

They Listen, But They Don't Hear Me.

Peter Smith

PhD Candidate - Centre for Disability Studies, Sydney Medical School
Research Fellow - Deakin University

Director - Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice
Consultant and Therapist



A discussion of some of the preliminary findings of research into the Disability Employment System, with specific reference to the lived experience of the system by people with an intellectual disability.

Setting

- ◆ The current DES – ESS system service provider – govt. agreement stipulates that the system is both person centred and promotes self determination amongst the DES clients.
- ◆ The system aims to be consistent with the NDIS / UN-CRPD principles.
- ◆ It does not define how these objectives will be implemented, obtained or measured.

One of the consistent features of the system over several versions has been the lack of client input into service provider ratings - Star Ratings. The system does not and has not given any weighting to the quality of the employment outcome and its impact on the quality of life of the client. The notion of what is customised employment is inconsistent and in many settings lacks evidence based methodology. I have had the experience of sitting with consultants and discovering that no one can actually explain what person centred means. As for self determination, I would argue that there is no clear understanding of what this actually is in practice. It also presupposes that any service can state that clients are self determined by simply saying that they are without any consideration for what conditions must exist for someone to become self determined.

Research Background

- ◆ 2011 – commenced PhD – Examining the system and factors that lead to the successful employment of people with a disability in open employment.
- ◆ 2013-14 – began interviewing participants within the DES system: clients, employment consultants, managers, senior exec, peak bodies, interested parties.

My research is based within the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis framework using a multiple perspective design. I have chosen to use this method in order to hear the participant voices and identify common themes for analysis.

Let's look at the client and consultant experiences and some of the comments and preliminary themes.

Client Experience

- ◆ High Staff Turnover
- ◆ What are your strengths? – Not really sure
- ◆ A job that I wanted to get out of bed and go to
- ◆ Employers who know where I'm coming from and understand my disability and respect me
- ◆ Employers who actually want to employ someone like me

Point 1. It's clear that the relationship between the client and consultant is important, like therapy 30% of the effectiveness of any intervention is the practitioner / client relationship. Yet this is one aspect that is still found wanting.

Point 2. Client's don't know their strengths, yet we somehow manage to suggest a job? The evidence based practice of Discovery isn't a common feature of DES-ESS, yet it has been refined over 40 years and is a common starting point for evidence based practitioners overseas.

Point 3. Like everyone else we all want a job that inspires us to get out of bed.

Points 4/5. Despite all the investment by government and agencies, clients still indicate that employers don't understand them and that they struggle to get any respect. Research and evidence from overseas highlights the need to change organisational culture for employment of PWD to be successful.

The discussion should also encompass the economic case for employing this person, not the social benefits as is common to many approaches.

- ◆ Quota's won't help, employers would like life unpleasant
- ◆ Companies should give people a chance – simple as that
- ◆ I want a job, but I don't really know what I want to do
- ◆ Work Experience helps
- ◆ We should be able to stay with the provider we like, but Centrelink doesn't care they just move us every two years.
- ◆ I'm just a number.

Points 1/2. Further highlight the necessity to find a method that will allow employers to engage in the discussion, rather than having disability employment forced on them. It further illustrates the potential for change by virtue of extending the work experience phase to larger numbers of settings that may also facilitate the

PWD to understand their strengths – maybe an opportunity for ADE's?

Points 3/4. These again illustrate the importance of work experience – the need to give PWD the taster experience.

Points 5/6. Illustrate to me that the notion of empowerment and person centred service is lost on the government – in particular Centrelink.

Consultant Experience

- ◆ A holistic approach is needed, but paperwork and forms are driving us away from the client connection.
- ◆ Job subsidies from JSA (now JobActive) has been a barrier.
- ◆ Some employers are subsidy based.
- ◆ The system rewards bad behaviour from providers.
- ◆ Matching client to consultant is important, but ad-hoc.

The system itself is inflexible, compliance driven and prevents a holistic approach to service delivery.

Consultants believe that the system rewards bad behaviour – gaming which was raised by the Senate Inquiry into DES in 2011/12 and highlighted by the current DSS consultation into the Disability Employment Framework.

Wage subsidies as used by JSA (JobActive) preferences the able bodied over PWD.

- ◆ We're just employment consultants!
- ◆ We would love specialised training in disability.
- ◆ Lack of mental health skills.
- ◆ Programs are compliance based.
- ◆ Lack of co ordination with other support services.
- ◆ System focused on employment – the disability doesn't matter.
- ◆ System is inflexible.
- ◆ Inflexible expectations from employers

The program is simply an employment program – the disability is irrelevant.

Staff need specialist training and the ability to co-ordinate with other specialist support services – a holistic approach.

Employer expectations are inconsistent with the realities of the PWD – which simply highlights the fact that there is no commercial imperative to employ anyone other than the right person for the job.

What Can We Conclude

- ◆ There's a simple truth that my colleagues in the USA refer to when it comes to truly customised disability employment services.
- ◆ “If the consultant doesn't have their own personalised career plan and if they haven't visited the client in their own home, then it isn't customised employment.”

In the 80's the management guru Tom Peters coined the term “management by walking around.” In essence it meant that to be truly connected to what was going on, managers had to get out on the factory floor and speak to the workers. They had to get out and talk to clients. For DES to be truly person centred and customised, it needs to understand the clients life and setting – see the barriers to employment that start at the clients front door.

- ◆ The DES – ESS system largely isn't person centred or empowering the client. Self Determination is a lost construct for the sector.
- ◆ Customised employment is not understood and current practices lack a strong evidence base.
- ◆ The clients are dis-heartened and service is inconsistent.
- ◆ The system itself lacks flexibility.
- ◆ The ad-hoc client / consultant match suggests that the relationship isn't important.
- ◆ It is simply a compliance based employment service that relies largely on good luck for outcomes.

Many service providers pass audit against the disability service standards – but this isn't enough. The standards don't prescribe practice and the industry itself doesn't invest heavily in research to develop the evidence base to any large degree. An examination of the training services offered by peak bodies to providers shows a focus on compliance. The evidence suggests that evidence based practice isn't a high priority and I would challenge the providers to produce the evidence that their work practices are consistent with the UNCRPD and NDIS standards.

The understanding of the evidence based practices of customised employment, career development and self determination could at best be described as rudimentary, at worst lacking any real understanding.

The client experience is still hit and miss, which is consistent with consultants views that matching clients and consultants is an ad-hoc process – despite evidence that the relationship is an important factor in outcomes.

The compliance based nature of the system prevents a flexible approach to service delivery that would be consistent with person centred practice and the principles of self determination.

Possible Future Direction

- ◆ Outcome measures and star ratings to include client outcome measures to ensure that the system is person centred instead of just compliance based. One possible avenue is PIE-OM™ (Personalised Inclusive Employment - Outcome Measure) that CDERP is developing.
- ◆ Payment system consistent with NDIS practices of per hour per service fee's.
- ◆ All services start in the client home or preferred place with an in-depth assessment using evidence based customised employment principles and the capacity for an advocate to be present.

DES Outcome measures must include a system that measures, not just the employment and time in the job, but measure the impact of employment on the clients life. If you think about it, the present measure is simply a compliance and payment assessment tool for the government to award remuneration and contracts to providers that comply with the contract conditions. Social Quality Theory which was developed out of the need to integrate social and economic policy, provides a possible base to develop a true outcome measure. The Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice is currently scoping a project to develop an outcome measurement tool based on Social Quality Theory and the primary domains of Socio Economic Security, Inclusion, Social Cohesion and Empowerment as successful measures of customised employment services. These domains are more closely aligned with NDIS and UNCRPD principles.

The current DES-ESS system should migrate to an NDIS type system and open up the system to registered providers, rather than the current system which seeks to aggregate service provision with larger national providers. Local registered providers will succeed or fail based solely on client satisfaction and job delivery. The current DSS DES Framework consultation alludes to this as a pathway for the future. All service providers must be audited against evidence based practices, not simply the Disability Service Standards. It would mean that providers would have to develop customised employment systems, which are consistent with a person centred approach that promotes self determination.

- ◆ Work Capacity assessments to be based on ability, not presumed disability and should happen in the work environment, not over a desk.
- ◆ Self employment or Micro Enterprise should also be a normative model for employment, not pity jobs.
- ◆ There is a role for Disability Enterprises to play as a pathway to training and open employment.
- ◆ Disability Employment should encompass whole of life aspects.

Marc Gold demonstrated in the 70's that no one is unemployable and that everyone irrespective of their disability has the capacity to learn work skills. Self employment is a viable option for many people. In the current environment where the employment landscape is evolving for many people, not just those with a disability - self employment is one possible pathway to inclusion and independence.

Whilst service providers continue to function in the silo environment created by Workfare policies – the notion of person centred employment won't be realised.

Service providers need to recognise that employment is only one part of the client intervention and that they need to focus on whole of life to ensure that clients have both the personal skills and health to not just get a job, but to sustain it past the current 13, 26 and 52 weeks outcomes.

There is much to be done to improve disability employment with the current DSS consultation a good place for everyone to get involved in the future.

Contact Details:

Peter Smith

Email: info@cderp.com.au

Phone: 0427 813840