



Evidence Based Employment

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2018 Retreat Findings



One of the activities at our 2018 Retreat was the full day group work focusing on developing a new disability employment system. This was based on the premise that come 2021, the existing DES and ADE systems would be replaced by one system focused on the individual. In other words, we gave everyone a clean slate to come up with a new system model.

After getting my head clear over the summer break, I've taken the group sheets and transferred the content to a spreadsheet. From here I've applied my favourite analytical tool of Thematic Analysis and present to you the findings from this very fruitful exercise. I've refrained from adding too much commentary, as I wanted your work to speak for itself.

As a separate exercise, I'll produce a more academic version complete with comparisons and references to existing evidence at a later date. I've left a few acronyms in the document that have apparent meaning to everyone. Feel free to provide feedback on any points.

The Themes.

Not surprising, while the focus was on what would a new system look like, we can't and didn't get away from looking at the failures or faults in the existing systems. Not a bad idea given that understanding our past does inform future discussions, although I sometimes worry about an intense focus on the past stifling innovation. The primary themes discovered were; Transitions, System Issues, Families, Employers, Community and the Individual. The theme of capacity building was present across all domains, so is not given a specific theme. As to be expected there are a few minor outliers, that I'll mention as well.

Transitions.

As we would expect this covered the need to integrate transition to employment within the context of the education system and post-school employment. It was felt that there needs to be a clear vision or strategy that supports transition, one that not merely looks at employment skills, but also aides in developing resilience and motivation to change, along with life skills. The process needs to be elementary but driven by capacity building within the individual, informed by the specific skills required by employers in specific employment settings. This would need to be underpinned by a detailed understanding of the person with a disability gained through the use of evidence-based tools such as Discovery. It is very much a one person at a time process that builds the capacity to exercise choice and control and normalises the idea of work or employment.

System Issues.

This covered two areas of the system; the provider side and the government/policy side. There is very much a need to adopt an "Work First" approach to disability, with employment seen as a fundamental human right. Not surprising given that we are a UNCRPD signatory!

Employment is seen as a life cycle model in that employment or work is generally a whole of life event.

Focusing on the provider side there is a clear need to develop the capacity of both DES and ADE's to support the economic participation of the person with a disability, but also within the context of involving families and communities in the process. The sector itself was seen as being in need of redefining the service provider staff roles and investing in education and innovative practices that would support the adoption of new innovative methods and new positions. The provider side needs to recognise that services start at the client's home, something that shouldn't be an issue within a system that is driven by the individual and by extension professes to be person-centred. The paradox here is that providers have used the OH & S as their default reason. I might add that outside of employment services; this isn't an issues with lifestyle support services, aged care and to be honest parts of employment services a decade ago (PSP/JPET).

On the funding/policy side of the system the issue of educating the LAC's and Planners about employment and having a Work First approach was prominent. Sitting beside this was the subject of the parallel disability employment systems needing to function without gates or fences that prevent the client from exercising real choice and control regarding who delivers their services. I would comment that employment has been something that ADE's have provided for longer than DES, but DES was seen in the context of the Disability Services Act as something of a panacea to real integrated employment. The evidence suggests that despite the gains made, the reality is that we managed to reduce real choice and control and muddy the waters and create competing systems that serve themselves. It was felt that the present systems lock people out! That didn't surprise me, given my dislike of the benchmark hours model – I'm working on an alternative.

Against this and despite individual system successes, the system still doesn't have a clear vision on what is needed, what works and doesn't and what does it cost? One of the questions that surfaced was the need to inform the decision makers of the real evidence for practice that can be used to inform the policy and funding bodies. You may recall that on the last day a decision was made on how to progress this and I'll be writing to everyone soon on what you proposed and how it would work.

Interestingly, it has been suggested that the DSP should be seen as not a lifetime exercise but an enabler of employment. This sat beside the idea of a single source of funding for employment services. There was also a need for the adoption of emerging models of practice that have an evidence base (existing or emerging) that

meet the participants needs. That would be something of a radical departure from the existing system.

Families.

It was recognised that Families were the original driving force behind employment for people with a disability, acknowledging that it was families who took the reign's and developed the sheltered workshop movement and its successor; ADE's. Somehow over the past thirty years, we have forgotten the role of families in the employment process. Families have rich community connections that can be explored for employment opportunities, and that legacy needs to be tapped into. It was felt that families have been excluded from the employment discussion that there is a need to educate, involve and resource them to actively engage with employers and friends. This can be done through workshops that educate families into the processes that their children will undertake with the provider networks.

Our own experience working with families supports this proposition, and it should be noted that given the current low levels of employment amongst people with a disability, along with the underwhelming levels of employment provision in NDIS plans, this proposition takes on a matter of urgency.

The Individual – the Person with a Disability.

Given that the systems supposedly focus on the person with a disability, there is considerable cross-over with the other themes. Principle amongst the findings was a lack of real understanding of who the individual is. What are their dreams, their strengths, is it the right time? There is a need to acknowledge their history, the need for safe places and that any employment is built on solid foundations with markers built into the process to ensure that the foundations come with resilience and that it is the right job. Their needs to be the ability for the individual to grow, to have a career if that is their dream.

Interestingly I was happy to see the issue of adaptation to different settings come up, as this is one thing that has always puzzled me. Why do we expect someone with a disability to adapt to a new setting without appropriate supports when it would be easier to alter the environment? Better still, with a better understanding of the client why would we put the client in a setting that potentially creates behavioural issues?

One outlier here was the mention of the possibility that we may depending on the clients age, in fact, be looking at retirement planning. This would be something that would come up with a sound Discovery process and highlights what we believe is the multi-dimensional nature of Discovery.

Employers.

Predictably there was reference to engage with employers, something oddly we find many consultants reluctant to do. This may be a reflection on their training or personal anxieties. Interesting, there is the suggestion that providers engage with entrepreneurs a swell as part of the process. There is merit here in that it would be a motivating tool for consultants and potentially lead to cutting-edge solutions. The marketing of disability employment was not seen as useful and to a degree lacked "sex appeal" (possibly not to pc?). The employment proposition has to be seen as a win for the employer, although I would think mutuality would be preferable as everyone gets what they need.

This engagement should happen in the school system to inform the skill development process, something that was alluded to in the Transition theme. I would add that in my view we have reached "peak" disability awareness programs. Rich Luecking wrote about this a decade ago, but we still running them. I would suggest that community engagement would be a better investment.

Community.

Community was a common theme across the groups, with suggestions that employment programs should involve intentional social participation and community engagement. This would serve to change community thinking and natural bias along with raising expectations and highlight the benefits to participants of inclusion. There is abundant evidence to support the proposition that building community and family expectations about employment is a predictor of higher levels of employment.

I would suggest that the soft approach of employer engagement that is "Informational Interviews" would be a great tool to begin this process. This would also serve the purpose of making your business more apparent and a willing and valuable part of the community.

Outliers.

The principle outlier was Supports. In particular getting the right supports and the use of natural supports. Natural supports have been a part of the direct support sector and in my view are intrinsically linked to active support models. Why we are supporting someone ten year after they've been employed is beyond comprehension. We should have built natural workplace supports and faded out long ago! That would be called inclusion and self-determination. The only other outliers mentioned were about creating a quality person-centred support and the inability of the medical model to provide the answers – we've moved on hopefully!

Summary.

That's the outcomes from the day one activity, and I must congratulate everyone who participated in what for me was an overwhelming gratifying engagement and exercise. I'm not going to state the obvious that these are factors that we should and do know, but it does raise the question in that if we know it so well, what are we doing wrong?

I observed that with all the change and pressure that exists in our setting, it's not hard to focus on the business of running the business. However, we're missing something given our results over that past quarter century, so maybe it's time to bite the bullet, create a vision for the future and invest in it. If we don't who will?

It's not easy, we're all flat out busy, but we have a vast network locally and globally so if we don't get there, we have only ourselves to blame. Time to get cracking and invest in the future.