Dr Ann Nevile | September 2026

Disability Employment AUSTRALIA

Centre for Inclusive Employment



Blended Transitions

Making NDIS and IEA Work Better Together

THE **DEA** PAPERS 002

About the DEA Papers

The DEA Papers are a growing series of policy and thought-leadership papers exploring disability employment through the lens of systems, architecture, and economic participation. Each paper examines a specific issue, while contributing to a broader body of work that seeks to understand how Australia's disability employment ecosystem works and how it can be improved.

The papers are designed to build on one another. As the series grows, each paper adds to a developing understanding of the forces shaping disability employment and the reforms required to improve outcomes for people with disability.




Disability Employment Australia acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respect to them, their cultures, and to their elders both past and present.



Disability Employment Australia is committed to fostering a culture of inclusivity, respect, and empowerment. Our aim is to celebrate differences and to create equal opportunities for all, irrespective of ability, background, or identity.

Cover image:
A.S. Venetsianova-Rubenstein, *Husky Wuskey under the mock oranges*, Access Arts

Document design crafted with care by **TDL Creative**

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Foreword

Australia can lead the world in person-centred disability employment. To realise that opportunity, we need to move beyond program silos and build the architecture that enables people and providers to work together within a coherent employment ecosystem.

This report starts from a simple observation: people do not live their lives inside program boundaries or funding silos. They move, sometimes unpredictably, across employment, education, community life, health supports, and everyday responsibilities. Some people engage with NDIS employment supports. Some engage with Inclusive Employment Australia. Many engage with both. Others rely on community organisations, support coordinators, allied health professionals, or family networks at different points in their journey.

That reality should be expected. People bring different strengths and aspirations, and they face barriers that vary enormously. Employment journeys will differ, and good systems should be able to accommodate that variation.

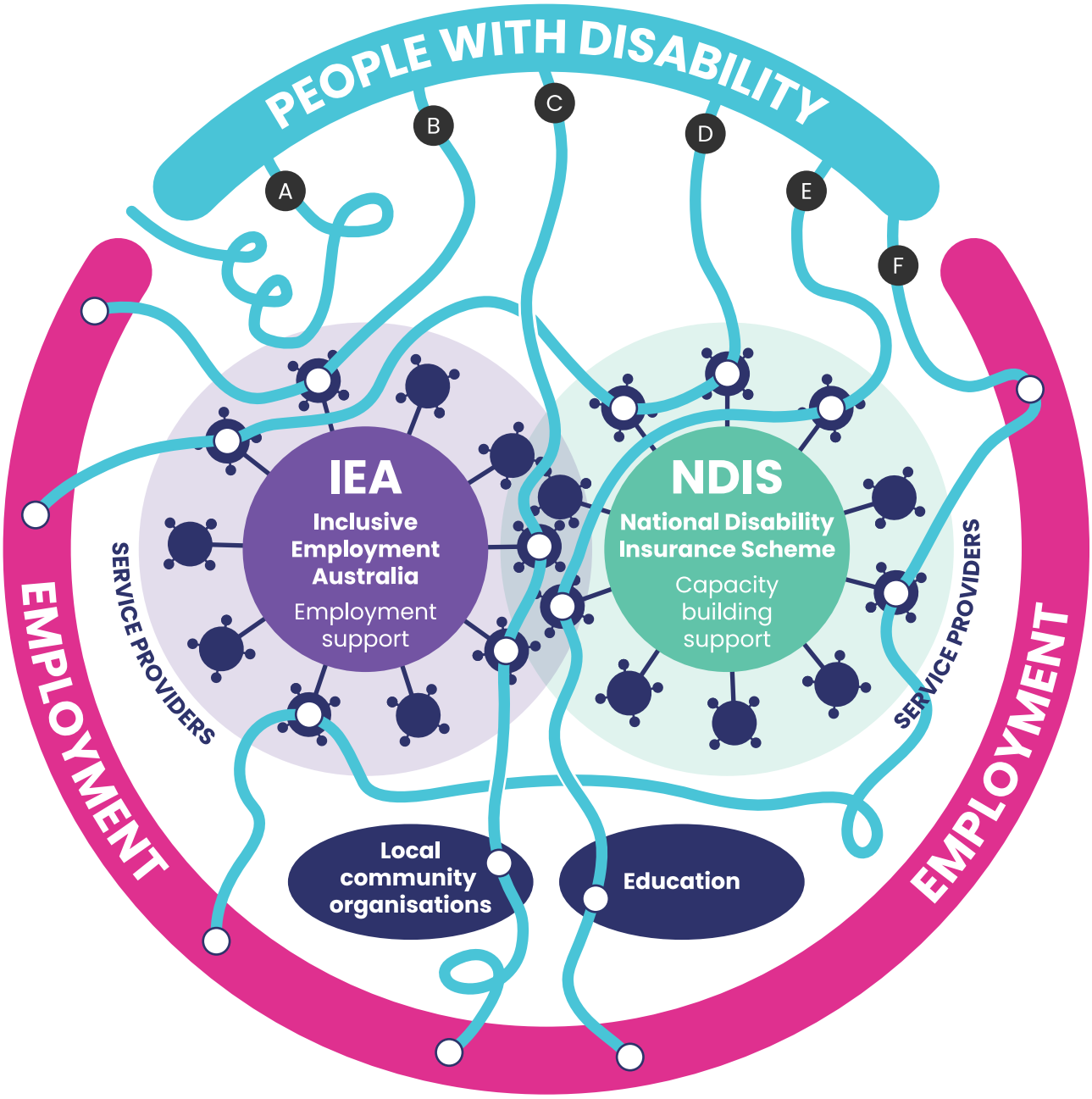
The problem is that while people's lives are interconnected, the systems designed to support them often are not.

Throughout this project, we encountered countless examples of participants moving across service systems and organisational boundaries. Clear, intentional pathways designed around the participant were much harder to find. We found providers working together creatively to combine supports around an individual. We found seamless transitions that preserved momentum and improved outcomes. But while we looked for such examples very intentionally, they did not present with high frequency.

Too often, pathways relied on individual relationships and local goodwill rather than system design. Too often, participants and families were left trying to understand boundaries that seemed inexplicable. Too often, progress slowed, stalled, or stopped because responsibility for managing the interface between systems sat with the participant rather than the system itself.

The graphic on the following page is one way of bringing those journeys into view. Each line depicts a pathway, not a person reduced to a diagram. The point is to show how people move toward work while different supports are combined, sequenced, joined up, or sometimes missed altogether. Read this way, the graphic makes visible the person's experience, the local service landscape, and the quality of the interfaces between systems.

Person-centred Employment Pathways



- **Line A** represents a pathway where people fall through the cracks because of transition failures, funding gaps, assessment delays, provider transfers, or uncertainty about eligibility and responsibility (pp. 39–48).
- **Line B** represents a relatively direct pathway from Inclusive Employment Australia into employment, as illustrated by the Park Royal Hotel case study (pp. 32).
- **Line C** represents a pathway where IEA and/or NDIS supports are combined with broader community-based assistance to help people find and sustain employment (pp. 33).

- **Line D** represents a pathway where sustained employment depends on coordinated assistance from multiple services, such as the Woolworths employee whose long-term employment was sustained through IEA ongoing support, occupational therapy, psychology, and NDIS-funded daily living supports (pp. 26).
- **Line E** represents an education-led pathway, illustrated by Riley's journey from school and vocational education into an apprenticeship, supported by NDIS employment assistance, employer engagement, and a warm handover to IEA (pp. 55–56).
- **Line F** represents progression from supported employment into open employment, illustrated by Sheridan's journey through supported employment, SLES, and IEA into ongoing work at Hungry Jack's (pp. 58).

None of these pathways is hypothetical. Each reflects a real example or evidenced pattern identified through the research. Their significance lies in how difficult it was to find planned journeys and thoughtful navigation. In general, things just happen.

People already move between systems. Providers already find ways to bridge funding streams and program rules. The issue is that successful pathways too often rely on exceptional effort rather than deliberate design. Where they exist, they are dependent on strong local relationships, determined staff, and organisations willing to work around system constraints and even take risks, such as being accused of 'double dipping' - being funded twice for the same thing and subject to funding clawback and reputational risk.

People's lives have always crossed multiple systems. Employment sits alongside education, health, transport, housing, and social connection. The task is to build the infrastructure that allows people to navigate that complexity successfully.

When we talk about employment pathways, we are really talking about architecture which encompasses the practical arrangements that determine whether a participant experiences a coherent pathway or a series of disconnected programs; that is, how information is shared, how transitions are managed, how responsibilities are understood, and how funding rules interact. Good architecture allows people to move between systems without losing momentum. Poor architecture leaves participants, families, and providers carrying the burden of stitching those systems together themselves.

Many of the strongest examples identified through this project succeeded because providers created that architecture locally, and specifically around the

participant. They developed trusted relationships, coordinated supports, and found practical ways to bridge organisational and funding boundaries. The fact that this happened is encouraging. Its dependence on local ingenuity is the problem.

That is the central message of this report.

People will continue to draw on NDIS, IEA, education providers, community organisations, and other supports in different combinations. That reflects the reality of person-centred employment support. The system now needs to give participants and providers enough clarity and confidence to work together effectively.

Organisations need to understand their respective roles and how responsibilities should be divided without creating gaps or duplication. Providers need enough confidence to combine supports creatively without fear that appropriate collaboration will later be treated as double funding. Goodwill and informal relationships are valuable, but they cannot carry an employment system at scale.

With stronger interfaces and more deliberate transition arrangements, more people with disability will secure and retain employment. This Report makes seven key recommendations .If adopted, pathways would become easier to navigate, momentum would be preserved, and fewer people would be lost at the points where systems meet.

This report shows what good pathways can look like. The policy task is to create the architecture that allows them to emerge consistently, intentionally, and at scale.

The goal is a system designed well enough both to support the complexity of people's lives and enable them to achieve their aspirations.

Peter Bacon

CEO, Disability Employment Australia

Acknowledgements

The Blended Transitions project is a Disability Employment Australia initiative in partnership with the Centre for Inclusive Employment. The importance of this report for the sector is reflected in the very high number of DEA members who responded to the invitation to be part of the project. The richness of the data, and hence the strength of the recommendations, is due to their willingness to put aside time in what are busy and pressured work lives to share their experience and wisdom. It was a privilege to be part of those conversations. I would also like to thank DEA staff, particularly Sally Karandrews and Renae Hartmann, for their help and support.

The images in this report are from Access Arts, Queensland's leading organisation creating opportunities in the performing and visual arts for people with disability or disadvantage. My thanks to Tim Brown, Arts Manager, for bringing the idea of using Access Arts' images to fruition.

Dr Ann Nevile

August 2026

List of acronyms

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DEA	Disability Employment Australia
DSS	The Department of Social Security
DSP	Disability Support Pension
ESA	Employment Service Area
ESAt	Employment Services Assessment
IEA	Inclusive Employment Australia
ID	Intellectual Disability
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LAC	Local Area Co-ordinator
NDIA	National Disability Insurance Agency
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
OH&S	Occupational Health and Safety
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SLES	School Leaver Employment Supports
TTW	Transition To Work
WHS	Work Health and Safety



Screech Arts, *Rock the Bells*, Access Arts

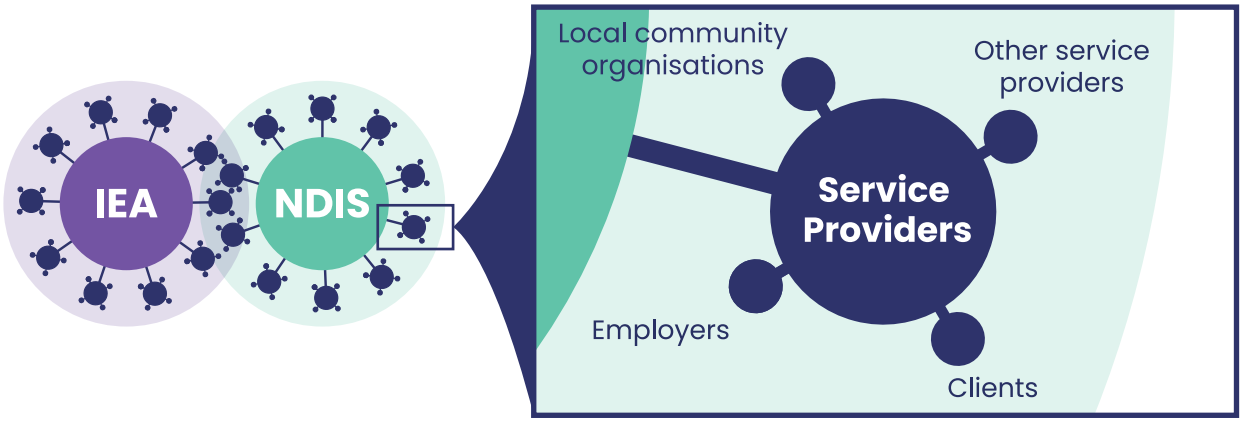
Executive Summary

Inclusive Employment Australia, the new specialist disability employment program, replaced the Disability Employment Services program on 1 November 2025. Under IEA, participants are able to choose their service provider and are able to stay with their chosen provider as long as they need to. At the same time, there has been an increase in the number of specialist providers in IEA. Many of the new IEA providers are NDIS service providers who assist NDIS participants with their employment and career-building goals. NDIS participants have always had the opportunity to include employment related supports in their NDIS plan. However in the past, there has been significant under-utilisation of employment supports in participants' plans.

The aim of the Blended Transitions project is to identify how best to combine IEA and NDIS funded employment supports so that more people with disability are able to find and sustain meaningful employment.

The evidence presented in this report shows that employment should be understood as a pathway, rather than a series of disconnected service episodes. Participants often move between NDIS supports, IEA supports, work experience, supported employment, open employment and on-going support arrangements. The critical factor is whether these movements preserve momentum or disrupt it.

Relationships play a vital role in creating pathways that preserve momentum. These relationships are initiated, developed and maintained by service providers. Service providers can be seen as the hub of a wheel and their relationships with clients, other service providers, employers and local community organisations are the spokes of the wheel that hold everything in place. Strong relationships are what makes information sharing, co-ordination and collaboration possible.



However the current design and administration of NDIS employment funding creates uncertainty that undermines the development of holistic, person-centred pathways. Service providers identified uncertainty associated with:

- obtaining employment related funding;
- variable planning decisions;
- changes to funding arrangements;
- participant access to supports; and
- the interaction between NDIS and other employment programs.

This uncertainty affects participants, but it also affects provider behaviour. When funding is unpredictable, it becomes more difficult to invest in employment capability, sustain specialist staff and develop integrated pathways that span multiple systems.

The recommendations set out below are designed to remove barriers and reduce uncertainty so that service providers are better equipped to assist people with disability and the businesses who employ them.

Recommendation 1 - opt out

Participants opt out of having employment supports in their NDIS plan rather than the current practice of clients having to specifically request the inclusion of employment supports.

Recommendation 2 - planning process

We are aware that a new NDIS planning process is being developed and would recommend that the new planning process:

1. prioritise employment goals;
2. ring-fence employment funding within a participant's NDIS plan;
3. only allow a participant's employment funding to be reduced or removed with their written consent;
4. prioritise transparency by providing reasonable justifications for decisions made by NDIS planners; and
5. ensure all relevant information provided by an individual as part of the planning process is passed on to support staff when clients transition from one NDIS provider to another, or transition from an NDIS provider to an IEA provider.

The transfer of information to relevant IEA support staff is of particular importance when a supported employee is thinking about moving into open employment. In such cases, their families are often concerned that their family member will have to work with new people who may not understand them, as well as their family member having to go through their story all over again.

Recommendation 3 - Career Action Plan

Where a participant is receiving support from both NDIS and IEA, providers ensure that the participant's Career Action Plan includes the following:

- the participant's employment goal;
- where they currently sit on their employment pathway;
- the role of NDIS funded employment supports and the role of IEA funded employment supports;
- the reason(s) why that combination of supports are needed;
- information sharing arrangements; and
- measures to prevent gaps and duplication.

Recommendation 4 - formal statement

That DSS issues a formal statement to the effect that using the same service delivery processes which have been shown to be effective across a range of different programs or funding streams does not constitute double dipping.

As set out in Recommendation 3, if a participant is combining NDIS and IEA funding, their Career Action Plan will provide a justification for the dual funding structure. A general rule around dual servicing is if a client is in IEA and doing an activity which is part of the IEA Deed, then the cost of that activity cannot be funded by using the participant's NDIS funding.

Recommendation 5 - collaboration

That Disability Employment Australia, the Centre for Inclusive Employment, DSS and NDIA work together to develop:

- model MOUs
- warm handover protocols;

- consent templates;
- role clarity tools;
- information sharing guidelines; and
- examples of effective practice;

which will make successful collaboration easier to replicate. The Centre for Inclusive Employment already has a mandate to provide tools and training to help service providers deliver quality employment services and supports to participants and employers. It is recommended that development of educational material should prioritise:

- educational programs targeted at NDIA plan managers, support co-ordinators and LACs;
- information for employers about the ways in which service providers can help employers; and
- educational material service providers can use to help clients and their families understand the respective roles of NDIS and IEA and what happens to the DSP when an individual starts work or increases their hours of work.

Recommendation 6 - working group

That DSS establishes a working group with Disability Employment Australia to identify inconsistencies in the Inclusive Employment Australia Deed and Guidelines, and opportunities to simplify requirements while maintaining participant safeguards and service quality. The top two priorities of this working group should be:

1. to remove the requirement to undergo an ESAt process for all NDIS participants;
2. to remove the requirement to seek approval for placing a participant in a related entity and replace it with a requirement for service providers to explain the reason for the placement in a related entity in the participant's individual case notes.

Recommendation 7 - disability social enterprise

That the Centre for Inclusive Employment commissions work exploring how disability social enterprises could be scaled up so that more NDIS and IEA participants are able to take advantage of disability social enterprises' capacity to build confidence, skills and connections to employers through supported employment (for NDIS participants) or work experience (for IEA participants).

Currently, employment in any disability social enterprise is not claimable as an employment outcome. As part of the process of scaling up the use of disability social enterprises, the definition of what constitutes a claimable employment outcome should be revised along the following lines.

- If an individual on a supported employment award is paid less than the national minimum wage, then their employment is not claimable as an employment outcome. In all other circumstances, it is.



Annika Strand, *My Abstract World*,
Undercover Artist Festival 2025 hero image, Access Arts

Section One:
Significance of the research

Inclusive Employment Australia, the new specialist disability employment program, replaced the Disability Employment Services program on 1 November 2025. Under IEA, participants are able to choose their service provider and are able to stay with their chosen provider as long as they need to. At the same time, there has been an increase in the number of specialist providers in IEA.

Many of the new IEA providers are NDIS service providers who assist NDIS participants with their employment and career-building goals. NDIS participants have always had the opportunity to include employment related supports in their NDIS plan. However in the past, there has been significant under-utilisation of employment supports in participants' NDIS plans.

IEA providers who have been supporting people with disability find and maintain employment over many years believe that effective service provision is characterised by holistic, wrap-around supports.

> When you think about a person's journey and the role of DES, it should absolutely be collaboration across a continuum [of different programs] that gives you the optimum outcome...Over the last ten to fifteen years we have seen more and more people falling through the cracks. So that is why you need to maximise fluidity in that pathway, [while] minimising the opportunities for falling off that pathway, or slipping through the cracks.

Many IEA providers have established long-standing collaborative relationships with NDIS providers that are embedded within particular communities, while others have expanded beyond their traditional focus on disability employment to include NDIS, and other types of support, within the one organisation.
The introduction of IEA with its focus on choice of provider, the widening of eligibility criteria and the provision of more specialist providers, makes it even more important to understand what works, and why, in terms of providing holistic, wrap-around supports that transcend individual programs or funding mechanisms. For this reason, the Blended Transitions project aims to identify how IEA and NDIS funded employment supports can be combined to deliver more holistic, person-centred employment pathways.

The first phase of the Blended Transitions project consisted of on-line interviews with CEOs or Senior Managers of service provider organisations who

delivered IEA, NDIS or a combination of IEA and NDIS employment supports. The second phase of the project consisted of 10 site visits where I spoke with Area Managers and front-line service delivery staff. In total I had conversations with 100 individuals across 32 organisations that ranged from small providers to providers who are part of a business with an international footprint. Their combined geographical footprint covers metropolitan, outer metropolitan and regional locations in Queensland, NSW, the ACT, Victoria, South Australia and WA. The services provided by these 32 organisations include both specialist and generalist IEA services, NDIS employment supports, youth employment supports, self-employment assistance as well as supported employment.

The interviews with CEOs and Senior Managers, and focus groups with Area Managers and front-line staff, focused on the following questions.

- What do existing blended pathways look like?
- What institutional processes or structures facilitate holistic, person-centred pathways?
- What are the situations where clients are likely to fall through the cracks?
- What do clients' families want to know about the process of moving from NDIS funded employment supports to IEA?
- What sort of supports should be funded through NDIS employment supports?
- What sort of supports should be funded through IEA employment supports?
- What needs to change so that service providers can confidently combine supports in ways that maximise outcomes for each individual?

Section 2 of this report identifies the institutional processes or structures that facilitate holistic, person-centred pathways. Section 3 identifies the barriers to person-centred, continuous pathways, while Section 4 looks at what can be done to minimise or remove existing barriers so that people are able to move seamlessly through employment pathways as their needs change.

Lisa Blake, *Me and My Kinda Things*,
Access Arts



Section Two:
Holistic, person-centred pathways

Service providers talk about person-centred employment pathways as a journey. When employment is conceived as a journey, it changes the focus from a single, short-term objective – getting a job – to a broader perspective that opens up the possibility of people engaging in different types of work which may change as an individual goes through their life.

Employment journeys are not always linear, and must be flexible to enable clients to have the right supports when they are needed, with the speed and direction of the employment journey determined by the individual. As Stephen explained:

> I had worked in open employment with different DES providers because I was keen to find on-going work. But some of the services didn't always work well for me. I was often assigned different case workers. This made it difficult to build a strong working relationship and feel fully understood in terms of my goals and support needs. Because of this, I decided to move into supported employment...[where] the support was more consistent and I was able to build confidence in my abilities over time. Supported employment has given me the opportunity to grow, learn new skills, adapt to different environments and feel more comfortable in a work setting. It has helped me build independence and confidence and I feel more prepared for future opportunities in open employment.

Supported employment is often thought of as a less than desirable employment option. Part of this is a hangover from the days when there were very few pathways to meaningful employment for people with disability. However the experiences of people such as Stephen demonstrates that supported employment can be a highly effective way of building capacity, skills and confidence. It is also worth noting that not all employment journeys end in open employment. For example, Alison has worked with many disability employment providers over the last 25 years.

> I had many jobs, none of which lasted long. A friend...told me about her employer that hires people with disabilities which is what I now know as an Australian Disability Enterprise. What makes this a wonderful thing is that we are paid based on what is called the supported wage scheme. This means we are assessed and paid a percentage of the award wage,

> compared to someone on the open market and we still get to keep most of our pension. I have been there nearly 13 years now – the longest I have had a job - and in that time I have been given the opportunity to fill in at reception in another office, which after a good report got back to management, I was asked to go to another office to help with archiving files, which then led to a traineeship in Business Administration Certificate III...For the last six months I have been working in the Head Office learning new skills including learning how to work in a customer call centre while still being supported by a support worker.

Alison goes on the explain that, unlike her previous employers who did not understand the implications of her disability, she now has the support she needs to be able to continue working and learning new skills.

Because success looks different for every person, the outcomes of person-centred pathways must be re-imagined to include open employment, supported employment, social enterprises, self-employment and micro-enterprises, creative enterprises and arts-based income generation, as well as combinations of different types of employment. For example, someone may be combining income from a creative enterprise, such as creating craft items to sell at local or regional markets, with working in a social enterprise and casual work in the hospitality sector. Some people may choose to divide their work week between an open employment work site and a supported employment work site, because this allows them to mitigate the risks involved in open employment as well as continue to enjoy a work site that integrates work culture with a strong social orientation. As one supported employer provider explained:

> [In our] hybrid model, people go out and experience work outside [the ADE]. Slowly build capacity so that they feel comfortable enough to leave while still having a foot in the door...where they can come and see their friends.

Another supported employer agreed that remaining connected to their social network is very important for their employees. Even when employees working in one of their social enterprises felt they were ready for open employment, "they actually preferred the [social enterprise] setting and working with like-minded people and their liked peers". If they did move to open employment, it would only be for one or two days a week because "they are just happy here".

While some people do move from this hybrid model into full-time open employment, it is important to keep pathways open so that people can take a break from open employment if they need to without being seen as a failure.

> People with disability…are seen as [someone] that needs to be on this upward trajectory all the time, rather than giving them the grace to fall back if they're not feeling well, if something's happened in their personal life, and then coming back into employment. There's no provision for that drop-off. It's seen as 'this person has fallen out of employment. We now need to recover this outcome.' That's the language that's used and it trickles down onto the individual themselves. They feel it.

Endeavour Foundation staff had observed a similar pattern under DES "where individuals will go out, get placed through DES and six months later they're back in the supported employment environment because they didn't have the confidence, or the experience, or the wrap-around supports to step into that zone and be comfortable." Consequently the Endeavour Foundation established their Supported Hosted employment option where participants are employed by the Endeavour Foundation and work as a contractor for one of the Endeavour Foundation's external business partners.

> Since we've started these programs, we're seeing individuals get excited about going [into open employment]…We work with Kennedy's Timber and…the CEO and Founder of the organisation is really loving the program. We've got two participants there who he is looking at employing through IEA potentially, or just employing directly because he's identified that they are very skilled and capable individuals, which wasn't the case when they first started.

The remainder of this section explores the organisational processes or structures that facilitate holistic, person-centred pathways, focusing on service providers' relationships with clients, other service streams or providers, employers and local community organisations.

2.1 Relationships with clients

Stephen identified being able to develop "a strong working relationship" with his supported employment provider as the point of difference. In other words, effective, person-centred pathways depend on providers being able to establish strong relationships of trust with their clients. When asked about

how they build trust with their clients, front-line staff said it is "being honest and realistic with them…It is finding those little things that you only get out of an honest, good conversation, to then use that to support [the client] and work with them. If they have really niche interests, I tell them, 'I can't say I'm going to get you a job next month because it is something we are going to have to work on'. And then we build and strategize in how we are going to get to point A to point B."

It is not uncommon for clients to approach their initial meeting with their service provider with very low expectations about what, if anything, will be achieved, which is why employment coaches or mentors work very hard to build rapport and then trust with clients.

> I think sometimes it's about their past, [what] they have experienced in the past, that's why they miss appointments. They think 'what is the point continuing coming to appointments if there's nothing, no position you have for me?' So I always make sure at the start of the first appointment, I clearly explain…that we work together – 'I'm alongside you and helping you and you also are taking part…If you're not participating or not doing anything, I can't do it by myself. It's working together.'

The connection established through initial meetings are maintained by employment coaches continuing to re-engage with clients who may be experiencing difficulties without being overly intrusive.

> I'm big on 'let's take it at your pace…My only rule is just don't go missing in action on me…If you're having a bad day, you don't feel like coming to an appointment, or if you want to hide under the covers, that's all right. Just text me and I'll text back just to make sure you're OK'.

Clients who are in work can also experience difficulties when past trauma re-emerges. It is in these sort of situations that staff who provide on-going support have honest conversations with their clients who are wishing that they didn't have to work, [but] 'I'm on Job Seeker, I need to work'…Then I always try and reassure them about the real reasons why they should not be on Job Seeker…If we don't stop them in the middle [of a decline], it's too late."

Honest conversations help employment coaches or mentors understand what motivates their clients and opens up the possibility of using a client's non-employment goals to help clients move forward. "Clients tell us what they want to achieve and we go, 'yep, that's a great idea. Let's work together on that'. The client may want to go on a holiday, or save for a car, or get their drivers licence."

These non-work goals can be powerful tools as employment coaches find a way to link them to employment related activities.

Front-line staff place a high priority on always listening to what the client is saying and caring about their clients.

> People can immediately tell if one of us is sitting there and not genuinely seeking to understand where they're coming from. Or genuinely wanting to know what has gone wrong in the past, why are they frustrated, why has it been hard?..Someone automatically knows if you care or not. I don't know if the best way to build trust is to care about someone and make sure that they know that, but it seems pretty easy.

Caring about their clients often involves going the extra mile. For example one provider I spoke with had a client who wanted to do very physical work and "that had been her working history to date".

> We marketed her to a company. They said, 'yep, that's great'. She went and had the interview and it was all fantastic. But then because of their business...there was [a lot of] on-boarding tests and requirements that had to be addressed and completed on-line. On-line is not her capability whatsoever. So we had to literally block out hours at a time for her to come in and [we would] sit together to assist her to get through [it] all... She was just, 'I'm lost, I'm out, I can't do any of that. 'No, you can, but just with some support'.

Where clients have NDIS funding, service providers often find themselves helping clients prepare documentation for plan reviews.

> I had to assist [a client] with changing their plan because they don't have a support co-ordinator. Unfortunately the LAC that they do have is very unresponsive, which is a bit of an issue...that you'll find with participants on NDIS. A lot of the LACs are quite unresponsive. You can't get hold of them, so it is hard to change a client's plan.

Building trust also involves establishing two-way accountability.

> It's a little bit of give in the first instance to start laying that foundation for trust...[and then it's] meeting halfway: 'this is what I'm going to require from you, but this is how I can help you along the way'.

Developing a more detailed Job Plan, or Career Action Plan is one way service providers develop and strengthen two-way accountability because the Career Action Plan is used to record, and then tick off and celebrate, milestones achieved. This more detailed plan is flexible and is revised as needed. For example, if a client is finding it difficult to make progress, the steps in the more detailed plan can be tailored to reflect this, as one staff person explained.

> I've got a client that struggles to leave the house. Her tasks are very small – getting to her appointments and going on-line and looking for a job on Seek. Just look, she doesn't have to apply. So when she does come in and [tells me] 'I was on Seek for 20 minutes', I praise her – 'that is fantastic!' The look on her face is 'wow, someone's proud of me!'...It's all about continual encouragement and making them accountable.

All the service providers I spoke with used the words 'client-centred', 'person-centred' or 'holistic wrap around supports' to describe their service delivery model, and had relegated administrative processes to the background in their intake process, instead focusing on questions designed to gather information about the client - who they are, what they are looking for, their conditions for success, their skills, abilities and attributes. Care is also taken to ensure that clients feel as comfortable as possible at the initial meeting.

> We ask them about where they would like to be seen. Do they want to bring a support person with them? Is there an emotional toy they need to bring in? [Are] lighting conditions important? All those type of things.

Providers also check on their clients' understanding of why they are here talking to them.

> Do you know why Centrelink has sent you here? Do you know what we are about? Do you know how we can support you? It's an information session both ways I feel. It takes a few appointments for [clients] to start opening up because we are strangers.

Another important element of the intake process is collecting information about a client's formal and informal supports.

> If [a] person is linked in with an NDIS provider for their supports, we would utilise that as opportunity to say, 'how can we connect with them to make sure that you are getting that holistic support that we know you need?

NDIS provider EPIC Assist highlighted the importance of "having a really open conversation about where this is leading" and introducing the possibility of employment as part of the initial intake process so that NDIS employment supports do not become just another component of the day service week.

> Unless you've had that really upfront discussion and follow through with the commitment that you make in that upfront discussion, then nine times out of ten [NDIS employment supports] will not work towards sustainable employment.

A lot of providers talked about using a discovery model. Some referenced Mark Gold and Associates, other providers had adjusted the Discovery model in various ways to fit their particular client cohorts, while others used the term 'discovery' in a more generic sense. Most providers did not follow all the steps set out in the academic literature, with one provider remarking that the funding mechanisms in Australia makes model fidelity difficult.

> The IEA contract talks about customised employment, but I'm yet to see how [IEA] funding actually supports its implementation.

One of the providers I spoke with has adopted an human rights approach to the delivery of employment services. I was interested in this decision and asked whether adopting a human rights approach had changed the way they delivered employment supports. The provider noted that the impetus for the introduction of a human rights approach came from the organisation's experience at the Disability Royal Commission and "some real failures in safeguarding and leadership."

> In our supported employment services, it's absolutely shifted the way we manage all of the conversations and all of the ways that we work with people…Just looking at safeguarding wasn't enough. You had to go to the next level…A human rights-based approach places an onus on our staff… which doesn't just exist in a client-centred approach…It's an additional kind of knowledge or understanding than just pure client-centricity.

The provider went on say that implementing a human rights approach is part of facilitating their client-centred service delivery model.

> I don't think you can have a human rights-based approach without being person-centred, but I think you probably could be person-centred and not have a holistic human rights-based approach to doing things.

Adopting a rights-based approach means accepting your responsibility as the duty holder for helping clients realise their right to work, which is "a more powerful starting point for educating staff who perhaps haven't thought along those lines before."

When I asked front-line staff how they knew when a client was ready to move from NDIS supports to IEA, or to move within IEA from capacity building activities to working with marketing or recruitment staff, they all said that "usually our clients tell us when they're ready because you've built that rapport. They'll be like, 'you know what? I'm actually ready to do this'".

One provider has developed a Results Pyramid which sets out the steps their IEA clients take to achieve their goals. Staff assess a client's readiness in terms of four stages - have we built trust? Is there open communication? Has the client created and committed to their goals? Have we established two-way accountability? If the answer is yes, then the client is ready to move forward. Staff recognise that client readiness can be fluid as clients move up the pyramid, then down the pyramid and then up again. Some clients start the process and then want to speed things up.

> We have one participant [who has] found that the journey is taking too long and 'I just want to work tomorrow. Please help me'. So we see him once a week instead of [once a fortnight].

Other clients may feel ready, then lose confidence in themselves and the process, and then surprise their support worker. For example, a Career Development Advisor found a position that she thought might be suitable for one of her clients, "a very loud, lovely lady well suited to a factory environment."

> However, the client "had a bit of a meltdown in the office. She got really upset saying she was never going to be able to get a job...I tried to source some outside help for her to talk to somebody. But then she came back in the following fortnight [and] to my surprise she was ready to go again. She was back on track. Then she said, 'I suppose I'm at the bottom of the heap and you're not really going to try.' I said, 'no, no, we're really keen on getting you something.'

The client had some work experience in supported employment, but had never worked in open employment before, so she effectively went from supported employment to 30 hours per week in open employment. The Career Development Advisor explained what that level of employment would mean

for her DSP and made sure that she understood, but the client was more than happy. She would be earning over $1,000 a week. The day after she started work, she sent her Career Development Advisor a photo where she had a huge smile on her face saying, "still early days, but I'm loving it. This is the best job ever. It is so easy and so chilled out and I don't have to deal with anyone but my boss and my supervisor. This is great. Thank you so much."

As well as responding to individual clients' capacity and enthusiasm for moving towards their employment goals, service providers also structure organisational processes based on client preferences. For example, one organisation I spoke with decided to create a client co-ordinator role because a significant number of their clients preferred to have one individual as their "go-to person". The organisation has in-take, marketing and in-work support roles, but throughout their time with this organisation, clients and their families are always able to contact their client co-ordinator.

> It should be simple for our clients so they understand, if I have a problem, I can go to my client co-ordinator and say, 'I'm not sure where the support officer is. I haven't seen them for a couple of days'. The client co-ordinator will take care of it.

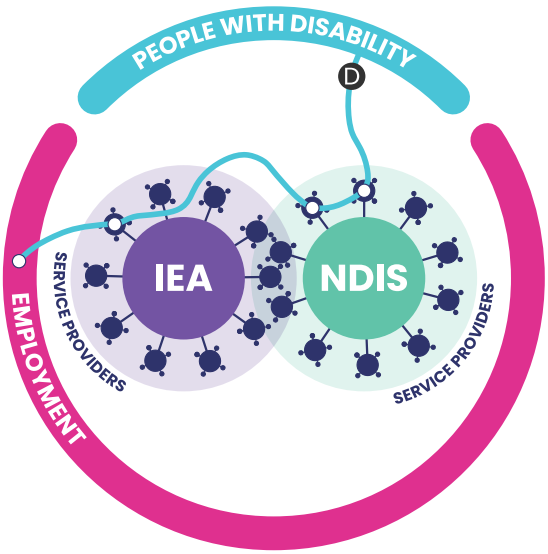
In a policy sector that is always looking for "the secret sauce" it is important to remember that while patterns of good practice can be identified, "it's not an exact science, what we do. There isn't a set formula. It's about changing to be in tune with person that's right in front of you."

2.2 Relationships with other service streams or providers

The strong relationships of trust service providers establish with their clients is what makes employment pathways person-centred. What makes employment pathways holistic is the relationships service providers have with other service streams or providers. In other words, internal and external collaboration allows service providers to offer a range of different sorts of supports. Some organisations are able to do this in-house.

> We had a person who came to us through interaction with our community engagement officer. The person was struggling to engage generally with the community. They clearly had a disability, but did not have NDIS funding because they lacked proper assessment. So their association with

> us began with the health team who completed an autism assessment. And that then triggered some therapies, so the person continued working with our team of psychologists. We were able to introduce them into the NDIS employment program. The person has also started doing some capacity building work with our health team around social interaction. This continued for a period of time and the person progressed wonderfully to the point where they could move into DES and the last time I checked the person was completing a Cert II or Cert III through our training team.



Blending different types of NDIS and IEA supports is particularly important in assisting clients who face more significant barriers to participation in open employment. For example, a participant who has a number of functional and vocational barriers including concentration and endurance limitations, restricted mobility and manual dexterity challenges as well as difficulties with workplace communication, adapting to change and managing stress, has been able to maintain her employment with Woolworths for over seven years through high levels of on-going support available through IEA and support from occupational therapists and psychologists and daily living supports which are accessed through NDIS.

Service providers who have an RTO as part of their organisation find this helpful in terms of employer engagement, and for clients who are doing a vocational course that requires a work placement.

> Other providers and RTOs would expect the participants to find their own work placement. We have an employer that they're going into before we start the course. So before we take enrolments [we know our participants] are going to be doing their placement on these dates with this employer. And a lot of the time they start work with that employer.

The organisation's RTO also run short employer-led courses in different industries such as manufacturing or contact centres which, in many cases, are co-designed with an employer in mind. For example, contact centre courses were developed after a number of contact centre operators said, 'if people are coming to us for work, we'd really love them to have a couple of these skill sets that will help them have that little bit of an edge over other people applying' [for a position].

Building productive working relationships between teams within the one organisation, or between two partnering organisations, is all about communication. Internal trust building is done by staff getting to know what different groups or teams do and hence understanding how different skill sets can help them in what they do for clients. As one provider put it:

> Education is the key. So talking to our IEA staff and saying, 'NDIS is a tool that you can use to get your KPIs and outcomes...And then educating our NDIS support workers by going, 'hey, this is not something that is going to take your job. IEA is going to enhance the outcomes you're going to get for your people that you are, quite rightly, protective about. Actually it can be done well Together.'

Information can be combined with practical team building activities where IEA and NDIS staff work together to facilitate outcomes for clients.

> Once a month we have an employer engagement day. The idea is to pair our IEA Career Coaches and Partnership Coaches with NDIS counterparts to help support SLES and Finding and Keeping a Job...[The IEA and NDIS pairs have to do] direct employer engagement in local communities... [about] the supports both these services can offer to employers and clients. Usually every session they'll run a different type of game...The first one was a treasure hunt. [The IEA and NDIS pairs] had a list of things that they needed to do during the day while they were marketing and going out to employers and talking to different people.

Co-location certainly facilitates cross-program co-operation. For example, when I asked one provider about cross-program collaboration, the IEA Operations Manager pointed to four desks towards the front of the office and said his IEA Career Mentors are talking every day with their Job Advisor colleagues in Workforce Australia who use those desks and because "we share an office space, we share participants on more occasions than one where there's a warm handover discussion." However, while co-location is helpful, it is not essential because staff are still able to share best practice across different programs within their organisation.

> I have so many things that we use in IEA that TTW are like, 'oh, hey, that would actually really work for our cohort out here', and they've taken this tool and brought it across and Workforce has done the same.

Front-line staff are also able to utilise all the connections they have built up over the years.

> We can't do it on our own. We have to partner, or we have to have these relationships with other providers because [a client's] supports are in place for a reason. We just need to work in harmony. It makes more sense that way for the client as well.

For a specialist IEA provider operating in large ESAs, "making sure we have the right partners that we can connect with" is an important strategy in mitigating the tyranny of distance. Another provider valued partnerships with other service providers because "we don't want to be the sole support where [the client] becomes [heavily] reliant on us, then decisions get made which are outside our control – DES to IEA being the perfect example – and…if the client is solely reliant on us for their financial well-being, the employment services, the life skills…that's when we see the most vulnerable people in our community become even more vulnerable."

An experienced NDIS Manager pointed out that "most of what we do in NDIS is about working with a multidisciplinary team" where everyone is aware of their role and how it fits into a client's package of supports. For example, "if a client's got a positive behaviour support plan and [the client] has a really bad meltdown, [we] give that information [to the positive behaviour therapists] so they can then train our staff how to deal with that." She believed partnerships with IEA providers should work in the same way.

From my conversations with providers, it is clear that both within and across IEA and NDIS, front-line staff are constantly engaged in existing partnership relationships or looking to form new ones. What was also clear is that partnerships between different organisations starts with a recognition of shared values. As one NDIS provider remarked, "there are definitely some great people working in IEA…so if we get to spend time with…an IEA staff member who…is what we call one of the 'good guys', then we will absolutely form a relationship with them, but they're always informal." Another NDIS provider remarked that it has been a struggle trying to find DES/IEA providers that they would feel comfortable partnering with so that their Finding and Keeping a Job clients could work with a a provider that had access to more resources.

> We trialed a few connections with DES providers. Their idea of support and empathy was a little bit different than ours. So we went alone and continued on doing it ourselves because we just found that in the first five minutes, there was talk about outcomes and fees and stuff like that.

Trust between partnering organisations begins with conversations between people who recognise that the two organisations are 'like-minded', and is built and maintained by being very clear about what it is that each partner organisation is going to do. In other words, staff from both organisations talk about what supports a particular person needs and reach an agreement as to the activities each organisation will provide based on a prior understanding that each organisation will fund the activities they have agreed to provide. This collaborative work practice allows staff from different organisations to present as a single, unified team when talking to clients, families of clients, or employers, to help them gain a clear understanding of the whole suite of services or supports available to them through the combined resources of different teams within the one organisation, or within the two partner organisations, without having to worry about who will be providing what type of support. As noted earlier, partnerships can be informal, based on people having known each other for quite a while and hence being able to say, 'we will trust them and we will act in each other's best interests.' Trust can also be built on explicit agreements such as MOUs which set out what each partner organisations will do.

2.3 Relationships with employers

In many ways employers value the same things as clients in terms of their relationship with service providers. Employers want to work with service providers who listen, take the time to understand their business, how it operates and what they are looking for in prospective employees. Employers want consistency, "a solid, seamless relationship."

> That was the feedback that we had when we were trying to get our own model right...Employers were used to working with one [staff member] and then that person changed because the client's funding system changed and they didn't have that previous relationship. They were having to explain things over again.

Another provider who has developed a very successful long-term relationship with Kmart agreed that Kmart "didn't want major change...They wanted consistency, especially with clients, but also for them, because Kmart managers were used to working with the same people [from our organisation]." For example, in my conversation with the provider's Kmart Program Co-ordinator, he talked about the workplace adjustment passport they had developed.

> In retail there's high turnover. There's high burn-out and Kmart as a business...will move managers around from store to store...What the passport intends to capture is the adjustments that we're putting in place...[so that there is] continuity of adjustment, irrespective of the manager that comes in. I think it gives the managers confidence that this process has already been done.

The workplace adjustment passport is a personalised education piece for the employer. Instead of providing generic information about autism, for example, it focuses on a particular individual's "capabilities and the adjustments we can make to support them in Kmart...as well as demonstrating how the adjustments which have been put in place, or will be put in place, align with the values of the business and the pressures faced by managers, for example, in meeting productivity expectations."

Service providers are well aware of the importance of first impressions when building a relationship with employers.

> When you first meet an employer and you think there is lots of potential, you probably wouldn't put someone in that role that you weren't 100 per cent comfortable with. You need to build that relationship with an employer over time. Whereas when they are so connected with you, they [are] happy to take people who might not be the best fit, and if it falls over, that hasn't broken the relationship. They're still willing to take people. That's where it really works best.

Building a relationship with an employer over time requires "good communication...working through any issues or barriers, being contactable, recognising the employers."

Service providers all acknowledge that finding the 'right' employer is the key to successful long-term outcomes. But how do you find out who in the market is disability friendly? Some providers start their search by looking at the business' websites, but then find that this is not a particularly reliable indicator, because if an employer doesn't already have appropriate structures in place, or a really high level of openness and willingness to create those structures, then the outcome is unlikely to be positive. For example, a service provider had a client who was deaf and had been working full-time for three months when the manager who knew the client was deaf and thought he was "doing great" at work left. A new manager came in and fired the client on the basis that 'he's a health and safety risk because he's deaf.' Providers agreed that "employers need that employment piece," but also highlighted situations where they had

spent a lot of time talking to relevant HR managers only to find that when they put forward a suitable candidate, "they don't get a look-in" which is why they believe disability awareness and inclusivity has to be actively supported by senior management.

One Marketing Officer talked about how she sometimes goes and checks what a work site is like.

> If someone wants to work in a certain store, I might go out there one day and walk through the store…just to see what the environment's like. While I'm there I might strike up a conversation with who's in the store. [Then] I'll go back to the participant and say, 'I was there. It's really loud. There's lots of lights'…Or 'this is exactly what you're looking for. Do you want me to go and approach them and see if I can chat to someone?'

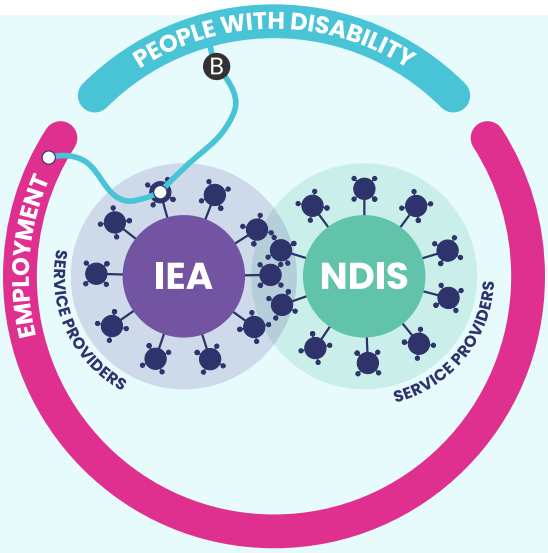
Some providers use a work experience placement as a test on the understanding that they will quietly terminate the work experience placement if they believe it is not in the client's best interest to continue. For example, if they believe the client is being exploited, or there is too much inappropriate language being used at the work site. However, even in these sort of situations, participant choice is respected.

> I've had some staff in tears, like 'I know this is the wrong environment'. But we always harp back to the point that…it's about these guys having choice. We have to respect that and…be prepared to pick up the pieces if it goes wrong.

Providers said that the majority of their employers are small or medium sized businesses in the local area. For some of these businesses their disability awareness and willingness to employ people with disability comes from their own experience, which means their attitudes to employing people with disability are not likely to change, even if issues arise with a particular employee. Small and medium sized businesses also operate within local networks so that if you provide one local business with a great candidate [Joe], the word goes around, and marketing officers or employment engagement partners find that other employers will be asking them to send them someone exactly like Joe.

Customised employment requires employers to be willing to "throw their cards up in the air and go, 'all right, we've always done it this way but let's have a conversation about how else it can be done.'" The following case study contains all the elements which make up a successful job carving process in terms of identification of interests, building skills, work site visits, conversations with HR staff, the interview, and finally, discussions about job carving.

Case Study: Park Royal Hotel



A young school leaver came into the IEA program and he talked endlessly about the Park Royal Hotel as his dream job. He stays there every year on his birthday and has done since he was a kid. Over the last six months we've gone through everything, from creating a resume and cover letter to going out and visiting six of their hotels. We interviewed their staff about what a day in their life looks like. From there the client decided he'd like to work in the hospitality area of the hotel. So then he did a hospitality essential skillset course at our Bankstown office. He's done his RSA, RCG, got all his upskilling functions done. We then went and did six employer introductions at six different hotels where he had to go and introduce himself. I would accompany him and stand in the background so I could talk about how we can support our client.

We then went to the Park Royal a couple of times and spoke to an HR person. He had an interview and was very nervous. Thankfully they were so accommodating and allowed him to attend the interview with a support person. As the interview progressed he was making jokes and everyone was laughing and was super personal about it. After the interview we met up with them to talk about whether they had any concerns about his capacity or how he might be able to fulfill the requirements of the role. They were very transparent around concerns about verbal commands from hotel guests given his primary barrier is language processing disorder. We were able to talk about the sort of environment he's going to be best supported in and that he's really going to thrive in. They were like, 'what can we do to help create that?'

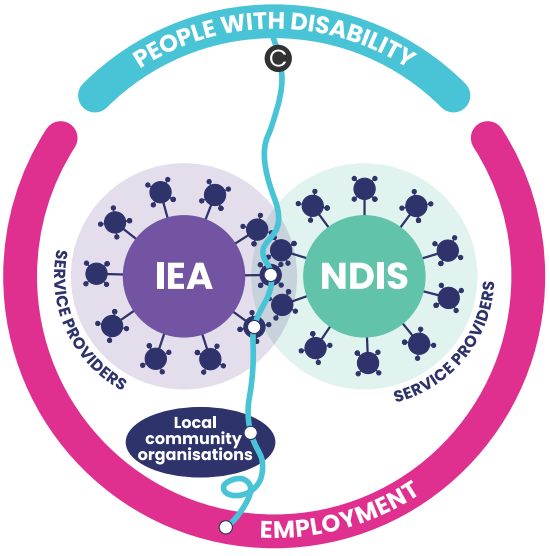
So then we did a bit of job carving. The staff have a full buffet style cafeteria that all their staff can access during their shifts. It's stunning. He will be working in that buffet and servicing the staff. We were not sure how he would cope with conflicting demands that might arise, so we talked with the employer about creating checklists. Setting up the buffet he will have set tasks he does every day so it becomes routine. Then the staff that he'll be servicing are different from customers. They'll be understanding. They'll know him and build that rapport. It'll be the same people every time. All of this is carving out that role to help him build his capacity and then moving to other roles and positions as he progresses. His goal is to become a CEO of a Park Royal Hotel.

2.4 Relationships with local community organisations

The relationships that service providers develop and maintain with local community organisations are essential in facilitating relationships with clients, employers and other service providers. As one provider put it, it was important their organisation was known " as a disability employment service provider [which] was proactive in our linkages with community organisations...[and] at the same time, joining regular events to make sure that our name was known, the service offering was known."

Attending local events, expos or local business forums increases brand recognition among clients as well as employers. As one Employment Coach explained, their direct registration clients "get to know [about us] from the community because I do a lot of community work." Word of mouth continues to be an important source of information for clients looking for an employment services provider, as "family or friends of individuals who are already engaged in the service or have have in the past" talk about their experience, and this is strengthened by staff involvement in community organisations.

Community engagement work also provides an opportunity for other support providers in the local area to get to know what a particular IEA provider can do for their clients and provides an opportunity for IEA providers to establish relationships with allied health providers, mental health services or training organisations to which they can refer their clients.



> We've got a number of RTOs that we work with licences...WHS, OH&S white cards and confined spaces type tickets. Then we have Atwea College (a large provider of community-based adult learning), who we've worked with on Aged Care qualifications [and] business administration.

The Area Manager went on to explain the reciprocal nature of these relationships.

> [We] have training rooms [and] we're always open to other providers coming in and organising training. We had an Open Day…last week and a local RTO attended. They walked into where we did the opening ceremony. They're like, 'can I rent this space out?' I was like, 'you can have it for free, come!' 'Are you serious? Other providers and community organisations have a room hire [charge]'. I was like, 'no, absolutely not. We're part of the community. It it's upskilling the community, come, bring everybody.'

Another provider operates a Toy Library at one of their sites. The library consist of 89 different categories of toys which parents and occupational therapists can borrow for six weeks at a time. As well as providing a valuable resource for the community, the Toy Library offers opportunities for young people with disability to learn reception skills, telephone skills, how to make appointments, computer cataloguing skills and data base management.

Service providers giving back to the community can also take the form of sponsorship of community organisations or assisting community organisations run events. For example, "AMES has a sponsorship strategy and targets organisations that work with our cohorts of people." Building relationships with community organisations is part of AMES' service delivery model becasue "you don't sustain employment if the lived environment you're in is dysfunctional or is not engaging. You've got to develop across the spectrum to achieve sustainable independence."

The importance of community connections and engagement is even more important in regional areas.

> If you ask the question about how do you service in a regional area, you just have to become a local expert in your region. You have to know this employer here, they start their chicken service at 7am. I know the bus doesn't run there, so I'm not going to send [a client] there if they're on public transport. You have to be an expert and know everyone, because in regional areas it's a very personal thing…You have to know every street, every bus route, every employer – you just have to have a relationship with everyone!

Being deeply embedded in their local community has led ETC to incorporate a community support fund in their service delivery model.

> Last year we gave away half a million dollars in community support to organisations in our area…Organisations are nominated by ETC staff who have a personal relationship or professional relationship with an organisation. 'That's somewhere I send my customers, I know they really need a new van for their food outreach service'. The staff member then nominates that organisaton for the community support fund and it's voted on by a panel of staff in that region. Again, local people who know what needs funding in the local area…Then that gets submitted to [our] Board who then decide on how much money [each nominated organisation will receive]. It's so grassroots and it is so community.

The Operations Manager summed up the reciprocal benefits of ETC's community support fund when he said, "[the community organisations] have participants that need to come our way, and we've got participants that need to go their way."

Screech Arts, *Festive Fusion*,
Access Arts



Section Three:
Barriers to holistic, person-centred pathways

While the enabling factors discussed above are all things that providers have direct control over, the main barriers to person-centred, continuous employment pathways all exist in the external environment where service providers have no direct control, and very little indirect control.

Perhaps the most stark example is what has just happened with the IEA tender process where some high performing organisations lost a significant proportion of their business. Consequently, all of the relationships they had built up over many years with clients, their families, employers, schools and other local community organisations, are now broken. While new providers will be working to establish their own relationships, that process takes time – months and years, rather than weeks – and in the meantime clients and employers have to go through the process of engaging with a new organisation – in a sense starting from scratch. This can be particularly difficult in rural areas where locals have been working with the old provider for a long time, and when a new provider tries to engage with schools or other local organisations, "people look at you like, 'what are you doing here? Get out of here.' "

A number of providers reported financial challenges with the IEA contract because their caseload was significantly lower than expected.

> I think over all we've received 60 per cent of the clients that we were meant to receive. In our biggest area, we're at 39 per cent of the people we were meant to achieve...Basically what the government did was... shake the market up a little bit, bring some new providers in. The providers that were staying in the [same] location signed up everybody. So they're sitting on 150 per cent and we're sitting at 39 per cent...We're getting good outcomes. For the number of clients, the percentages are high...but all businesses work to economies of scale...I can see why we picked up the ESAs that we got, but we haven't been supported to move into them... [so] our aspirations aren't able to realised. At [one of our sites] there are multiple offices. There's a big training room. Now based on data in the IEA tender, I should have a caseload of 120 there. We got less than 40 which is barely one person's role. So I've got an office where the rent is $60,000 or $70,000 a year...So what we've done is try to focus on all of our NDIS clients to fill up the office...but is that what the market needs?

The service provider then went on to explain that the inability to match office space and client numbers affects their holistic, wrap-around service delivery model. Other service providers have had to put off staff they had just hired because they were not getting expected referrals.

> We've just had to put a staff member off. In good faith we rented an office down here [in a fast growing rural town] and put a staff member on. [But] we've only got 25 clients for two staff and we just couldn't sustain it.

As another provider remarked, " it's chicken and egg, isn't it? Do we hire a staff member in that [new] area, or do we wait until the referrals start to work?"

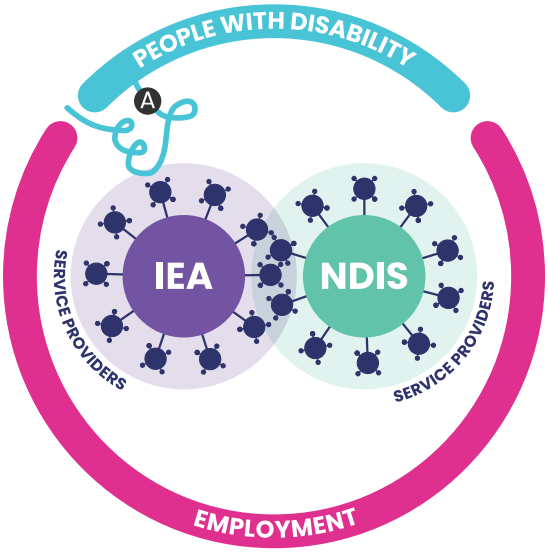
For another provider, the effects of a lower than anticipated caseload were exacerbated by the behaviour of a service provider who lost their DES contract and instead of transitioning their in-work participants, they advised their on-going support clients to stay with them and receive on-going support through their NDIS funding.

> That makes it a bit hard. We'd already taken a hit because we got told 'you're going to get 700 clients' and we're 200 down. Then we start losing people like this because their old provider is not wanting their old clients to sign up with us...We'd say to the clients, 'can we contact [your old provider]?' No, they wouldn't engage with us, which is annoying because its the clients that it affects...The money in their plans will run out and their employment will be jeopardised.

On the other hand, uncertainty around eligibility affected clients who wanted to transition to their new provider. For example, an organisation with a sensory specialist contract found it difficult to get clarity around what specific disabilities are included in their sensory contract "because sensory can be an awful lot more than just deaf, blind and autism, which is sort of pretty much where we got to." Centrelink staff not fully understanding the purpose of specialist providers can also cause problems. For example, in the past, a specialist provider had experienced difficulties with Centrelink not referring Workforce Australia clients because "they won't promote a specialist licence because they see that's advantaging a specialist over a generalist [provider]. The same pattern emerged in the transition to IEA.

> A client came to see us. They had a Vietnamese background and wanted to move from one provider to a specialist provider because we speak Vietnamese and we're in the local area. So they wanted to exercise their right to transfer. The national customer service line said, 'just because you to want to doesn't mean you can'... Four times the customer service line said, 'no'...you've got to give us some reason, some valid reasons'. Isn't choice the reason? ...When the [client] started yelling at them on the phone, shaking violently at our site, demanding to be transferred, [the national customer service line] eventually said, 'all right' and transferred to client across to us. Is this how you do respect?

System issues, such as delays in the department approving new sites, or on-going support clients not being able to link with their old provider because Centrelink couldn't find the old provider on their system, also created opportunities for participants to fall through the cracks.



> There was mass confusion at the start of this contract. We believe there's still probably people out there that aren't connected to a provider that would have been and would like to be.
>
> There was a small portion of people that were under the DES umbrella that were working, and the government was telling us that they're not eligible for our service. And then they'd change their mind on the rulings... We're like, 'ok, well, that's great', but the impact that's had on the individual throughout that process with saying you can't come into our service... We're still trying to get clarity on certain processes from a Guidelines perspective. And the impact is on the customer.

One NDIS provider characterised the IEA transition process as pushing providers into survival mode.

> They close themselves off and they're just trying to repair and get themselves back up to speed. But in the meantime, what we are seeing is participants falling through the gaps...I think a lot of participants are feeling lost...[In our organisation] we mainly have people with an

> intellectual disability…They already felt they were being left behind …[in] the DES model – put in that 'too hard basket'. Now when we're trying to help them and go, 'ok we can work together with IEA', they don't want to work with an IEA provider.

The provider went on to talk about how a legacy of the exclusion of people with a 0-8 hour benchmark in DES "leaves a stigma with the participants, and a bit of trauma really from just being left." Having worked in DES and in NDIS, this senior manager could see the advantages of NDIS and IEA providers working together to help clients who may need more capacity and confidence building, but "we've tried four [IEA] providers now [and] there's not really the appetite to help or work at this stage."

The emphasis on participant choice was seen by providers as one of the positive features of the IEA contract, but participants became confused when "the department kept saying, 'you have choice', but they couldn't select us as their provider because their disability didn't fall into the eligibility [criteria] for us to provide services."

The removal of high performing organisations, either fully or in part, also raises questions about what sort of choice do clients have when their provider of choice has been removed from the market? Clients living in metropolitan areas may be able to choose to return to their previous provider through direct registration if the previous provider still has a contract in a neighbouring ESA. However, that option is unlikely to be available to clients living in regional areas. A commitment to participant choice sits uneasily in a government structured quasi-market divided into distinct geographical areas which restricts the ways in which service provider can support their clients.

> It is disappointing for me as an NDIS provider not being able to support people [through] IEA because I don't technically operate in that region.

Another provider highlighted the on-going impact of current policy settings on clients.

> The government has certainly demonstrated that they're very comfortable with merger and acquisition activity and cannibalisation of the market…[But] it's really difficult for the families, for the participants to understand…We as a sector need to avoid continual cannibalisation of the market. It's not good. It's not good for people with disability to have to go and re-tell their story to new people in the future.

I believe the quasi-market structure within which IEA providers operate is a barrier to the development of collaborative practices that facilitate better outcomes for clients. This is clearly seen in the behaviour of some exiting providers who failed to adequately explain to transitioning clients the differences between DES and IEA, or provide any sort of warm handover.

> Some clients [had been] in the DES program and they had no idea what IEA was...[or] what sort of assistance we provided, so I explained all the assistance. Then they said, 'I want to go back to my previous provider'. So I said, 'they're no longer in business'. I just tried to get the client to engage and participate in all the activities, [but]...they were devastated. Especially with their location as well. It's a big thing. Some of them had providers in their suburb. Now they've had to re-engage a lot further afield.

Even some continuing providers were not interested in liaising with a previous provider whose clients were transitioning to their organisation.

> The reality was when I was reaching out to continuing providers...they were very disengaged. They were like, 'we've got this. We'll pick it up. Please don't reach out to me. We don't want a handover. We don't want to speak to your clients.'

When the organisation which was transitioning their clients hosted two open days as a warm introduction for the transitioning clients and to help them choose their new provider, not one continuing provider showed up.

The transition issues discussed above all involve a loss of momentum, or connection to known support services. The potential for loss of momentum or connection also occurs at other points in an individual's employment journey. The most frequently cited example occurs in the employment journeys of young people or school leavers, particularly school leavers whose disability is seen as preventing them, or making it unlikely, that they will be able to achieve employment outcomes. Successful school to work transitions begin when a young person is still in school because service providers have put a lot of time and resources into building relationships, and then activities or programs with schools in the local area. This means that when young people finish school, they don't "fall off a cliff" because the pathway to future employment is already there in front of them and the young people know and trust the people who will be working with them on the next stage of their employment journey.

All of the providers I spoke with were aware of the importance of the school to work transition. Providers who moved into new areas as are a result of the IEA tender process are making contact with schools a priority.

> We've recently been doing presentations which cover all of [our areas] in Sydney...We've done presentations, we have interviews lined up next week with schools and with students...[The schools] haven't a real good understanding of what we can do as a [specialist] provider.

This specialist provider found that schools were "reaching out to us to go into [their] schools and meet the students and parents and talk about what the support [for the students] needs to look like."

Other providers have not found it so easy to connect with schools in their local area.

> Our biggest bugbear is schools seem oblivious to [youth employment supports]...We try to get to schools and say, 'we're happy to give presentations to staff'...[or] 'we'll come to the school once a week. Give us an empty office and we'll be there for people to ask questions'...but it's not consistent. It's usually your very progressive principal or head of disability that will give you that permission.

While individual principals or teachers with a responsibility for disability can make a significant difference in terms of facilitating school to work transitions, one provider highlighted the role of State and Territory education departments in funneling young people into youth programs which are more like community day programs rather than programs with a strong focus on capacity building for employment.

> One of the biggest gaps in Australia with youth employment transitions is the education departments...We're seeing a lot of young people referred out of school into community day programs...State education departments have delegates that sit [in regions] across the State or Territory...[who] partner with preferred organisations and shift that pathway [away from employment].

Many of the providers I spoke with agreed that the old Transition to Work program, which pre-dated NDIS, was relatively successful because it was flexible and allowed providers to be more creative in how they assisted young people find employment. In the current context, providers have to turn to departmental or philanthropic grant funding if they want to develop more innovative service delivery models for young people. A feature of these grant funded youth employment programs is a focus on disadvantage rather than disability. For

example, the Employment Buddy program was set up to work with 15 to 24 year olds who are struggling to find work, not just those with NDIS funding or in IEA. The Employment Buddy program provides capacity building opportunities as well as work experience placements where the young person has a 'buddy', provided by the employer, who works with the young person during their work experience placements. The provider found that the program "works better if you've got the support of the schools: you've got the employment [and] the educational assistance…that can also support and work with the students". While the Employment Buddy program is not an IEA or NDIS funded initiative, the provider noted that the program "is not completely separate…We do interlink… There is some cross-referral from the Buddy program and IEA and Finding and Keeping a Job. And we've also referred Buddy employment participants to other providers."

Providers who do not have an IEA contract also rely on grant funding "to do the heavy lifting we can't do under NDIS." For example, getting a drivers license can be a big barrier for people with disability being able to find employment, or have the confidence to look further afield and move out of supported employment. Consequently [our organisation] is working with the Road Safety Commission help vulnerable cohorts participate in the Commission's Keys4Life program.

> We pay for some of their driving lessons…one drivers license attempt…and their permit once they pass Keys4Life…The driving lessons that they get are with an occupational therapist to help them identify certain issues, that they might be facing. It's a very individualised learning for them as well as the additional support…[of] an occupational therapist.

While grant funding provides opportunities to try out different service models, at some point the funding will come to an end and the provider then has to find other funding sources if the program is to continue. Partnering with well-established youth programs which are not reliant on disability funding is one way around this problem. For example, a couple of years ago a provider set up a pilot project with the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and the partnership is on-going.

> We're managing to support people with disability get through. I think we have had something like 45 young people through [the Scheme] and conversion rates are above able kids. We're getting about 80 to 90 per cent of our people through.

The provider noted that participation in the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme does not lead directly into employment, but it does build confidence.

> What we have been finding with the Duke of Edinburgh is that it really fast tracks those young people. We don't introduce them to Finding and Keeping a Job until they've got a month or so under their belt with the Duke of Ed and you can see they think 'right, ok, [I can do this]'.

Under the DES contract there were providers that had long-established, relatively successful transition pathways between NDIS and DES for young people who wanted to be involved in DES but were not quite ready to take that step. One such provider had a Work Ready program. When an NDIS participant felt they were ready to go into employment, "our Work Ready program was activated." Initially the participant worked with the Work Ready team and then transitioned to DES, or they could stay in Work Ready while also working with the DES team on different days of the week.

> It was case by case, but it worked really well…It was a really good working relationship bringing the two programs together.

This transition was facilitated by the number of co-located sites which had both NDIS and DES staff. The move to IEA saw the provider lose a number of their old DES sites, so that the organisation is now only operating the Work Ready program at one of their Sydney sites, and there has been a decline in the number of NDIS participants using the Work Ready program to transition into IEA. The Senior Manager I spoke with remarked that, having lost a number of their DES sites, they now have more NDIS employment sites than IEA sites and it has not been easy to find like-minded partners in the areas where they lost their DES contract.

While IEA providers face financial challenges adjusting to the new payment schedule or juggling the resources required to establish operations in new areas, NDIS providers face on-going issues around funding. The base rate for delivering very basic employment supports is $75 an hour which only provides one and a half to two hours of support a week.

> So the financial viability of the service is problematic, to say the least. The experience and skills you need to be a consultant working with participants under NDIS [is considerable]…You need well-rounded skills and experience both in employment and in disability supports.

For this reason, one provider said they "had moved to only providing NDIS Youth Employment Assistance at the block rate."

Furthermore, the increasing number of funding reviews which result in significant reductions of funding, or the removal of certain types of funding, such as school leaver employment supports, creates additional work for NDIS staff who have to support their clients in preparing the necessary documentation requesting a review of the decision to reduce, or cut, a participant's funding. For example, a man in his 50s, who had worked in the past, but now has an acquired brain injury, wanted to do more with his life. This individual is not very engaged, but always turns up to appointments with his mentor. The mentor found some shift work for this gentleman. He tried it out, got through his shift and loved it. He couldn't wait to do it again. Then an unplanned review went through and his funding was dropped from $25,000 to $4,000.

> So now we [the service provider] have to write a whole new report asking, 'why did this reduction in funding happen?...If you can give us $11,000 we think we will be fine for 12 months.' And that's just heartbreaking. The application of how we make our money work smarter needs to be an across the board business case. Not ripping money from certain sections of the plans and not thinking about that person holistically – that where the problem is.

Similarly, school leavers now face increasing delays in getting NDIS employment supports in their plan, in part because NDIA planners are telling participants and their parents "we are not reviewing your plan yet because you need a functional assessment" which is not relevant to their potential to benefit from employment supports. In other cases, the NDIA is simply rolling over young people's plans after they finish school "despite families saying, 'I need a few changes, including the SLES thing', or families being told that their son or daughter couldn't benefit [from employment supports]...That didn't happen before, that's new."

Delays in getting employment supports into a person's NDIS plan is particularly disruptive for young people who have just left school because their parents need to organise some sort of support for their son or daughter and, in the absence of employment supports, their son or daughter ends up in day care programs and any momentum towards employment developed through school-based programs is lost. Delays in approving requests for employment supports, or rejection of requests for inclusion of employment supports, has a significant impact on the financial viability of providers, such as Job Support, which specialise in achieving employment outcomes for people with a

moderate intellectual disability. A person with Downs Syndrome is a typical Job Support participant. Under the old Transition to Work program, every young person who wanted to participate in the program was able to do so. More recently, under NDIS many people are kept waiting and many fail to get any money at all. In 2025, 40 per cent of the young people who left school failed to get employment supports in their plan by 31 December 2025. "Job Support's higher results are a direct result of significant investment in training and staff and it is important that these staff are retained. The delay in approving SLES funding is creating significant losses [for the organisation]." [1]

Even if an NDIS provider has a more diverse client base, the fact that some part of the supports they provide come from core funding, an NDIS funding stream that is shared with other services, affects the level of support they can provide as well as the overall financial viability of the organisation.

> We had a client who was supposed to go into a volunteering role, [but] we were informed by his support co-ordinator and plan manager that he needed to stop services because they couldn't pay for anything. With that, the opportunity for him to volunteer disappeared…We find that if the clients aren't really doing anything, they're just at home…We've had clients come back [and] disclose to staff members that they've had a lot of mental health troubles from that, because they haven't had a community of people to be able to rely on.
>
> If we can't leverage off existing premises and internet and established processes, then the service by itself is not really viable…[While] we do [youth employment program] out in the community…we start our day and end our day in the office. If you don't have a home base, it can be very difficult to do well in a room hire.

Furthermore, financial pressures create incentives for NDIS providers to utilise as much as they can of the money attached to each participant. There is a significant financial incentive for NDIS providers to keep servicing their SLES participants for the full two year period because the payment to providers not achieving an open employment outcome is significantly higher than payments to providers who do achieve open employment outcomes. For example, Job Support places 27 per cent of its participants, people with a moderate intellectual disability, into jobs during year 1, a further 22 per cent during year 2 and 15 per cent after two years. Based on 2025 funding levels and without

1 Specialist disability employment services post 2025, (CIE 2023: 23-24) provides more detailed analysis of decreases in real funding from March 2010 to July 2023.

an outcome payment, Job Support's SLES funding averaged $30,532 for the 49 per cent of their participants who obtained jobs within two years. Services that retained participants in their SLES program for two years and achieved no employment outcomes received $52,552 in funding.

Currently organisations are unable to commence a client (unless they are an Eligible School Leaver participant) until after they have completed the ESAt assessment process.

> One of our employment support consultants, she's doing direct registrations at the moment. We're getting quite a lot coming through, but is getting them assessed that takes forever...I was hopeful that with the new [IEA] contract that part would change, but it didn't.

The Area Manager went on to explain that the ESAt process was much better prior to COVID because "we knew all the assessors in our local Centrelink, we would go with the client...we would help and support them." Now the ESAt process is conducted on-line with clients being assessed over the phone by a stranger and having to talk about their disability, whether they can cook or clean, or take the rubbish out – "that's upsetting for a client to experience that".

Not only is momentum lost as a client waits to be able to commence working with their service provider, but for some clients, the thought of having to undergo an ESAt process is enough to stop them taking further steps towards employment. For example, in a 2025 trial involving 20 NDIS participants and a DES provider,

> all of the participants were so afraid of having an ESAt and going through that process with Centrelink before they could see a [DES] provider. [They said]... 'I am 500 steps away from employment, why would I even sign up to an employment provider? I'm so far away from that, I'm not even going to try.'

What the participants wanted was an opportunity to try and see if moving towards open employment was going to work for them, rather than having to go through the ESAt process and then be forced into a program that they were not sure was going to work for them. The CEO of Job Support believes the key to successful outcomes is "overcoming self-fulfilling low expectations... We think that's the main barrier [our clients] have...School leavers who lack the confidence to go directly to a DES are placed into work experience customised to their job preferences and strengths and supported by on-the-job training.

The goal is to ensure that [each individual] experiences success and gains the confidence to aspire to enter a DES."

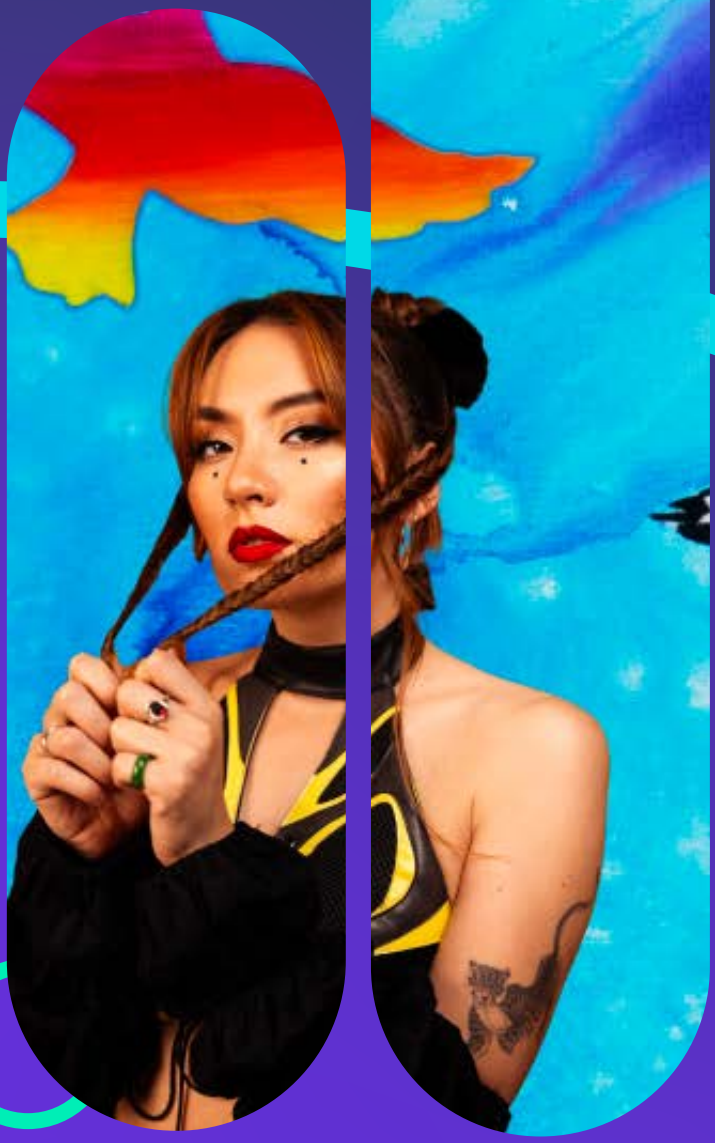
While the ESAt process does reveal useful information about clients' disability and what struggles they might have had around previous work, providers now undertake a more gradual induction process where staff take time to get to know each client and build rapport – a less intimidating process than talking to a stranger over the phone - and one which can uncover the same information, and more, than the ESAt process.

The process involved in moving from one provider to another was also identified as a potential point where clients can fall through the cracks. In the past, if a participant moved to a new area and updated their address, the system would automatically move them to a provider near their new address. Because of the emphasis in the new IEA contract on participant choice, a participant has to choose to transfer to another provider and many participants are missing this step.

> So what's happening is they're stuck linked to us [the old provider]. They need to make a phone call to the provider transfer line to link up with a new provider. We can't do that for them...[But the wait time] on the provider transfer line is two and a half to three hours. They then have to resort to a provider transfer by agreement form that has to be signed by the old and the new provider. If we've got someone who's not tech savvy, that's really difficult to do interstate.

Even if a participant goes to a Centrelink office and asks for help, they are simply put on the phone to wait in the queue because Centrelink staff "are not trained in what it is they would need to do to push the [transfer] button". The consequence of a participant remaining linked to their old provider while living many hundreds of kilometers away is that they are recorded as not meeting their diary appointments and compliance issues arise.

So what we have is a recurring pattern where people are being lost at the same points again and again. School exits, assessments delays, funding gaps and provider transfers cut across motivation and momentum, or even close off pathways that were otherwise viable.



Jaguar Jones, *Unite*,
Access Arts 40 Year Anniversary

Section Four:
Where to from here?

Towards the end of the on-line interviews I asked the blue sky question: in an ideal world, what would you like to change so that you could improve the support you provide to your clients? Responses included current policy settings and statements of principle focused on access and equity.

> No goal-keeping! Anyone with disability who wishes to seek support should be able to do so.
>
> Every person that has an NDIS plan should be funded for employment. It's not something you have to ask for, it's an expectation that when you leave school you do go and get a job...If you're capable of getting a job, you should be absolutely funded to build those skills to do that.
>
> People with disability [being able] to see a clear pathway to career progression, to changing jobs, to doing a different job, to being promoted and...[having] the same contractual and fair work rights.

Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in June 2008 undertaking, among other things, to "safeguard and promote the realisation of the right to work" (Article 27). Rights based discourse featured prominently in the lead-up to the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Bill, with the then Parliamentary Secretary for Disability noting that giving people choice and control over the care and support they receive is one of the ways in which Australia will give effect to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The introduction of IEA with its emphasis on participant choice and the widening of eligibility criteria is another important step in removing some of the barriers faced by people with disability in realising their right to work. However, more can be done.

The first two recommendations in this report directly address the issues of access and equity cited above by eliminating barriers identified in Section 3 where momentum is lost or people with disability are unable to begin their employment journey because of delays in accessing NDIS funding, or being denied employment supports in their NDIS plan.

Recommendation 1 - opt out

Participants opt out of having employment supports in their NDIS plan rather than the current practice of clients having to specifically request the inclusion of employment supports.

Recommendation 2 - planning process

We are aware that a new NDIS planning process is being developed and would recommend that the new planning process:

1. prioritise employment goals;
2. ring-fence employment funding within a participant's NDIS plan;
3. only allow a participant's employment funding to be reduced or removed with their written consent;
4. prioritise transparency by providing reasonable justifications for decisions made by NDIS planners; and
5. ensure all relevant information provided by an individual as part of the planning process is passed on to support staff when clients transition from one NDIS provider to another, or transition from an NDIS provider to an IEA provider.

The transfer of information to relevant IEA support staff is of particular importance when a supported employee is thinking about moving into open employment. In such cases, their families are often concerned that their family member will have to work with new people who may not understand them, as well as their family member having to go through their story all over again.

4.1 The relationship between NDIS and IEA

The relationship between NDIS funded employment supports and IEA was a recurring theme in discussions with CEOs and senior managers and front-line staff. Providers were very clear about their belief that NDIS and IEA should remain separate. What was needed was a funding mechanism and timely decision-making that allows individuals to transition through different programs or funding streams when they need to, or want to.

> I really like that there are two programs. I wouldn't want to homogenize it all...The interface is where we need to get better.

Improving the interface was seen as important because it would create more linkages between different work environments and make it easier for service providers to establish effective partnerships with other providers. A service provider that works with participants who require more intensive support pointed out that there were risks in merging IEA and NDIS employment funding, in that, given current settings, it was unlikely that the additional level of intensive support would be adequately funded. The service provider agreed that what was needed was better access to information about all the supports available to an individual; that is, "having the systems talk to each other".

> I've absolutely fallen in love with IEA. I think it's such a fantastic program if used correctly...[But] what are the expectations for Finding and Keeping a Job?...So that would be my dream, to have those two programs really aligned, with a very clear boundary [as to] when you hand it over.

Another provider went further, setting out the type of guidance they felt was required.

> Fundamentally [what is needed] is some clear guidance for providers around the use of funding and making sure that somewhere it's written down that the department agrees that the intensity and the time and the instances of support someone needs means that you're absolutely safe to be dipping into those other supports. Or if it's this type of support, or that type of support, then yes that comes from NDIS because it's actually not IEA's purview. And that has to be very clear and there is no argument around that.

The desire of providers for clear boundaries between NDIS and IEA is no doubt influenced by the fact that "we don't want to be seen to be double dipping". For example, a provider related how they try to have a little bit of separation and differentiation between their NDIS and IEA service models after an NDIS auditor made the observation that "some of our participants and/or some of our staff, were not always easily identifying the difference in what those service delivery aspects look like. She said, we're not alone in that in terms of her observations - that's occurring in various providers around where she's auditing. And she certainly didn't offer any easy solution in how to resolve that challenge."

However, establishing clear distinctions between the type of supports funded by NDIS and the type of supports funded by IEA becomes problematic when you take into account the fact that people's employment journeys can begin in

different places and involve movement away from open employment as well as movement towards open employment. For example, all of the front-line staff I spoke to, talked about an initial discovery process, regardless of whether the client was looking at supported employment or open employment. Similarly, both NDIS funded youth employment programs and IEA use various forms of work experience or industry visits to help their clients decide whether or not a particular workplace or industry is for them. Clearly there is a degree of overlap in the delivery models used in IEA and NDIS funded employment supports.

I would argue that there is nothing wrong with staff in different programs using the same service delivery processes which work equally well across a range of different programs or funding streams. What this practice does suggest is that identifying all the different types of employment supports and dividing them into NDIS appropriate supports and IEA appropriate supports is not going to be very useful.

So, having considered, and abandoned, the idea of having two definitive lists, I then started thinking about the pros and cons of each type of funding and quickly came to the conclusion that the biggest advantage of NDIS funding addresses the potential problems caused by the biggest disadvantage of IEA funding, and the biggest advantage of IEA funding overcomes the difficulties caused by the way NDIS funding is structured. The following paragraphs explain what I mean in more detail.

Front-line staff identified the capacity of NDIS funding to provide more intensive support if it is needed, as its biggest benefit. For example, when a participant is placed in a customer greeting role in Kmart, they may need "two months of really intensive support. We're going to need to have someone predominantly with them the whole time...[to help the new employee] when there is a curly question from a Kmart customer...That's when a support worker can say, "let me assist", and [the new employee] can get back to focusing on the warm greetings and receipt checking". Providing two months of intensive support allows the new employee to relax into their role knowing there is support around them while building more independence, until they get to the point where they can say, "yes, I know where the toasters are, let me direct you".

The biggest disadvantage of NDIS funding is that different types of support can be grouped under one overarching funding category such as core supports or capacity building. Consequently, employment service providers have no oversight of what, and how much, someone is spending on non-employment related supports. This means that people who are working and utilising NDIS

supports, including in-work supports, can "run out of funding [and] we are unable to fund the support that they need…This does happen quite often to clients…It means that the client will be unsupported for a period of time, until their support co-ordinator, or a LAC, does a plan review. But a plan review can take up to three months or longer". Supported employees are also affected if they use other supports such as physical therapies or OTs because all of their support needs come out core funding. If, for whatever reason, they use all of their core funding before the end of the quarterly funding period, they may have to reduce their supports at work, work fewer hours, or stop working until the beginning of the next funding period. Supported employees who require higher levels of on-the-job support are more likely to be adversely affected than employees with lower support needs.

On the other hand, one of the main advantages of IEA is that on-going support can be open ended, "as long as we've got the right documentary evidence to support a case for moderate or high on-going support. The on-going support may be once a month, or really sporadic, especially for clients with episodic mental health conditions…We can pop in, fix, pop back out…and let the client succeed. Also with employers – employers love to have us as a bit of a back-up".

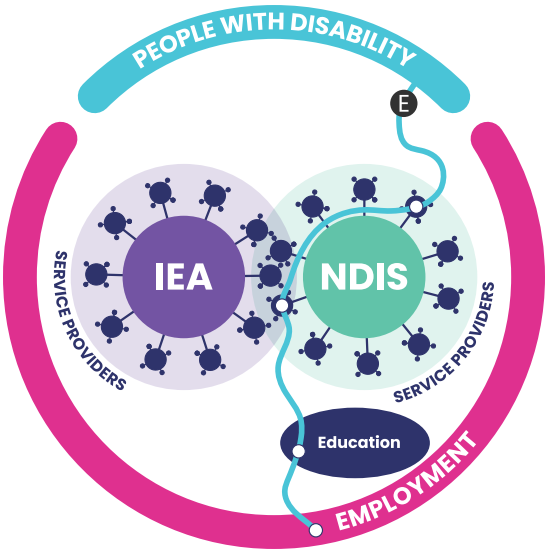
So IEA on-going support can continue for as long as it is needed, but does not allow for shorter periods of really intensive support. The way in which on-going supports are structured in NDIS and IEA means that outcomes for some clients may be better if they have access to both types of on-going support. This also holds true in situations where non-employment NDIS supports are used to enable individuals to commence and maintain their employment. For example,

> There was a client with an acquired brain injury who wanted to find work. We got him a job, but he couldn't get there. He just gets quite confused and cross around public transport. And so we worked with the support co-ordinator who said, 'you know what, that's not an issue, because he's got more than enough core support funding for us to put a support worker on in the morning to get him up, drive him to work, and then again two hours at the other end of the day, because we can do his grocery shopping on the way home from work.' We were then able to place [the client] into employment'.

In this example, the question of who funds what did not arise because IEA staff did their job – finding appropriate work – and the individual continued to use their NDIS core supports. Right from the beginning, conversations with the

client's support co-ordinator focused on "what are the tools in our arsenal? How do we best utilise them? Who's going to do what?" In other words, conversations focused on how to maximise outcomes for the client rather than financial outcomes for the two organisations, or two different groups within the one organisation.

What this example points to is that the focus of organisational practice shouldn't be around how we divide up supports between two different programs or funding streams. Rather, it should be focused on how to combine all the supports that are available to an individual so that they have the best possible chance of finding and maintaining employment. A good example of how leveraging the benefits that come from NDIS and IEA organisations working in partnership is seen in a young man's journey from school into his future career pathway.



Riley (a pseudonym) completed Year 12 and a Certificate II in carpentry while still at school. Riley then used his NDIS funded employment supports to commence one-on-one support in the community with The Personnel Group (TPG), building his confidence and independence, communication and job search skills. Riley also obtained his obtained his driver's licence. With help from his TPG Career Mentor, who undertook targeted employer engagement, Riley reconnected with an employer with whom he had previously completed a period of work experience. An apprenticeship opportunity was identified and Riley was able to commence full-time employment in the construction industry.

It was at this point that TPG activated their established partnership with STATUS in Western Australia. Riley's Career Mentor facilitated his direct registration with STATUS and completed a warm handover ensuring there was no gap in support at this critical transition point. Riley was introduced to his Post-Placement Support Mentor at his initial appointment with STATUS. As an IEA provider, STATUS was able to assist with purchasing required workplace tools and providing fuel vouchers prior to Riley commencing employment. These practical supports removed immediate barriers and increased Riley's confidence as he entered the workforce. Riley is now successfully engaged in his apprenticeship as he continues to build his skills, confidence and long-term career stability.

TPG and STATUS believe good outcomes are achieved when NDIS and IEA are thought of, and operate as, one connected pathway, rather than parallel systems. Because TPG and STATUS were committed to working together, the transition from one service to another was intentional and integrated into the service delivery models of both organisations.

However, while the relationship between TPG and STATUS has developed through informal individual relationships of trust based on people having known each other for quite a while, not all providers are in this position and feel constrained in their ability to effectively align the NDIS and IEA interface by the differing financial incentives built into the NDIS and IEA funding mechanisms, and the lack of an institutional pathway that facilitates communication and information flows between NDIS and IEA. As one provider put it, "unless [a client] tells me they're on the NDIS, I have no idea. And that's probably one of the biggest barriers...If we know as a provider up front, I feel the progression and the supports could be put in place more quickly and [they would be] so much more tailored to that person's needs."

Recommendations 3 and 4 aim to create an environment where service providers have the clarity, and hence the confidence, to creatively combine NDIS and IEA supports so that people with disability are able to leave school, get a job, and create a career that is meaningful and fulfilling for them.

Recommendation 3 - Career Action Plan

Where a participant is receiving support from both NDIS and IEA, providers ensure that the participant's Career Action Plan includes the following:

- the participant's employment goal;
- where they currently sit on their employment pathway;
- the role of NDIS funded employment supports and the role of IEA funded employment supports;
- the reason(s) why that combination of supports are needed;
- information sharing arrangements; and
- measures to prevent gaps and duplication.

Recommendation 4 - formal statement

That DSS issues a formal statement to the effect that using the same service delivery processes which have been shown to be effective across a range of different programs or funding streams does not constitute double dipping.

As set out in Recommendation 3, if a participant is combining NDIS and IEA funding, their Career Action Plan will provide a justification for the dual funding structure. A general rule around dual servicing is if a client is in IEA and doing an activity which is part of the IEA Deed, then the cost of that activity cannot be funded by using the participant's NDIS funding.

Examples of appropriate dual servicing arrangements are likely to occur in:

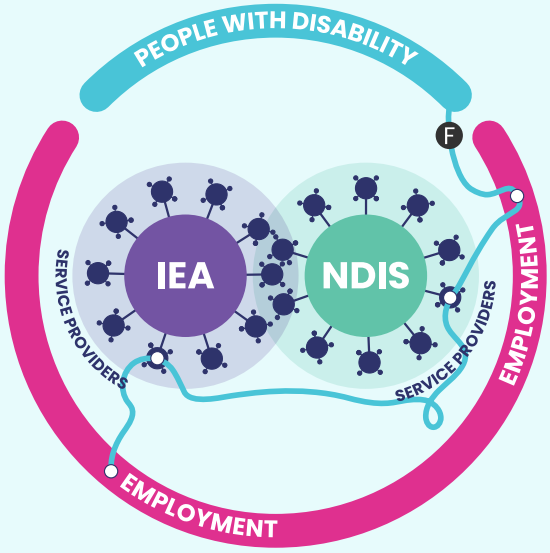
- school to work transitions – see Example 1 below;
- transitions from supported employment to open employment – see Example 2 below;
- where participants require intensive in-work support for a relatively short period of time at the beginning of their employment which necessitates the use of both NDIS in-work support and IEA on-going support – see Example 3 below; and
- where participants require both IEA on-going support and NDIS non-employment related supports – see Example 4 below.

An inappropriate use of dual funding would be when a participant is receiving travel training and the cost is coming out of both their NDIS plan and IEA.

Example 1: School to work transition

We had a client who transitioned from SLES to DES and then into open employment. In the last six months of that transition we were providing NDIS supports and DES supports. While the participant was still in the SLES program we helped organise a three month work experience placement. When the client got a part-time job, we were primarily working with the employer around workplace communication and time management issues. So as well as doing post-placement support, we talked to our NDIS counterpart and asked if they could help develop a structured program that would help the client understand why time management is important and how best to manage workplace communication. That structured program worked really well and the client's been in that job for almost two years now.

Example 2: Transition from supported to open employment



Sheridan's long-term employment goal was to work in the hospitality sector. Her journey began in supported employment doing food packaging. Sheridan then transitioned to the SLES program where she developed foundational communication skills, confidence and readiness for open employment. When Sheridan transitioned to IEA, Sheridan received tailored supports including further confidence building and communication skills, skill development in hospitality, interview preparation, reverse marketing, and workplace capacity building. Mylestones Employment secured open employment for Sheridan at Hungry Jacks. Reasonable workplace adjustments were implemented along with extended on-site job coaching. Support was also provided to her employer so that staff at Hungry Jacks understood Sheridan's needs and how to communicate with her. High levels of individually structured on-going supports has allowed Sheridan to increase her work hours, complete a traineeship and maintain a permanent part-time position of 15 hours per week being paid at the full national award-wage rate.

Example 3: Intensive use of in-work support when commencing employment

Mylestones' Kmart program primarily places IEA participants into positions in local Kmart stores. Some of their Kmart program participants have NDIS funding which can be used to provide more intensive in-work support for the first 6 to 8 weeks of their employment. For example, Kmart has a refresh role which happens each afternoon when staff restock and tidy shelves. Often the individual doing the refresh role is given a phone to take phone calls from outside of the store or from the sales team, if the sales area needs some support. In order to take some of the burden off the person when they commence in a refresh role, Mylestones will provide in-work support, or "we will tap into an NDIS support worker to provide a little bit of assistance" so that the person can focus on restocking and tidying. Being able to use both NDIS and IEA supports in this way means that participants with higher support needs are able to participate and succeed in the Kmart program.

Example 4: Combining IEA and NDIS non-employment supports

A good example of how IEA can be used to find a person employment and then that employment is able to maintained with the use of NDIS non-employment supports is the client with an acquired brain injury who had secured employment but couldn't get to his work site because "he gets quite confused and cross around public transport". However because the client had sufficient NDIS core funding, a support worker was able to get him up, drive him to work and then drive him home again at the end of the day while doing his grocery shopping on the way home.

4.2 Education and changing attitudes

Service providers identified a need for education programs targeted at NDIA plan managers, support co-ordinators and LACs about the role of NDIS employment supports, the difference between NDIS and IEA supports and how they are used, what IEA providers get funded for and when they receive those funds, as well as the impact of delays in accessing funding, sudden decreases in funding, or running out of funding, on a participants' ability to continue to progress towards their goal of finding a job, or their ability to maintain their employment once they have a job. An experienced Senior Manager who had worked as a LAC explained that "you get a lot of very young, inexperienced people...both in IEA...[and] the same with LACs. [LACs] don't have any experience, and you're giving them a lot of power with no understanding. And the internal [NDIA] training is generally not great." For example, when this Senior Manager received a plan which stated "we're going to fund [client X] for 26 weeks of NDIS employment support and 26 weeks of DES employment support", she contacted the LAC to explain that once a participant gets a job they can transition to DES. The LAC refused to believe that this was possible, telling the Senior Manager that "you don't know what you are talking about".

> I was like, 'okay'. [But] that impacts the client...It is very difficult when you're trying to write a plan for someone and you don't understand what you are actually giving to that person.

Service providers would like more resources directed to ground level employer education, or upskilling of employers because "the education piece isn't there [that] we've got the resources and capability to educate employers, share

information and try to negotiate or job carve positions." Service providers also felt that education programs were needed for young people, their families, teachers and local communities. For example, one organisation noted that their clients often misinterpreted the intention of the IEA program and the supports available to clients.

> We did a lot of work coming into the new contract to try and reformat some of the thinking of our participants. However there is still a lot of misunderstanding...[where participants think], 'I want things, you need to pay for everything, help me', versus us helping break down barriers to them finding and keeping their employment.

Participants are also confused as to what mutual obligation means in the IEA context driven in part by old policy settings. Participants come into IEA thinking, 'oh gosh, now I have to apply for all these jobs'.

> There's a very large amount of our clients that get quite confused around 'why doesn't my job plan have how many jobs I'm doing and what date is it due?' We're educating and explaining, but...the next fortnight they'll come in and go, 'what do I have to do? I don't want to be cut off. I need to know what my job search is.'

The Area Manager then went on to say that even now almost six months after the commencement of IEA, at least a couple of clients will ask about it every day because of the lingering fear engendered by the old compliance requirements.

In organisations which provide both IEA and NDIS services, staff get a lot of questions from clients and their families about the difference between NDIS and IEA.

> Why should we be referred into your IEA department, if you guys essentially do the same things at NDIS that IEA will be doing? Do we really need your servicing?

In these situations, co-location is useful as NDIS staff can easily arrange meetings with IEA staff. If NDIS and IEA services are not co-located, meetings are organised with an IEA team leader when they are visiting an NDIS site.

> The meetings with parents and clients around the difference in the program is very much around the funding structure. We don't detract from the NDIS funding. We're department funded...We can make sure you've got

> that forklift licence that you need for that warehouse job and we'll pay for it. We can go out to the Road Traffic Authority with you and get you sorted. Make sure you've got the PPE, [do] those last fiddly bits and then move [you] into a job.

Service providers identified a need for easily accessible, accurate information around the DSP and what happens when an individual starts work, or increases the hours they work.

> We have lots of people on DSP...If [we have someone] who we feel is ready, but they're saying 'no, no, no'...we ask, 'what's holding you back? Is it financially...because you're worried about how [work] is going to affect your rent, your Centrelink benefits?'...That's one of the things that will deter someone from wanting to work.

Because of the big jump where people transition off the DSP, "it worries them... because they also lose other benefits like their housing [rent assistance] and their utilities...If they are in supported housing, they might lose access to that." The DSP also give pension holders greater access to PBS concessions, "without the DSP, that goes". For younger workers it is often their parents or caregivers who are worried.

> If I'm not here anymore and my son loses his DSP, how is he going to get back onto it without my help? I don't have the mental capacity to go through all that again.

The fear of losing their DSP and the associated benefits it brings is magnified because the history of disability services in Australia is littered with examples of support programs that are not continuous or permanent. The NDIS is not immune from this, with individuals experiencing unexpected reductions in funding and uncertainty around the impact of current NDIS reforms. For this reason, information about the DSP needs to come from a trusted source. Service providers are the obvious choice as the 'trusted source', and some providers do have discussions with clients about the impact of engaging in employment or increasing their hours of employment. Other providers feel they are not in a position to provide definitive answers on such an important issue, but are happy to accompany their clients to Centrelink and support them while they seek advice from Centrelink staff.

Recommendation 5 - collaboration

That Disability Employment Australia, the Centre for Inclusive Employment, DSS and NDIA work together to develop:

- model MOUs
- warm handover protocols;
- consent templates;
- role clarity tools;
- information sharing guidelines; and
- examples of effective practice;

which will make successful collaboration easier to replicate. The Centre for Inclusive Employment already has a mandate to provide tools and training to help service providers deliver quality employment services and supports to participants and employers. It is recommended that development of educational material should prioritise:

- educational programs targeted at NDIA plan managers, support co-ordinators and LACs;
- information for employers about the ways in which service providers can help employers; and
- educational material service providers can use to help clients and their families understand the respective roles of NDIS and IEA and what happens to the DSP when an individual starts work or increases their hours of work.

4.3 Regulatory complexity and rigidity

One of the items on providers' wish list of changes was reducing the complexity of the IEA Deed and Guidelines and making the two sets of documents consistent. While providers value accountability and consistency, excessive complexity can limit flexibility and make it harder to tailor support around individuals. Many of the examples and case studies of successful transitions in this report arose from providers' ability to respond creatively to participants' needs, rather than mechanically following program rules.

On the other hand providers were also able to identify barriers created by a lack of understanding of IEA principles by Centrelink staff, or uncertainty around

definitions which affect eligibility for specialist services. The fact that many staff now engage with the Deed or Guidelines through AI generated summaries is concerning, and supports the argument that the Deed and Guidelines are too complex and need to be revised. Definitional issues are easily resolved by giving specialist providers the autonomy to decide whether they can help a particular individual. Harmonising the Deed and the Guidelines is a more time consuming task, best done in partnership with service providers.

As discussed in Section 3, the requirement to undertake an ESAt assessment prior to commencing in IEA can act as a deterrent for some clients who are thinking about transitioning from NDIS funded employment support to IEA. Furthermore, the more detailed in-take process now being undertaken by IEA providers duplicates much, if not all, of the information collected in the very brief ESAt assessment process.

The issue of placing participants in a related entity was raised by a number of providers. As a major NDIS provider explained, "you can place in a related entity on an individual basis, [but] every single time you have to get approval...That's been a pain point for us as an organisation because it slows down pathways for individuals to be able to be placed...That's the challenge – we can't place within our own entity, our own organisation."

Recommendation 6 - working group

That DSS establishes a working group with Disability Employment Australia to identify inconsistencies in the Inclusive Employment Australia Deed and Guidelines, and opportunities to simplify requirements while maintaining participant safeguards and service quality. The top two priorities of this working group should be:

1. to remove the requirement to undergo an ESAt process for all NDIS participants;
2. to remove the requirement to seek approval for placing a participant in a related entity and replace it with a requirement for service providers to explain the reason for the placement in a related entity in the participant's individual case notes.

The final recommendation reflects the often overlooked, but significant role disability social enterprises can play in a participant's employment journey.

Recommendation 7 - disability social enterprise

That the Centre for Inclusive Employment commissions work exploring how disability social enterprises could be scaled up so that more NDIS and IEA participants are able to take advantage of disability social enterprises' capacity to build confidence, skills and connections to employers through supported employment (for NDIS participants) or work experience (for IEA participants).

Currently, employment in any disability social enterprise is not claimable as an employment outcome. As part of the process of scaling up the use of disability social enterprises, the definition of what constitutes a claimable employment outcome should be revised along the following lines.

- If an individual on a supported employment award is paid less than the national minimum wage, then their employment is not claimable as an employment outcome. In all other circumstances, it is.

The Blended Transitions project arose out of a desire to answer the question as to how NDIS and IEA can work together so that people experience a single coherent employment pathway rather than a series of disconnected programs? The evidence presented in this report shows that employment should be understood as a pathway, rather than a series of disconnected service episodes. Participants often move between NDIS supports, IEA supports, work experience, supported employment, open employment and on-going support arrangements. The critical factor is whether these movements preserve momentum or disrupt it.



Relationships play a vital role in creating pathways that preserve momentum. These relationships are initiated, developed and maintained by service providers. Service providers can be seen as the hub of a wheel and their

relationships with clients, other service providers, employers and local community organisations are the spokes of the wheel that hold everything in place. Strong relationships are what makes information sharing, co-ordination and collaboration possible.

However the current design and administration of NDIS employment funding creates uncertainty that undermines the development of holistic, person-centred pathways. Service providers identified uncertainty associated with:

- obtaining employment related funding;
- variable planning decisions;
- changes to funding arrangements;
- participant access to supports; and
- the interaction between NDIS and other employment programs.

This uncertainty affects participants, but it also affects provider behaviour. When funding is unpredictable, it becomes more difficult to invest in employment capability, sustain specialist staff and develop integrated pathways that span multiple systems.

Regulatory complexity and limited understanding of NDIS and IEA supports and how they can be combined also undermines the development of holistic, person-centred pathways.

From the material presented in this report, the answer to the question about how NDIS and IEA can work together is clear. NDIS and IEA work best when they are understood as complementary parts of a single employment pathway. The task for governments and providers is not to eliminate every overlap between the systems, but to create the guidance, planning tools, funding certainty and transition architecture that allow people to move seamlessly through employment pathways as their needs change.

Working together to build a diverse and vibrant workforce across Australia

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