



Autism Queensland Response to the National Disability Employment Strategy Consultation Paper 2021

“When I work, I feel a sense of independence. It gives me back a sense of purpose in life. Now I can be somebody in the community.”

Autism EmployABLE participant, 2020

Autism Queensland welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation paper.

We are Queensland’s lead agency for the provision of services for people on the autism spectrum. The experience, insight and knowledge gained over almost 55 years of operation has led to the development of highly effective state and national support services, guided by a vision of a life of participation, opportunity and choice for people on the spectrum.

Autism Queensland’s Autism EmployABLE program is a participant led, autism-specific employment access program for people to explore, navigate, gain, sustain and thrive in employment. The pilot program was funded in 2020 through the NDIS Information, Linkage and Capacity Building program. The success of the program saw this funding secured again this year through June 2022.

Evaluation of the pilot along with prior research undertaken by Autism Queensland continues to emphasize the increasingly urgent need for ongoing specialist employment service provision. Jobseekers on the autism spectrum are being failed by current Disability Employment Services (DES) who are unable to adequately meet needs of people with a disability.

This needs to change.

Are there barriers or concerns for Jobseekers with a disability not covered in this consultation paper?

In short yes. The Department of Social Services, National Disability Employment Framework, Issues Paper noted in 2015 that different groups of people with disability have different needs. For example, those people with a physical disability will have different needs to those people with an Intellectual disability. The Paper also stated that employment Service provision needed different approaches to assist these different groups of people.

This consultation paper written **six years later** still does not address the varying employment support requirements of different cohorts of people with a disability and seemingly continues to favour the one size fits all approach.

Key Barriers and Concerns

Inadequate DES provision

- The issue of DES providers not adequately meeting the needs of people with a disability is not new. It has been raised repeatedly through advocacy groups and research papers such as the “*Consumers front and center: What consumers really think about Disability Employment Services*” paper (2014) funded by the Department of Social Services, DES Consumer Engagement project. Yet very little has changed.
- People on the autism spectrum are one of the most marginalised groups in Australia in terms of access to employment.
- They are three times more likely to be unemployed than those with other disabilities and nearly eight times as likely when compared to people without a disability (ABS,2018).
- The Autism EmployABLE evaluation showed the main concerns about DES providers were the lack of consistency due to high staff turnover, limited to no understanding and knowledge of autism and of individual needs, and jobseekers being asked to undertake work that was not commensurate to their interests and skill set. For example, they were being sent for an interview as an unqualified support worker for someone on the spectrum just because they were also on the spectrum so would “know what to do’.
- DES provision has been clearly shown to be failing the people it is meant to be supporting and furthermore does not adequately support either the Jobseeker or employers (Pillay, Brownlow & March, 2021; AFDO, 2014).
- DES as generalist providers are not equipped with the specialist knowledge required to adequately support adults on the spectrum into meaningful employment (Neary, et al. 2015)
- DES staff in the most part are not appropriately qualified to provide the on-the-job support needed to enable jobseekers with disabilities like autism to thrive in the workplace (Brooke et al. 2019).
- Research shows the outstanding employment results that can be achieved with specialist, tailored participant led provision (Ashburner, Glastonbury, Bobir, & Sanders, 2021; Pillay, et al. 2021).

Speed to placement

- The DES model rewards ‘speed to placement’ whereby providers receive greater financial incentive to place people into employment as soon as possible. Consequently, many providers are therefore driven by employment outcomes resulting in poor behaviours such as placing jobseekers into any role to meet key performance measures regardless of their interests, qualifications, and limitations.
- Also, it has been consistently reported that clients with more specialist needs are side-lined in favour of those who are thought to be easier to place (Pillay et al. 2021; Ashburner, et al. 2021).
- The DES model places too much emphasis on short term employment outcomes by rewarding providers with strong incentives to place often at the expense of longer-term sustainable employment.
- This model is neither in the clients’ interests nor in the interest of providing employers with appropriate candidates.

When employer incentives equal jobseeker disadvantage

- Some “incentives’ for employers, for example, Supported Wage System (SWS), have been shown to not be in the client’s best interest as they often favour the employer (Disability Employment Issues Paper, 2015). Average productivity of a jobseeker under the scheme was shown to be at just 60%. There was little or no support to improve or increase this figure over time and build the individual’s capacity as they become familiar with the expectations of the role.
- There are no known safeguards in place to prevent this disconnect from happening or for flagging employees of concern where this misplacement has occurred in order that additional support/coaching and investigation can occur.
- There are instances where the employee is reassessed, and their productivity has decreased as they have become demotivated through lack of support, lack of role advancement and reduced earnings. We need to ensure that there is adequate support for both the employee and their employer in these instances. Do we now need to incentivise the employer for this to happen?

Target cohorts

- There seems to be an emphasis on youth unemployment in this paper which, whilst important, only accounts for 33% of the DES caseload as opposed to the remaining 67% who are aged 35 and over.

Opting out of service provision

- As of 30 April 2020, just 3.8% of the DES caseload identified autism as a primary disability which equals approximately 12,000 people (DES monthly reports, 2021).
- Only 45% of the participants who engaged with the EmployABLE program reported they were registered with a DES provider. Many of them reported only receiving fortnightly phone contact. A significant proportion of those who were not registered indicated that while they had been previously linked to a provider, they no longer wished to be as they did not see the benefit.
- Increasingly concerning is the growing number of potential jobseekers on the autism spectrum that are not receiving DES support nor qualify for NDIS assistance.

Recommendations

1. Comprehensive reform of the DES funding model with options for services to be procured from specialist organisations with a knowledge of disability.

Removal of the incentives that promote short term employment outcomes.

Consideration of whether outcome payments are desirable, whether payment time frames are too short and whether a portion of payments should be clawed back if a jobseeker re- enters the system (AFDO, 2014).

2. A DES model that is more person centred on the needs of jobseekers and employers.

Focused on the four principles of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) relating to the participation of people with disability and individualised funding. Ability to choose a specialist provider where needed that has a proven ability to meet their needs.

3. Allow a user choice system.

Whereby a person can choose an employment provider (specialist) based on the provider’s performance and ability to support their unique needs.

4. **NDIS support for the procurement of specialist employment services from a qualified provider rather than the default generalist DES provider.**

Jobseekers with specialist support needs can access employment support through NDIS. For example, people on the spectrum who fail to meet eligibility for NDIS support but still desperately need specialist employment assistance.

5. **Allow for specialist qualified providers to support certain cohorts that are marginalised by the current system.**

For example, funding for specialist organisations to use their expertise in assisting individuals into meaningful sustainable employment. Autism Queensland's Autism EmployABLE is one such program that has proven the impact specialist, participant-led, tailored employment support has significantly increased the likelihood of success for adults on the spectrum seeking employment (Ashburner, et al. 2021).

6. **Explore ways to service those individuals that have opted out of DES support for failing to meet their need and are not eligible for NDIS assistance. They are an increasingly large cohort.**

A study in Australia found that reducing the unemployment of people with ASD by one-third would lead to a \$43 billion increase in the Australian Gross Domestic Product (Griffiths, et al. 2020) It is therefore not only ethically and morally important to do so but economically as well. Autism EmployABLE was established to address this unmet need.

7. **Professionalisation of the disability employment sector.**

Achieved through a focus on training and minimum qualifications and skillsets for providers and their staff.

8. **Review of the supported wage system to ensure that it is equitable for employees.** Incentives to increase the participants productivity over time. The employee receives the full wage, the employer still pays the assessed amount, for example, 60% and the remaining 40% is funded through DES or NDIS. The employer is then incentivised to show the supports given to increase the individual's work capacity over time.

9. **DES providers are not-for-profit organisations.**

They need to demonstrate a person-centred approach and ability to meet jobseeker needs above the need for profits.

Are there barriers or concerns for employers not covered in this consultation paper?

In our experience of working with employers over the last 18 months whilst running the Autism EmployABLE program we believe there are key areas that need to be addressed to assist employers to facilitate more inclusive workforces.

Key Concerns

We need to change the narrative when seeking employment for individuals with a disability.

- Too often individuals are viewed from a position of deficit and through the lens of impairment instead of for their strengths and capability.
- The employer needs to see and be shown the jobseeker's value and appreciate how they can contribute to their organisation irrespective of their disability, rather than viewed as a potential cost with a need for accommodations.

- Additionally, employers need to see how employees on the autism spectrum may demonstrate “above standard” workplace performance compared to their counterparts related to increased attention to detail, work ethic, and quality of work (Griffiths, et al. 2020).

The support and coaching process needs to be easy to navigate and seamless.

- DES providers are failing in their ability to engage employers as they are not recognising and understanding the employer’s unique business needs. They are not taking the time to understand the work environment, role requirements or matching suitable carefully job matched jobseekers.
- DES providers who properly assist with recruitment, job matching, discuss accommodations, coaching and ongoing support will have much greater outcomes (Scott, et al. 2017). Collaboration between employers and DES providers has been identified as a key component promoting positive employment outcomes for employees with a disability (Brooke, et al. 2018).

Promotion of the National Work Experience Program (NWEPP) to employers.

- The NWEPP is a considerably underutilised resource, often not known to Employers and in our experience, even some DES providers.
- Promoting task-based interviews, work experience and work that allows the jobseeker and employer to see if they are a good fit is essential.
- Dreaver et al. (2019) demonstrated the importance of work environment and job match as being critical to employment success.
- Participants and employers need to be given the opportunity for this to happen in an easy and straightforward way. The NWEPP is a good resource open to both employers and potential employees.

Lack of employer awareness regarding their recruitment practices

- Too often recruitment practices do not support all candidates to demonstrate their capabilities especially those on the spectrum.
- Interviews that test social skills and the capacity to “sell yourself” rather than testing the ability to do the tasks of the job.

Recommendations

1. DES providers need to consider the broader context of the employer and their business needs, not just the needs of the potential employee if they are to increase engagement.
2. Frequent open conversations need to be had by DES providers with employers to see how they can improve their relationship and more importantly listen to what the employer needs to employ a person with a disability.
3. Recruitment processes need to become sufficiently agile to allow individuals with a disability to demonstrate their capabilities.
4. Encourage and find pathways for employers to utilise the NWEPP so they have direct experience of working with people with a disability and can make informed decisions based on experience rather than misconceptions.

5. Pathways to employment and negotiating work experience need to be easy to access and widely known.
6. There is a need for greater availability from DES providers for site visits and on the job support at both the employee and employer's request.
7. Educate employers with current research findings that shows there are no additional costs associated with employing individuals on the spectrum over and above that associated with any new employee (Scott, et al. 2017).

Do you have any feedback on the proposed vision or priority areas?

Changing community attitudes and understanding the value individuals with a disability can bring to an organisation is one of the most important priorities.

In general employers hold positive attitudes toward people with disabilities when asked, however, when faced with the prospect of employing an individual with a disability many employers appear conflicted and reluctant to do so (Scott, et al. 2017).

In our experience there is still a lack of disability awareness, acceptance, and reticence from employers especially in relation to autism which is often referred to as an invisible disability. Employers' lack of understanding of autism and mistaken suppositions such as assumption of intellectual impairment must be addressed if there are to be any improvement in employment participation rates.

Improving access to relevant information and support for the employer is vital.

Promotion of the research regarding the benefit of hiring people with a disability.

- Employees with autism have dramatically lower turnover rates than neurotypical employees and in some industries have been shown to work a much higher capacity than their colleagues. Representatives of JP Morgan & Chase Company report that their employees with ASD are producing 48 to 140 percent more work than their neurotypical colleagues (Griffiths, et al. 2020).
- Evaluation of the National Disability Recruitment Coordinators (NDRC) June 2019 stated they performed well with regard to increasing employer's knowledge about employing people with disability. However, they performed less well in assisting employers to action and implement their plans, for example, developing job vacancies or jobs specifically for people with disability.

Employers need a clear call to action.

- Suggestions could include:
 - 'Improve your business, hire someone on the autism spectrum!'
 - 'Concerned about your bottom line? Hire someone on the autism spectrum!'
 - 'Don't just talk about more inclusive workplaces actually employ someone on the autism spectrum!'

An urgent need DES reform and increased accountability

- As mentioned, the DES performance model rewards 'speed to placement' which has been shown to drive undesirable behaviours such as placing individuals into any role to meet key performance measures, regardless of their interests or qualifications. (Pillay et al. 2021; Ashburner et al. 2021).

- Our research has shown a growing number of individuals on the spectrum are placed in positions that are not commensurate with their skills and interests due to a lack of skill identification and appropriate job matching. For example, job seekers with masters' degrees being placed in menial jobs such as shelf stacking in a supermarket. There need to be much greater accountability of their performance.

"I very, very, very quickly learned that they (DES staff) are not there to help...Any sort of pushing I received was pushing into a program or a class or a course or a completely inappropriate thing for me".

Autism EmployABLE participant – 2020 Evaluation

- The DES employment model needs to place more emphasis on individualised job matching, sourcing relevant vacancies and role creation for sustainable employment of people with a disability. Blanket programs and generalist providers do not capture or support the needs of a growing number of disability cohorts seeking meaningful long-term employment.
- There is ample evidence to support the critical need of specialist providers/organisations to support marginalised groups within the disability sector. Too many individuals are being denied access to employment due to a complete lack of service delivery that is tailored to their needs (Pillay et al. 2021; Ashburner et al. 2021).

The fact this paper calls for DES providers to become *'more person centred, recognise the multiple challenges faced by people with a disability and build meaningful relationships with employers'* is genuinely concerning. These are considered the very basics of disability employment services provision. Is this an indication of how broken the DES model has become?

Which actions or initiatives would best create positive change for people with disability and employers?

- Specialist employment service provision for the most marginalised groups within disability run by the relevant lead agencies.
- Introducing individualised employment assistance funding based on job seeker needs and aspirations through NDIS, regardless of whether they qualify for other NDIS assistance.
- Brooke, et al. (2018) has demonstrated many employees with a disability, benefit from ongoing assessment and subsequent tailored support to continue to thrive in employment.
- Taking a back-to-basics approach of focus on long-term career planning, individual capacity building and getting to know individual support needs.
- Promoting and allowing/assisting greater self-advocacy of individuals with a disability in terms of their employment goals and needs. Thus, demonstrating the wide acceptance of a need to put people with disability at the centre of all decisions regarding their employment goals.
- Employer engagement plans using NWEF as the basis of a call to action to get employers commitment to undertake work experience for people with a disability.
- Information, tools, and resource development needs to be tailored to the business, not a blanket approach.
- Building employer knowledge and confidence through relatable industry specific case studies.

The best way for an employer to understand how to support someone with a disability into employment is to employ them!

How do we measure the success of the Employment Strategy?

- Report via the Labour market portal on the sustained employment outcomes over longer timeframes of at least a year.
- Capture data on all disability subgroups to ensure that employment outcomes are being achieved throughout the sector and people from all subgroups are sufficiently represented in the sustainable outcome claims.
- Independent jobseeker and employer evaluations- qualitative data to measure their experience, meaningful employment outcome and sustained employment.
- Providers to report on the qualifications of their staff with the view to improve training and relevant qualifications attained.
- Providers to measure and report on staff perceptions: internally case reviews: have they done the job they set out to do? have they delivered a good service, reflective practice within organisation.
- Record and track the number of support services accessed by employers via the employment services Ares (ESA) for the Employer Assistance Fund, Job Access, Supported Wage System, Wage Subsidy Scheme and National Disability Recruitment coordinator.

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