

DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AUSTRALIA

Annual Report

2024-2025



Disability
Employment
AUSTRALIA

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Maxima

Mapping their future – Michaela and Angus find dream jobs in data analytics

When first-time job seeker Michaela was adjusting her resume to send to employers, her Maxima employment consultant noticed just how brilliant the computer whiz was with technology.

Knowing that Australian Spatial Analytics was looking for talented neurodiverse people like Michaela, Maxima quickly found the perfect entry-level opportunity as a junior data analyst.

"This is my very first paid job – when I first got the job, I was very excited.

"Before then, I felt like I was falling behind a lot of people my age. The fact that I haven't been given the opportunity to have a job until now made me feel like I was worthless, almost, at times.

"But now that I am contributing something, I'm feeling a lot better about myself, especially because the camaraderie in here, everyone's from similar places of struggling to hold down a job so we can all relate, and it just feels really good.

"Having a job, it makes me feel independent, like I'm contributing to society," Michaela says.

It was a similar job seeking journey for another Maxima customer, Angus, whose hobbies include map-making. Angus is part of the friendly geospatial analytics team at ASA and is now making digital maps for a range of clients. "It is nice to have those transferrable skills," Angus says.

"Maxima has helped with training, helping me find volunteer work to build up my resume and ultimately finding this place through their connections.

"ASA are at the forefront of working with neurodiverse employees and so if you're a jobseeker who is neurodiverse a company like ASA that is geared and equipped for it is a good place to start if you can," says Angus.

Together with Maxima and ASA, Angus is now working on his career goals.



"At the moment, it's exploring my own space in this industry, which I wasn't aiming for when I joined, it was just a job opportunity. Now that I've been involved in data analytics especially and geospatial data, I'm starting to think about ways I can develop my skills and work in this space long-term."

Maxima National Specialist for Strategic Growth and Innovation Tori Christian says employment consultants tailor support to individual needs.

"It's not just about the job; it's always about the journey and the career for people.

"Maxima works with people all the way from when they very first start and are looking for a job and can provide that support, whether that be in the workplace, outside of work, or just being that friendly person at the end of the phone for someone to debrief about their day," Tori says.

DEA Board



Matthew McIntyre

Chair

The Disability Trust



Keryl Neville

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Andrew Hills

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Until June 2025



John Gibbons

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Real Futures



Peter Bacon

Secretary

CEO, DEA

About Disability Employment Australia

Disability Employment Australia (DEA) is the country's peak body for Australia's disability employment sector.

Representing providers of disability employment services, we are devoted to the purpose of helping people living with disability to find meaningful, productive, and fulfilling work.

We are committed to confronting and challenging the exclusion of people with disability, including within the workforce and workplace. Everyone should have the chance to be fully involved with their community and control over their own life choices. Participation in the open labour market is a crucial factor in realising these goals and we are dedicated to this cause.

For more than a quarter of a century, we have been a leader in the disability employment sector; our membership encompasses 70% of the sector's providers and over 92% of the caseload. 80% of DEA's members are not-for-profit and deliver a range of services including the Disability Employment Service (DES), NDIS, social enterprise, and community-based programs.

Policy and advocacy are core elements of DEA's work. Previously, DEA has worked with government over critical changes and developments, including moving from block to case-based funding; developing the participant assessment model; uncapping DES; establishing a Disability Employment Hall of Fame; advocating for a National Disability Employment Strategy; and contributing to the Disability Royal Commission and NDIS Review.

As the country's pre-eminent peak body for disability employment, we represent a group of members with deep experience and outstanding expertise in delivering specialist services for people with disability.

DEA has a responsibility to foster excellence, innovation, and flexibility of service within DES and to promote disability employment more widely. We support our members to achieve best practice service provision, and advise, advocate, train, inform, and organise events to strengthen and promote the sector.

MEMBER STORY

EPIC Assist



Realise
what's
possible

Stephen finds 'stable' employment at Bribie Island Road Saddle Club

Meet Stephen, one of the recent farmhand hires at Bribie Island Saddle Club. For those local to the Caboolture area, Bribie Island Road Saddle Club is a breath of fresh air. It's a place where horse riders are inspired to improve their skills and confidence in themselves.

And the confidence-building ethos boasted by the saddle club isn't just limited to its customer base. Stephen had seen just how good of a community the saddle club had fostered for itself and wanted to be a part of that. That was easier said than done however, Stephen hadn't been employed in a long time, so the whole process felt almost alien to him.

"It was my first job interview in decades. I was very nervous," Stephen confessed.

Despite his fears, Stephen knew he didn't need to go about the application alone. He had an entire team of experts backing him every step of the way.

With the help Local Disability Employment Services (DES) provider EPIC Assist (EPIC), Stephen got himself a phone and set up a new email and tackled the job interview with enthusiasm. The people at the saddle club saw Stephen's passion for giving life another go and were more than happy to give him a chance.

Hoofing it into a job at Bribie Island Road Saddle Club

The momentum of positive change means a great deal to Stephen. His journey with EPIC began when he had been homeless for quite some time. Living out of a tent, Stephen adapted to taking life one day at a time. He had been attending the neighbourhood centre at Bribie Island one day before someone approached him. Megan, one of EPIC's Employment Advisors, had taken notice of Stephen and wanted to hear his story.

"She got me into a roof, which was a great step. She asked me if I was interested in work. I hadn't been to work in a long time thanks to a lot of medical problems in my life. Then she helped me with Bribie Island Saddle Club, I ended up interviewed and employed. The rest is history," said Stephen with a chuckle. Stephen said there's another aspect to his job that he didn't expect to find so comforting.



"To have people relying on you. To understand that the club couldn't run as well without me, that sense of importance helps.

"I feel wanted and appreciated. I'm not spending all my time twiddling my thumbs anymore. If you spend long enough doing nothing, you begin to really question your ability to succeed," Stephen confessed.

Stephen's mane duties

These days Stephen takes care of a lot of duties once he clocks into work at the saddle club. One of his favourite parts of the work is that no two days feel the same. There's always something different that needs to be fixed or looked at.

"At the moment, I'm reorganising our yards at the bottom, clearing them out so that we can move some more horses in. I've also been clearing out the stormwater drains in the house, putting the finishing touches on that today. And I'm also taking care of a bit of plumbing work too since I'm pretty handy with it," Stephen explained.

EPIC saddles Stephen with stability

Now that he's had a taste of independence, Stephen is laser-focused on saving enough money to move into his own place. Being able to live feeling totally safe and independent is the goal he's working towards, and Megan and EPIC will be there supporting him every step of the way.

Report from the Chair



Matthew McIntyre,
DEA Chair

As we close out 2025, it's clear this has been a watershed year for the disability employment sector. Though delayed, the changes have been profound. After seven years delivering the previous Disability Employment Service contract, we now look ahead to building on that legacy and driving even greater impact for people with disability and the workforces they enrich.

Peter's analysis elsewhere in this publication outlines the Inclusive Employment Australia (IEA) tender process — its wins and its shortcomings. The upheaval across the sector, and the loss of outstanding organisations and individuals, is deeply saddening. While the new program brings promise, it also carries significant costs: disrupted relationships for participants, recruitment challenges for employers, and major transitions — or closures — for providers and staff.

Despite this, I remain confident that IEA presents a powerful opportunity to elevate standards. With five-year contracts now in place, improved policy settings and funding — thanks in large part to DEA's advocacy — set a strong foundation. I particularly welcome the focus on meaningful engagement, the cohort provider model, expanded eligibility, and longer program durations.

I'm also thrilled by the launch of the Centre for Inclusive Employment, with DEA as a key consortium partner. This institution will be instrumental in capturing and sharing best practice across the sector.

Thank you to our members and stakeholders whose engagement continues to grow. Our May 2025 DEA Conference, held during the quiet period between tender submission and outcome, exceeded expectations in attendance and energy. Despite the lack of Queensland sunshine,

the program — from the Centre's launch to the Implementation Masterclass and Gala Dinner — was vibrant and inspiring. I was honoured to induct Professor Alastair McEwin AM into the DEA Hall of Fame, recognising his enduring advocacy.

The Conference has evolved to truly centre people with lived experience of disability. We're improving physical accessibility and wayfinding, but the most meaningful change is in the voices on stage and in the room. That trajectory will continue to shape DEA's future.

Although the program is still in its early stages, DEA's pioneering Professional Membership Program and the MDEA post-nominal are laying the groundwork for true professionalisation of disability employment consultancy. Supported by the Centre and widespread uptake of Inclusive Employment Fundamentals training, we are well placed to thrive under IEA and beyond.

To our members: thank you for your resilience over the past 18 months and for recognising DEA's value as your peak body. Your daily commitment to supporting Australians with disability to achieve their employment goals is deeply appreciated.

Finally, my thanks to the DEA Board and team for their unwavering dedication during this period of transformation. Your efforts have strengthened our organisation and amplified our collective voice.

MEMBER STORY

ETC Ltd



Empowered and employed: Maddacen's journey overcoming anxiety and securing employment

Maddacen's story starts three years ago, when she arrived at ETC with high levels of anxiety and depression, compounded with Oppositional Defiance Disorder and Asperger's Syndrome.

These conditions created significant barriers to employment, affecting her concentration, mood, motivation, and relationships.

To overcome her barriers and ultimately secure employment, Maddacen started working with ETC Jobs Advisor, Jaralyn.

Over time, through regular appointments tailored to Maddacen's personal circumstances, Jaralyn carefully built a trusting rapport with Maddacen. These sessions were instrumental in helping Maddacen step out of her comfort zone and gradually become comfortable interacting with people outside her family.

ETC then connected Maddacen with a counsellor who taught her valuable strategies to manage her anxiety and panic attacks. This support was crucial in helping her leave the house and engage with the outside world. Maddacen was also guided to obtain a mental health plan through her GP, which she continues to follow.

"The anxiety is always there", Maddacen said. "But I now have tools, coping strategies, and emotional support to keep pushing and challenging myself," says Maddacen.

Armed with new tools, Maddacen was next referred to TAFE in Port Macquarie, where she proudly completed a Certificate II in Career Preparation. This achievement not only provided her with a qualification but also helped her adapt to a structured environment and interact with others.

Then with ETC's assistance, Maddacen secured a housekeeping role at Wyndham Resort. This job was ideal, allowing her to work independently or in small groups, which suited her anxiety levels.

Maddacen has now been employed at Wyndham Resort for over two years, consistently performing above benchmarks.

ETC has also helped Maddacen obtain her L's, as well as assisted with driving lessons enabling her to secure her P's! She is now excited to be close to getting her full open licence.



Maddacen regularly checks in with her current ETC Jobs Advisor, Dave, who has become a trusted source of guidance and support. Dave has also stepped in to help with financial assistance for essentials like quality footwear and fuel, making sure she can keep her job without any added pressure.

Having a job has given Maddacen's life purpose and boosted her confidence. She said, "It feels like I have a purpose. Like my life now has a purpose. I actually feel really proud, and I feel like I am able to go on now and do more things, and of course, the extra money is helpful."

Now excelling at work and in her personal endeavours, Maddacen has truly transformed her life.

"My income has contributed big time to getting my family and I better accommodation in Port Macquarie and it's nice to feel like I can help my family as we are now in a way better house.

"I am truly content with where I am right now. For the first time, I have the much-needed structure in my life that I never had before. While I'm unsure of what the future holds, what I have at this moment is more than enough," said Maddacen.

Membership

Disability Employment Australia is first and foremost a membership organisation. We exist to represent, support and resource our members to build a diverse and vibrant workforce across Australia. Below is a list of our 2024-2025 members.

- » Ability Options Limited
- » Ability Works Australia Ltd
- » AMES Australia
- » Asuria
- » atWork Australia
- » Australian Foundation for Disability (Afford)
- » Autism Association of Western Australia Inc
- » Back2Work Pty Ltd
- » Barkuma Inc
- » Best Employment Ltd
- » BIZLINK
- » Bounce Consulting Pty Ltd
- » Breakthru
- » Campbell Page
- » Castle Personnel
- » CPL (Choice Passion Life)
- » Community Bridging Services (CBS) Inc
- » CVGT Employment
- » Disability Services Australia
- » EDGE Employment Solutions
- » Enterprise & Training Company
- » EPIC Employment Services Inc.
- » Flourish Australia
- » Forrest Personnel
- » Gforce Recruitment
- » Headspace
- » Ideal Placements
- » Incentive Employment T/A Chapter 1 Employment
- » Institute of Capacity Building
- » IntoWork Australia
- » Job Futures Ltd (CoAct)
- » Jobsupport
- » Key Employment
- » Kimberley Personnel
- » Lead Employment
- » Links Community Services
- » Madec
- » Matchworks
- » Max Employment
- » Maxima Joblink
- » MEGT
- » Mission Australia
- » MTC Australia
- » Nexus Human Resources
- » Nova Employment
- » OCTEC
- » Omnia Inclusive Employment Solutions
- » Ostara Australia
- » Palladium International Pty Ltd
- » Populi Australia trading as Populi Solutions
- » ProActiv People
- » Real Futures
- » Salvation Army Employment Plus
- » Sarina Russo Job Access Pty Ltd
- » Serendipity (WA) Pty Ltd trading as APM
- » Settlement Services International Limited
- » Sign For Work (Deaf Children Australia)
- » Status Works Pty Ltd
- » Sureway Employment and Training
- » SYC
- » The Disability Trust
- » The MS Society of SA and NT Inc (Multiple Solutions)
- » The Personnel Group
- » Tursa Employment and Training
- » uLaunch Pty Ltd
- » UnitingCare Community
- » Verto
- » Westgate Community Initiatives Group Inc. trading as WCIG
- » Wise Employment
- » Workways Australia
- » Yooralla
- » Your Future Employment Pty Ltd

MEMBER STORY

CVGT



Andrew brings unique insight into his Data Analyst role

With support from the CVGT Employment Disability Employment Services team in Preston, Andrew has found a meaningful role at Banyule City Council as a Data Analyst working three days a week through their Inclusive Support Program.

Andrew has a vision impairment, but in this role, using screen reader technology, he can interpret ABS statistical data in a unique way to model predictions for future council planning.

"It's been an amazing experience. I've heard I am doing a good job with looking at data, everyone's happy with my work so far. Also, everyone loves Fred the Guide Dog.

"Every day I come in they put water out for the dog, ask how I am going, and are very supportive," Andrew says.

Paul Browne, Senior Business Development Consultant at CVGT Employment, provided Andrew with support through the Disability Employment Services program to apply for jobs, get ready for interviews, work on interview questions and prepare his resume. He also assisted with purchasing suits for office work and transported Andrew to and from interviews, which helped support his preparation.

"It's good because on the travel time, we could practice our interview questions on the way in, and on the way back he could tell me about how it went," Paul says.

Inclusive Support Program Lead, Mahamed from Banyule City Council has appreciated the great contribution Andrew has made to the organisation so far. "Andrew as a worker has been amazing, the team has really appreciated his Data Analyst skills. He's also taught us as a council as well, better ways to support those who have low vision, introducing us to some new programs, strategies and techniques," Mahamed says.

Mahamed also expressed his thanks to CVGT Employment for their support. "CVGT have been an amazing support to Andrew during our time in the Inclusive Support program, assisting with providing clothes for work, getting to the work location, as well as supporting me to connect with other job seekers."

The Inclusive Support program at Banyule City Council supports residents who have barriers to employment with a 6-month placement within the council.

The program has been a great success, with 86% of people participating in the program going on to find ongoing employment afterwards within the council or externally.

This has greatly contributed to the council's goal of building a more diverse workforce, and there are plans to expand the program to other councils as well.

Andrew's vision was impaired as a child following the removal of a brain tumour, but it did not stop him from having a life filled with remarkable achievements. Following completion of a Bachelor of Science at Latrobe University he completed a Master of Data Science. He has also had some amazing achievements on the sporting field, including representing Victoria in cricket, Australia in soccer, and achieving a 3rd dan black belt in taekwondo.

For other job seekers with a disability, Andrew offers some advice to encourage them to keep going.

"Be patient. It takes time to get a job. Work on the areas you need to work on. Be positive about what your strengths are. Don't focus on what you can't do, focus on what you can do to get yourself a job."



Andrew with Paul Browne from CVGT Employment and Mahamed from Banyule City Council.

Business Partners

DEA's partners are dedicated supporters who seek to provide our members with excellent services and be part of the goal to achieve continuous improvement in employment outcomes for people with disability.



The Aon Not For Profit (NFP) team brings over 30 years' experience within the Not for Profit and Disability Employment communities. We are on hand to provide technical expertise to Disability Employment Service providers and will assist to protect them from risks as well as provide educational material and resources.



Prime Super members like to choose how we support them. Many members develop a trusted relationship with a super specialist over time. Whatever your super needs, we're here for you. You can download the app, explore our website, and use the online tools and calculators. Or call us on 1800 675 839 Monday to Friday, 8am to 8pm. A quick chat can make a big difference—book a time in a super specialist's diary at primesuper.com.au. For a Product Disclosure Statement and Target Market Determination call 1800 675 839 or visit primesuper.com.au/pds. Prime Super Pty Ltd ABN 81 067 241 016 AFSL 219723 RSE L0000277 (Trustee), Prime Super ABN 60 562 335 823 RN 1000276.



Prospert believes in quality employment services for job seekers and employers, partnering with organisations to create sustainable work opportunities. As a boutique professional services firm, we offer business transformation, strategic planning, operational improvements, tender management, learning and development and more.

We specialise in programs like Disability Employment Service and Workforce Australia, bringing global best practices to our clients. Our name reflects our commitment: your organisation will 'PROSpert from our exPERTise.'



ReadyTech is a leading provider of innovative technology offering next-generation and mission-critical software.

With over 25 years of experience, ReadyTech is Australia's premium management technology provider for disability employment services. Our flagship solution, Job Ready, aims to foster employment outcomes for people with a disability. An engaging user experience driven by AI to help DES providers achieve the best practice outcomes in attraction, placement and retention, empowering individuals, and businesses.

To learn more about ReadyTech and how we're strengthening Australian's workforce visit [//readytech.io/DEA](https://readytech.io/DEA)

MEMBER STORY

edge



A career with heart

When Helen first connected with Edge, she was eager to find meaningful work but wasn't sure how to get there. With the guidance of Employer Consultant Claire and the support of the Edge team, Helen has not looked back.

Encouraged by Claire to pursue her interest in early childhood education, Helen enrolled in a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education. In just five and a half months, she completed her qualification and was ready to put her skills into practice.

With Edge's assistance, Helen secured a work placement at Nido Early Learning. This opportunity led to casual employment and later a permanent position.

"Edge encouraged me to do the course in childcare. And by having up-to-date catchups, they ensure that everything is going smoothly for me. The amount of support was outstanding, with lots of encouragement. I get to do my job better with the support by Edge," shared Helen.

Now working as a Childcare Educator, Helen spends her days guiding children through creative learning activities such as painting and drawing, to prepare them for their

future schooling. She finds great joy in her role and credits her manager Vicki and the supportive team for making her experience enjoyable and fulfilling.

"I love the support provided by Edge. I love this job because I care for children, and all colleagues have been great and teach me on any tasks throughout the day," said Helen.

With the ongoing support of Edge's Work Assist program, Helen has not only found employment but also gained financial stability and a renewed sense of independence.

"Absolutely, employment changed my life after a short stint of casual employment, I was able to gain a permanent position and save money and gain independence," she said.

The team at Edge are proud to have been part of Helen's journey and to support her continued success in a job she loves.



CEO REPORT

Chief Executive Officer



Peter Bacon, DEA CEO

They often say of parenting that the ‘days are long, but the years are short’. It’s an aphorism that rings equally true for the last year in the disability employment sector. It has flown by, but at no point has it been straightforward. At many points, it has been stressful.

The main event was the procurement of the new Inclusive Employment Australia program. We are very aware that this has been a turbulent experience for our members. Our views are on record, and they are clear: this was a fraught, messy process which led to results that were overly disruptive and didn’t relate to either performance track records or community connections. As we have conveyed to the Department and Minister, this is not an appropriate way to procure critically important services for people with disability, and we must calibrate our expectations accordingly.

At this point we would like to acknowledge the exceptional work of several organisations that have received a disappointing tender result, including many strong DES providers (with decades of history doing the work) who were not offered the opportunity to deliver Inclusive Employment Australia. These organisations have played an invaluable part both in building the disability employment sector in Australia and in DEA itself, while helping countless people to find employment and live lives of their own choosing.

However, as many have said, we cannot ‘put the toothpaste back in the tube’. We must get on with the important business of delivering Inclusive Employment Australia, and the full constellation of employment services for people with disability, to the very best of our collective ability.

The good news is that we know that we can do this. The Disability Employment Service (DES) has delivered over 215,000 26-week outcomes over the past five years. It has consistently outperformed its government-specified KPIs and there is simply nothing else in the Australian system that is delivering anything like these numbers for people with disability at this scale. The new program is going to enable us to extend upon this, with greater eligibility for people with disability and some elements of improved service design.

The whole process certainly kept us very busy, from quickfire consultations to a narrow tender window to delays and contract extensions, and now the final publication of results. We hope we have represented providers as best we can through the period and were pleased that our advocacy led to a funding increase – including an over 15% improvement in outcome funding. This was an important step for DSS to take, after a long period of real-terms cuts to DES funding. We were also satisfied that our advocacy efforts were successful in securing five-year contracts for Inclusive Employment Australia providers, thereby giving providers the certainty and confidence required to really invest in the new program.

In our Annual Members Survey we were pleased to receive improved average scores from members in almost all areas.

Key headlines included:

- » How would you rate DEA's support to your organisation out of 10 – 8.8/10 average (up from 8.1)
- » 8.8/10 for policy work and advocacy (up from 8.6)
- » 8.9/10 for keeping the sector informed (up from 8.4)
- » 7.6/10 for capturing and spreading best practice (down from 7.9)
- » 7.7/10 for advancing the cause of disability employment in general (up from 7.1)
- » 8.3/10 for networking opportunities and events (down from 8.8)

Once again, we see that policy and advocacy is our strongest suit – as it has been for many years. However, we have heard the feedback about where we can improve loud and clear – members would like us to have a broader scope than just DES/IEA and to have a greater focus on practice.

In terms of the former, we have strengthened our NDIS-related capability and capacity through the newly created NDIS Policy Manager role. This was evident in our extensive submission to DSS regarding 'The Next Steps in Supported Employment'. DEA made these key recommendations:

1. Phase out subminimum wages with a wage offset model by 2034.
2. Replace segregated pathways with inclusive employment systems and reform barriers.
3. Embed supported decision-making in employment systems.
4. Replace ineffective NDIS supports with targeted, evidence-based Foundational Supports.
5. Ensure the new IEA program provides effective, complementary support.
6. Support ADEs transitioning to Disability Social Enterprises including through social procurement and targeted funding.
7. Use wage offsets and adjustment funding to enable ADE transformation and manage transitions.
8. Reduce DSP taper rates and extend suspension periods to better support recipients.
9. Boost employer demand via public sector recruitment, mandatory reporting, confidence schemes, and social procurement.

Members can expect to see much more activity in this area over the coming year.

Likewise, DEA will indeed play a stronger role in promoting best practice through our role as a Consortium Partner of the new Centre for Inclusive Employment. This initiative is an unprecedented opportunity to develop and provide world-leading resources to the disability employment sector. Already, we are seeing the fruits of this approach with our Fundamentals for Inclusive Employment training package being rolled out across IEA providers – this was developed with our partners genU Training and NDS, and co-designed with the Centre and DSS. We have also launched a Community of Practice for Specific Cohort providers to enable these organisations to make a flying start to IEA delivery, capture evidence as to 'what works', support the application of evidence-based practice, and feed back to DSS on points of advocacy.

Complementarily, DEA this year launched our new Professional Membership Program. This service is included in all members' annual subscription fee and has been designed to curate the best training available and recognise learning that has taken place, through the attribution and accumulation of CPD points. This approach recognises that long, unwieldy courses are unlikely to be a one-size-fits-all solution for our sector professionals and that microcredentials, webinars, and other short courses are valid routes to upskilling. We have seen this through the DEA/genU Training partnership's development of Fundamentals for Disability Employment, which was adopted by approximately a quarter of DES providers.

This increased emphasis on practice will also feed into our events, which had another successful year. In November, we debuted a new concept just after tenders were submitted through 'Decompression Sessions' in Brisbane, Melbourne, and Sydney. In these more informal events, the highlight was the 'Interview with a DEA Hall of Famer' section, which included Dr Geoff Waghorn, Professor Vivienne Riches, Lucy Macali and Dr Jenny Crosbie. This was followed in March by our members-only Leaders' Forum, held in Old Parliament House in Canberra. Around 100 members were in attendance to hear about the latest sector developments, which were unfolding in real-time on the eve of an election being called.

This year our annual Conference was held on the Gold Coast. Despite awaiting their tender results, more than 300 delegates attended. Highlights included a new MC in Elly Desmarchelier; keynotes ranging from Dr Dinesh Palipana OAM to Elizabeth Wright, to Bus Stop Films; erudite panel discussions on the future of ADEs and employment within the NDIS; the launch of the new Centre for Inclusive Employment; an Implementation Masterclass; and the Gala Dinner featuring our DEA Awards Ceremony. The Conference received strong ratings from attendees, with many commenting on how the voice of people with disability was central to the agenda.

In keeping with such a transitional year, we have a new Minister, with Tanya Plibersek replacing Amanda Rishworth. It is evident that Minister Plibersek has a bold agenda for disability employment, with Inclusive Employment Australia at the heart of her plans. It has been pleasing to witness the level of engagement from the Minister and her team, and it opens up new opportunities for the kind of reform which could be game-changing for people with disability. This includes potential demand side measures and DSP reform.

As ever, DEA is thankful to its staff and Board for their hard work and steadfast support for our purpose. This year we farewelled longstanding Policy Manager David Best, who has moved onto pastures new at the NDIA. David has been an integral part of our work for nearly a decade. During that period, he has built a fine reputation and strong relationships with our members, as well as other key stakeholders. He has been a huge contributor to our policy and advocacy, and always played an invaluable role in programming and staging our events. He is already missed. However, we have also added to our team over the last year, adding Sally Karandrews as IEA Policy Manager and Raelene Woods in a Marketing/Projects role, alongside the NDIS Policy role.

I would like to thank Mathew McIntyre for his tireless work as Chair and for his wise counsel over the past year, building well on the legacy of our previous Chair David Coles. I would like also to thank the other current serving Board members Keryl Neville, Andrew Hills, John

Gibbons, Nicole Grainger-Marsh, Karen Rainbow and Ashley Williams and previous Board members David Coles, Thérèse Campbell, Mark Chaffey and Tracey Fraser. Your support for our work, as ever, has been critically important. We have achieved another solid financial result – better than breakeven – with continuing growth in member numbers, and this is testament to the robust governance of the Board. Our 2023-26 strategy has been well executed in all respects.

Most of all I would like to thank our members for their support and contribution to our work over the past year. We genuinely could not do this without you. It has been a turbulent year, but we have all been in it together. I look forward to working in collaboration with all our members to drive disability employment in Australia forwards and enable ever more people to live lives of their own choosing.

MEMBER STORY

OCTEC



Brock's determination to fight illness echoed in return to work

Brock moved to North Queensland after finishing high school, leaving his family home in NSW's Hunter Region. Wanting to make something of himself, he built a successful career in the mining industry.

Unfortunately, he got sick and returned to his family home Cessnock. He was diagnosed with Leukaemia and received treatment in Newcastle and Sydney. The cancer went into remission two years later. The whole experience took a toll on his physical and mental health. He was unemployed for eight years after this due to this.

Determined to reclaim his life, Brock sought assistance at OCTEC Cessnock. He partnered with Consultant Julie who quickly recognised his resolve and eagerness to start a new chapter.

Brock secured an interview with mining cleaning company Mainstream Industries, ready to apply his significant industry experience. He did require some intensive training but doubted his ability to succeed.

Julie arranged a Biz Support package for the company to assist with finance for Brock's first aid, working at height and confined space training. He passed his medical examination and induction, before starting at Glencore Mining Singleton.

As Brock began to restart his career, he expressed his appreciation of Julie's dedicated support.

"Julie has helped me so much in getting back on track into the workforce. She supported me with PPE and training so that I can start a new job and journey in the mining industry."

Brock's story highlights the importance of dedicated support and the resilience of individuals facing life's challenges. OCTEC is committed to helping people like Brock reclaim their paths and build fulfilling careers, regardless of the barriers they face.



Professional Membership Program (PMP)

Launched in May this year, our Professional Membership Program (PMP) is a milestone initiative designed to strengthen capability across the disability employment sector. The program recognises and rewards continuing professional development through an annual points system, enabling members to build skills, stay connected, and demonstrate their commitment to best practice.

The PMP provides an opportunity for organisations, managers and individuals to take charge of their training agenda while contributing to a more consistent, high-quality standard of service for clients.

By 30 June 2025 there were 167 individuals engaged in the program, of which 60 had accrued a minimum of 100 points, qualifying as DEA Professional Members and attaining the right to use the post-nominals, MDEA. This strong uptake reflects the sector's shared commitment to building practical professional standards.



"The Professional Membership Program is building a shared foundation of standards, knowledge, and values across the sector. For me, its real strength is in creating a professional identity for our workforce – something that signals to government, employers, and participants that we are part of a recognised profession with clear expectations and accountability. This lifts the credibility of the sector, supports consistency in practice, and helps retain skilled people by offering a clear professional pathway."

Being part of DEA gives me visibility of the challenges and innovations happening across the sector, while also providing opportunities to share experiences and learn from peers. It reinforces that, while we may be competitors in procurement, we are collaborators in building a more inclusive labour market. That connection keeps me grounded in the bigger purpose of the work we do."

The opportunities to engage with thought leaders, share practice with peers, and access resources aligned to the DES Quality Framework and IEA guidelines are also critical. These not only sharpen my own practice as an executive but allow me to cascade learning across my teams, ensuring capability uplift at every level of the organisation."

Nyssa de Waard MDEA

Executive General Manager – Training & Employment, CoAct



How we select products and training partners

The Professional Membership Program offers a wide range of professional development opportunities that are delivered directly by DEA or through our training partners.

All learning products included in the PMP undergo a structured assessment process to ensure they are high-quality, accessible and relevant to the sector. Training providers and event partners may propose new courses or events at any time. Each proposal is reviewed to ensure compliance with mandatory accessibility standards and then assessed against specific criteria to determine suitability for inclusion in the PMP and CPD points allocation.

To be considered, learning products must:

- » Meet accessibility standards (WCAG for online learning; MEA Accessible Events Guide for in-person).
- » Be publicly available.
- » Align with DEA's purpose and strategy.
- » Be relevant and fulfil a demonstrated need.
- » Include high quality content and resources.

Once endorsed, courses and events are promoted on the DEA website with details of content, format, outcomes, cost and CPD value. This transparent process ensures that all offerings provide meaningful professional development opportunities and support the delivery of consistent, high-quality services across the disability employment sector.

DEA's 2025 Conference



The Gold Coast promised to be a fabulous place to hold the DEA Conference on 13-15 May and, while the weather was not as advertised, the program and the vibes delivered in spades.

While DES providers persevered through the limbo of the extended tender result timeline, we focused on preparing for the changes ahead – the pre-Conference agenda included the launch of the new Centre for Inclusive Employment and an Implementation Masterclass, ahead of the traditional Welcome Reception on Tuesday evening.

Implementation Masterclass host Wayne Herbert guided attendees through a thoughtful afternoon that covered navigating change, Right Fit for Risk, privacy and AI, Workforce Preparation, and implementation planning.

On Wednesday morning, the Conference proper opened with a free yoga class for the early birds, and fabulous coffee (even by Melbourne standards) for the later risers.

After we were officially welcomed to country, emcee and advocate Elly Desmarchelier set the tone for the Conference with her opening address, *Aiming higher for disability employment*.

The day's rigorous agenda saw thoughtful and rewarding presentations and panel sessions from voices across the sector and beyond, interrogating so many top-of-mind issues:

- » The future of disability employment in Australia
- » The Australian economy in 2025, labour market movements, trends and indicators for disability employment
- » The State of Disability Discrimination in Australia Today
- » Panel Discussion: The role of social enterprise in disability employment
- » JobAccess and Inclusive Employment Australia working together to support clients
- » Building organisational practices to employ young people with disability
- » Hosted by the Centre for Inclusive Employment –

Evidence to Practice: Transitioning to employment

- » Assisting First Nations Peoples with mental health conditions develop vocational confidence and knowledge of work to pursue their employment and other vocational goals
- » Accessing Hidden Talent: Practical Disability Employment
- » Inclusive Employment in the Screen and Media Sector

One of the day's highlights was the absorbing Q&A between MC Elly Demarschelier and Paralympian and ABC Journalist Elizabeth Wright, after the latter's presentation *How we can all be better allies in employment*.

The Gala Dinner, complete with pineapple table centrepieces, honoured delegates receiving medals for their years of service to the DES sector, presented our sophomore DEA Awards and DEA Chair Mat McIntyre inducted Professor Alastair McEwin AM into the DEA Hall of Fame.

Day Three turned fully to the future, examining the next steps in supported employment, building neuro-inclusive workplaces, and a panel discussion on the future of employment and NDIS.

Gold Coast local, the emergency physician, academic and lawyer Dr Dinesh B Palipana wowed us with a compelling and surprisingly humorous autobiographical keynote before the afternoon's breakout sessions.

To round out the Conference, DEA DES Policy Manager Sally Karandrews interviewed Hall of Famer Graeme Innes AM in a thoughtful, broad-ranging conversation.

That's all to say nothing of the exhibition area. Just outside the plenary and overlooking the pools, it was full to bursting with suppliers and the venue for networking between formal sessions, wheeling, dealing, phone charging, coffee and more.

The whole event was only possible because of the support from our sponsors and exhibitors, chief among them the platinum sponsor genU Training, and gold sponsors Aon, Prime Super, Prospert, ReadyTech, Licences 4 Work and Alfie.



MEMBER STORY

MatchWorks

MatchWorks

Two women breaking barriers into under-represented trade careers



Two DES participants are motoring along in male-dominated sectors, with MatchWorks supporting them on the road to satisfying work.

Amelia is working in a mechanic workshop and Leighshell is toiling away on tractors as an auto-technician, and the pair couldn't be happier with their choices after overcoming their individual struggles to re-enter the workforce.

Amelia connected with the MatchWorks' Aldgate team in October 2024, with the goal of re-entering the workforce after nine years of raising her boys and the challenges associated with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), PTSD, anxiety, and ADHD.

Despite a combination of issues making a return to work a daunting prospect, Amelia was determined to reclaim this part of her life. In following her passion and breaking barriers in a male-dominated industry, Amelia is proud to show how women can excel in the trade.

"I love that I'm challenging those old stereotypes. It's empowering to know that I'm paving the way for more women to take on roles that were once seen as 'men's work'."

Amelia's story highlights how the right opportunity and support can transform lives and prove that women can thrive in under-represented industries.

For DES Armadale participant, Leighshell, her life trajectory changed when she sustained a significant knee injury. This led to multiple surgeries and a painful three-year rehabilitation.

"I had to learn to walk again, and I have no feeling in my knee due to tendon damage," she said. Focusing on her recovery, Leighshell worked with MatchWorks to explore new opportunities.

This led to Leighshell embarking on a new career in July 2024, through an Adult Apprenticeship, working as a Diesel Motor Mechanic specialising in John Deere equipment.

Current Jobs and Skills Australia data show Amelia and Leighshell are in rare company. There are only 1% women in Diesel Motor Mechanics roles and 2% in Motor Mechanics (general), so in addition to building their skills and careers on open employment, Amelia and Leighshell are also lifting the representation of women in these traditionally male-dominated fields.

HALL OF FAME



Each year the Disability Employment Australia – Hall of Fame Award recognises the outstanding contributions individuals have made to disability employment policy and practice.

The 2025 inductee into the DEA Hall of Fame is Professor Alastair McEwin AM.

Born profoundly deaf, Professor McEwin has spent decades championing the rights and inclusion of people with disability, across Australia and on the international stage.

With a background in law and advocacy, he has held a number of influential roles that have shaped national policy and advanced equity in employment, education, and access to justice.

He was involved in the drafting of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, has been the Manager of the Australian Centre for Disability Law, CEO of People with Disability Australia and Executive Director of Community Legal Centres NSW.

Professor McEwin has also been the President of the Deaf Society of NSW, the Chair of the Disability Council NSW and has served on other boards and advisory groups focused on improving outcomes for people with disability.

Many people would recognise Professor McEwin from his service as Australia's Disability Discrimination Commissioner, where he led national work on

employment reform, access to education, and the human rights of people with disability. He played a national leadership role in advocating for stronger protections, inclusive policies, and employer practices that support people with disability to access and retain meaningful work.

He has advocated for open employment for people with disability and called for reforms to ensure better pathways into meaningful work and shifting attitudes around disability employment.

Professor McEwin's contributions to systemic reform were recognised through his appointment as a Commissioner on the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, where he made recommendations to advance inclusion, safety and opportunity for people with disability, with a strong focus on systemic change in a number of areas, including employment.

In recognition of his service to disability rights, Professor McEwin was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in 2022.

It is with great pride that we welcomed Professor McEwin to the DEA Hall of Fame.

MEMBER STORY

APM

Jacob's on the road to a bright future



When Jacob first walked through the doors of APM Employment Services, he wasn't just looking for a job – he was searching for a fresh start.

Battling homelessness and mental health challenges, Jacob had every reason to give up. But instead, he chose to look forward. With a quiet determination and the right support, he found his path in an unexpected place: traffic management.

Through regular, collaborative appointments with APM, Jacob discovered that he was drawn to work that offered structure, routine, and clear responsibilities. Traffic management ticked all the boxes. It wasn't just a job – it was a chance to rebuild.

His local APM Employment Services team helped Jacob explore the industry, understand the training involved, and see how this career could support his long-term goals of stability and independence. But the road wasn't easy. Jacob faced significant barriers—financial hardship, unstable housing, and limited access to essentials like food and transport.

Through the Disability Employment Services with APM, Jacob accessed practical support, securing course funding and providing food and petrol vouchers so he could attend the six-week Work Zone Traffic Management course with Altus Group.

Regular check-ins and emotional encouragement helped him stay focused and confident.

Jacob didn't just complete the course – he excelled. His attendance was flawless, his engagement unwavering.

With his new qualification in hand, APM helped him update his resume, prepare for interviews, and apply for



roles. Jacob was even provided the necessary work gear, removing the final hurdles to employment.

Today, Jacob is thriving in his role with Complete Traffic Services, and his consistent performance and positive attitude have made him a valued team member.

The structure and routine of the role have helped him regain confidence and stability. He now has secure housing, improved mental health, and a renewed sense of purpose. He's proud of how far he's come and is already thinking about what's next, including potential leadership opportunities in his field.

And Jacob's transformation hasn't just changed his life—it's inspired others. His journey was recognised on a national stage when he was named a finalist for the 2025 genU Training Participant Award at the Disability Employment Australia (DEA) Awards.

At the gala ball, Jacob stood alongside other remarkable finalists, and his story was shared as a shining example of the positive impact of disability employment services across the country.

THE 2025

DEA Awards

Honouring excellence in disability employment

Now in their sophomore year, the DEA Awards recognise some of the incredible work happening across our sector. Each award acknowledges different contributions, but all reflect the values of inclusion, commitment, and quality employment outcomes for people with disability.

This year, there was again a high number of outstanding nominations across DEA's award categories, and deciding the winners was exceptionally difficult.

We would also like to acknowledge the considerable effort entrants went to in developing their submissions and participating in the Awards program.

The Rex Eagle Practitioner Award *Proudly Sponsored By Prosperit*

This award recognises an outstanding disability employment frontline worker who has demonstrated exceptional commitment to participant-led employer engagement and to delivering service of the highest quality, going above and beyond in their work supporting people with disability into meaningful employment.

Presented by Paul Diviny, Founder and Director of Prosperit Consulting and Training, the Award went to:

► **David Furci, nominated by Mark Little, CVGT**

The other finalists were:

- » Hayley Cremona, nominated by Shane Brooks, Ability Options
- » Sue Bashford-Rankin, nominated by John Cranwell, Status Works

The genU Training Participant Award

This award celebrates a disability employment services participant who has demonstrated commitment, growth, and achievement through training and employment. This award recognises and celebrates a participant who has achieved amazing things on their journey to a fulfilling career. Proudly sponsored by genU Training. The award went to:

► **Justin Bayliss, nominated by Jessica Cullen, Asuria**

The other finalists were:

- » Hugh Homshaw, nominated by Jacob Irvine, IntoWork
- » Alison Miller, nominated by Cath Roze, Sureway



- » Jacob Schmidt, nominated by Mignon D'Souza, Serendipity WA
- » Joseph Salt, nominated by John Cranwell, Status Works
- » Andrew Radford, nominated by Rebecca McIntyre, The Disability Trust
- » Jamie Halliday, nominated by Mark Little, CVGT

Erin Carey Employer Partnership Award

This award honours Erin Carey. Erin was a fierce champion for people with disability and remarkable leader in the in the Employment Services industry who sadly passed away in 2024. This award in Erin's name recognises a strong and sustained partnership between an employer and a DES practitioner who have collaborated to create high quality, sustainable employment outcomes.

The award was presented by DEA Hall of Famer Suzanne Colbert AM GAICD. The Award went to:

► **Kelli Isaacs (CoAct/BUSY Ability) and Glen Givens (ICS Service Solution)**

The other finalists were:

- » Van Tran (Matchworks) & Andre Pereira (Derrimut 24:7 Gym)
- » Allison Dean (Verto) & Blair Blashki (West Orange Motors)
- » Courtney Murray (HELP Enterprises) and Jen Stuart (Abilities Plus)
- » Adam Barnett (CVGT) and Kellie Beacham (Matson Hospitality)
- » Alexandra Iordanidis (Asuria) and Erin Nicholson (Arjo)

DEA Leaders' Forum events

DEA usually holds two members-only, Leaders' Forum events throughout the year, in November and again in March. These events are exclusively for DEA members and include a strong focus on policy, collaboration and networking.

In November 2024, DES providers were coming off a sustained period of stressful work developing and submitting their tenders for new disability employment contracts. Recognising that a day of keynotes and workshops was likely not what was needed in that moment, we elected to instead hold a series of informal, local 'Decompression Sessions' in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

In each city Pete shared an update on the sector and recent data points and we heard from DEA Hall of Famers reflecting on their work in disability employment. In Melbourne, Dr Jenny Crosbie and Lucy Macali were interviewed together – a unique delight given their shared history with DEA. On a hot afternoon in Sydney, we were treated to Professor Vivienne Riches, and in Brisbane Dr Geoff Waghorn held court with a comprehensive presentation about the benefits of Individual Placement and Support fidelity models.

As these events were held all along the eastern seaboard, we took the DEA Annual General Meeting online and announced the new Board at that time. Mathew McIntyre (The Disability Trust) was elected as Chair and Keryl Neville (Lead Employment) was elected Vice Chair and Andrew Hills (WCIG) was elected as Treasurer.

The March 2025 Leaders' Forum took place at Old Parliament House in Canberra. Well may we say the program was strong, because nothing could distract us from the looming (as we then thought) tender results.

Wayne Herbert from Lead Employment facilitated the day with his signature charm and pointy observations. Program highlights included Win Win Outcomes' Brendan Brien setting the scene with the current political context and an overview of the Federal Election and Wayne's Q&A with new DEA NDIS Policy Manager Kelly Treloar.

We also enjoyed updates from NDIS Director of Employment Supports, Mary Hawkins and DEA Professional Membership & Development Manager Hanif Mohamed introducing DEA's new Professional Membership Program – a CPD program to support the further professionalisation of the disability employment sector.

We rounded out formal proceedings with Dr Jenny Crosbie from Swinburne University's Centre of Excellence and Professor Anne Neville from ANU's Provider Collaboration Project, before DEA Chair Mathew McIntyre wrapped up.



MEMBER STORY

Nick's comeback ride

WISE
Employment

Rebuilding lives one wheel at a time



When Nick talks about the past few years, he doesn't sugar-coat it. A serious bike accident during COVID left him with an acquired brain injury, time in ICU, and a long, lonely recovery that knocked the wind out of him — physically, mentally, and emotionally.

"I had to relearn everything," he says. "How to write, how to process things, how to keep track of time. It wasn't just the physical stuff — it was mental, emotional. And a lot of people around me didn't understand," said Nick.

Nick was getting up at six every morning to catch public transport across the city for appointments, coming home exhausted, and still had no answers. The friends and family who once checked in slowly drifted away. With work options limited, he says he would've done anything—sweep floors, take bins out, volunteer.

"I just needed a chance," Nick explains. "Not even a job — just a space where I wasn't invisible," he said.

That space turned out to be Brainwave Bikes, a social enterprise launched in Dingley Village, Victoria, designed to do three key things: keep bikes out of landfill, raise money for Brainwave Australia — a charity supporting children with brain injuries and their families—and help young people living with a disability build employability skills to transition into mainstream employment.

Nick began as a volunteer, finding not just work, but community and purpose. He was soon introduced to Tanya Cooper, his Employment Consultant from WISE Employment, through the Disability Employment Services (DES) program. Tanya met Nick at a fragile point in his journey, managing fatigue, anxiety, and vision loss in one eye — still uncertain if employment was even achievable.

"Nick came to us with huge potential, but he'd been knocked around," Tanya says. "He needed an employer who understood his barriers and could work with him, not around him.

"Nick didn't need handholding," Tanya explains. "He needed trust and structure. Once he had that — he thrived."

Today, Nick has moved from volunteering to casual employment, working as a bike mechanic and mentor, leading the workshop's work-readiness program. Jess Hyland, Employment Pathways Manager at Brainwave Bikes describes Nick as more than just a mechanic—he's a steady influence who models dedication, maturity, and honesty.

"He doesn't talk down to anyone," Jess says. "He listens, he shares, and people respect that. He's been where they are."

Nick now enters the workshop with a sense of calm and capability, sleeves rolled up, often surrounded by trainees — someone who not only fixes bikes but helps coach others through their own journeys.

And Nick's own journey continues. Despite ongoing health challenges, he now has the confidence to take the lead, guide others, and find rhythm in everyday life. Outside of work, Nick is embracing new challenges too — he recently became a father to a baby boy, marking another joyful milestone on his remarkable comeback ride.

As Nick puts it, reflecting on how far he's come: "I just needed a shot—and Brainwave Bikes gave it to me."

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP PROGRAM

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**Membership is free to DEA member
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