

# National Disability Workforce Project

## Project Rationale May 2008

### Project Purpose

Workforce capacity challenges present a direct threat to the sustainability of disability services across Australia. The purpose of the NDS National Workforce Project is to:

- increase awareness of the workforce capacity challenges facing the disability sector;
- strengthen the relationships between disability services providers, Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers and other stakeholders; and
- trial a range of strategies to attract and retain skilled staff in non-government organisations.

This is a two year project, managed by the Queensland Office of National Disability Services and funded under the *National Skills Shortages Strategy* on behalf of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

### Context

The lack of workforce capacity represents a significant challenge to sustainability of disability service delivery across Australia and internationally. Community services across the board are experiencing unprecedented growth in the demand for services. Simultaneously, they face increasing uncertainty in the labour supply. Nationally, our labour pool is shrinking as our population ages and the competition for workers grows between industries. The sector is expected to face at least a temporary shortage as demand for services continues to rise and the workforce ages.<sup>1</sup>

Increasing compliance and accountability requirements from government and service models that require people to work on their own more, have, to an extent, been welcomed by the sector. However, these changes provide new challenges. The changing nature of the services provided by the disability sector has increased the level of discernment required in the recruitment of employees. At

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<sup>1</sup> Productivity Commission 2005

the same time, the need to equip workers for new service models with higher service expectations that require greater flexibility is emergent.<sup>2</sup>

There are also historical and cultural factors impacting the disability workforce. Historically the sector has its roots in community-based welfare — with a heavy emphasis on volunteering and very little opportunity for career development. Disability work also is not an area promoted by careers counsellors, endorsed by families of school leavers and does not have a profile as a positive career choice. While there has been an attempt to improve the image of the sector, the perception remains that employees in the disability sector are people with low skill levels. A recent NDS poll of its members rated the following items as the highest areas of need for the disability workforce moving into the future:<sup>3</sup>

- the requirement for higher skill levels;
- greater professionalism
- greater autonomy
- workforce retention
- recruitment; and
- the ageing workforce.

On the whole, low perception of the industry, a shrinking national labour pool and a lack of understanding of contemporary work “drivers” for both traditional and non-traditional groups employed in the disability sector have resulted in the sector being poorly positioned to attract and retain suitably qualified staff.

## **Overview of methodology**

This project commenced with the exploration and research needed to build our understanding of the nature and extent of the workforce capacity challenges the disability sector is facing and create a sense of urgency. This research will support disability organisations to question their own place and performance. Through the use of web based resources and the local delivery of workshops and direct support, the project will support disability organisations to strengthen relationships with important stakeholders and review their own workplace and working arrangements in the context of attracting and keeping skilled staff. The project will also facilitate the documentation and sharing of learnings about retention strategies at an individual organisation level, without attempting to be prescriptive or make generalisations about what works and why.

This project involves disability organisations in a practical exploration of ‘what works’. It also engages organisation and in the trialling and dissemination of

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<sup>2</sup> NDS Qld Social Policy (Employment) May 2007

<sup>3</sup> NDS Qld Workforce Poll Results April 2007

workforce strategies so that organisations may better position themselves to deal with workforce capacity challenges.

The work is organised around a series of strategic questions.

**Topic 1: Data gathering to establish baseline on nominated workforce capacity indicators**

*Q 1.1 What is the nature and extent of the workforce capacity challenges faced by the disability service sector?*

*Q 1.2 What are the priorities for action/opportunities for leverage to address the disability sector workforce challenges?*

The methodology for Topic 1 will involve:

- reviewing the mainstream and disability literature on current workforce issues/solutions and results of the Rimfire Resources Queensland Workforce Benchmarking exercise to identify the nature and extent of our current workforce capacity challenges, within a broader labour market context;
- considering (and facilitating discussions with the sector about) the implications for supporting disability organisations to position themselves for a sustainable workforce in the future;
- identifying specific opportunities for change/influence; and
- identifying the retention strategies to be promoted during the course of this project.

**Topic 2: Literature review currently underway to identify national and international labour market trends and approaches to addressing the workforce capacity challenges which are now universal.**

*Q 2.1 What have been the learnings from research to date with regard to addressing the workforce capacity challenges we have?*

*Q 2.2 How do they prepare us to progress to a sustainable workforce in the future?*

The methodology for Topic 2 will also involve:

- industry based discussions on the implications for learnings from literature review and the Rimfire Resources Workforce Benchmarking Report;
- the development of an awareness raising kit (available on line and in a train-the-trainer format); and
- the delivery of awareness raising workshops in each Australian state and territory.

**Topic 3: Exploration of existing and potential attraction and retention strategies, including but not limited to:**

- **job redesign;**
- **strengthening relationships with VET; and**
- **strengthening relationships with stakeholders within the broader industrial relations and disability service provision contexts**

Q 3.1 *What retention strategies work in which contexts?*

Q 3.2 *How do workplaces respond to the call for innovation in attraction and retention?*

Methodology for Topic 3 will involve:

- reviewing the available literature on retention strategies and the ways in which links with the VET sector can assist employee retention;
- identifying the retention strategies that are the most appropriate for particular contexts;
- developing web-based employee retention information and resources for stakeholders to trial and provide feedback on;
- surveying individuals and organisations about retention strategies they have found successful;
- engaging with relevant stakeholders on the labour relations implications for each strategy (individually and in combination);
- working closely with a limited number of pilot sites in each state and territory to undertake systematic, in-depth trials of a number of strategies and to document learnings;
- facilitating learning exchanges between pilot sites to share learnings and strengthen collaborative efforts; and
- developing and delivering workshops to assist services to translate the finding from pilot organisation activities and other learnings, into practice.

### **Key Activities**

We will review, analyse and consider data from various sources and undertake the following related activities:

1. Review recent reports on the Australian disability and broader community services workforce, and literature pertaining to the broader labour market trends. Approaches to addressing workforce capacity challenges will also be scanned and relevant points summarised.
2. Test and consider the above findings for relevance and implications by discussion with both the National NDS Workforce Committee and the National Workforce Project Steering Group. The fundamental question is, *'Do the findings hold true from the perspective of experienced service providers and nominated government agencies?'*
3. Analyse and interpret findings (project technical adviser) with regard to academic rigour. Final report on findings will inform the development of:

- a. an awareness raising resource package (web based and delivered nationally) to disability service providers; and
  - b. a retention strategy toolkit.
4. Develop a participant package for the pilot organisations and distribute to nominated pilot sites (informed consent and statement of commitment will be obtained prior to proceeding).
5. Conduct an NDS member online direct support staff survey (web-based) to establish a comprehensive understanding of what drives our workforce
6. Conduct a two-day national briefing workshop to:
  - a. align pilot sites and key stakeholders on purpose, expected outcomes and key messages;
  - b. negotiate and establish scope and expectations for pilot site work plans;
  - c. choose strategies to be included in the trial; and
  - d. arrange any support that may be required from the project team.

### **Expected Outcomes**

The expected outcomes for the National Workforce Project are that disability service providers:

- are aware of the broad labour market context in which they operate;
- are aware of the impact of current labour shortages on their own business/service viability;
- have access to current, relevant data about what drives their workforce;
- have access to tools and ideas they can use to strengthen their capacity to attract and retain staff at a local level;
- have started to build and improve relationships with vocational education and training providers, schools and other stakeholders to support their efforts in attracting and retained appropriately skilled staff;
- are better positioned to address the workforce challenges ahead; and
- will have a higher profile with key stakeholders in the training and business community at a strategic and policy level.