Centre for Inclusive Employment and National Disability Services (NDS)

Lunch and Learn Session 14 October 2026

'What Works' in Employment Services and Supports for Mature-age Jobseekers with Disability

Presenters: Associate Professor Sue Olney and Dr. Jennifer Frean – University of Melbourne

Facilitator: Colin Entwistle, NDS

Colin: Welcome again to you for our lunch and learn on 'What Works' in Employment Services and Supports for Mature-age Job Seekers with Disability. This is one of a series of Lunch and Learns that NDS is delivering in conjunction with the Centre for Inclusive Employment alongside of some of our other consortium members that are also running a series of these Lunch and Learns. And also noting that this lunch and learn is being recorded and will eventually be loaded onto the Centre for Inclusive Employment's online hub where you can circle back, share and point other people to. And we certainly encourage you to share the hub as a resource and feel free to have a look at some of the other lunch and learns that have already been run and where you can actually see some of the forthcoming lunch and learns that are coming up over the next period of time as well.

Again, thank you for joining today. We are here for our lunch and learn on what works in employment services and support some mature age job seekers with disability. I think we've given enough time for people to connect. So, if we go to the next slide please, Carlene. I'd also like to welcome Emma today, who is our Auslan interpreter. So, feel free to spotlight Emma if you are needing interpreting, a valuable piece for us. And thank you again, Emma. So, it's a bit of the usual housekeeping from me. So please keep yourself on mute if you're not speaking, but please also have your camera on if you're able to do so. It's always lovely to see faces and for presenters to have that extra connection by seeing faces on the screen. Please feel free to add your organisation's name in brackets next to your name. You can do this by hovering over your name, clicking on more and selecting rename. It's always lovely to see where you might be joining in from. Please use your hands up

feature or wave to ask questions or contribute to the discussion. There's also the chat function, which most people are pretty familiar with, but if you feel you don't want to speak directly or put your hand up, feel free to pop questions in the chat. There will be an opportunity at the end of the presentation this afternoon to ask questions, and I'll moderate those either through the chat or direct questions as well. Again, we love this to be sort of interactive session, particularly through the Q&A piece. So please allow us to do that and we encourage that, and allows us to make sure that your questions are being answered in what you may most be interested in. Next slide please, Carlene.

So, a quick acknowledgement of country. So, I respectfully acknowledge the traditional lands that I work across and Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander custodians of these lands, all elders, and leaders past, present, and emerging. I acknowledge that the past is not just the past but is bound up in the present and I honour the rich and powerful connections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have with country as Australia's first peoples. Today I join you from Victoria, which is the lands of the Wadawurrung people, and feel free to pop in the chat where you might be joining from today. It's always nice to see in these sorts of forums where you might be joining from across the country.

Now quick overview of the session today, What Works in Employment Services and Supports for Mature-age Job Seekers with Disability. Bit of a long title, but I think it expresses what we're here to cover. Have a couple of lovely presenters, very well knowledgeable in this sector and been active for many, many years. And they are Associate Professor Sue Olney and Dr. Jennifer Frean. Sue is a principal research fellow in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Her research examines policy design and implementation and the impacts of reform of public services on individuals, communities, service providers and bureaucrats with a particular focus on disability services, employment and welfare to work service systems. Jennifer is a research fellow also at the University of Melbourne whose work explores the role of communication in inclusion, employment and social participation. Her research focuses on practical strategies that support meaningful employment outcomes in inclusive workplaces or workplace cultures for people with disability. As that pretty much talks to itself, well engaged in this sector, really on point with all the things that are happening and within the broader disability reform agenda. With no further agenda, again, thank you for joining us today and I will hand ball to our lovely presenters today, Jen and Sue. Thank you.

Sue: Well, thank you. Thank you very much, Colin, for that introduction and thanks to the team at NDS for inviting us to speak to you about our research today. Some of you will be aware that the University of Melbourne is also a partner in the consortium delivering the Centre for Inclusive Employment for the Australian government, but we're not involved in

organising the lunch and learn sessions. So, this is a great opportunity for us to talk to you directly and to hear from you directly about your work. I'm hoping that this will be a conversation rather than policy wonks presenting their research in a dry way. But Jen and I will run you through some of the findings that we have from our work and summarise the report that we have on the CIE website.

Now, the first thing I'll say is that anyone hovering around the age of 45 might be horrified at the thought that they might be described as a mature age job seeker or a person of advancing years. And this is the interesting thing about the way that government thinks in terms of life stages and in how policy is organised. But certainly, when you hit the age of 45 in the labour force, you are categorised as someone who is moving into the more sort of the end or second stage of your working life. But realistically, if you lose your job at that point, you are really only halfway through your potential working life. And this is why I have a really particular interest in saying 'how do we improve employment outcomes', not just for mature age job seekers, but particularly for mature age job seekers who face health conditions, disability, or any type of condition that changes their capacity to work well before the age that they're ready to retire.

Oh, here we are. Here's our names. Jen and I will give you some contact details for us at the end of our presentation, but I'll pop straight in and I'm going to start with some very big picture, kind of population level thinking, that we've been doing in our research. But I'm conscious that today's discussion is very much about inclusive employment in Australia, and I promise I'm going to get there quickly. But I think it's important to be thinking about the fact that our population is aging and that many people's capacity to work changes as they age. And what we know from looking at the data is that the workplace is not necessarily responding well to situations where people's capacity to work changes.

So, you'll see here that prevalence of disability in the Australian population peaks between the ages of 45 and 54. So that can be for a combination of factors. We're certainly more aware of disability and what constitutes disability than we have been in the past. We're looking at a jump that essentially covers the COVID years as well, so that it's sort of to be expected that more people would identify as having a disability post - COVID. There was also a change in the way that the government asked the question about disability at that time. And so it may be that people felt more comfortable responding positively about whether or not they had a disability or a health condition or identified themselves in the new way of questioning in a way that they wouldn't have before. But for whatever reason, we do have to understand that the prevalence of disability in our working age population is rising. So, we'll get onto the next slide.

So, what we do know from the population level data is that there are many more people with disability who are not attached to the labour force than those who are deemed permanently unable to work. And so, we have a very large group of people who have capacity to work but are not working. And we know that that is a really significant labour market disadvantage in Australia. So, if you have some capacity to work, you are likely to be unemployed or to have completely detached from the labour force. And yet this is unrealized potential for us in our working age population. If people have capacity to work and they can't find a spot to work, then that is something that affects all of us. So, I'll go onto the next slide.

So what we're focusing on today, as I said, is the people who are in Inclusive Employment Australia. And I don't have to tell anyone who works in this field that more than half of the IEA caseload is aged over 45 and one third of the caseload is aged 55 and over. Most of those job seekers have restricted capacity to work in terms of the hours that they can work or the type of work they can do. And when I say most, it's over 80%, I think it's around 88% of the caseload. We also know that some people on their caseload are not available to start work immediately, and some of them are already employed with post-placement support and ongoing support. So this is the group that we're going to be really focusing on today. But part of that conversation is also who else is in this population that we're talking about who will also be looking for work in the same environment? Now, we have a lot of job seekers in Workforce Australia who also fit this bill. Around one third of the Workforce Australia caseload now are people with disability. They also have a caseload that leans very heavily towards people over 55. Then outside the employment services system, we have around about 450,000 Australians aged between 45 and 64 who left, who retired permanently from the labour force in 2024, 2025. So again, that is a significant number when we think about population level labour force participation. And there's no doubt that ensuring that people can keep their job when their capacity to work changes will have a significant effect on numbers at a population level. Then apart from these three groups, we have another large group of Australians aged 45 to 64 who aren't seeking work. Either they've got independent means or they're part of a household income setup or who might work just casually or episodically, they're not engaged with employment services, but they may be moving in and out of the labour force. And there's a very high number of people who fall into that category. So there's our picture.

So today, why are we talking about mature age job seekers when we're talking about inclusive employment Australia? First of all, the numbers. So if you want to make a real difference into employment outcomes for people with disability, most people on the caseload are older. I'm always amazed by where the attention is focused, and I want to be really clear about this. It is critical to improve employment outcomes for people with

intellectual disability, for people with autism. But when you look at the numbers of people in terms of their primary reported disability, we have over a hundred thousand people whose primary reported disability is psychiatric and over a hundred thousand people whose primary reported disability is physical. And so, I like just this kind of very stark reminder of where a lot of attention is focused and thinking about what outcome we want to achieve. And if the outcome we want to achieve is to close the gap in employment between Australians with disability and without disability, we need to address this very large group. Similarly, as I said, most of our caseload in IEA have capacity to work 15 hours a week or less. And so that suggests that there's a lot of work to be done in or very high level of demand for customised or adjusted or negotiated work as distinct from job matching, which is where a lot of emphasis is at the moment. So we've got to find ways to think about how we structure work to suit people who have restricted capacity to work, they can't work full-time, they may have fluctuating or variable capacity to work, and what might work look like to suit those people. Thanks.

So we know, anyone who works in this space knows that no-one is one thing. So a person with disability is not just a person with disability. This is an area where there are intersecting labour market disadvantages associated with age, disability, and health. So barriers to work faced by Australians with disability as they age are predominantly structural and systemic. So understanding that intersecting factors that shape the working lives of people with disability or ill health over the age of 45 is critical to improving their employment outcomes. Now, employment services and supports alone cannot address all of these barriers to work. And so part of the discussion that we're having today is what can we do where cross-government coordination is needed to achieve an inclusive labour market? What can IEA providers do to get people on their caseload into work? Because we've got to start there.

And so some of the factors outside your control will be things like social determinants of health, labour market conditions. The composition of a household can be really critical in terms of whether somebody is able to work or not. Housing and transport, we know are critical accessibility of the environment outside work. And then of course, the very important intersection of the structure of the welfare system, the health system, and the disability services and support system.

Now, at this point, Jen, is this where I'm going to hand over to you?

Jen: That is exactly right, Sue. And so..

Sue: Thank you.

Jen: I'll step in now. Thank you, Sue. And as Sue mentions, employment services and supports can't overcome every barrier that job seekers face in finding and securing and maintaining safe and meaningful work. But however, the scope of available evidence that we see shows three key barriers that consistently pop up and persistently pop up, and they're almost insurmountable when you think about an individual's capacity to overcome these challenges. So it's really great to be having this conversation to look at these now and then talk about what employment services can do to bridge these barriers.

So the first of these is a major barrier, and we see conscious and unconscious bias popping up in both the recruitment and employment environments. Employers and colleagues really see the disability first, and that means overlooking the potential of ability in the employee in front of them and focusing instead on the perceived cost or capacity or capability level of someone with disability and making assumptions about that. So the evidence tells us that people tend to overestimate the potentially negative consequences of hiring these job seekers and see people as a potential liability in the first instance rather than a potential investment. So that really leads to a perception of hiring a person in this group as a risk-based thing, and it can be seen, therefore, as more of an act of something that is beneficial for the employee rather than the employer. And it can be positioned, therefore, as an act of social corporate responsibility rather than a business imperative in terms of broadening their talent pool. This comes to negative stereotypes in the workplace, and they relate to both age and disability, and they tend to promote prejudice and discrimination and devalue and stigmatize these groups, results in both overt and covert discrimination. We see costs to individuals and workplaces in terms of workplace belonging or lack thereof, and then internalised self-perception, negative self-perception. There's a huge amount of cognitive and emotional depletion that comes to the individual. But meanwhile, workplaces see people with limited progression, people being judged as saying negative performance compared to their colleagues who may deliver the similar level of work. And so these sorts of things sneak into the way that we do things.

A second barrier that we see is issues in workplace culture, inclusion and safety. So one major factor in terms of culture is this idea of flexibility being seen as a compliance method rather than a method of realising the benefits that are available for flexible work through flexible work conditions and how these can bring benefits for both the employer and the employee. A key challenge with this is that it positions the flexibility that many people in this group require to do their job productively and safely to be seen as an earned privilege for a trusted employee. And so as Sue mentioned earlier, securing part-time work and flexible hours is really important for this huge cohort, but a new hire who is unknown to an organisation coming in asking for flexible work conditions in terms of the hours that they might work or to negotiate a part-time role, when this culturally is seen as something that

is negotiated based on an established social capital and leveraged based on relationship, it can be perceived negatively by the employer if it's addressed by the applicant, but also it can then, if it's granted in cases where it's granted, be seen as something that can be easily taken away because it's a privilege rather than a right and a way of effectively and efficiently doing your work to the best of your ability. Another thing that the evidence tells us is that employees, sorry, employers tend not to be able to identify easily which roles could be flexible and how then to do that, which might end up just resulting in not offering flexible conditions for people who live with disability or health conditions. And these tend to be granted more when they are granted for people relating to family, people with young children, for example, and more likely to be declined for health reasons in the workplace.

The final barrier that we'll talk about and then look at how to overcome these is unclear leadership and accountability in the workplace for employment policies and practice. Like any successful change initiative, disability inclusion in the workplace really relies on clear, credible, and ongoing leadership to be successful. So we might see processes for reporting issues in the workplace be processes that place an unreasonable burden on the person with disability. And that could be by way of documentation or proof that this provides a workplace health and safety issue and needing the specialist reports, for example, that can be both costly to achieve but also require time out of the office to go and attend these specialist appointments. There's a lot of cost involved in that that is not always seen by people who've not experienced these kinds of health conditions. We also see unaddressed issues in the workplace relating to culture inclusion and safety. So discriminatory attitudes that go unchecked, behaviours that go unchecked. Something that comes through in the evidence actually is bullying behaviours that can pop up with colleagues when a way of working is granted for one person. It can be perceived as a fairness issue by other colleagues, and therefore you can get negative reactions within social and peer groups in the workplace that actually exclude the person who needs this difference to do their work safely and effectively. So these can all combine to be a pretty sobering reality for people with acquired disability and ill health.

I want to take just a minute before we transition to Bridges to look at the experience of a person in this group and think about the fact that there's real trauma that happens in terms of identity and experiencing these kinds of barriers in the workplace. And they're multilayered, they're systemic, they're personal. By the time a person comes to job seeking, there's a good chance that they've been through a lot. And the importance then of working in ways that address these barriers so that you can successfully see someone into a safe, meaningful, and really importantly, an ongoing employment position, it just cannot be overstated because I guess employment services have a dual client. It's not just the job seeker, but it's also the employer. And when things don't go well, it deepens the rift and it

makes the next placement harder for everyone involved. And worse, you may even lose either or both clients in terms of their willingness and ability to try again. And certainly it's not easier the second time when that effort and goodwill and energy has gone into what ends up being an unfilled job and an unemployed job seeker.

So let's think then, considering that starting point, how can we overcome this and what can we do? Okay, you might have noticed that a lot of these barriers relates to core challenges that relate to organisations and workplaces. And so this indicates that shifting the focus for employment services away from individual job seekers and equipping them solely to do their work toward helping employers create suitable employment opportunities is much more likely to produce job outcomes at the scale required for the sorts of caseloads that we looked at earlier that Sue talked about. And we can see from the evidence that Sue presented earlier, we don't really know what works because this is still an issue. It's a big issue. And we have some hints from the evidence about what might work. And we have some international evidence suggesting what could be helpful in an Australian environment, but nothing has been trialled at the scale that we need, and nothing's yet been successful.

So these are the sorts of things that the evidence suggests will be helpful and we need to do more work just to check. But what we can see is that conscious and unconscious bias, well, this is a positioning issue. So in terms of both the benefits, it's a positioning issue that requires raising awareness of both the benefits of this group of job seekers and the benefits of flexible working conditions. So firmly positioning this group as part of the labour market and job seekers who are valued and valuable would be really powerful. And current narratives around employing people with disability represent prospective employees using a deficit-based lens that often focuses on this corporate social responsibility side of things and a benefit to an individual job seeker. But overcoming that stigma and misconceptions of people with disability in the workplace is really around developing a compelling business case, not only for the benefits and the value of these employees, but also for the flexible work conditions. And this will position people firmly as an underutilized skilled and flexible talent pool that can provide benefits to the organisation.

Investing time with employers before and early in the recruitment process, this is really important because equipping employers to understand why it's important for their business, not just for the person on the other side of the desk to have the job, but it's important for the business to have a skilled person in a job that suits their skills. This encourages meaningful systemic and cultural change within organisations rather than thinking of this at the localised level relating to the individual employee. So again, coming back to that recognition of the dual customers, we've got both the employer seeing benefit

here and the job seekers and the trauma that can be experienced when that doesn't work out, and not every placement will work out, but the value of investing time with employers early in that job placement process cannot be overstated and it readies them too to then successfully place other people in their organisation rather than starting again to sort of shape the process again from scratch. So, it really builds that pipeline of people who are seeing benefit, and systems that are ready for safe and meaningful and ongoing work for people in this cohort. That's a win-win. Under the right conditions too, I think positioning flexible work as that benefit for both business and employee, it's a perception sometimes that if people work out of sight, that they cannot be trusted. And so we're going to need to, I think, focus on a lot of the training around equipping managers to be able to shift to a different method of outcome-based performance. And I'll come back to that in terms of in the third slide that I'm about to present.

Okay, and the final bridge for this one is shifting the focus from the medical diagnosis, from the cause of a disability to the effect of it. And even when people have the same diagnosis, the experience and effect of disability on someone's working life is quite unique. It depends on their specific situation and the interactions of things that co-occur outside of the workplace. So, employers' reliance on medical diagnosis of conditions really is a bit of a flawed approach from the outset because there are economies of scale in terms of looking at people's needs rather than the causes of those needs. And what is it instead that could help people do their work safely and effectively? So, one example is to offer an alternative to an open plan workspace when in-person work is required. That supports the needs of groups, including people with neurodivergence, mental health conditions, energy limiting conditions, because they may experience symptoms like sensory sensitivity. And also it supports people with immune compromising conditions. Okay.

Let's have a look at this second one, issues in workplace culture inclusion and safety. And I'll try to fly through these, so we've got some time for questions. There are several different elements that we can approach with this one. We can equip employers with the tools to successfully recruit, hire, and retain people. So reinforcing the idea of accessible by design, that allows us to set up jobs from the outset via better design. And that means that things are less costly than adding accessible functionality later. So it can include inexpensive changes to the workplace and increase accessibility proactively. And it signals an inclusive workplace by making improvements that benefit existing employees as well. They could offer flexible working options by default, including at the point of hire, extending that into the advertising and recruitment process, equip line managers with the knowledge and capability to support the needs of people with disability and other health issues. There are some existing tools that could be valuable. There's the job demands and accommodation planning tool, which is also known as the JDACT that helps employers to

anticipate the demands of a specific job and identify practical accommodations. There's the employer toolkit created, informed by research commissioned by Deaf Connect in partnership with Deakin University. While neither of those are specific to mature age workers with acquired disability, there's definitely evidence that they would be very valuable for that group.

Now I'm going to move forward here, providing job seekers as well with the tools that they need to understand their rights and to find work that is suited to their strengths and personal circumstances. Now, we can provide help for people who acquire disability or health conditions to recognise and articulate their value to employers by harnessing some of these narratives as we articulate them more strongly about the benefits of people with disability in the workplace. If we can provide those in ways that are accessible for people to actually use those to shape discussions that they have as they are in the workplace, things such as performance development when they're in interviews or also looking at requesting accessibility and why this is a value, sorry, going to provide value for the employer rather than the employee. When I can do my job well, that's a benefit for you and allow people to come at these things from a strengths-based perspective rather than a deficit-based focus. These are the kinds of tools that we could provide for people to support them. There's also other, it'd be worthwhile mentioning that there are really some really great initiatives happening in the UK. There's Flex Plus. This is around flexible work and the conditions required for people to be able to work. There's also some work happening in Canada, inclusive design for employment access. That's another good initiative to check out. Very conscious of time.

The final barrier that we have is unclear leadership and accountability in the workplace. So again, it's about shifting the focus to equipping potential employers and preparing them to manage workplace re-entry for mature age new hires after a break in employment, having less of that focus on the individual work seeker, sorry job seeker. So some tools could include ready access to information and resources specific to particular groups of marginalized job seekers when they need it, because that will move around in terms of the types of groups of people with disability, for example, that they might be focusing on employing and those needs will differ. There'll be resources and checklists to embed flexibility and accessible policies consistently across organisations in communications as well and in procedures. And processes such as providing regular, even small tweaks to processes such as providing regular schedules and ample notice of any shift changes as far as possible in advance for rostering hours, that would make a huge difference to people who have say medical appointments that have to be booked months in advance and that people have little control over the timing or duration. These sorts of tweaks can be really fundamental in workplace design and the way that work is shaped to allow people to be

able to continue in their work. Oh sorry, this equipping employers. Training managers could have access to training for outcomes-based performance monitoring. And so that includes adjusting workloads to ensure that workloads are based on deliverables and also don't exceed a person's ability to deliver within their paid employment hours. I'm sure this is one that's probably dear to many people's hearts. Training resources about how to adapt jobs and how to adapt jobs rather than adapt people. And we know that organisations have difficulty identifying and then implementing that.

Finally, these things cannot succeed without senior management championing them and making it possible. So senior management must lead this in a sustained way. And this includes ensuring that policies and procedures align so that employees can access adjustments as needed. And then forging connections across systems and sectors. There's some real opportunity there in terms of being able to play a role in connecting these things and access the innovation that's happening across the sector, reducing replication when things are not working, sharing lessons for things that are working and helping people identify where best to focus their energy for this particular group. But I'll fly through that now and just say thank you very much. We'll throw back to Colin. Please keep in touch. We didn't get a chance to say so much of what we would've loved to say and tell you more about, so please do download our report and there's a link that will be in the slides there for you to do so. And please contact us at any time. Thank you.

Colin: Thank you very much, Jen. Excuse me. Thank you very much Jen and Sue. Really informative and really important piece. I think I often find a lot of people don't realise a lot about the makeup of both the IEA and Workforce Australia sort of caseload concept. And we do tend to talk a lot about the need around activating some of that employer demand at the moment as well. So common themes in broader discussions, but some really wonderful insights to how to work with, what to consider. Again, a key takeaway from me is we've got a lot of work to do in this space in terms of tools, resources, and to really uplift workforce capability of working effectively in this way, both at the workforce level of those working in the services, but also in that education of employers to make sure that the, the activation opportunity sort of goes live a bit as well.

Now I will drop the report in the chat as well, which is located on the centre hub. So please make use of that. Has anyone got any questions? I'm quite mindful of time. It was a lot to get through and the intent of the lunch and learns is to give you an essence of some of these key findings and principles and to allow you to go and dig around a little bit more in follow up. But any key questions from anyone? No, there's not much in the chat. I guess I'll ask one in the minute or so we've got. From your research, is there a need to consider a specialisation stream in IEA and Workforce Australia for mature age job seekers? I think

Sue, you said it best. It's a distinct component. Again, with my knowledge around IEA and the previous DES it's probably highlighted in the combination of what was the disability employment or disability management service stream which has been incorporated into the broader IEA one, One stream program now. But it's a massive cohort and it's always normally taken a specific approach to work with that group. Any thoughts from you on that?

Sue: Yeah, I think that.. I think there is a need definitely to address it just because of the scale at a population level that we are looking at. And when you think that of the number of people who are dropping out of paid work halfway through their working life and the cost, the public cost over their life course of them, you know, the consequences for superannuation, the consequences of not earning income for a long time and then growing older without any of that underpinning asset base behind you, I think the government should be throwing a lot more money at this group.

Colin: Tend to agree. And I think it's also maximizing the opportunity when we're crying out for workforce. Here's a truly untapped workforce candidate. Yeah. And, and

Sue: Jen and I say consistently, you know, this is, this is our human capital in Australia, and these people have so much to contribute. And so, it's a genuinely missed opportunity.

Colin: Last one, last question from me. Now, the broader data set reflected 2022, and I'm really curious on this one. And you reflected that the spike in COVID and the impact that's had. I think we may see that actually expand even further. I think that was the tip of the iceberg then in terms of the data set. When, when's the next sort of broader data set available? Is it 2026 or beyond? I

Sue: Think, I think it'll be after that. There tends to be a time lag with the disability data from the census. So, they'll publish the census data and then it's generally 18 months to two years after that, so it'll be a while. We'll probably have the 2026 data in 2028.

Colin: Okay. So that'll be a very indicative storytelling piece, I think, in terms of the post - COVID implications for this sector and for these age groups.

Sue: Yeah. I mean, we're talking about mature age workers today, but I think there will be a very interesting picture of the 15 to 24-year-old group over that period as well, because that was a, you know, a particular, a particular natural experiment, I think, in, at that, in those formative years. We'll see what happens.

Colin: I agree. I might have to close it off there. I'm not sure, Carlene if we have that final slide that you wanted to put up, but I'd certainly like to thank both Sue and Jen for their presentation today.