



**National Disability Services**

## **National Workforce Project February 2009**

### **Summary of Round Two Data (of three rounds) from the Most Significant Change Technique**

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## Introduction

As described by Shaddock et al. (2009), the NDS Project involves:

1. The collection of data on workforce indicators.
2. Review of research on labour market trends.
3. The conduct of small, locally-based pilots that trial strategies aimed at attracting & keeping staff.

Shaddock et al. (2009) summarised data collected in the second half of 2008 using the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique with 13 sites that trialled selected staff attraction and retention strategies. This paper also described the general methodology and the MSC approach in some detail. In summarising the second round of MSC data (collected in 2009) the current paper provides a further progress report on the progress of the trials.

## Methodology

Three experienced interviewers collected the MSC data using the following stimulus questions in face-to-face or phone interviews that took approximately 20 – 30 minutes:

- Could you tell me what has happened over the last three months in the project?
- What do you think were/have been the most significant changes in the project?
- What makes these changes significant to you?
- Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about the project?

## Data analysis

The Round Two MSC data were analysed in the following way:

1. The two first authors independently studied the thirteen transcripts and compiled a list of potential themes arising from the data from all projects.
2. Nine common themes were identified.
3. Discussion and clarification resulted in a final list of six greed themes.

## Results

As expected, there was a degree of overlap between Round One and Round Two themes. For example, respondents in Round Two again raised issues that reflected the following Round One themes:

- Involvement in a national project has positive spin-offs.
- It is important to test one's assumptions with reference to data because sometimes what we think *should* happen, does not happen at all.
- Projects develop and change over time and even positive change can be threatening.
- Projects take time, effort and thought.
- Many believe that attraction and retention are directly impacted by relationships, organizational culture and management support for staff
- Even when it is agreed that change is needed it still needs to be managed.
- Use of data leads to increased understanding and awareness of positive and negative outcomes of strategies and the complexity of workforce issues.

The six additional themes that were derived from the Round Two MSC are briefly illustrated with direct quotes from the transcripts.

### **1. Improving attraction and retention strategies is an ongoing activity**

*We are using the NDS method of recording. We will continue to do that after the life of this project, but also we want to continue to share this information with NDS. ...the project will grow like an octopus in several areas. As a sense of how we now do things in the future, that will be another thing that will feed back into this. I just think it's probably been worth the effort and things have unfolded as they've come along, gone along with the journey as these projects do. That things crop up that you don't expect to happen...*

### **2. The economic downturn presents threats and opportunities**

*So, the last three months I think have been really significant and I don't think that the project can actually take the majority of the credit as far as the employee applications go. I think that the economic turnaround has really done some very serious helping with this.*

*I think the industry needs to really take the opportunity that's going to be presented over the next year or so because it probably will get a bit easier to get staff because unemployment is rising. It's a great opportunity to become a sector of choice, not just to squander the opportunity because it got a bit easier to get staff.*

### **3. It is hard to demonstrate the impact of some attraction and retention strategies in a one-year project**

*I think that there is a lot of work to be done on this project. I think that this will probably be the one out of the four of them that we will need to continue putting a lot of effort into and getting it right... and we've got a commitment to get it right ...probably within the lifetime of the pilot, we're probably not going to see the effects that we want in relation to retention. We're going to have to go through that storm-in sort of thing in a change where we're probably going to have a lot of people unsettled by it. And probably the later part of the change, when people are actually more comfortable with having the discussions, is going to not be for another year or so. And then I think we will see the rewards that we were expecting, not in the short term.*

*Look I don't know if the process of change ever really stops...I can see at least another six months work in this before that project is fully implemented, even on a trial basis...and probably another six months after that before we can really judge how effective it's been.*

### **4. Some attraction and retention strategies have unintended effects**

*One of the surprising things was that we offered people salary sacrifice and we've had a very poor take uptake on the salary sacrifice.*

*Some people have heard it's (exit interview) even a bit of a retention strategy ... they figure out that they could solve some of the issues and then that was it. They came back.*

*I think trying to implement the (strategy) and then having to do the twenty-six, twenty-seven skills assessments to ensure that they meet that level that we want them to meet has taken a lot of time.*

*And in fact, it's quite interesting, because the intention of us doing this pilot was to actually increase retention within those sites but in fact, we've had a request for at least one person to transfer out of the site because of those discussions. They've actually found it quite uncomfortable; it's brought it home to them how uncomfortable they are within the team and they are now wishing to transfer elsewhere. It might actually have the opposite effect.*

*Because the other part of thing we considered was going to universities, to the local university and putting an ad there but because we've had such a huge response (from the community information sessions) that's had to be put off for a while because just the sheer volume of applicants.*

### **5. Many successful attraction strategies involve finding new sources of employees and illustrate win-win solutions for organisations, communities and individuals**

*Instead of advertising in the Positions Vacant in the paper what we're doing is actually putting an ad in there inviting people to an information session ... What we've found is that it actually sort of worms out those that think that this is the industry for them (once they hear more information they change their minds).*

*The most significant change is the higher quality of the 'intake' to start with. The biggest and most significant change that I have seen is this group of people (recruited in a different way from a different source) have got the passion — you know, so far, have got the passion for this, and that's exciting.*

*I actually think it has been really successful because we split that position so if one of those people leaves, there's an opportunity for an international student to take it up. So we're actually meeting the needs for some international students for permanent part time work.*

*The biggest quote that came out was a lot of the people said, 'Oh we often used to see people in the community and wondered if we could do this sort of work but we didn't know what was needed.' So after coming to our session they now have the confidence in applying for disability work.*

*I think the most significant changes in the project have been that we've actually empowered a whole lot of people who never thought they had A, the ability or B, could ever work in this sector so that's probably the most significant changes in the project.*

*Our most significant change is because we've never had interest from young school leavers before in our history. We have, which was the basis of this whole pilot project, predominately women in the age group 44-54 years of age. So it is significant for us because we need younger workers to ensure age appropriate activities for young adults with a disability.*

*We are offering an opportunity for young women to remain in their local area, to develop skills, to study and also to have a career path within our organisation. This has been brilliant and we've actually done it again except we've done the emails out to uni students across all ends of the state and it's been a fantastic response, it's been really successful. I didn't expect a huge take up from paying \$200 to reach two and a half thousand people as a marketing tool.*

*I know when I first started the main theme was, well people only come to disability when they can't get anything else. This (employing university students) is proving that wrong.*

## **6. More collaboration and networking among organisations are needed if solutions are to be found to workforce challenges**

*There are two or three other sites that are doing the same thing, sort of added that to what they were doing and they have got really great responses as well and they said the same thing.*

*The other thing is it's made us think more about, ok well if we train up these people (new staff) and we've got them working for us, can we outsource them to another organisation.*

*I like the fact that I was able to talk about it in another forum and everyone saying 'Hey, yeah, we have all these problems with that'. It wasn't just us thinking 'Oh God we've got to try and get this together somehow'.*

*There has been a little bit of what I call a more cooperative effort down the south-east, in terms of looking at the way they can better utilise resources. The interesting question ... is whether or not it may well be that there will be some sort of pooling of like resources. So that, for example, if we need a part time supervisor in cleaning down there, and there's another agency that needs a part time supervisor in cleaning or if they're looking at support workers generally, whether or not there's going to be a need to explore ways of better handling and managing the most effective utilisation of the available resources.*

## **Conclusion**

This 'insiders' report from those involved in the trials illustrates that progress in implementing change is rarely linear and predictable and that the context in which these strategies are being trialled is changing rapidly. However, many participants reported some success in implementing their selected strategies and there is evidence that some are having extraordinarily positive results.

In analysing the interviews with the 13 sites we formed an impression that the strategies that are more *direct* and/or that focus on *recruitment*, e.g., establishing traineeships, changing the way in which individuals are recruited, and identifying and implementing local solutions that are finely tuned to local needs, tend to have more immediate and measurable effects. It may be that less direct strategies and/or those that focus on retention, e.g., improving managerial skills in order to improve organizational culture and climate in order to improve retention, require more time for any benefits to be observed. However, as many of the participants have indicated that they will, when the NDS project concludes, continue to apply an 'action learning' model that involves testing one's assumptions and relying on data for decision-making, the impact of the selected strategies on retention may become more evident.

From a methodological standpoint, the Most Significant Change technique continues to provide useful information about the trials and it does so in an efficient way. The Round Two data complemented and extended what was learned about the Projects in Round One, three months earlier. Round Three, (about six weeks after Round Two), will have a slightly different focus and will invite participants to:

- a) report on the most significant changes that have occurred for them *over the life of the project*;

- b) make a data-based assessment of the extent to which their original objectives were achieved and their plans were realistic; and
- c) to consider 'Where to from here?' in improving attraction and retention strategies in a rapidly changing economic context.

## References

- Davies, R. and Dart, J. (2005). *The 'Most Significant Change' technique: A guide to its use*. Retrieved 9 October 2007 <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf>
- Shaddock, A. J., Jones, M., Rose, V., Becker, S., Harwood, G., Sampson, J. & Speake, L. (2009) *National Workforce Project: Summary of Round One Data from the Most Significant Change technique*. National Disability Service, Brisbane, QLD.