



Australian Federation of Disability Organisations

# Consumers front and centre: What consumers really think about Disability Employment Services

**National report prepared by the  
Australian Federation of Disability Organisations**

*This publication has been prepared by the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations for the Australian Government, represented by the Department of Social Services. The views expressed in this publication are those of Australian Federation of Disability Organisations and do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Government.*

## Consumers front and centre

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## About the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations

The Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) is the primary national voice to Government that fully represents the interests of people with disability in Australia. AFDO and our member organisations are governed and operated by people with disability for people with disability. Our member organisations are individual consumer peak bodies representing a range of disabilities.

Our vision is a community where people with disability can participate in all parts of social, economic, political and cultural life.

Our mission is to champion the rights of people with disability in Australia and help them participate fully in Australian life.

To achieve our mission and vision, AFDO provides policy advice and representation to the Australian Government on matters that impact on the lives of people with disability. AFDO also works to inform and educate the general community about disability, support disability organisations and people with disability and undertake and support joint and collective campaigns towards elimination of structural and attitudinal barriers for people with disability.

## Executive Summary

*“If you have a disability in our country you are more likely to be unemployed, more likely to be living in poverty and more likely to be less educated than if you don't have a disability. Too easily we're overlooked and ignored. Too often the story of disability is told through unemployment and poverty. Our system is broken. We aren't doing enough”.*

Kurt Fearnley, Australia Day Address 2013

The voice of consumers with disability has, up until this point, largely been absent in the development of employment policy designed to maximise economic participation – our participation. It is clear from the findings of this national collated report that this can no longer continue if Australia is serious about closing the 30 percentage point workforce participation rate gap<sup>1</sup> which exists between people with disability and those without.

The following report centres on the experiences of people with disability as consumers of Disability Employment Service (DES) program, a government funded initiative which contracts employment service providers Australia wide to assist people with disability to become job ready and to find and keep employment.

Consumer reports highlighted a number of elements that have worked well for consumers, such as staff who demonstrate a strengths based approach and who make the time to understand each consumer's needs. It appears, however, that the positive experiences of consumers have very much been dependent on the approach taken by individual DES consultants and the relationship between the consumer and the DES provider, rather than the design of the DES performance model itself. Consumers responding to the DES consumer engagement projects were, for the most part, unsatisfied or highly unsatisfied with their experience with DES. This dissatisfaction has led to the identification of a number of areas of reform to improve the quality of DES provision and to ensure that people with disability remain engaged, supported and most importantly, become employed.

AFDO, through the analysis of the consumer engagement projects undertaken by individual disability consumer organisations, have identified a number of consistent themes and recommendations, categorised as short term reform, medium term reform and future reform. Our recommendations, informed from the voice of people with disability from across Australia, include:

### Short term reform

- Increasing knowledge of disability (its impact, the capacity of people with disability, the types of reasonable adjustments that are available and how these work for people with different types of disability) and the effects of culture
- Professionalisation of Disability Employment Services, with a particular focus on improving remuneration, training and introducing qualifications or competencies to improve the skillset of the sector

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<sup>1</sup> Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012

- Broadening DES eligibility to include people with disability who identify as requiring employment support, including people with disability seeking to build their career
- Introduce requirements for DES to have a representative workforce of people with disability
- Lessen red tape and consider framework reform which enables DES to provide a dual focused, dual client approach that can support and resource the needs of people with disability and employers
- Introduce measures to assess quality and consumer and employer satisfaction
- Increase awareness of the DES program among people with disability and employers with a national targeted marketing campaign

**Medium term reform includes:**

- Auspice research which examines multi-layered disadvantage experienced by people with disability to inform evidence based approaches to address employment disadvantage
- Framework reform which encourages and enables DES to adopt a holistic and cross-discipline approach to support a person with disability to secure sustainable employment, taking into account the multiple barriers to employment that people with disability often experience
- Recognition of the employment continuum as part of a cross-discipline and holistic approach, with adequate resourcing
- Framework redesign which enables DES to work innovatively and flexibility with consumers
- Encourage the introduction of specialised employment support services to address identified consumer and geographic gaps
- Resource the development of a Disability Employment Institute, which includes employers, their peaks and the disability employment sector, to develop workforce strategies which are progressive, evidence based and directly informed by people with disability and employers

**Future reform**

- Move to a truly self-directed employment model which is centred on the needs of jobseekers and employers, centred on the principles of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and individualised funding.
- Resource the development of a new employment model which is jobseeker and employer centred

## Introduction - the employment and disability landscape in Australia

*“Employers who take on people who have been out of work for a long period or who have never worked take on extra risk. There is no proof of reliability or of capacity to work productively. Employers are fearful of taking on an extra burden that they may not have the time or skill to handle. Many would prefer to leave vacancies unfilled than to employ someone who might not be able to do the work without more support”<sup>2</sup>.*

The statistics relating to the employment of people with disability in Australia are well known and reinforce a story of poverty, unemployment and under-employment of people who are often already at the periphery of society and subject to chronic, systemic disadvantage.

Consistently, the most significant barriers impacting the economic participation of people with disability reported by people with disability themselves are stigma, entrenched stereotypes of what people with disability can do and the capacity of people with disability to work, and what that work might be. The Shut Out report, and subsequent reports since, have noted that a ‘culture of low expectation’ continues to be one of the largest stumbling blocks to entering the paid workforce. The National Disability Ethnic Alliance (NEDA) and the First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN), in their respective reports, note that embedded cultural expectations and ethnic community norms can also significantly impact whether a person with disability from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background will, or can, even consider employment as a viable option. Gender can also play a significant role in the choices women have and can make regarding the type and frequency of employment. These factors, when combined for individuals with disability, can compromise whether seeking and keeping a job is even on the table.

As has been well reported in the Shut Out report and recognised in the National Disability Strategy, unemployment or under-employment is often only one of a number of interconnected barriers experienced by people with disability, with access to affordable transport, housing, essential daily support, health and economic sustainability all factors which influence the likelihood of getting and keeping a job.

While Disability Employment Services (DES) have an important role to play in assisting people with disability to find and keep sustainable employment, their role is only one part of a broader system which supports and encourages workforce participation. While progressive reform to DES has been identified as necessary by consumers with disability, it is clear that reform to the DES framework alone will not lead to greater employment outcomes. Parallel efforts to change how we see and value the capacity of people with disability to work and how this ‘perception’ is practically demonstrated in workforces across Australia is also paramount. As noted by People with Disabilities Australia (PWDA) in their report

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<sup>2</sup> Fowkes, L, *Rethinking Australia’s Employment Services*, Perspectives, Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney, 2011.

*“disability employment is not just a reporting and disclosure problem, it is a participation problem involving barriers, disincentives, community attitudes, service performance and systems like income support”.*

AFDO is not alone in identifying the need for a seismic and systemic shift in how we address the woeful workforce participation rates of people with disability in open employment. We are also not alone in identifying the need for a parallel seismic shift in how we break the continued stereotypes of the capacity of people with disability to be seen as more than support recipients (be that welfare, access to disability support programs and equipment) to people who can, and should, be expected to economically contribute.

The collective findings of the consumer reports highlight the need for urgent prioritisation of employment reform which gets to the heart of the structural barriers impeding employment for people with disability, followed by proactive steps to address these barriers. This report will examine the evidence collected by consumer organisations of what is needed to improve access and participation in DES as one part of the employment system. This report will also take a holistic look at how the current DES model can be improved to be more responsive to people with disability as well as the broader, systemic changes beyond the current framework that are required to substantially improve employment outcomes.

## **Project scope and delivery**

In 2013, 15 consumer organisations were provided with funding by the Department of Social Services (with funding administered by the National Employment Services Association) to undertake individual projects focused on improving the awareness of DES among consumers with disability and to collect information about the experiences of people with disability using DES.

AFDO’s contribution to the DES consumer engagement project is the compilation of a national report from data collected by national peak member and non-member organisations, with 12 organisations agreeing to participate in this project (a list of these organisations is supplied in this report). Adopting a holistic perspective, this reports looks at systemic employment related issues including how DES can be re-oriented to best meet the needs of people with disability, as well as recommendations informed from AFDO’s broader systemic work in the employment space and with business stakeholders.

In August 2013, AFDO contacted each recipient of consumer engagement funding, with the view of working collaboratively and supporting funded organisations to undertake their DES consumer engagement projects. This was followed by a teleconference held by AFDO and attended by nine funded organisations, with apologies from two organisations. An outcome of this teleconference was the development of a standard data collection template which could be used by each organisation to collect consistent baseline data or to inform and guide their data collection process. The agreed data collection matrix is provided in Table 1. During the project period, AFDO also attended both Disability Employment Service Consumer Engagement Group meetings held in Canberra in November 2013 and April 2014.



During the project period, AFDO maintained regular contact with organisations interested in participating in the development of a collated national report. This also provided opportunities to collect interim data to inform our broader systemic work, including the disability consumer sector's representation on the Commonwealth's DES Reference Group. In April 2014, prior to the second DES consumer engagement day, AFDO hosted a session attended by six organisations to collect preliminary consumer feedback from the consultations undertaken by organisations to date.

In mid 2014, AFDO submitted an abstract to host a panel at the Disability Employment Australia National Conference held in the Gold Coast in August 2014. AFDO's abstract was accepted, with a panel session titled 'Consumers front and centre: what consumers really think about Disability Employment Services'. This session was chaired by the CEO of AFDO, Matthew Wright and focused on the key findings of a selection of DES consumer engagement projects. Co-panellists included consumer organisations Inclusion Australia, Brain Injury Australia and the National Ethnic Disability Alliance.

AFDO also presented at a panel session at the close of the conference titled 'Australia 2025: What does employment look like for people with disability?' with the Business Council of Australia, Australian National University and National Disability Insurance Agency exploring the future of employment for people with disability.

## **Development of this report and limitations of the DES consumer engagement project**

Twelve organisations (of 14 funded organisations excluding AFDO) agreed to share the data collected during the project period to inform this national collated report. Participating organisations included:

Australians for Disability and Diversity Employment (ADDE)  
Blind Citizens Australia (BCA)  
Brain Injury Australia (BIA)  
Deaf Australia (DA)  
Deafness Forum of Australia (DFA)  
Disability Advocacy Network Australia (DANA)  
First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN)  
Inclusion Australia (formerly the National Council on Intellectual Disability)  
Mental Health Australia (MHA)  
National Disability Ethnic Alliance (NEDA)  
Physical Disability Australia (PDA)  
People with Disability Australia (PWDA)

While the surveys undertaken by the above consumer organisations capture the views of people with a wide range of personal experience of disability and take into account gender, age and geographic distribution, AFDO recognises that there are likely to be 'pockets' of people with disability whose experiences have not been captured in the consumer engagement projects. This includes, but is not limited to, people with disability who meet one or more of the following criteria:

- have no relationship or connection to a peak consumer disability body or to an advocacy agency
- have sought and gained employment through their own efforts or through mainstream recruitment channels
- with English as a second or subsequent language
- live in a regional, rural or remote location or geographic area not covered by an organisation's consultation mechanisms
- with limited access to mainstream technology (internet and personal computer) and/or adaptive technology (accessible hardware and software)
- with no knowledge of DES and/or no connection to the income support system
- who do not view employment as an aspiration and/or issue to respond to
- who have not used a DES, have actively chosen not to use a DES or have been dissuaded from accessing DES by other consumers (with the latter point raised in Mental Health Australia's report)
- who have had a poor personal experience with a DES and have disengaged from the employment system
- of school age
- outside of the scope of the consultations undertaken (over 65 years of age, experience a disability which is not comprehensively represented by one of the above project organisations etc).

While this is not empirical research (and does not claim to be), the findings and recommendations of this report are informed from the data that has been shared with AFDO, coupled with our knowledge and experience representing the voice of people with disability on a vast array of employment issues. This report is intended to provide a picture of what people with a wide range of disability think about DES and what they collectively identify needs to improve or change.

### **AFDO collated report outline**

This report has been categorised under four major headings: what has worked well, what has not worked well, what needs to change (which contains recommendations for short term reform, medium term reform and future reform) and what project organisations can do to increase awareness of DES among consumers.

**Table 1: Agreed Data Collection Matrix**

	<b>What has worked well for you?</b>	<b>What has not worked well for you?</b>	<b>What would need to change?</b>	<b>What can our organisation do to make it work for you?</b>
<b>People who have used a DES</b>	<p>Do you have a job now?</p> <p>Did a DES help you to get a job?</p> <p>What worked well for you when you used a DES?</p>	<p>What did not work well for you when you used a DES?</p>	<p>What would need to change for a DES to work well for you?</p>	<p>What could our organisation do to make a DES work well for you?</p>
<b>People who have not used a DES</b>	<p>Do you have a job now?</p> <p>What worked well for you when you were trying to get a job?</p>	<p>What did you find hard when you were trying to get a job?</p>	<p>What would need to change to make it easier for you to get a job?</p>	<p>How could our organisation help you get a job?</p>
<b>People who had tried to use a DES, but were not eligible</b>	<p>Do you have a job now?</p> <p>When you couldn't use a DES, what did you do?</p> <p>Tell us how well this worked for you.</p>	<p>What did you find hard when you were trying to get a job?</p>	<p>What would need to change to make it easier for you to get a job?</p>	<p>How could our organisation help you get a job?</p>
<b>People who had not heard of a DES</b>	<p>Do you have a job now?</p> <p>What worked well for you when you were trying to get a job?</p>	<p>What did you find hard when you were trying to get a job?</p> <p>Now that you know about a DES, are there any reasons why you would not use them?</p>	<p>What would be the best way to give you information about DES?</p> <p>Now that you know about DES, how do you think they could help you get a job?</p>	<p>How could our organisation help you to find out more about DES?</p> <p>How could our organisation help you find out about other ways to get a job?</p>

## What has worked well for consumers?

There were a number of consistent themes which emerged across consumer reports regarding what people with disability felt worked well in their experience with DES.

Not surprisingly, it appeared that the most positive feedback stemmed from consumers who felt that they were treated and respected as an individual, rather than as a transaction or outcome. As an example, the National Disability Ethnic Alliance (NEDA) reported that the highest levels of consumer satisfaction among people from a CALD background were at DES sites where consumers felt connected with the DES service and had a relationship with a DES provider founded on trust and mutual respect – someone who listened to what they had to say and helped them to reach their employment goals.

This feedback was consistent for most organisations, with trust, understanding of the person's disability and approaches which centred on the strengths of the person leading to higher levels of reported satisfaction for consumers. The value of a 'relationship' was raised in a number of reports, with the highest levels of satisfaction among consumers with disability who felt that their DES had a good understanding of their individual capacity and disability specific needs, treated them with dignity and respect and provided a tailored service with open and honest communication.

Ongoing pre and post employment support, particularly for people experiencing mental illness, also assisted consumers to feel confident and supported, with Mental Health Australia (MHA) noting that positive affirming attitudes and the aforementioned strengths based support "built self-belief among consumers – they began to believe that they could get and keep a job".

The openness of DES to work closely with other people (such as carers and families) and organisations (such as other non-employment services) who provided support to the consumer was specifically highlighted by MHA as vital for a successful employment outcome, enabling realistic expectations and goals to be set.

Tailored, practical assistance such as help with job applications, resume writing and interview skills; assistance to obtain workplace modifications; and skills mentoring that took into account a consumer's disability specific needs were also viewed positively. As will be highlighted later in this report, these very same elements were identified as areas requiring improvement by DES, highlighting that the experience of consumers can be shaped by the quality of personal interactions between a DES and consumer and whether the assistance provided actually culminates in well matched, sustainable employment.

## What has not worked well for consumers?

Consistent with the feedback shared with AFDO by consumer organisations prior to the commencement of the DES consumer engagement projects, consumers with disability across almost all disability cohorts expressed dissatisfaction with DES. There were a number of consistent themes which were identified as requiring timely attention to improve access to employment support and to ensure that people with disability, as DES clients, remain engaged and motivated, and most importantly, become employed.

### Overall awareness of DES and what DES actually does

The level of awareness of DES varied between diagnostic consumer groups, with organisations such as MHA reporting reasonable awareness of DES, while others such as Brain Injury Australia reported poor knowledge of DES among those surveyed. There were also notable differences in the level of awareness among people from a CALD background and people from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) background, with consumer organisations from these cohorts reporting lower levels of awareness and engagement with employment support programs.

Knowing what services are available and what a consumer can reasonably expect from a DES were also highlighted as areas which could be improved. Australians for Disability and Diversity Employment (ADDE), Physical Disability Australia (PDA) and Disability Advocacy Network Australia (DANA) in their respective reports note that consumers were often unaware or unclear

- of the services and supports available in the pre-employment and employment stage
- of their rights as a user of a DES
- of the services and supports that could be requested

which led to unmet or unrealistic expectations about what DES could or could not assist with and in turn, dissatisfaction, disengagement or disinterest. As noted articulately in DANA's report:

*“more effort is needed to ensure access to clear information and explanation of the support available to people; the service standards; their responsibilities and rights as DES users, including the right to choose which DES they use, and influence how they receive employment supports. DES users need support to effectively communicate and engage with DES consultants, express their preferences, needs and aspirations, and assume more control over directing and evaluating the jobseeking support they receive”.*

The need for more targeted information promoting the availability of the program, what to expect from a DES, how to make an informed provider choice (including which providers a consumer can choose from) and the inter-relationship with Centrelink and pensions was highlighted as necessary information by almost all consumer groups. Respondents to both Inclusion Australia and DANA's surveys noted that knowledge and understanding of DES was particularly problematic for people working in Australian Disability Enterprises, most notably

around welfare rules and how many hours could be worked without impacting eligibility to the Disability Support Pension. Others such as Deaf Australia (DA) reported that people with disability are being referred to a Centrelink nominated DES provider without appropriate consultation and information about what other providers, or options, are available.

For people from an ATSI background, more community education opportunities aimed at increasing understanding and awareness of disabilities in ATSI communities as well as workshops offered about the availability of services were identified as crucial. Strategies to improve cultural competency and awareness are outlined later in this report.

As noted in the limitations section of this report, it is difficult to gauge the extent of awareness of DES, as consumers with no knowledge of DES would be far less likely to complete a survey about DES. Strategies to improve awareness of DES are also outlined later in this report.

## **Communication**

Communication (how DES staff interact with clients with disability) and the availability of accessible, easy to understand information was raised as an issue for a wide range of consumers with disability. Inconsistent provision of information in accessible alternative formats for people who are blind (Blind Citizens Australia), reliance on written communication for people who are Deaf who may have limited or poor knowledge of English (DA and Deafness Forum of Australia) and no access to simple and clear information about the DES program, state funded transition to work and post school options (Inclusion Australia) were all raised as barriers to making informed decisions and exercising choice.

Taking this one step further, DA noted that the poor (and at times no) provision of interpreters can have a direct impact on whether the DES and client are on the same page in identifying and meeting the consumer's employment goals. DA note that a reliance on written communication for people who may use English as a second or third language can present difficulties for people who are Deaf being able to articulate themselves correctly in writing, which can then have flow on effects on the quality and direction of the service received. A reliance on communication in written format was reported to often extend to training, workshops and group peer sessions which can limit the efficacy of this support.

These experiences also resonate for people from NESB and CALD backgrounds who benefit from information which is culturally appropriate and easy to understand but also experience limited access to interpreters or information in other languages.

## **High caseloads = less time with clients, no one to one approach and a focus on compliance**

Consistently, consumers via their consumer organisations raised concerns that the high caseloads of some DES providers impacts on the capacity of providers to provide a truly self-directed, individualised service to consumers. DANA, in particular, noted that people with more complex support needs require additional time and support to develop job capacity and confidence. This has been inconsistent with the experience of some clients with higher

support needs who have felt that DES “have given up too quickly or easily”, with preference given to clients who are perceived to be easier to place in employment.

These experiences resonate with the concepts of ‘creaming’ (selecting the easiest candidates to place) and ‘parking’ with Struyven and Steurs (2005)<sup>3</sup> noting:

*“In employment programs, risk selection occurs when providers focus their attention on job seekers who are easier to place in order to maximise their financial return...Creaming can also be combined with parking where providers fulfil minimum requirements in order to receive an initial payment and then make little or no effort to find employment for the more disadvantaged job seekers because their chance of success, and hence the agency’s chance of receiving an outcome payment, is low”.*

The frustrations shared by consumer organisations were not inconsistent with the experiences of DES consultants, reported in research undertaken by the Australian National University<sup>4</sup>.

*Many front-line staff described the difficulty in balancing competing priorities; that is, the financial imperative to process clients as quickly as possible and their sense of what constituted a high quality service. This conflict was particularly acute in agencies where ECs [employment consultants] were responsible for a large number of clients or where management had embraced the Departmental view that employment outcomes are paramount.*

As noted by an employment consultant responding to the research:

*“Management is interested in ticking boxes...to get payment. So for them it’s the payment, and for me it’s a person with a name...In DES it is all about forming a relationship...so it’s been a bit of a juggle in terms of tossing up between whether I’m in the people business or whether I’m in the administration business”.*

High caseloads can also impact the capacity of DES professionals to develop customised placements for people with disability, provide practical ongoing support and build long term sustainable relationships with employers, which, in turn, can lead to ongoing job opportunities for other jobseekers with disability in the future. It is clear that this is a symptomatic issue which needs to be addressed if the framework is to effectively support all people with disability with the capacity to work and not just those that are seen to be easiest to place.

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<sup>3</sup> Neville, A & Lohmann, R, *It is like they just don’t trust us: Balancing trust and control in the provision of Disability Employment Services*, Social Policy Action Research Centre, Crawford School of Economics and Government, Australian National University, June 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## An inflexible system failing to provide a self-directed service delivery model

*“It needs to be tailored to individual needs, not follow process just for process sake”,*  
Blind Citizens Australia report

According to the Department of Employment website, one of the key principles of DES is to provide a range of services to support individual needs<sup>5</sup>. Individualisation of the DES process, however, has been far from the experience of many consumers with disability surveyed by project organisations.

Many consumer organisations noted the frustration of constituents who felt that they needed to fit within the tight parameters of the DES’ service offering, rather than have the time to explore employment options and to understand what is available and possible, both in their service access and in developing their own employment goals.

Increased flexibility in how DES is delivered emerged as a theme in a number of reports. This included:

- **where and how clients meet with their DES consultant**, with recommendations for the development of innovative service delivery models and outreach options. A number of organisations recommended the introduction of ‘mobile’ services, enabling clients to meet in more central locations or in their own home (which was raised as particularly important for people with significant mobility restrictions and/or people who experience transport barriers) and/or flexible contact arrangements, such as conducting a ‘touch base’ meeting by phone rather than in person.
- **Frequency of meetings** was raised by a number of consumer organisations. Some consumers felt that fortnightly meetings were a ‘tick and flick’ compliance exercise rather than productive time spent with the consultant. When consumers needed additional time (to explore a job vacancy or to discuss training), consumers felt that the time needed wasn’t available or was rushed. This is consistent with the perspectives of DES consultants reported in ANU’s research.

*“Staff commented that the new contract is much more prescriptive than previous contracts, pointing to the requirement to meet with each client every fortnight regardless of their circumstances. Staff felt this requirement was a misallocation of scarce resources because at times they were just going through the motions and when clients did need more intensive support, there was no time to provide the necessary support. Staff noted that in the past when clients were going well, they had the flexibility to make contact every month or so, but at other times, when job duties changed, or there was a crisis in a client’s personal life which affected their work life, staff had time to provide more intensive support”<sup>6</sup>.*

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Employment, *Disability Employment Services for jobseekers and employees*. URL: <http://employment.gov.au/disability-employment-services-job-seekers-and-employees>

<sup>6</sup> Neville A and Lohmann R, Op Cit.



- **Access to job readiness assistance and assistance with the development of ‘soft skills’** to improve employability, such as building confidence and presentation skills, understanding the effects of body language, appropriate workplace behaviour, developing interview skills as well as assistance to access peer support and develop personal and professional networks. PWDA, in their report, noted that this form of support “was most desired, yet less likely to be provided”.
- **Greater one to one support** which meets an individual’s expressed needs, with consumers noting that group sessions are not an adequate replacement (ADDE).
- **Access to ongoing support** - the lack of continuity in support once a consumer started a job was raised by some consumer organisations as an area of dissatisfaction, with MHA noting that intensity of support had dropped off even though some consumers believed it was still very much needed. This is consistent with feedback from other consumer organisations representing people with disability who may not be traditionally, or from a systems perspective, be viewed as requiring ongoing support such as people with sensory disabilities.

Advocates in DANA’s survey also questioned the responsiveness of DES to meet the expressed preferences of the consumer, with consumers reporting that they do not feel in control of leading decisions about how services support their needs and that consultants do not spend the time to really get to know the person and their job related support needs (which in part relate to high case loads and compliance).

This can express itself in doubt by DES consultants about the capacity of people with disability to perform more challenging roles requiring greater skills or responsibility or consideration of only a narrow range of jobs which may be seen as stereotypically suited to people with certain disabilities. This is consistent with feedback from Blind Citizens Australia (BCA), with respondents noting a significant push by DES providers to consider call centre or phone based work even if this is inconsistent with the person’s employment goals or skillset. MHA also reported that the consumers felt that their qualifications or trade experience were devalued or not recognised because of their disability, leading to recommendations to accept basic jobs, or worse still, to “never look for employment’ due to “too many mental problems”! Brain Injury Australia (BIA) and PWDA also reported similar findings.

As has been noted in mid-term consultations with the Department, a one size fits all approach cannot address the specific and individual needs of each person with a disability – even if two people have the same experience of disability. It is therefore imperative that short and medium term DES framework redesign enables providers to work more flexibly with consumers by removing red tape and lessening compliance burdens which are not essential. Strategies for innovation and flexibility are explored later in this report.

## What would need to change?

There was significant cross-over between what people with disability identified as “not working well” and what people identified as “needing to change”. The following are themes which emerged across a number of consumer reports which relate to both the structure and function of the DES framework, as well as broader reform in the employment space which adopts a longer term approach. These have been categorised as short and medium term reforms and future reforms.

### Short term reform

#### **Build understanding of disability and the effects of culture to improve service delivery**

Unsurprisingly, training of staff working within the DES sector was highlighted as an area requiring immediate improvement in almost all consumer organisation reports.

While some organisations highlighted the need for increased knowledge of the specific needs of diagnostic groups (BCA, DA and MHA among others) and ADDE recommending mandatory training as a condition of employment of DES staff, other organisations also highlighted the need for broader awareness, including better recognition of the day to day capacity of people with disability. This was identified by both NEDA and DANA as particularly important for people with severe and profound disabilities and by DANA and MHA for people with mental health conditions, with MHA noting perceptions that people with mental health conditions were “lazy” and “unmotivated”.

Improved training on what is possible for all people with disability, including people with impaired decision making capacity, ABI and psychosocial disabilities was also flagged, with organisations highlighting that the capacity of DES’ to work innovatively and creatively with consumers to meet open employment requirements is essential to successful outcomes.

The cultural competency of DES providers was also raised by FPDN and NEDA as vital to improving the employment outcomes of people from CALD and ATSI backgrounds. In both FPDN and NEDA’s reports, understanding of disability as well as how communities respond to disability was raised. As noted in FPDN’s report, the concept of disability is not universally understood or recognised by people from ATSI culture, which presents challenges for ATSI people who do not identify as having a disability but must do so to access government funded support. FPDN note that identification as a person with disability is often accompanied by fear of ‘coming to the attention of authorities and discrimination’, which is often coupled with a reluctance to use mainstream services due to historical discrimination.

To be inclusive of people from an ATSI background, FPDN recommends that a culturally competent organisation should reflect an “awareness of Indigenous perspectives not only in its direct service delivery but also in its policy and procedure frameworks, its administrative and business structures and in its human resource practices” and have a genuine respect and support for the cultural knowledge, insights and experiences which ATSI people with disability, their families and communities can bring.

## Professionalise Disability Employment Services and address high turnover of staff

The professionalisation of the DES sector was raised in a number of consumer reports (BCA and ADDE among others). Consumers noted that their expectations of a professional recruitment service pre-commencement with a DES were soon dashed by the reality of staff with limited training around disability specific needs (including reasonable adjustments); limited training on how to successfully 'market' candidates with disability to potential employers and the training to develop business networks; low expectations of the consumer's capabilities; and high turnover.

The professionalisation of DES was highlighted by a number of organisations as an important step forward in providing highly attuned employment support that could lead to higher employment outcomes. Increasing the qualifications of DES professionals, including the development of a nationally recognised qualification (ADDE) or the development of competencies (BCA) was raised by some organisations as a necessary move forward. Mentoring and ongoing professional development were also highlighted as important.

This view is supported by the former Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations Advisory Panel on Employment Services Administration and Accountability which concluded that the professionalisation of the workforce would "help lift and solidify standards and improve retention". The Panel were quick to note that this should not fall into "credentialism" for its own sake, but reflect service improvements, improve skills and capabilities and be tied to required skills and behaviours. The Panel recommended:

*"That DEEWR and the provider sector jointly pursue the professionalisation of the employment services workforce in a manner that is cost-neutral for Government and improves service flexibility and quality whilst reducing red tape. This would include developing agreed knowledge, skills and competency standards for provider staff, and removing Program controls rendered unnecessary by the introduction of competency standards. The professional standards would include recommended minimum qualifications, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Recognition of Current Competency (RCC), explicit recognition of on-the-job learning and a range of pathways to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge (Recommendation 8.1)."*<sup>7</sup>

AFDO maintains that this recommendation is as just relevant today and should be implemented as a priority.

Consumer organisations also recognised that improvement in the quality of DES was tied to better conditions of pay. Research conducted by Disability Employment Australia indicates that 55% of DES staff earn less than \$55,000 per annum<sup>8</sup>, which is less than the national

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<sup>7</sup> Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), Advisory Panel on Employment Services Administration and Accountability Final Report, DEEWR, 2012 accessed via <http://ja.com.au/sites/default/files/Lance%20Wilson/files/APESSAFinalReport.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Disability Employment Australia, Comparative Analysis 2013-2013 DES workforce, presented at the Leaders Forum, April 2014. URL: <http://disabilityemployment.org.au/file/05ace4456930398dd4d6a600bef163b3286dbff9/workforce-survey-results-leaders-forum-april-2014.pdf>

average weekly total earnings reported by the ABS as of May 2014 (\$58,391)<sup>9</sup>. Shining a light on the impact of wages, a participant in ANU's research, a manager of a regional DES provider, reported that a DES client working at Target earned more than one of her workers, without the stress associated of working in a DES.

As noted by ANU:

*“Employment consultants or support staff who have been working in these direct support roles for 12 months or more are now considered “veterans”. High case loads, the pressure to find work for clients who are not job ready, complex contract requirements, constantly changing guidelines, and a heavy administration and compliance load all takes its toll, none of which is compensated for by high wages”.*

Consumers reported that the high turnover of staff also needs to be addressed, with the lack of continuity noted as a source of frustration. Consumers across consumer organisations felt that the high turnover of staff impacted their employment progression, leaving them with no choice but to meet and establish a relationship with a new consultant who may have little understanding of their disability, their capacity and what they can achieve or to start again with a new DES provider.

Analysis undertaken by NESA provided to the DEEWR Panel estimated that staff turnover was as high as 30%, with the reasons for high turnover including “uncompetitive wages, high administrative requirements of staff, the nature and emotional toll of the work, and inadequate training”<sup>10</sup>.

These are critical issues which must be addressed as a priority in the reform of employment services.

### **Broaden DES eligibility – enable access to targeted, individualised support for people with disability who identify as needing employment support**

Almost all of the consumer reports recognised that employment support should be available for all people with disability wanting to improve their employment prospects, not just those who are currently unemployed or are identified by the Department guidelines as ‘eligible’. As an example, one in five respondents to MHA's survey reported that they were ineligible to access DES.

#### **- Assisting people with disability who are seeking more than entry level employment**

Many of the project organisations also surveyed people with disability who did not or could not use DES, as well as people who had previously used a DES but no longer do so.

Consistent with feedback prior to the DES consumer engagement projects, people with post secondary qualifications (including recent graduates) and people with previous work

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<sup>9</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Average weekly earnings*, 6302.0, May 2014. URL:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6302.0>

<sup>10</sup> DEEWR, Op Cit

experience who had acquired their disability later in life generally did not feel that DES were equipped with the skills or connected to the networks to help them meet their employment objectives.

Criticisms included a disproportionate number of entry level positions in a limited range of work settings, with these positions promoted to consumers who had previously held more senior positions or who had qualifications which surpassed, or were not suited, to the entry level work offered. Consumers across disability groups reported a sentiment that “DES was not for them” and seemed better suited to people who have experienced long term unemployment or were entering the labour market for the very first time. As one consumer noted in private discussions with AFDO “if you don’t want to work in retail or in a factory, there really isn’t anything for you’.

This feedback reinforces the absolute necessity of increased employer engagement strategies and closer working relationships with mainstream recruitment organisations to widen the availability and type of jobs available through DES providers.

#### - **Assistance to develop a career**

While changing jobs and upskilling is a well recognised part of the employment trajectory for Australians without disability, the same cannot be said for Australians with disability who may need additional support to ‘step up’ in the labour market. People with disability currently in work who responded to consumer surveys noted that the system was targeted only for people who are unemployed, with no recognition that people with disability in work may require assistance to progress their careers or make changes to their employment to support changes in their life circumstances, such as the start of family, changes in health etc.

The DES framework currently denies access to government funded support for people with disability in employment. A number of people with disability surveyed noted “feeling stuck” in their capacity for personal and professional development due to the restrictions of the framework in assisting people with disability in work to find a new job, negotiate career advancement or seek professional development assistance.

This restriction unintentionally perpetuates a culture of low expectations, with research indicating that people with disability are more likely to experience restricted career progression as compared to their peers without disability. Inadvertently, this also sends a message that people with disability who are employed, including people with disability in very low paid employment in Australian Disability Enterprises, should be grateful to have a job. This leaves people with disability seeking career progression with little choice but to consider quitting their job in order to access government funded employment support or to somehow work it out on their own. The system design as it stands fails to consider that independent job searching, without the assistance of employment services, may be beyond the capacity of some people with disability.

The DES as it currently stands also fails to recognise that working life is not static, but rather fluid, progressive and marked by learning and development. As noted by an advocate responding to DANA’s survey:

*“DES should provide services to people with disabilities who are currently employed and want new work. People with disabilities want careers too and they don’t want to be stuck in the same job forever. This will help them to transition into new work before reaching crisis point, when they feel the need to quit without first securing a new job, resulting in long term unemployment”*

Access to career progression support is also linked to the issue of concurrent access to employment support programs, with ADDE, DANA and Inclusion Australia highlighting this as an important area requiring reform. Consumer feedback collected by Inclusion Australia indicates that 32% of respondents with an intellectual disability want to move to a better job, with a further 11% wanting to move to a job in the open labour market. These individuals are currently denied this support based on framework design; design which is inconsistent with the move towards building the capacity and increasing the economic participation of people with disability which are central tenets to the NDIS.

As noted by a respondent to DANA’s survey:

*“people with disabilities who are already employed have no access to employment supports to advance their career or find a more fulfilling/better paid job. They can only access support to remain in the same job, even if they dislike the job, it pays poorly with poor conditions, and they wish to move on to a new job.”*

Consumers, particularly in ADDE and BCA’s surveys, also identified other areas where the support of a DES would be productive. This included assistance to negotiate increased hours of work, increased responsibilities, changes in the consumer’s work role and professional development. These were recognised as important steps to enable career progression and to remain current and competitive. Some consumers also highlighted that employment support would also be helpful to assist people with disability to explore other job options, such as telework or starting a business.

While the consumer sector is in agreement that the scope of DES should be extended to recognise career progression, it is clear that the current DES model is ill-equipped to meet new demand.

The current capacity of DES providers to assist people with disability to build their careers is hampered by unsustainable caseloads, a heightened focus on compliance and poor remuneration which impacts staff recruitment and retention. Without addressing these issues, the inclusion of individualised career progression assistance (which consumer reports and the findings above show is vitally needed), would further burden an already struggling system. It is critical that these issues are addressed as immediate priorities to enable career progression to then be addressed.

## **Disability Employment Services to have a representative workforce of people with disability**

The need for DES providers to “walk the walk and talk the talk” also featured in the consumer reports, with consumers questioning why DES providers are not proportionally staffed by people with disability who have the appropriate qualifications.

*“Another major theme was that there does not appear to be persons with disabilities working as a DES consultant. There is a strong feeling that if there was, the impact of this would be immediate for the people trying to access the service and for the potential improvement in the understanding of disabilities for fellow workers. Our members of course would recommend that people who are blind or vision impaired could be employed in a DES, however the major obstacle is that none of the systems used are accessible. Hence we strongly suggest that all programs used must be brought into line with the available technology that allows for screen readers, screen magnification and that all websites referred to should conform to WCAG 2.0 for accessibility”. Blind Citizens Australia report*

Consumers held the view that if we are serious about increasing the employment of people with disability, we need to start with the very services that are promoting the inclusion of people with disability within the community – disability service providers and disability employment support providers. This is also reliant on government systems, including compliance systems issued by the Australian Government for use by DES providers, being accessible to the DES workforce.

Research undertaken by Disability Employment Australia indicates that just under 15% of DES consultants surveyed identify as having a disability, with 40% not wishing to identify their disability and 20% selecting ‘other’ as a category<sup>11</sup>. While this is promising, this research and the findings of the consumer engagement projects highlight a gap between the identification of DES staff as having a disability and consumers with disability feeling that the impact of their disability and what is achievable is understood by DES consultants.

Some consumer organisations, such as ADDE, recommend the consideration of incentives to DES providers to hire more people with disability. AFDO takes an alternate view, noting that proportional representation should be a requirement of future DES funding contracts and of government funded disability service providers rather than an ‘incentive’ for practice which should already be occurring.

AFDO also recommends work by the disability employment sector to improve disclosure levels – if DES staff are uncomfortable disclosing their disability to their employers, there is significant work which needs to be undertaken to address the ethos and work practices of the sector.

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<sup>11</sup> Disability Employment Australia, Comparative Analysis 2013-2013 DES workforce, presented at the Leaders Forum, April 2014. URL: <http://disabilityemployment.org.au/file/05ace4456930398dd4d6a600bef163b3286dbff9/workforce-survey-results-leaders-forum-april-2014.pdf>

## **More than words: Disability Employment Services needs to become a dual focused employment assistance program**

The purpose of a DES was queried in a number of reports, with organisations questioning whether DES is tailored solely to assist people with disability into work, is an employer focused program, a program of government compliance or a recruitment program, as well as the extent to which there is a cross focus on all of these elements. As noted by PDA in their report:

*“There is confusion about whether the Disability Employment Service (DES) program is a disability program or an employment program, one result of which is that a number of DES providers demonstrate better knowledge of disability than they do of employment”.*

As has been highlighted throughout this report, consumers felt that DES staff need to have a better understanding of the needs and capacity of people with disability; relationships and networks with a wide range of employers that can offer more than entry level jobs in a limited range of work settings and the skills to secure a sustainable job placement as a recruitment professional.

Many consumers, and advocates who responded to DANA’s consumer survey felt this this balance – a service designed to concurrently meet the needs of both jobseekers and employers – is not being achieved, with advocates in particular calling for stronger awareness and connections with employers as well as increased pro-activeness and initiative to work with employers to create more jobs for people with disability. As ADDE also note in their report, “DES need to be knocking down the doors of employers to understand what jobs are physically available”.

This sentiment is consistent with consultation undertaken by AFDO with employers and their peaks during 2013-2014, with stakeholders highlighting a significant weighting to the supply side – people with disability – without appropriate investment in meeting and understanding the needs of employers, building relationships with businesses and providing services which meet employers’ needs and expectations. Stakeholders that AFDO consulted with noted the importance of support which assists an employer across the scope of their business, including but not limited to improving the accessibility of their recruitment processes, practical support to improve the accessibility of worksites which in turn create an accessible customer environment, website accessibility and so on.

DES also have a role to play in addressing the perceptions of employers about people with disability (including perceived risks) and the capacity of people with disability to work.

The importance of a good job match which meets the needs of the employer and matches the aspirations and skills of the jobseeker was also raised consistently by stakeholders as one of the most important elements to ensure an ongoing, successful employment partnership. Stakeholders AFDO engaged with noted that providers often do not take the time to understand the specific business needs of each employer which can lead to poor job



matches and a decrease in employer confidence.

With only an average of 30% of DES clients reaching a 26 week outcome<sup>12</sup>, it is evident that there is a need for investment to understand what high performing DES' (relative to other DES') are doing well, analysis of existing successful employment engagement strategies that can be learned from and how these learnings can inform refinement of the framework. The development of a Disability Employment Institute (outlined later in this report), which would include involvement from employer representatives, would also be useful to identify targeted employer engagement strategies for small, medium and large businesses which can lead to more effective outcomes.

### **Measure quality and consumer and employer satisfaction as part of the DES performance framework**

*Greater importance is placed by some DES on achieving the job placement, rather than on job satisfaction, PWDA report.*

While the introduction of the Star Rating system and public release of DES performance data has been useful, consumers identified the value of independent qualitative information about the experiences of consumers, as well as quantitative data on how consumers rate a service's responsiveness, the service's awareness of disability and whether job placements are consistent with the consumers goals and commensurate with their skills and experience.

Just as critically, there is no quality measure to assess the satisfaction of businesses who receive support from a DES and whether the support has met their expectations or requirements.

Any systemic reform of the DES system must include the inclusion of an independent quality measure which assesses the satisfaction of consumers, in addition to the performance of the DES service, to enable consumers to make well informed decisions. A quality measure should also consider the perspectives of businesses to ensure that providers are delivering a dual focused service which is mutually beneficial to both jobseekers and business.

### **Get the word out to consumers and employers – in a much more strategic way than it is being done now**

While \$800 million per annum spent on the Disability Employment Services program, it is clear from the data collected that the knowledge of DES by both consumers and employers is low, with current marketing ineffectual in attracting new employers to consider hiring people with disability.

At a strategic level, some consumer organisations have identified strategies to improve awareness of the program, and more broadly the employment of people with disability

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<sup>12</sup> Department of Employment, *Disability Employment Services – DES Outcome Rates by Disability Type*, Labour Market Information Portal, June 2014 URL: <http://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/DisabilityEmploymentServicesData/DESOutcomeRatesbyDisabilityType>

among business and the community, with PDA calling for the development and resourcing of a national disability employment marketing and communications strategy and campaign.

Supported by practical resources and success stories, AFDO believes that this campaign could leverage on the growing community awareness of the NDIS to showcase business opportunities and the economic benefit of a workforce which includes people with disability. As many businesses in NDIS trial sites are recognising, this can lead to an increase in the customer base for companies who are 'open for business'. This includes customers with disability, their families, colleagues and friends who comprise a significant proportion of the Australian population.

## **Medium term reform**

### **Improving employment outcomes is reliant on data which looks at multi-layered disadvantage experienced by people with disability**

While data regarding the workforce participation of people with disability exists, the full extent of the employment disadvantage experienced by people with disability is not clear; an area identified by consumers as lacking.

In order to work to close the gap between the workforce participation of people with disability as compared to those without disability, it is imperative that we have an objective research and evidence base which looks at multi-layered disadvantage. This includes data by gender, age, ethnicity, geography, type of disability, whether the disability is congenital or acquired (which is particularly important in understanding the extent of workforce disadvantage and how prior work history impacts employment transition or re-entering the workforce) and other characteristics.

The current data is inadequate in understanding and addressing multiple disadvantage where living with a disability is just one of the factors of disadvantage. Objective evidence is also critical to set clear and measurable improvement targets and to unpack the types of measures that are needed to best support different disability cohorts.

### **Disability Employment Services to be part of a broader holistic approach to supporting a person with disability to secure sustainable employment**

For a person with disability, getting and keeping a job requires more than the disincentive of losing the Disability Support Pension and basic assistance with job search functions. People with disability, particularly individuals who have been long term unemployed and have experienced sustained disadvantage require additional support to build confidence and capacity, as well as assistance to address a range of barriers impacting workforce participation.

Consumer organisations have recommended that DES should be a component of a more holistic framework which can work in tandem with allied services, government, community services and formal and informal networks to address the multiple barriers which impact on

a person's capacity to work. Reform to the employment services framework needs to consider and promote interaction between cross-disciplinary support services who can work together to enable a person with disability to become work ready and work confident, which concurrently addressing other barriers to participation. This includes but is not limited to housing availability, income support, community connections, individual capacity and independence. As noted in the report prepared by PWDA:

*'Just as physical housing is only one part of a broader set of issues surrounding a person who is homeless, so there are a range of inter-relating obstacles and issues in the lives of people with disability who are experiencing barriers to the labour market'.*

Looking at this from an ATSI perspective, FPDN note that addressing the social and emotional needs of ATSI people with a disability is just as important to successful engagement as finding a job. Indigenous jobseekers experience greater labour market disadvantage as compared to non-indigenous job seekers. This often includes lower levels of education, poorer health and wellbeing outcomes, higher rates of disability and poor access to employment opportunities due to geographic location. FPDN, drawing on the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, report that

*"service providers who create strong links with local indigenous organisations, communities and employers find it easier to engage with and assist Indigenous job seekers".*

Understanding the importance of societal responsibilities and utilising the strengths of family and community based kinships can also increase the possibility of involvement in disability and mainstream employment services.

For people from CALD communities including refugees and humanitarian entrants, a cross-disciplinary approach will also need to involve better links with settlement services outside of the disability sector who can provide case management services and can help to address cultural and integration barriers.

### **A holistic approach needs to recognise the employment continuum and resource this in a coordinated way**

Developing a holistic system also extends to the employment continuum. The current system inadvertently expects that people with disability will somehow find their own way through the complex and inter-layered system of welfare, education, vocational training and disability employment programs into employment. While many people with disability have successfully navigated the system or have gained employment of their own accord, the current system does not provide a continuum where all parts are intuitively connected.

An effective employment system extends well beyond the mechanisms that assist people into work, including DES, and should recognise, plan for and provide support across the continuum. This should include the following elements:

- work experience in school to provide an insight, as well as practical experience of, and exposure to, the world of work;
- effective transition pathways from school to post-school training and employment, and ongoing development in the workplace;
- inclusive graduate programs;
- peer support, job mentoring and external support, and workplace support as required;
- access to quality disability service providers to build and support individual capacity (including employment service providers);
- job readiness skilling and practical experience to enable people with disability to build personal confidence and demonstrate competency to employers;
- a responsive employment service system which meets the needs of both jobseeker and employer and
- once in a job, access to career advancement and leadership opportunities that are available to any other employee.

At present, education, vocational training, disability employment programs and employment sit in four different portfolios across government. There is no apparent coordination between portfolios, creating a haphazard and adhoc approach to building, resourcing and supporting a continuum of employment which ensures that people with disability are supported in their journey to employment. This is consistent with consumer feedback, with some organisations (Inclusion Australia and DANA) reporting poor transition pathways between education to post education options, including training and work experience.

AFDO recommends the establishment of a cross-departmental advisory mechanism, as an absolute minimum starting point, that includes disability representation and peak bodies representing each element of the employment continuum, including DES, to guide better linkages and coordination between these currently independent systems.

### **Encourage innovative practice to occur**

#### **- Moving beyond a silo mentality**

Consumers observed that the current DES program works in a silo mentality and raised co-operation between DES' and other employment pathways as an important element to achieving employment success. Consumer organisations noted that competition for outcome fees can inadvertently work as a detriment to people seeking work. Reported barriers include

- Unwillingness to assist people with disability to find a job outside of their employment service area
- Unwillingness of providers to work in collaboration, even where this has been identified by people with disability themselves, advocates or family as leading to better outcomes

- Generalist providers being able to “tap” into advice from specialist providers who may be unwilling to share information as there is no financial benefit in doing so
- The willingness of providers to work together, rather than in competition, to support local employers to get the best fit and to ensure employers feel supported, rather than inundated

The latter point is consistent with feedback received by AFDO from business stakeholders who have reported that the constant approach from individual DES providers is time-consuming (particularly for large organisations who work across the diversity spectrum), ineffective and off-putting.

As noted by PDA in follow up conversations with AFDO, there are currently no incentives, financial or otherwise, for DES providers to work collaboratively with each other or to explore co-operative relationships with mainstream recruiters to assist clients to find the job best suited to their abilities. This continues to inadvertently reinforce that the employment of people with disability should be considered separately rather than as part of the broader recruitment pool.

To move beyond a silo mentality, AFDO encourages

- framework reform which reduces red tape and balances only the ‘must have’ compliance with flexibility to explore specialised self-directed support options that best support a client
- collaborative working arrangements (which would be particularly useful in employment service areas with limited labour market vacancies) with other DES’ providers and mainstream recruiters
- a cross-employment support program approach with intersections made with mainstream recruiters and
- a cross-disciplinary holistic approach which works with a range of services assisting a person with disability to participate in community life as outlined.

### **Encourage the introduction of specialist employment support services in addition to good quality generalist services**

With the move towards a social model of disability, there is a view that diagnostic specialisation has become less necessary in favour of inclusive, generalist services that can (or at least should) meet the individual needs and requirements of people with disability. While people with disability should be able to choose and receive an equivalent level of service and support from a mainstream or generalist disability provider, consumers across a number of cohorts have identified the value of specialist employment support which can provide in-depth understanding of the needs of particular disabilities and the practical support to facilitate a solid job match. As noted by PDA in their report:

*“...a specialist model brings unique benefits to the employment process that are less about the process itself, and more about understanding the total needs of the individual with disability”.*

This is also important for people from a CALD background, with NEDA questioning the efficacy of generalist services to meet the needs of CALD consumers and the lack of specialist DES' performing this function, recommending that resources should be allocated to research whether generalist services are achieving outcomes for this cohort.

Inclusion Australia, PDA, BIA, NEDA and FPDN cited the lack of providers with the expertise in assisting diagnostic groups and people with other employment barriers as an issue which requires timely attention. Over half (55%) of respondents to Inclusion Australia's survey reported that they were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with their employment service provider, with dissatisfaction further exacerbated by the lack of choice of providers specialising in assisting people with moderate levels of intellectual disability into open employment.

It is clear from the consumer feedback that demand exists for the introduction of additional specialist providers. Analysis of gaps in current provision by disability and geographic location, coupled with more targeted consultation with consumers with disability, would be a helpful first exercise.

**Resource the development of a Disability Employment Institute which facilitates the development of workforce strategies that are directly informed by people with disability and employers**

Despite significant investment in the DES program, there is an absence of evidence about the mechanisms, policy drivers and levers which will drive change and increase employer buy-in, and in turn participation. It is clear that without greater business buy-in, we are unlikely to make any sizable dent in addressing the employment participation of people with disability.

Up to this point, policy and workforce strategies have been largely developed by government in isolation of input and direction by people with disability and business representatives. The exclusion of people with disability from decision making is contrary to the intent of the National Disability Strategy and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which mandates that people with disability should have the opportunity to be actively involved in decision making processes about policies and programs, including those directly concerning them.

Taking a systematic view, PDA recommended the establishment of a Disability Employment Institute which would

*'combin[e] perspectives and expertise of employers, the employment industry, people with disability and government to lead the development of disability employment in Australia. In the first instance, the Institute would conduct the strategic review and the redesign of the business model'.*

AFDO believes that the role of the Institute or thinktank could be extended (with adequate resourcing) to

- Identify the structural and operational barriers and disincentives experienced by employers and jobseekers.
- Develop a medium to long term plan (3-5 years) to increase the workforce participation rate of people with disability which is informed by the direct experiences of employers and people with disability about what works and what changes are required.
- Identify employer led initiatives by industry/sector which have achieved successful employment outcomes for both employees with disability and their employers
- Utilise this information to inform the design of a system more responsive to a demand driven approach which recognises both the supply and demand side of employment and that enhances opportunities for more systematic application of successful pilots by industry/sector.
- Provide consumer and employer driven advice on the re-alignment of job support services (DES and JSA) so that they are an effective and mainstream resource for employers, while ensuring that the flexible specialist support that may be required by job-seekers with disability and by employers remains an inherent component of the service system.
- Monitor the rollout of the NDIS and its interface to employment and provide advice as to how employment support could be re-oriented to provide more choice and control for consumers, including the potential for self directed packages
- Inform policy development and levers which encourage people with disability to aspire, take active steps toward and gain employment and economic independence, including in the areas of welfare; vocational education and training; integrated work learning strategies; and other mechanisms.
- Challenge the culture of low expectations of employers, the community and of people with disability themselves (and their families) by showcasing the diversity of occupations and industries that people with disability work in and economically contribute towards.
- Investigate innovative 'out of the box' approaches which promote and provide job readiness, practical workplace experience and increase connection to the workforce to increase long-term employability.
- Pilot programs targeted to different demographics including school age and young people with disability; post school age and graduate; people with disability who are long term unemployed; as well as explore peer support, mentoring opportunities and career advancement.
- Better understand disability's place within diversity and how reforms/initiatives undertaken in the diversity strands of gender, indigenous and multiculturalism can be applied to people with disability.

## Future reform

### Consumers front and centre – a true self-directed service model

As has been noted in this report, the principles of self-directed service delivery vs the reality of what consumers currently receive does not match up. With the promise of self-directed service delivery in sight with the pending implementation of the NDIS, consumers have identified the need for greater choice and control in what is considered to be employment support and how it is accessed.

Individualised funding packages to purchase employment related support, in line with the approach to be adopted by the NDIS, was viewed positively by many consumers across a number of organisations. ADDE, in their submission, noted that the move to a more market style approach similar to the NDIS and Transport Accident Commission models could lead to “increased flexibility and assistance which sits beyond the scope of what a DES can deliver”.

Consumers identified the following benefits:

- The ability to choose the ‘best provider’ that can assist a person with disability into work rather than a provider restricted to an Employment Service Area. This is consistent with the findings from ANU’s research which noted:

*“From interviews with job seekers it was clear that high performing agencies quickly gain a reputation among jobseekers as an agency that is able to find you a job. Therefore restrictions on agencies taking clients from outside their ESA should be removed. In other words, let market mechanisms rather than administrative regulation determine the flow of clients into a particular agency”<sup>13</sup>.*

Consumers noted that this should include specialist or generalist disability service providers, mainstream recruiters or career specific recruiters (aligned with a person’s career goals) or to choose not to use a provider at all in favour of other options which build employment capacity.

- Ability to purchase other types of support which can increase employability including
  - Individual capacity building to build preparedness to enter or re-enter open employment (which could include the development of the ‘soft skills’ outlined earlier in this report). This gap between the skills of candidates vs the foundational skills employers expect has been consistently raised by employer peaks including the Business Council of Australia<sup>14</sup> as a significant issue for the future workforce
  - training and skill development
  - access to professional and peer mentoring
  - career development assistance

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<sup>13</sup> Neville, A and Lohmann R, Op Cite

<sup>14</sup> Social Ventures Australia Employment Dialogue, presentation by Jennifer Westacott, CEO, Business Council of Australia, 5 June 2014



- purchase of additional supports not covered by the Employment Assistance Fund such as additional Auslan interpreting hours or equipment

During the last financial year, AFDO has undertaken significant work to design, in consultation with stakeholders, a new employment model which is jobseeker and employer centred. The elements above are very consistent with the parameters of the proposed new model which will be released in late 2014.

In light of some of the preliminary findings from the NDIS trials, it is clear that there also needs to be parallel investment in building the capacity of people with disability, particularly for people with disability who are unused to taking charge of their own lives and supports. The success of such a move is dependent on independent, impartial information available to consumers with disability to explore the options available, with advice available to assist people with disability to decide how to 'spend' their self-directed package to meet their own employment objectives.

### **Development of a new employment model which is jobseeker and employer centred**

It is clear that undertaking reform to the DES system alone will not lead to the changes needed to significantly reposition the employment of people with disability in the eyes of the community and of businesses seeking to hire capable workers. During 2013-2014, AFDO undertook the National Disability Employment Advocacy Project, with AFDO consulting with employers and their peaks on strategies to increase the workforce participation of people with disability, taking into account the needs of both jobseekers and business.

In April 2014, AFDO convened a roundtable that was attended by 45 strategic thinkers and leaders from both within and outside of the employment space, including employer peaks, employment service peaks, business leaders, innovators and futurists, which also included people with disability. The focus of the Roundtable was to develop the parameters of a new employment model centred on the needs of jobseekers and employers.

Key recommendations from the roundtable included a focus on greater support and incentives for employers; increased choice and control for consumers and more flexibility and innovation in how employment services are delivered. The following elements were identified at the Roundtable and the form the basis of the proposed model developed by AFDO.

1. Support and incentivise businesses to become proactive employers of people with disability. This includes the development of targeted resources; an approach which looks at senior leadership as well as practical business support to create sustainable job matches; a flexible approach recognising the needs of businesses of all sizes and optional access to programs including incentives and subsidies.
2. Empower people with disability to take an active role in their employability and place funding in the hands of consumers to purchase employment supports that best meet their employment needs. This would include a NDIS style system which enables people with disability to choose employment support/s that will best assist to reach employment goals

(which would include a much broader range of employment services including mainstream services and training options), independent information and capacity building.

3. Re-orient the employment service system to be an enabler rather than driver. This would include a ‘shake up’ of the service system, with the bulk of funding diverted from the system to assist employers to hire people with disability and assist people with disability to purchase appropriate supports which lead to employability.

4. Recognition and support of the employment continuum, with better support and connection between employment pathways.

With extensive work underway with the implementation of the NDIS and the pending review of DES contractual arrangements, the next two to three years are critical to investigate the changes that are required to move to a more effective jobseeker and employer centred model.

### **What can organisations do to make DES work better for consumers?**

Not all consumer reports included a section on how consumer organisations could provide assistance to “make DES work better for consumers”. However, the importance of independent information without the marketing gloss, coupled by independent support and advocacy, were raised as important.

#### **Resource consumer organisations to provide independent, objective advice to people with disability and their families**

As indicated in this report, the level of awareness of what DES can and cannot assist with was low for some disability cohorts, leading to incorrect assumptions and expectations.

In addition to the introduction of a quality measure, consumers raised the value of access to independent information and advice provided by people with disability for people with disability to enable informed decisions not only about DES but also employment pathways. The independence of this information was given particular emphasis.

Consumers and families responding to the Inclusion Australia surveys highlighted the value of hearing the experiences of other people with disability - their stories, service experiences and outcomes – to help people with disability and families make informed decisions about the most suitable providers who cater for disability specific needs. Families at the Inclusion Australia consultations noted that access to the direct voices of people with intellectual disability and their families about their experiences in open employment were extremely helpful in not only showcasing what could be achieved, but also in navigating the plethora of services available which may sound good, but not deliver.

Consumers responding to the BCA consultations requested a database of job roles and companies who employ people who are blind or vision impaired to get a greater sense of what is possible, promotion of the success stories of people who are blind or vision impaired in the workforce and factsheets which bust the myths about blindness and vision

impairment. This was also consistent with feedback received by PWDA who note that people with disability are interested in hearing about the types of jobs people were able to secure through the assistance of a DES and the types of services offered; information which may not be completely objective coming from a service provider trying to secure business.

Consumers also identified access to broader employment and income support information as important. This is consistent with feedback received by AFDO, with people with disability often having very poor knowledge of income support rules and changes, as well as employment pathways to step into employment.

Both DANA and NEDA highlighted the importance of increasing knowledge of workplace rights and obligations, particularly in an Australian context for people who are newly arrived in Australia or new to Australian workplaces. This not only includes information about the expectations of a workplace and an employer but also what are reasonable expectations of employees, rights as well as responsibilities to ensure that a person is being treated fairly.

Poor resourcing of independent advocacy, peer support and mentoring remains a significant barrier in enabling people with disability to learn about the experiences of others in a non-commercial, non-compliance setting. Based on the feedback presented by consumers, AFDO recommends appropriate resourcing of independent advocacy and funding for consumer information sessions run by people with disability for people with disability to provide independent information and settings for people with disability to obtain impartial information. Simply providing a list of local service providers after a Job Capacity Assessment as has been done is not enough.

## Conclusion

It is clear from the findings of this report that the experiences of consumers with disability, just like the employment support needed, cannot be categorised as a 'one size fits all'.

The experience of consumers can be influenced by a multitude of factors including how well supported and informed consumers feel, the quality of interactions with DES staff who know their job well and can create a good match and the ability to access ongoing support when and as needed. The experiences also varied considerably for consumers from CALD and ATSI backgrounds. Not unlike people without disability, consumers with disability want to be recognised as an individual with goals to achieve, rather as a number in a large caseload or a pending outcome fee. DES that were able to achieve this balance were generally the ones with the highest levels of satisfaction.

This report outlines a series of shortcomings and recommendations that need to be addressed in the short and medium term, as well as a proposed way forward to ensure that service delivery becomes truly self-directed as well as employer focused.

If the National Disability Strategy is to be more than mere words, we need a commitment to employment reform which is informed by the voice of people with disability and employers – the two players the system is all about – followed by actions to reorient the employment system to meet its intent: to get more people with disability into sustainable open employment.