Centre for Inclusive Employment

Working well with families

A practical guide for employment service providers to build strong working relationships with people with disability and their families.

nacbo National Alliance Capacity Building Organisations | Imagine More

GUIDEBOOK

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Why this guide matters

Despite decades of investment in disability employment, people with disability remain significantly less likely to get and keep meaningful employment.

Even when people with disability find work, they are more likely to experience:

- low-paid and insecure employment
- fewer opportunities for career development
- workplaces that don't fully recognise their strengths and potential.

This doesn't have to be the typical experience for people with disability. There are countless examples of people with disability, including intellectual disability and complex disability, who have been able to find:

- long-lasting employment with award wages
- ongoing opportunities to build skills that lead to career development
- workplaces that genuinely value (and benefit from) their contributions.

Why is it that some people with disability have such a poor experience of employment while others thrive?

Strong employment outcomes often begin with a deep understanding of the person's strengths, interests, preferences and support needs. This understanding is crucial for making good employment decisions.

Families often have knowledge and insights that can contribute to this understanding, particularly where a person needs significant support with communication and decision-making. Families may also bring practical support and networks that strengthen employment outcomes.

This guide provides practical guidance to help employment service providers build strong working relationships with people with disability and their families throughout the employment journey.

Working well with families can:

- make your job easier
- strengthen employment decisions
- help identify and address problems before they grow.

This guide is for you if you want to:

- achieve better employment outcomes for people with disability
- develop a richer understanding of a person's strengths, needs and what they can offer a workplace
- make the most of the knowledge, experience and networks that families bring
- invest time early to build trust and reduce challenges later
- strengthen your employment practice through reflection and practical ideas
- build a service that families recommend to others.

But knowing that families have an important role and knowing how to work well together are not always the same thing.

Building stronger relationships with families isn't always straightforward. You may be asking yourself:

- How do I balance family involvement with the person's own voice and choices?
- How can I build strong relationships with families within the time and funding available?
- Where are the boundaries, and how much should families be involved?
- What if working with families has been difficult in the past?
- Will investing in relationships with families actually lead to better outcomes?

If these questions resonate, this guide is for you. It offers practical ideas, reflections and examples to help you improve your practice by building strong working relationships with families throughout each stage of employment support.

The approaches we describe in this guide can be successfully used by:

- NDIS-funded employment services (including for customised employment, micro-enterprises, work experience and apprenticeships)
- Inclusive Employment Australia services
- Australian Disability Enterprises
- Work Integration Social Enterprises
- other services that support people in finding or keeping employment.

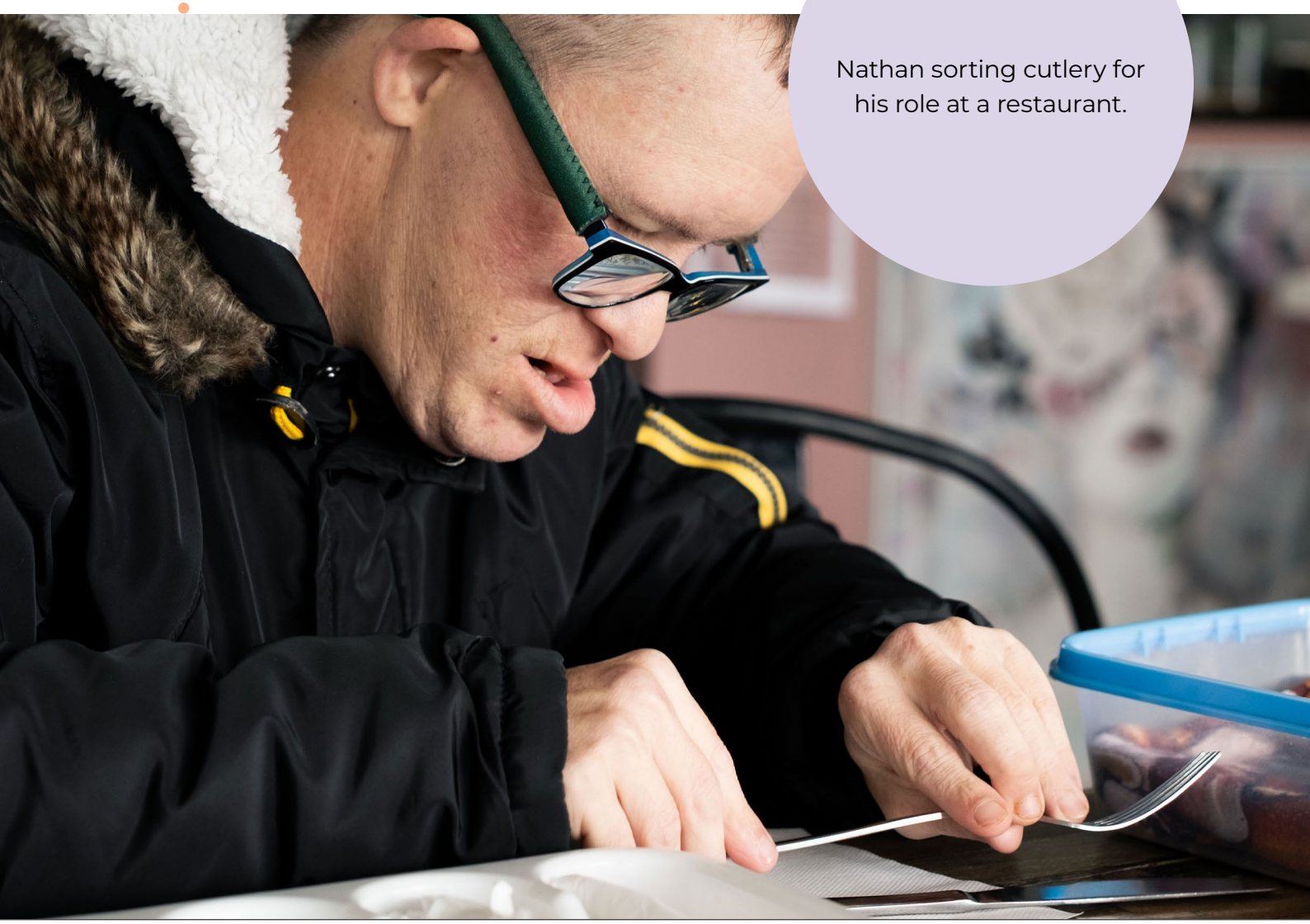
The guide draws on the experiences of people with disability, families and providers. Families spoke about the difference strong provider relationships made, but also about missed opportunities, poor communication and feeling that their knowledge wasn't always recognised or valued.



Samuel working at his desk on the computer.

This guide is designed to support practice throughout the employment journey, rather than be read once and put aside. The accompanying resource: Working well with families: reflection checklist summarises the key practices in this guide and can be revisited at different stages of the employment journey.

These insights were gathered through consultations conducted by members of the National Alliance of Capacity Building Organisations (NACBO) on behalf of the Centre for Inclusive Employment.



Nathan sorting cutlery for his role at a restaurant.

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1.

Start the relationship well

From the first conversation, people with disability and their families decide whether they can trust you to support them well.

Early conversations can help everyone understand:

- how you will work together, including communication
- family involvement in the process
- what employment support will involve
- what the person and family can expect at different stages of the employment process
- how progress will be made over time.

Family involvement looks different for everyone. Some people with disability choose to involve their family closely. For people who need significant support with communication or decision-making, families often play a critical role in supporting meaningful employment. Some people with disability may have strained family relationships, no family available or choose not to involve family.

In every situation, the person should make an informed decision about whether and how family members are involved. This includes understanding the benefits of family involvement, while ensuring the person's preferences and individual circumstances guide the decision.

Most challenges at this stage are not caused by a lack of goodwill. They arise when assumptions and expectations aren't yet shared. The following examples highlight some common challenges and practical ways providers can respond.

1.1 Start employment planning early

The challenge: When planning doesn't begin until the final year of school, students, their families and providers can feel pressured to quickly figure out a pathway to life and work after school.

You could start planning with the student, family and school well before the final school year to:

- **explain each stage** of the employment journey, what to expect, typical timeframes and how the student and family can prepare
- **identify strengths together**, focusing on what the student enjoys, does well and needs to succeed at work.

Resource: This conversation starter helps the person and their family to prepare for early conversations with employment providers.



Lee and his family at home with their dog.

1.2 Help families understand the system and make informed choices

The challenge: People with disability and their families often describe the employment system as confusing and fragmented. Different terms, types of services and funding can make it hard to understand what support is available, how services connect and where to start.

The following practices can help the person and family understand their options and make informed choices:

- **use plain language** to describe how your service works day to day
- **be clear** about your approach, what outcomes you work towards and any limits to your service
- explain how your **service differs** from other employment services or models
- explain how your **service is funded** and what activities happen behind the scenes
- encourage the person and family to **ask questions** and compare different options
- talk through any concerns about the **Disability Support Pension** and refer families to reliable information
- explain where your service **fits in the employment system**, including whether it is funded through NDIS or Inclusive Employment Australia.

Resource: Share the attached employment roadmap with people with disability and families as early as possible, including before support begins. It can help them understand the employment journey, what to expect at different stages and questions they may want to explore when choosing or working with a provider.

1.3 Agree on how you will work together

The challenge: People with disability, their families and providers may have different expectations about communication, family involvement and what the service can provide within available resources. If these aren't discussed early, misunderstandings and frustration can build.

Talk about these things from the beginning so everyone knows how you will work together:

- **support the person to make informed decisions about family involvement** by discussing the benefits of involving families and different ways families can contribute throughout the employment journey
- **clarify everyone's roles**, including what the provider can offer
- **value each other's knowledge**, recognising what the person, family and provider each bring
- **agree on communication**, including how often you'll be in touch and who will contact whom
- **discuss how you'll work through different views**, keeping the person's goals, preferences and rights at the centre
- **be clear about expectations**, including what support you can provide and what sits outside your service.

Resource: This conversation starter helps you clarify communication.



Lee and his parent, meeting with a professional.

1.4 Work through differences together

The challenge: Sometimes the person, their family and provider have different views about employment goals, risk or the best way forward. These differences are often shaped by past disappointments, responsibilities or concerns about the person's future. Working through these differences takes time, trust and support. Without this, progress can stall and employment opportunities may be missed.

To work through different views constructively, you could:

- **take the time to understand** what is shaping the person's and family's views
- **work through concerns together**, providing information and supporting informed decisions rather than trying to persuade
- **link the person and/or their family to additional employment support**, including family capacity-building organisations or peer networks, where appropriate.

For example: A person may want to pursue an employment goal, such as a type of work or award wages, that their family feels is unrealistic or involves too much risk. You might ask the family questions like:

- What are you concerned might happen?
- What is important to the person about this goal?
- What information would help us understand the possibilities?
- What would make this feel safer?
- What could we explore or try before making a decision?

It's important to explore the person's perspective too, including what matters to them and what risks they are comfortable taking. This can help separate specific risks that can be planned for from assumptions about what the person can or cannot do.

2.

Build a rich picture of the person

Before making employment decisions, take time to get to know the person well. Understanding their strengths, interests, aspirations and what helps them be at their best can lead to better job matches and support that works for them.

A family often knows the person across different parts of their life and can share insights that might otherwise be missed. Knowing more about the person gives you a better chance of finding work that fits, and can uncover possibilities you wouldn't otherwise see.

2.1 Explain why this stage matters

The challenge: People with disability and their families can become frustrated when a lot of time is spent gathering information rather than looking for jobs. If they don't understand why this stage matters, it can feel repetitive or like no progress is being made.

To help the person and their family understand what is happening, you could:

- explain why this stage takes time and what you are learning
- show how what you learn will guide employment decisions and the search for work
- keep everyone updated on progress, including what has been learned and what happens next.



Robbie delivering fresh produce as part of his job.

2.2 Learn from the person and their family

The challenge: Important knowledge can be missed when providers rely mainly on reports, assessments or early, short conversations. The family may know things about the person's strengths, interests and everyday life that can help build a fuller picture and avoid poor employment decisions.

To build a richer picture of the person, you could

- **invite the person and family to share insights** about the person's strengths, interests, contributions and what helps them do well
- **learn how the person communicates**, makes choices and shows what is important to them
- **encourage the family to learn more about** the person through observations and everyday experiences
- **value family knowledge** while keeping the person's own voice, preferences and choices at the centre.



Jacob serving coffee from his coffee cart business.

2.3 Keep expectations high and explore possibilities

The challenge: Low expectations can narrow employment possibilities before they have been properly explored. What a provider considers "realistic" may differ from what a person or family believes is possible. If possibilities are narrowed too early, opportunities may never be explored.

To help keep possibilities open, you could:

- **start with the person, not the job**, focusing on strengths and aspirations, rather than assumptions about job readiness, capability or support needs
- **listen to what the person and family believe is possible**, even when their ideas are different from your own
- **share examples of people with disability in meaningful employment** to broaden expectations and spark ideas
- **explore employment opportunities** before deciding what the person is ready for or capable of
- **acknowledge how previous disappointments** may shape expectations, while optimistically exploring future work opportunities.



Alex working in the warehouse.

Example: what this can look like in practice

Building a fuller picture develops over time through listening and shared reflection with the person and their family. Mike's story illustrates how this approach can contribute to sustainable employment.

"Although we have only worked with this one employment agency, we felt that they valued the information and ideas that we offered them. They met with us on numerous occasions, so we felt they took the time to get to know us and Mike. They would offer suggestions and ideas of types of work and we could talk to them about the difficulties or positives of this, what would work or what may not."

The information shared by Mike's parents was vital information. The employment agency believes that collaboration is the essential element in Mike's employment success.

"No one knows Mike as well as his family. The information, guidance and feedback that the family have provided throughout Mike's employment journey has been the key to his success. Mike has been working for over three years, but we still collaborate, seek guidance and feedback from the family to build on his career and deepen his relationships with his colleagues".

Read more about Mike's story here.

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3.

Explore and secure work

This stage is about finding and exploring work opportunities that fit the person.

Different providers and employment approaches find work in different ways.

Some create or negotiate roles around the person's strengths, interests and conditions for success. Others match people to existing vacancies with employers. Some provide employment through their own business, social enterprise or employment program.

Whatever the approach, start with what you have learned about the person and keep their strengths, interests and aspirations at the centre of employment decisions.

3.1 Explore work opportunities together

The challenge: Employment opportunities can become limited by existing vacancies, familiar employers or what is easiest to find. Families and their personal networks may know workplaces, employers and people in the community that can help broaden the search.

You could explore opportunities together by:

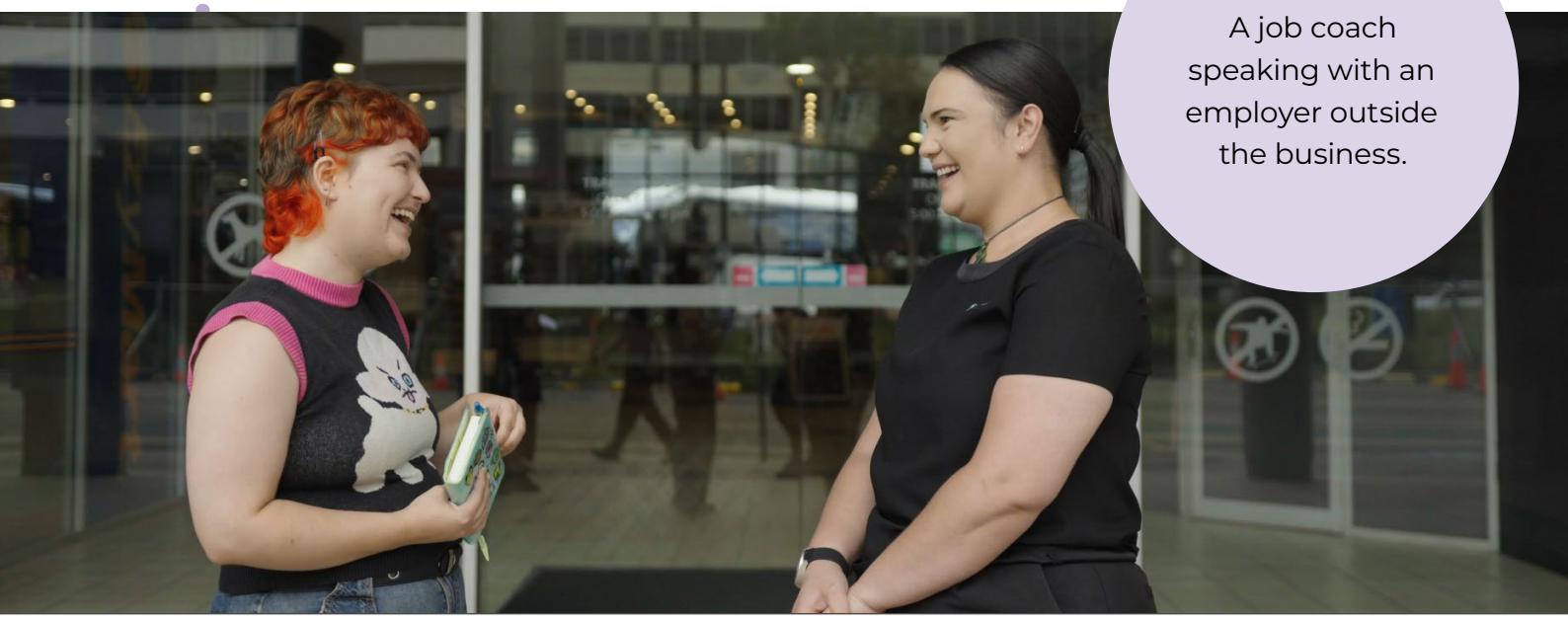
- **starting with what you have learned about the person** when deciding where and how to look for workplaces
- **looking beyond existing vacancies** and reaching out to different employers and workplaces
- **asking the person and family for their ideas** about workplaces and employers worth exploring and agreeing on who will be approached first
- **drawing on family, personal and community networks** for ideas and introductions, while the provider takes responsibility for contacting employers and building relationships with them.

3.2 Keep the person and their family informed when things are uncertain

The challenge: Looking for work often involves uncertainty, and opportunities do not always unfold as expected or hoped. Finding the right opportunity can take time. When the person and family don't know what is happening, setbacks or changes in direction can feel like a lack of progress.

To keep the person and families informed, you could:

- **acknowledge that uncertainty is a normal part** of exploring employment
- **reflect together on what is being learned** from each try, rather than seeing setbacks as failures
- **encourage open conversations** about hopes, concerns and different views, recognising that everyone may see the way forward differently
- **be clear** about barriers and constraints while remaining hopeful and focused on finding the right fit
- **talk through changes in direction** with the person and family rather than making changes without discussion.



A job coach speaking with an employer outside the business.

3.3 Make employment decisions together

The challenge: As employment opportunities are found, decisions need to be made about job duties, hours, supports and adjustments. Important information may be missed if the person and family are only involved once these decisions have already been made.

When making decisions, you could:

- **involve the person and family** in discussions about proposed job duties, work hours, supports and workplace arrangements
- **draw on what has been learned about the person** when shaping the role to fit the person's needs and conditions for success
- **keep the person and family informed as the opportunity develops**, so they can raise questions or concerns before decisions are made
- **respect the person's decision** about whether an opportunity is right for them.



Harriet working in a kitchen weighing food on a scale.

Example: What this can look like in practice

Exploring employment opportunities often starts with the relationships and knowledge that already exist within a person's community. Harriet's story illustrates how bringing together family and local connections can uncover opportunities and lead to customised employment.

Harriet's family supported her employment journey by organising an employment network meeting, inviting friends, neighbours and local business owners to brainstorm potential opportunities.

By sharing Harriet's specific interests, skills and ideal working conditions, they tapped into the room's collective networks for warm introductions. The strategy paid off immediately when a local café owner saw potential for a role. The family connected the café owner with Harriet's job coach, setting up an initial site visit to explore how her strengths could benefit the business.

During the walkthrough, the job coach observed the café's fast-paced environment and small layout, keeping in mind that Harriet preferred non-customer-facing roles focused on food prep and cleanup.

Seeing an opportunity to support the busy pastry cook, the job coach helped design a customised role where, after the cook made the filling and cut the pastry, Harriet handled filling, sealing, and glazing pies and sausage rolls.

This carved-out role perfectly suited Harriet's preference for working in a small team outside the main customer flow, while directly boosting the café's efficiency by saving the cook valuable time and space.

Harriet stated that working in the café was the best part of her week. She had developed a friendship with Pip, the pastry cook, as they share many interests and enjoy spending time together outside of work, such as going to the movies.

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4.

Support success at work

Good employment support helps people settle into work, build confidence and grow in their role.

As work, goals and support needs change, ongoing communication with the person and family can help identify problems early and support new opportunities.

4.1 Stay connected after work begins

The challenge: Families may notice changes in the person's confidence, well-being or experiences of work before these become obvious in the workplace. If providers stop talking with families after the person starts work, useful information can be missed. Small issues can then grow into bigger challenges that affect confidence, workplace relationships or the person's ability to stay in the job.

To stay connected, you could:

- **create regular opportunities** for the person and family to share how work is going
- **invite the person and family to share concerns or changes** they notice outside work

When problems arise in the workplace, talk with the person, family and employer to understand what might be happening before making assumptions about what is happening or why.



Georgia working at the café cash register.

4.2 Work together to support everyday work

The challenge: Families may provide everyday support that helps the person get to work and manage their working week. This might include help with:

- getting ready on time
- figuring out or providing transport
- planning ahead or preparing for changes

If providers don't understand this support, important information can be missed, and extra pressure can fall on families. To work together, you could:

- **talk about everyday support** the person relies on to get ready, get to and from work and manage their working week
- **with the person's agreement, ask family members for information** that will help employers and co-workers best support the person at work
- **keep the person and their family informed about important workplace changes**, such as changes to staff, routines or work arrangements.

4.3 Review support together as things change

The challenge: The support a person needs can change over time. Reducing support too quickly can make work harder, but leaving the same support in place can also limit independence, workplace relationships or opportunities to grow. People can feel ready for new challenges while their support and job remain unchanged.

The person and their family can offer useful information about what may be working well or becoming difficult.

To review support together, you could:

- **talk with the person and family** about what is working well and what may need to change
- **make decisions about changes to support together**, based on what the person needs and wants
- **ask whether the person still enjoys their work** and wants new challenges, responsibilities or opportunities to learn
- **explain any funding or service constraints** that affect the support you can provide.



Dan explaining his work to another person.

Example: What this can look like in practice

Ongoing support works best when families and providers have a shared understanding of their different roles. Harvey's story shows how trust, clear communication and complementary support can help a person succeed and grow in employment.

At the commencement of Harvey's employment, the job mentor and the family developed a 'consistent approaches' document. This communication tool reframed workplace interactions. For example, understanding that Harvey's initial "no" signalled uncertainty rather than a refusal enabled co-workers to modify requests, utilise visual modelling (showing rather than telling) and provide explicit details.

Harvey's family felt it was important they didn't get directly involved in his role at the workplace, as this is not an ordinary experience for a young man in his 20's. Their expectation was that the employment service would do this and keep them in the loop with regular updates and emails. This meant they had an objective view of Harvey's progress and any support he required to keep his job. This led to a good relationship between both parties.

Harvey's family still assists Harvey with ensuring that he is ready on time, presentable and figuring out how he is going to commute depending on the weather.

Read more about Harvey's story here.

Acknowledgement

This resource was created by Imagine More, an Australian Capital Territory organisation that works alongside people with disability, families and communities to strengthen inclusion, belonging and opportunities for people to live meaningful lives.

Imagine More (ACT) is a member of the National Alliance of Capacity Building Organisations (NACBO), alongside Community Resource Unit Ltd (QLD), Family Advocacy (NSW), Belonging Matters (VIC), JFA Purple Orange (SA) and Valued Lives (WA).

NACBO brings a unique and critical lens to the national conversation on inclusive employment. Together, the alliance draws on more than eight decades of collective experience supporting families of people with developmental disability, with over 10 years of collaboration as a national alliance. NACBO's work is grounded in long-standing relationships with individuals, families and communities, and focuses on building capacity, shifting mindsets, changing attitudes and supporting inclusive, person-led practices.

** This resource is part of a co-branded Centre for Inclusive Employment and NACBO suite of inclusive employment resources, including a workshop presentation (Family Advocacy), guide, checklist and employment roadmap (Imagine More), family template handout (Community Resource Unit) and written case studies (Belonging Matters).*

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For more information about this resource, please contact

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