontline staff consistently experienced the Snapshot as shaping their early interactions in ways that undermined safety, trust, and meaningful disclosure.

Across all three question blocks, including Work Capacity, Living Circumstances and Personal Factors, staff identified similar problems relating to the underlying deficit framing and judgemental tone of question wording, a lack of context and allowance for nuance in answer options, and concerns about transparency and informed choice in why questions were being asked. These issues with the nature and content of the questions were seen as having the potential to cause participants anxiety, fear, and stress while hindering the establishment of relational safety and trust. As staff put it, the overall manner of the Job Seeker Snapshot was "very Centrelink, but it's not very trauma-informed".

At the same time, staff described informal practices they were able to use that reworked the tool into a more relational and trauma aware engagement process. These are described in further detail in Section 4.3. They primarily involved adopting a more patient and conversational approach to gathering the information required, and rephrasing questions to emphasise the assistance available to jobseekers and why the information being sought is helpful for tailoring and personalising services.

4.1 Deficit framing and implied judgement undermine early engagement

Across all blocks of the JSS, staff identified a strong deficit approach embedded in question wording and sequencing. Questions were frequently experienced as asking participants to identify "what is wrong" with them, particularly during the very first appointment. As one staff member summarised the deficit-lens underpinning most of the JSS questions:

> "I don't think you can get any sense of support from these questions. I think there's an implicit message of deficit, and if you're here, it's because there's something wrong with you".

In Block A (Work Capacity) this was most pronounced in questions requiring participants to quantify their limitations, especially those asking individuals to assess the number of hours they were "able" to work. Such questions were seen as inconsistent with a trauma-informed emphasis on the *agency* of service users, as "it's basically encouraging them to think and say that there's something wrong with them". For instance, question 15 on the JSS asks 'What is the most number of hours you think you are able to work per week?', giving jobseekers only three options: 30 hours or more, 15-29 hours, or less than 15 hours. A subsequent question, number 18, asks jobseekers who have disclosed disabilities or medical conditions, to estimate 'How long will your condition(s) affect your ability to work?'. Again, jobseekers are asked to select one of three options: less than three months, three months or more, or unsure/do not know. It was felt that these questions implied judgement about individual worth and capacity, and were inappropriate for a first conversation:

> "There's implied judgement there (...) to self-assess your worth or value of being able to do this number of hours (...) this being the first conversation you have with a person (...) [is] just not appropriate."

Closed questions which asked participants to name how many hours they could work were seen as ill-suited to capturing complex, contextual realities such as fluctuating mental health and episodic illness. This concern is further discussed in Section 4.2. One staff member highlighted the irony of asking participants to quantify how long a condition will affect their ability to work, particularly for mental health conditions where recovery is nonlinear and unpredictable. As one consultant remarked, the question implicitly asks, "How long do you plan to be depressed?". Staff felt the questions also stripped any nuance from participant answers, highlighting there was often a difference between what participants want to do, can do, and have previously been deemed capable of doing. Staff highlighted that these distinctions matter materially for employment planning but are flattened in the Snapshot.

Similarly, in Block B (Living Circumstances), the binary question about whether a person was renting or owned their own home was described as inherently exclusionary and shaming for people who may never have experienced stable housing and could be sleeping rough. For instance, question 30 on the Job Seeker Snapshot is currently worded to ask: 'Have you been living in rented accommodation or your own home for the past 12 months?'. While the question allows participants to answer 'Not sure/don't know', the wording reinforces either ownership or private rental accommodation as the norm for people's living circumstances. However, many jobseekers do not easily fit into these binary categorisations. "It's saying is it this or this? Well, it's actually none". Participants not living in rental accommodation or their own home could experience the question as stigmatising and judgemental, as staff explained:

> "I think there's shame associated with that. I feel like there is an expectation of you either rent or own your own home, there is not in between. And if you were someone … if [you] are a middle-aged person in particular, that has to walk in and say, 'I'm sorry, I'm neither, I'm living in my car … that's shameful"

The intent of the question was also unclear from the default question wording. In the view of staff, the purpose of the first three or four questions of the section on Living Circumstances should be to establish whether people have a safe place to live and, if not, to wrap supports around participants to help them find stable and safe housing. It should not merely be to assign people to distinct categories of living arrangements, or measure the frequency of their address changes within the past year. As staff highlighted, whether someone lives in their own home or private rental accommodation does not itself indicate if they have somewhere safe to live as people "might be in their own home or rented accommodation" but "they're still not safe". As staff explained of how they would reword the question:

> "We feel maybe just re-word it to say 'in stable accommodation', because in this day and age if you don't pay your rent you might be evicted. If you don't pay your mortgage you're evicted so then, and a lot of relationships break down, there might be a mortgagee of the house, but their relationship's broken day and they're in unstable accommodation"

In Block C (Personal Factors), questions about parental employment between the ages of 13-16 and criminal history were described as stigmatising and detached from their stated purpose. Staff highlighted that the question regarding whether a parent worked during teenage years made deep assumptions about how this experience might affect an adult in present day, and that in their experience this connection was unjustified and "sounds judgy". The question seemed to serve little purpose and staff questioned "the need for it at all".

Similarly, questions about incarceration held implied and discriminatory assumptions about present day behaviour and some of the questions in this section of the snapshot were seen as neither helpful nor necessary. For instance, question 46 asks those who have disclosed spending time in prison 'was your sentence 14 days or less'? Staff's reaction to this question was "who cares?" and "why do they need to know that?". As further discussed in Section 4.3, Instead of asking extensive questions about someone's criminal history, staff felt it was more appropriate to ask questions specific to the task at hand of finding someone employment. For instance:

> "Okay, we're going to have a chat about some of the documentation you might need to apply for a job. What about ID, birth certificate? Police check?" or "Would you pass a police check, a working-with-children check, for the purpose of finding employment".

Across the tool, staff expressed concern that deficit framing at the point of entry risks reinforcing stigma, increasing participant anxiety and disengagement while discouraging honest disclosure, particularly for participants already marginalised within the system. As one staff member summarised the broad concern that many in the workshop had about the deficit language and potentially stigmatising effects of question wordings:

> "I think there's a lot of guarded responses in a lot of these questions because of that judgement piece. And also for fear of, 'Well, why do they want to know'? Particularly drug use, prison … things like that, there's certainly guarded responses in all of that."

4.2 Standardised, closed questions inhibit disclosure and informed choice

A second major finding was that the JSS encourages staff to use it as a tick box questionnaire instead of engaging in conversation, limiting opportunities for building effective working relationships. The closed nature of the answer options was seen as particularly problematic. It inhibited participants' from telling their story in their own words and tried to scaffold them into pre-defined administrative categories rather than giving them agency and control over the process. Moreover, often, it may not be possible to give a singular answer to some of the JSS questions in a way that neatly fits into the available answer categories. Closed, narrow answer options were seen as unnecessarily creating pressure and anxiety for participants by forcing them into selecting responses they are unsure about: "And then they feel like, 'Oh God, I have to select one. I don't know'. And it can create anxiety'.

One particular example of this were the work capacity questions asking participants to quantify the number of hours they think they can work per week, and the duration of time they believe their disclosed health conditions may affect their ability to work. Staff observed that participants may not be able to give singular answers to these questions, as their answers could easily vary "based on the type of role" and depending on the type of employment they found. For instance, as one staff member explained of how a participant might give a contextualised answer to the question: "If it's a sit-down job they might say, 'Well, I can work 30 hours but if it's a stand up role I might only be able to work 15".

For people with episodic conditions, providing singular answers to questions about their work capacity and duration of illness could be particularly difficult and discomforting. While answering questions could be relatively straightforward "if you've got a broken leg, it's only short-term", many participants had mental health issues where the impacts on their work capacity were far less quantifiable. As staff explained:

> "Yeah, but if you've got PTSD or, you know, it's like 'Well, I can't really give you a timeline on when I'm [available for work]"

Staff consistently reported that closed questions encouraged participants to provide what they believed were "safe" rather than accurate answers. This concern was particularly salient for sensitive topics such as disability, health conditions, caring responsibilities, income and housing. Staff noted that participants often feared that disclosing certain information could negatively affect their payment or job prospects:

> "If there's only two responses to it. And this is a government agency who's trying to get information from me and to determine whether or not I can get a payment. I would think, "Okay, if I answer this one wrong, then that might impact something else".

Repeated or overlapping questions were seen as exacerbating this dynamic, making participants feel scrutinised or "caught out". As one staff member recounted, "they're quite repetitive as well (...) like, if you didn't feel bad the first time we asked you". Importantly, staff highlighted that participants often lacked clarity about why information was being collected, or how it would be used. This absence of transparency was seen as directly contradicting trauma informed principles of informed choice and collaboration and could escalate the anxious states that participants may already be in when attending meetings for the first time. As staff explained:

> "A lot of clients come in with a conspiracy theory. So, asking them these questions just tips them over the edge. And you know about, 'Well, why do you need to know all this about me? What's that got to [do] with me finding work or being here?' So it just escalates."

Face-to-face delivery was seen as helping to mitigate some of these risks, as it enabled participants to ask questions such as "Why do you need this?" and allowed staff to provide reassurance and context. In contrast, online completion of the Snapshot was described as "open to interpretation" and more likely to result in under disclosure.

Frontline staff repeatedly stressed the importance of explaining why questions are asked, a core element of trauma informed servicing:

> "I think just explaining to them "I'm asking this question because of A, B, C (...) Which is one of the basic frameworks of trauma informed care, is giving informed choice, so if they know why you're asking the question, then they can choose how they answer it"

Without this context, questions about criminal history, income, caregiving or housing were perceived as intrusive and purposeless. Staff argued that transparency and explanation should be embedded within the tool itself, rather than relying on individual practitioners to compensate. Together, these findings suggest that meaningful reform requires not only changes to question wording but a fundamental rethinking of how the JSS functions as an engagement mechanism at the point of entry into employment services.

4.3 Relational practice mitigates harms but requires informal workarounds

Despite these challenges, staff described a range of informal strategies they used to soften the impacts of the JSS and support trauma informed engagement. However, these strategies often required working

around the tool rather than with it, and finding ways of "asking the questions but in an open conversation way without actually asking the question". Furthermore, these relational approaches benefitted from the expertise of experienced staff who had developed skills in having such conversations with participants through repeated practice. A concern from this perspective was that, without appropriate training and experience, newer staff might stick too rigidly to the default question wording and sequencing. As a senior leader explained about the key to training staff in how to take a more relational approach:

> "It's time. It's sitting with experienced staff and listening to the conversations that they have over a period of time. They're [new staff] not going to be good at it straight up, no. They're going to read line for line for line for that."

Many staff deliberately avoided reading questions verbatim, instead using the JSS as a background reference while prioritising open conversation. As highlighted by one staff member, "that's [the JSS] not a conversation - it's a questionnaire. So, we need to have a conversation". To this end, experienced consultants and counsellors placed the emphasis on providing jobseekers with the opportunity to tell their story, in their words, rather than following a scripted protocol:

> "I have a quick look at what the questions are going to be. Now, I obviously know what most of them are, so I'll just sit and have a conversation face-to-face and then change it as I need (....) I think it's better than you looking at a screen and going back because then they might feel like, 'Oh God, I'm being interviewed'."

> "What the conversation is when I first meet someone is, "So why are you here? What's happening today? Why are you here today?" And from that conversation all the bits come from it, I then fill out all the [details on the form] ... And it's just a much more conversational way of, rather than going, 'Well, tell me about your employment; tell me about your drug and alcohol use; tell me about your relationships; blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.' You don't do any of that."

As in the examples above, several practitioners described completing the JSS *retrospectively* after the appointment, once rapport had been established. Body language and eye contact were emphasised as critical when discussing sensitive information, with staff noting that participants were more open and "happy to have a conversation" when practitioners were "looking at them, talking to them, [and] you're not looking at the screen".

Another informal adjustment that staff made to the JSS was *reframing questions* to communicate support rather than judgement or a deficit framing. Moreover, in many cases, practitioners felt that several of the JSS questions could be amalgamated into a single more open-ended question that would prompt conversation and deeper reflection on participants' strengths, goals, and needs. Further details of the question re-wordings proposed by practitioners are given in the Appendix.

For instance, question 14 on the JSS asks 'Do you have any disabilities or medical conditions that affect the number of hours you are able to work per week?'. The question is phrased to emphasise participant limitations without communicating *why* the information is being requested. An alternative way of asking for this information that prioritises the availability of support over participant limitations, and which signals why this information matters, is to ask:

> "We want to make sure any work arrangements suit your needs. Are there any health related or other factors that could affect the hours that you can work?".

Likewise, with several of the JSS questions about participants' Personal Factors. The questions in this section adopt a very direct approach to asking participants to self-disclose if they 'have been convicted of a criminal offence' (e.g. question 41) or 'spent time in prison … as a result of a criminal conviction (questions 40, 42, and 44). This was seen as "a very harsh way of asking somebody" about their past, while also not clearly explaining why staff needed to know this information. Instead, consultants suggested a less direct approach:

> "'Are you able to pass a police check" is more [sensitive], a better way to ask them that than, 'Oh, have you been criminally convicted'?"

Similarly in terms of the questions about participant's Living Circumstances, staff described reframing questions in a more open-ended way that was sensitive to establishing whether there were supports that they could offer participants to help stabilise their lives. For instance, instead of asking directly whether jobseekers lived in their own home or rental accommodation, consultants said they would start less directly:

> "'Whereabouts are you staying at the moment?' So, just more casual, conversational. They then will tell you, Oh, I'm living in my car'. 'Oh, okay, have we got a permanent place you're staying in your car at the moment? What do you have access to in your car?', things like that. To make sure that we're setting them up, because we want to make sure they've got access to common decencies and give them a shower, things like that."

Staff also highlighted they explored work preferences, previous roles and what "worked well" for the participant. One practitioner recounted the sort of conversation she would have with a participant, "Oh, what sort of roles have you done in the past?" "Oh, I used to do landscaping but I can't do that anymore because of my back" "Okay, what worked for you for that role?" "Oh, I really loved being outdoors, but I can't do the heavy lifting because of my back". This form of conversation was seen as gathering the information required without participants' feeling that their experiences were being judged negatively.

Overall, there was a strong conviction among the staff that, where possible, assessment processes should allow for open-ended responses, rather than narrow categorisation, and follow a conversational rather than scripted format. This facilitated a deeper level of disclosure from participants while placing them at the centre of the process. As one experienced consultant explained:

> "I think I get a lot more out of the clients when I let them, give them the chance to talk to you because they're telling you their story. It's not about us dictating to them what their story should be."

Curiosity was identified as a key trauma informed skill. However, staff were clear that these relational practices depended on individual discretion rather than system design. Several noted that the volume and immediacy of JSS questions limited opportunities to build trust, suggesting the tool should be completed over a longer timeframe rather than during the first appointment. For instance, one consultant favoured holding off on doing the assessment until after several meetings had already been held with participants. This allowed time for participants and staff to get to know each other first, enabling more meaningful disclosure and discussion of any circumstances that might arise:

> "I think if should be four weeks because the first couple of appointments, you're just getting to know someone and you're building rapport. You don't expect them to tell you all of their – what's going on with them when they don't know you, you don't know them."

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role that the JSS plays both as an administrative assessment tool, and as a formative site for engagement between jobseekers and employment services staff. While intended to support consistent assessment and service matching, the findings demonstrate that the JSS as it is currently framed and administered often operates in ways that conflict with trauma-informed principles and undermines early relationship building. This early relationship building is a core foundation underpinning the working alliance between participants and practitioners and enabling frontline practitioners to do their job and support participants into employment (Pearson et al., 2023; Carnochan et al., 2023).

Recognising that the working alliance 'is one of the many mechanisms that can promote the employment of disadvantaged unemployed persons', Ravn and Bredgaard call for employment services to be designed around 'promoting settings that are conducive to building stronger working alliances' (Ravn and Bredgaard, 2021: 430). The current JSS process detracts from such settings. It may also inadvertently cause participants stress and discomfort due to the lack of transparency about why information is being sought and the deficit-framing of question wordings. As acknowledged by a recent DEWR discussion paper, current assessment processes 'do not adequately support people to understand *what their information will be used for* and *feel comfortable enough to disclose* personal circumstances affecting their employment services needs' (DEWR, 2026: 14, emphasis added).

In a related study on the client-worker relationship in welfare-to-work services, Carnochan et al. (2023: 692) argue that 'the timing *and content* of the assessment process needs to be responsive to client readiness'. This is particularly critical given the potential for 're-traumatization of clients who are not ready to share information about difficult or stigmatizing life experiences' (Carnochan et al. 2023: 692). However, across all the question domains that were reviewed in the hackathon, practitioners identified deficit-based framing, limited transparency and reliance on closed, standardised questions as key challenges to safe, trusting and meaningful working relationships. These issues are particularly important given that the JSS is often reviewed at the first point of face-to-face contact, when participants may already be experiencing heightened anxiety about service access. Questions that require participants to quantify complex life circumstances, predict recovery timelines or disclose sensitive information too early in the service experience without clear explanation risk reinforcing stigma and discouraging honest engagement.

At the same time, the findings underscore the capacity of frontline practitioners to mitigate these risks through relational and trauma informed practice. Practitioners consistently described adapting, reframing and pacing the JSS in order to prioritise conversation and contextual understanding. However, these practices often operate despite the design of the tool rather than because of it, relying on individual discretion rather than being systematically supported. They also are learned adaptions that experienced consultants have developed over time through repeated practice. This underscores the importance of experienced frontline practitioners to enabling relational practice in employment services. However, a 2023 survey of Workforce Australia Services staff indicates that about a quarter of all frontline staff have been working in employment services for less than a year (Ball et al., 2023: 11). Frontline practitioners who are newer to working in employment services may be more prone to following the JSS verbatim, increasing the risk of participant distress and limiting the flexibility for richer conversations and deeper disclosures.

Taken together, the findings suggest that incremental changes to question wording alone will be insufficient. Instead, meaningful reform requires a broader rethinking of the Snapshot as an engagement tool, one that embeds transparency, informed choice, flexibility and participant agency, and that recognises the relational work required to elicit complex and sensitive information. Immediate changes should include clearer contextual information about why particular questions are asked, how the information will be used, and what choices participants have in responding. The timing of completion should also be reconsidered. Rather than requiring the tool to be completed at first contact, policy should allow it to be completed gradually over several sessions, giving frontline workers time to build rapport before asking sensitive or potentially distressing questions.

Appendix A: Hacked JSS Question Blocks

Question Block	Perceived extent question aligns with trauma informed practice	Suggested alternative, open-ended, question framings
Block A: Ability to Work		
14. Do you have any disabilities or medical conditions that affect the number of hours you are able to work per week?	Between not at all aligned and somewhat aligned	"We want to make sure any work arrangements suit your needs. Are there any health related or other factors that could affect the hours that you can work?".
15. What is the most number of hours you think you are able to work per week?	Not at all aligned	
16. Do you have any disabilities or medical conditions that affect the type of work you can do?	Between not at all aligned and somewhat aligned	"We're flexible and can tailor support to what works best for you. Health, disability and personal circumstances can affect the kinds of work or support that feel right. Is there anything that you would like us to consider when exploring work options together?"
17. Do you think you need additional support to help you at work as a result of your condition?	Somewhat aligned	
18. How long will your condition(s) affect your ability to work?	Not at all aligned	
19. What are the conditions?	Not at all aligned	
Block B: Living Circumstances	**Group consensus**	
30. Have you been living in rented accommodation or your own home for the past 12 months?	Not at all aligned	"Whereabouts are you staying at the moment?"
31. Are you currently staying in emergency or temporary accommodation?	Between not at all aligned and somewhat aligned	"Have you got somewhere safe to live?"
32. How often have you moved in the past 12 months?	Not at all aligned	
33. Do you live on your own?	Not at all aligned	
34. Who currently lives with you? Select ALL that apply.	Not at all aligned	
35. Are you the main caregiver for this child/these children?	Between not at all aligned and somewhat aligned	
36. What is the date of birth of your youngest child?	Not at all aligned	
Block C: Personal Factors	**Group consensus**	

Question Block	Perceived extent question aligns with trauma informed practice	Suggested alternative, open-ended, question framings
44. Have you spent time in prison in the last 7 years as a result of a criminal conviction?	Not at all aligned	"Would you pass a police check, a working-with-children check, for the purpose of finding employment?"
45. Have you been convicted of a criminal offence in the last 10 years but received a non-custodial sentence?	Not at all aligned	
46. Was your sentence 14 days or less?	Not at all aligned	
47. When you were in your early teens (aged 13 to 16), was at least one of your parents or legal guardians regularly in paid employment?	Not at all aligned	
48. Is there anything else that might affect your ability to work, get work or look for work?	Somewhat aligned	
49. Please select the factors that might affect your ability to work, get work or look for work.	Not at all aligned	"Tell me about what kind of work you have done in the past? What work do you enjoy doing?" Or "What is your dream job? What courses have you done in the past?"
51. What is your job search confidence?	Between somewhat aligned and well aligned	

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