The DEA Papers Webinar 2, 16 October 2026

2. Making NDIS and IEA Work Better Together

Webinar transcript

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Peter Bacon:

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Peter Bacon:

Afternoon, everyone. I'm not going to be talking much, which may be a relief to some of you. It's mainly going to be Dr. Ann Nevile, who we're privileged to be hearing from.

Ann Nevile

Thank you.

Peter Bacon:

So today we're talking about the second of the DEA Papers. For those of you that didn't see the first, it was called On the Importance of Architecture and that was written by me, came out maybe a month or so ago and I think some people have seemed to have enjoyed that. And we'll have another DEA paper coming out in about a month too.

So we're basically trying to have a monthly drumbeat of these different things. And a lot of it's really talking about the importance of being thoughtful in the way that we set up the systems affecting the lives of people with disability, particularly as it goes to them entering and retaining and progressing in employment.

And so today is a really apt topic, which is about how particularly the NDIS and IEA interface, or don't, as part of the story, which builds on some of that work in terms of saying, let's really be thoughtful about architecture and what we do to improve that.

First off, as always, we should begin today by acknowledging

that we're meeting on the unceded land of traditional owners, and we must acknowledge that and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. I'm calling from Wurundjeri land today and we extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

A couple of housekeeping things. I think we have a Q&A function and a chat function on today's meeting. I don't know whether we'll get to questions or not. If we do, we'll try and take a couple at the end if we have time. If not, these things that we can hopefully pick up with you later in conversation.

The session is recorded and we will be sharing it as we did for the first paper so people can engage with the content in that way as well as through the paper, recognising we all have our own different ways of engaging with learning and knowledge.

And yeah, do get in touch. If you don't have Ann's details, I think you probably all have my details. So feel free to come to me or I might share them at some point at the end too.

So without further ado, I'd like to hand on to Dr. Ann Nevile, who is someone who is greatly respected in this field, has done some fantastic work in the sector and with DEA in the past and it's been great to work with her on this project.

It's something that DEA, it's not been the case that we've just gone, oh, we're commissioning a project and go and take away and deliver it. Actually, our staff, particularly Sally and Renae, have been involved throughout and I was certainly a partner in the drafting process of the paper itself. So, without further ado, take it away, Ann.

Ann Nevile:

Thanks, Peter.

In the first DEA paper, as Peter mentioned, he laid out the problem facing all of those involved in the disability employment space. That is, in Australia, we spend far too much time focusing on individual systems or programmes, NDIS, IEA, income support and so on, and also the rules and the guidelines that are attached to each programme, without considering the broader environment within which these programmes operate. In particular, how the disability employment ecosystem is connected, governed, funded, sequenced and measured.

Now, Peter called this layer the architecture, and noted that DEA Papers Number Two, which I had the privilege of basically doing the research and writing, will focus on how the architecture is currently experienced by people within the system.

And it starts from the position of that IEA providers who have been supporting people with disability find and maintain employment over many years. And they believe that effective service provision is characterised by holistic wraparound supports.

Now, many IEA providers have established longstanding 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 wraparound supports that transcend individual programmes or funding mechanisms.

And for this reason, the Blended Transitions Project was established to identify how IEA and NDIS-funded employment supports can be combined to deliver more holistic, person-centred pathways.

The central proposition of my paper is that ***participants often move between NDIS supports, IEA supports, work experience, supported employment, open employment and ongoing support arrangements.***

However, all too often the architecture does not support seamless transitions.

Rather, the architecture creates circumstances which cause participants to lose momentum in their employment journey and all the motivation to continue moving forward.

And today, I will briefly talk about how people move between different programmes, what facilitates that movement and what the barriers are. I'll talk about these quite quickly because before turning to the important question of what changes need to be made.

Just before I start, I want to say that **my remarks and the paper focuses on what I found out from talking to 100 CEOs, senior managers, area managers and frontline staff from 32 organisations, which includes specialist and generalist IEA providers, NDIS employment supports, youth employment supports, self-employment assistance and supported employment across Australia.** And I am very grateful for the people at NDIS, DEA members who gave up their time to talk to me so that I could basically gather their wisdom and experience and create DEA Paper Number Two.

So what creates or facilitates holistic person-centred pathways? Service providers talk about person-centred employment pathways as a journey.

But employment journeys are not always linear. So it's not just a straight line from job seeking to open employment. People may engage in different types of work at different times in their lives. So **employment programmes need to be flexible enough to enable clients to have the right sort of supports when they are needed. In other words, flexible pathways are more effective pathways. And effective pathways depend upon providers being able to establish strong relationships of trust with their clients.**

Now when I asked frontline staff how they build trust with their clients, they said trust is built by being honest and realistic, listening to what the client is saying, caring about their clients, establishing two-way accountability, setting achievable goals that reflect where an individual is at, at this point in their lives, and recognising and celebrating achievement of steps forward, however, small.

Effective pathways also depend upon the relationships that service providers have with other service streams or providers, employers and potential employers and local community organisations.

So **the strong relationships of trust that service providers establish with their clients is what make employment pathways person-centred. What makes employment pathways holistic is the relationships that 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 sort of supports. Blending different types of supports are particularly important when it comes to assisting clients who face more significant barriers to participation in open employment.**

From my conversations with service providers, **it's clear that both within and across IEA and NDIS funded programmes, frontline staff are constantly engaged in existing partnership arrangements and or looking to form new ones.**

But what was also clear is that partnerships between different organisations start with a recognition of shared values. And these relationships are built and maintained by each side being very clear about what it is that each partner organisation is going to do.

So you have shared values and clarity of communications around roles, which is, you know, agreement has been reached on that. Just turning very, very briefly to employers, in many ways, employers value the same things as clients in terms of their relationships 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 terms

of prospective employees. Employers want consistency and a solid, seamless relationship.

A final brief comment about engaging in local community work: this provides an opportunity for service providers to increase awareness of what they do amongst potential employers as well as clients. It also provides an opportunity for providers to establish relationships with allied health providers, mental health services, or training organisations to which they can refer their clients. And in regional areas, community connections and engagement is even more important than in metropolitan area.

So that's in a sense what service providers do and in many, many cases do very well.

And the relationships of trust that they build with their clients and other organisations and potential employers is what drives outcomes in disability employment. Now, the good news is that developing trusting relationships is something service providers have direct control over.

However, **the main barriers to holistic person-centred employment pathways all exist in the external environment where service providers have no direct control, very little indirect control and usually involve a loss of momentum or connexion to support services.**

And perhaps **the most stark example of what I've just described is what happened with the IEA tender process, where some high performing organisations lost significant proportions of their business. Consequently, all of the relationships they had built up over many, many years with clients, their family, employers, schools and other local community organisations are now broken.**

While new providers are working to establish their own relationships, this 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.

In addition, system issues or a lack of clarity around eligibility criteria affected clients who had to transition to new providers, creating uncertainty, anxiety and a loss of momentum in their employment journey.

The transition to IEA, I believe, is a good example of the gap that continues to exist between policy and practice. For example, a policy commitment to participant choice, for me, sits uneasily in a government-structured quasi-market divided into distinct geographic areas, which restrict the ways in which service providers can support their clients. As one particular provider noted, it's disappointing for me, as an NDIS provider, not to be able to support people through IEA because I don't technically operate in that region.

Now, while the transition from one iteration of the programme to a new iteration is a periodic event. It doesn't happen all the time. But **there are ongoing examples that create barriers. The most frequently cited example is what happens to young people who finish school and don't have any prior connection with a service provider. Providers describe this situation as one where young people fall off a cliff.** Delays in getting NDIS employment supports in a young person's plan or having existing plans rolled over despite family saying they need a few changes, including that SLES thing, or families being told that their son or daughter couldn't benefit from employment supports means that young people end up in daycare programmes rather than working with service providers who can assist them build capacity and employment related skills.

Significant reductions in funding or situations where NDIS clients run out of funding can also lead to people falling through the cracks. An example that was told to me was about an organisation where we had a client who was supposed to go into a volunteering role, but we were informed by his support coordinator and plan manager that he needed to stop services because they couldn't pay for anything anymore. With that, the opportunity for that client to volunteer disappeared.

Momentum is also lost when organisations are unable to commence a client until after their ESAT is completed.

An IEA team leader that I spoke with remarked that it's hard to explain to a client that you've made contact with, who is excited about the possibility of finding employment, but you can't actually support them and work with them, and they're going to have to wait for several weeks or longer before they can start their employment journey.

So that's a very, very quick run-through of pertinent points from Section 2 and Section 3 in the paper. And I would encourage everybody to download or get hold of an e-copy and read all the information in the paper because it's got much more detail, a lot more useful examples and it basically goes into the whole thing in more depth. But today I wanted to focus on how we can better support the work done by service providers.

So this is moving into, in one sense, the crux of the paper, which is the recommendations. But before talking about specific recommendations, I want to discuss the question that was posed at the beginning of this webinar about the relationship between NDIS funded employment supports and IEA.

Providers believe that NDIS and IEA should remain as separate programmes, but what is needed are clear boundaries between what should be funded by NDIS employment supports and what should be funded through IEA.

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 pathways can begin in different places and can involve movement away from open employment as well as towards open employment.

For example, all of the frontline staff I spoke with talked about an initial discovery process, regardless of whether the client was looking at a supported employment or open employment. Similarly, both NDIS funded youth employment programmes 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.

So clearly there's a degree of overlap in the delivery models used in IEA and NDIS funded employment supports.

Now, I would argue that there's nothing wrong with staff in different programmes using the same delivery processes, which work equally well across a range of different programmes or funding streams.

What this practice does suggest is that identifying all the different types of employment supports and dividing them into NDIS appropriate employment supports and IEA appropriate supports is not actually going to be very useful for anybody.

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 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.**

And I'll explain what I mean in more detail. And once again, there are actual examples about what I'm going to be talking about today in the paper that illustrate what I'm going to be talking about.

So frontline staff identified the capacity of NDIS funding to provide more intensive support if it is needed as its biggest benefit. 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 people can run out of funding and service providers are unable to provide the support that the individual needs at the time that they need it.

On the other hand, one of the main advantages of IEA is that ongoing support can be open-ended, as long as service providers have the right documentary evidence to support a case for moderate or high ongoing support. So IEA ongoing support can

continue for as long as it is needed, but it doesn't allow for shorter periods of really intensive support.

The way in which ongoing supports are structured in NDIS and IEA means that outcomes for some clients may be better if they have access to both types of ongoing support. And that's what I mean about actual examples of where people have had access to this and how it's been beneficial in the paper.

For this reason, I would argue that the focus of organisational practice shouldn't be around how we divide up supports between two different programmes 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.

Very clearly from my conversations, there are organisations out there who do this. So the recommendations in this report are focused on how to make this process of focusing, combining, thinking about all the supports and how to best combine all the supports that is available to an individual. How can this be made easier? What sort of changes need to be made so that this can become easier for service providers to do?

So I've now got to the recommendations part. And you'll notice that the recommendations are out of numerical order and that's just because of how I structured the final section of the paper, but I will be going through all of them.

So, three recommendations – recommendations 3, 4 and 5 – were formulated so as to make it easier to effectively combine NDIS and IEA supports.

Recommendation 3 says that where a participant is receiving support from both NDIS and IEA, providers ensure that a participant's career action plan – or whatever the more detailed document is called – includes the following:

- **the participant's employment goal,**
- **where they currently sit in their employment pathway,**
- **the role of NDIS funded employment supports and the role of IEA funded employment supports,**
- **the reasons why that combination of supports are needed,**
- **information sharing arrangements and**
- **measures to prevent gaps and duplications.**

You can see that this is trying to get at the clarity of communications that I mentioned earlier.

Recommendation 4 says 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 programmes or funding streams, does not constitute

double dipping. It was quite clear in conversations that some providers were reluctant to try and merge or have seamless transitions because of the fear of being accused of double dipping and possible consequences. Very simple recommendation that can be done simply, can be done very simply.

Okay, so just as a footnote to Recommendation 4, as set out in the Recommendation 3, if a participant is combining NDIS and IEA funding, their career action plan will provide a justification for the dual funding structure, and hopefully this will allay departmental fears about a potential double dipping because you've got documentary evidence about how it's not double dipping, it's actually considered a programme of activities which is needed.

A general rule around dual servicing is that 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. That's as prescriptive as we get in terms of this one.

Now, **Recommendation 5 is all about trying to enhance and make collaboration, which is what makes things work, easier.**

And so this recommendation that Disability Employment Australia, the Centre for Inclusive Employment, DSS and NDIS, work together to develop:

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

all of which will make successful collaboration easier to replicate. In a sense, if people are looking to start new ventures, they don't have to start from scratch.

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, and it's recommended that the development of educational materials should prioritise:

- educational programmes targeted at NDIS plan managers, support coordinators and LACs,
- information for employers about the way in which service providers can help them, and
- educational material that service providers can use to help clients and their families understand the respective roles of NDIS and IEA,

And also, which was a problem that came up frequently, what happens to the DSP when an individual starts to work or increases their hours of work? And there's more information around this in the paper.

Okay, now Recommendations 1 and 2 were included to remove the barriers identified in relation to individuals accessing NDIS funded employment supports.

And the first, **Recommendation 1, is basically opting out. Participants opt out of having employment supports in the NDIS plan rather than the current practice of clients having to specifically request the inclusion of employment supports.**

Recommendation 2.

I think this is particularly important in terms of reducing the barriers that currently exist in terms of accessing funding, NDIS funding. **We're aware that a new NDIS planning process is being developed and would recommend that the new planning process:**

- **prioritise employment goals,**
- **ring fence employment funding within a participant's NDIS plan,**
- **only allow a participant's employment funding to be reduced or removed with their written consent,**
- **prioritise transparency by providing reasonable justifications for decisions made by NDIS planners and**
- **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.**

Okay, so moving on to Recommendation 6, only two more to go. Good, so we'll have lots of time for questions or discussion.

Recommendation 6 was included to remove barriers related to the requirement for individuals to undergo an ESAT and rules around related entities, and more broadly, the uncertainty arising from inconsistencies between the IEA deed and guidelines.

So, **Recommendation 6 is 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.

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

So, **Recommendation 7 is 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 then able to take advantage of disability social enterprises' capacity to build confidence, skills and connexions to employers through supported employment, for NDIS participants or work experience for IEA participants.**

Now, 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*.

So 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 programmes.

From the evidence presented in DEA Paper number 2, the answer to this question is clear. NDIS and IEA work best when they're understood as complementary parts of a single employment pathway. So the task for governments and providers is not to eliminate every overlap between the two 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.

So with that, I say thank you very much and hand it back over to Pete. And we've got 10 minutes good for questions, comments, discussion.

Peter Bacon:

Thank you very much, Ann, for that very interesting and thought-provoking thing. I think it's really important to note the number of people you consulted through this process. In some ways, the sum total of many of those views is what's come through. And there's some really rich detail and specific examples in the paper that I think is well worth your digging into.

Before I ask some questions, I think it would be, it was remiss of me at the start not to mention that this piece of work that Ann has undertaken, obviously has been done with DEA, but it's also been funded by the Centre for Inclusive Employment as part of their ongoing remit, which includes making sure that research happens in areas where there's not been much research in the past. And I think it's fair to say that this has been under-researched piece, given its potential influence on some of the lives of people with disability.

So as I say, in the chat there is the opportunity to ask a couple of questions now, so feel free to put your questions in there. There are none there yet, so I will ask one.

Through this process, what did you find most surprising? What really jumped out at you that you didn't expect to find?

Ann Nevile:

It was how beneficial supported employment is for people. And that may be a reflection of the fact that all my work in the past has been done on the DES (now IEA) side. And so I hadn't really gone around and spent a lot of time talking to supported people, supported employment providers. It was clear that that is an area where things are changing, but it is also an area where some of the people who work in it still feel that it's stigmatised from how people used to think about that part of disability employment.

And I had fantastic visits. I was blown away by some of the providers, you know, the ones I was actually able to visit and talk to frontline staff and see what they were doing. So that was, you know, what stood out for me.

Peter Bacon:

Yeah, that's an interesting one because it's a difficult one to have a nuanced opinion on sometimes because on the one hand, I would very much point out that the average wage paid in supported employment providers is $7.11, something like that, which is too low. But equally, people can have a good experience.

I would also want to see more progress into open employment through some transition models, but I recognise that some supported employment providers are certainly trying to develop some of those different transition models in a way that could be quite effective. So it's good to take a nuanced view of it, I think, and to see the potential for it in a pathway.

Robert in the chat asks, former colleague of mine actually, Robert, he asks, can DEA, so this might be partially a question for me, provide example, but I think it would be great for you to talk about it a bit, which is, **can we provide examples of effective**

practice for members? So perhaps you could talk about some of the things that you probably bring out a bit in the paper itself around what some of the effective practices that you did find as you went around the country.

Ann Nevile:

Yes, I mean, and this is why I was exhorting people to read the paper, because in it there were examples of clients who had a lot of barriers and they were supported through ongoing high IEA - a high level of ongoing support that maintained their employment. There were other examples of where people needed more intensive support at the beginning, but then they could just have more sort of check-in type support. So it was those sorts of examples.

There were examples of what providers were doing, because all providers have got different mixtures of supports, different service areas, and all of this sort of thing. And so feedback I got from them, because I gave the draft to people I spoke with as part of the ethics protocol, they said it was really interesting learning about what sort of things other service providers were doing. Maybe partnering with non-employment type organisations in terms of helping their youth employment providers, so there were those sorts of things there.

The recommendation that went into IEA providing examples, or that it can be taken further if there are things within the sector, which the Centre for Inclusive Employment could bring out. Now, I'm not on top of exactly what they're brought out at this very moment, but there is a huge potential for those, what you were talking about, to be propagated.

Peter Bacon:

Robert's clarified, he asked would the targeted document potentially have greater penetration into grassroots servicing than the full paper? Yeah, I agree with that. And I think it's a question, as Ann says, as to how the conversation we have with the Centre of Inclusive Employment on the back of this and thinking about the resources and training that could potentially be supplied.

The other thing which I'm very interested in doing, which is a last sort of longer work plan, is a collaboration framework. So organisations can easily set out how they might work together in partnership to support people through one seamless journey. So I think, get the personalised version of that, which is the sort of career plans that Ann mentioned, but I think there's also a cross-organisational piece that could be developed that I think would be quite effective, which is a neat segue into what probably has to be our final question.

Ah, we've got two more now, but we'll see what we can do. From **Maria at TPG who asks, were there any practical things you encourage providers to do where multiple providers work together when they are different providers of IEA and NDIS employment, etc?**

Ann Nevile:

The main thing was what I mentioned about shared values. It doesn't work if there's no shared values. And being clear, that was because that came out of the examples that people told me about where they had established successful collaborative practices. And this was also, interestingly enough, internal as well. So it was organisations that have both NDIS and IEA, they also need clear communication and understanding of the role of NDIS and IEA in a participant's journey within the organisation, so the staff don't feel like their clients are going to be pinched by someone else, to put it slightly crudely. So basically, it's clarity, good communication and good understanding of the roles of each part of the organisation or each organisation.

Peter Bacon:

And just, I think that's a good place to finish for this particular session.

And it probably leads back to a reflection of mine that you see in my foreword to this piece, which is when we commissioned Ann to do this piece of work, I thought we'd go out there and we'd see lots of different examples of organisations successfully blending these different funding streams to be able to offer a more cohesive and coherent journey to the people we serve.

And the truth is, there weren't that many. There were some and they've been brought out in the paper. But I don't want you to read it necessarily as, oh, this happens loads already, the system's really working. It is an example, among many examples across many domains that I could cite, where you sometimes get providers or staff members in different places, because they're really committed to these ideas. They make it work. They make the system work. They kind of, by hell or high water, they find a way to kind of jerry-rig things together and offer that experience.

But the reality is, as I'm sure you're well aware, Maria, who asked the question, it's a lot harder than that. It's hard because you don't have the clarity among your funding bodies about the right ways it's supposed to work. You're kind of having to guess and hoping that you're not getting pinged later. And because of that, you don't have the confidence to go forth and really build these amazing journeys that we could all build that are going to change people's lives in such profound ways.

So for me, the big takeaway is these things can happen and we have examples upon which we can build. But if we want them to happen more, we need to fix things at an architectural level.

Now, some people will be aware that I have some fairly radical thoughts on some of those architectural pieces that I will be sharing at least in the very next DEA paper. But for now, I find the work that Ann's done a really good example of showing the impact that architecture can have on people's lives, where they have to tell the story again multiple times, where they don't have certainty whether they're going to get the employment funding in their next plan. They need some more. They go back and they find it gets cut.

Those things are inevitable to be able to offer the kind of personalised, cohesive journeys that we want to be able to do. So from DEA's advocacy perspective, that's the big takeaway for me and what we'll be working on. But we'll have the paper out there.

Thank you all for your interest in this piece. I think it's a really important subject and of course, I'd very much like to thank Ann for her work on it. It's been a pleasure to work with you on this piece, Ann. I think we've got a really valuable set of learnings and recommendations at the end of the day.

Ann Nevile

Thank you, thank you. I have enjoyed this enormously. Very hard work. I didn't expect it to be this hard, but I've had a fantastic time going around Australia, talking to DEA members and it's just been great.

Peter Bacon

Thank you, everyone. Much appreciated.

ENDS