

National Disability Workforce Project

Pilot Site Report

ATTRACTING, RETAINING & DEVELOPING STAFF – REGIONAL WORKFORCE ISSUES

Bedford Industries

Workforce issues targeted:

Bedford has, until the last two years or so, provided various services to people with a disability in metropolitan Adelaide. During the period 2007-2009, as part of its strategic direction and to enhance service options for South Australians with a disability, Bedford has established a strong regional presence through mergers with services in the South East (Mt Gambier & Millicent), Eyre Peninsula (Pt Lincoln) and York Peninsula (Pt Pirie, Kadina & Wallaroo).

Historically, Bedford has been supportive of and adopted a leadership role for the sector through a number of initiatives, including:

- Outsourcing commercial contract work to interstate & SA ADEs
- Involving various SA ADEs in its innovative & ground-breaking “Abilities for All” training partnership with DFEEST/TAFE SA, whereby many hundreds of employees with a disability have undertaken accredited Certificate courses in a range of vocational disciplines
- Supporting regional disability services through mergers, with subsequent resource and capital/building investments and commitments
- Providing advice, information & resource assistance to various services requesting same.

During due diligence processes & associated discussions regarding Human Resource (HR) & general workforce issues re mergers, the issue of attraction & retention of staff in regional settings was raised as a matter which might require further consideration. At the time of one such merger, some difficulty had been experienced by one of Bedford's merge partners in a recruitment exercise in the South East of the State. Anecdotal commentary suggested other services had experienced like problems.

This issue had also been raised and partly explored through a project undertaken by a Bedford staff member as part of her tertiary studies in Human Resources.

It should be noted that this Project was somewhat different to most other site projects in that its focus was not predominantly on the host organisation's circumstances but rather, considered issues impacting on staff attraction/retention from a broader sector perspective.

In this regard, the intent of the project also took into account such factors as:

- Raising the profile of the sector & scope of employment opportunity in disability organisations/providers
- Strengthening stakeholder relationships
- Looking to provide training to address skill shortages/gaps.

Our assumptions:

The assumptions underpinning this project were initially considered to be:

- Regional services can't obtain suitably qualified staff
- Existing staff may not have requisite skills
- People [staff, both existing and potential] will want to engage in education, training & development
- The nature of work, rates/conditions of employment & opportunities should be generally attractive to those seeking to work in the sector
- The disability skill set is transferable.

It was recognised that several of these assumptions might vary across regional areas. Also subsequent discussions with various parties suggested that the above might well be tested through the project (e.g. a number of staff who had contributed to another sector survey indicated that while the nature of work was appealing, rates of pay were felt to be less than desired).

It was decided that the project would best focus on a specific regional area — namely the South East of SA. Not only did Bedford have a presence in this region but also it was felt there were likely to be a number of service providers in the locality who would participate/contribute to the project.

Strategies trialled:

The strategies trialled for the project covered 4 main areas:

1. Targeted Marketing/Information Dissemination

This aspect of the project sought to identify key stakeholders; to meet with/contact them and apprise them of the site project and provide general information about the overall NDS Workforce project – this would help ensure their understanding of the broad scope & intent of activities & hopefully secure their engagement/commitment.

This was largely achieved through:

- Reviewing Resource Directories to determine potential providers, as well as discussion with relevant agencies to gather necessary contact details; participants' existing awareness of providers complemented this approach.
- Provision of a flyer re the broader NDS Workforce Project
- Sharing information re the project per meetings of a local consultative forum
- Email/telephone contact and
- Issuing a letter with a survey about turnover/recruitment/retention issues - detailing the intent of the project & seeking the support of providers with the survey.

2. Relationships Developed With Stakeholders

Building on the preceding, it was recognised that it was necessary to encourage the ongoing participation of key stakeholders.

This was achieved through attendance at various local (South East) meetings, telephone and email contact.

3. Review Available Position Descriptions From a Sample Of Services

One strategic aspect of the project considered important was the collection of a selection of Position Descriptions (PDs) from several agencies, to assess/compare the scope of roles, position responsibilities and requirements – and thereby gauge whether there were any factors likely to impinge on the attraction and retention of staff in the sector through such documentation. 4 local providers contributed PDs.

4. Conduct Survey/Assessment

Another phase of the project sought to gather certain basic demographics regarding providers and turnover details, as well as the number of local students in the system undertaking Disability Studies & associated destination data.

In broad terms, the survey sought to gather data from providers re:

- Their type of Activity and Number of Clients eg ADE : DEN : Day Option : Accommodation
- Staffing Levels (Management/Support/Other)
- Staff Turnover
- Attraction - concerns, factors of impact
- Retention - concerns, factors of impact

10 surveys were issued to providers, a healthy 80% response rate was achieved. Follow up meetings were held with respondents to clarify details in responses and discuss the project in general.

Meetings were convened with the local TAFE Disability Studies Co-ordinator/lecturer to address the student participation rate and associated destination data.

How we measured the impact of our strategies:

Risks/issues

From the outset, a number of factors were noted as having the potential to impact on the Project's success, including:

- Distance from sites – the South East (SE) region is ~ 4½ hours travelling distance by car from Adelaide, where Bedford's main site is located – indeed, the “tyranny of distance” proved to present challenges in terms of being able to drive aspects of the Project when one was not present in the region.
- Further to the preceding, there could be logistical issues re organising & meeting contacts, as a number of providers were in neighbouring townships which were up to 1- 1½ hours apart, and in different directions
- One concern was that the assumptions above were not realised, not so much in terms of whether they were proved/disproved but more so as to whether sufficient data would be available/obtained to test same.
- Low interest in the project by local services due to other priorities which might assume greater significance. The impact of the “then emerging” global financial situation was expected to have an impact in this regard (discussed later).

Survey

As reflected above, an encouraging 80% response was received from the 10 surveys/letters issued to providers in the SE.

The survey yielded the following responses and data of interest; as can be seen, there was a strong employment presence (5 ADEs, 3 DENs), with 2 Day Option facilities also operated by 1 DEN and 1 ADE (these were not the main focus/activity of the respective provider(s)), while 1 service provided tenancy support to a small group of clients. .

ORGANISATION/TYPE OF SERVICE	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	TOTAL
ADE	X	X	X		X			X	5
DEN				X		X	X		3
ACCOMMODATION				X#				*	1,1 x *
DAY OPTION				X	X			*	2, 1 x *

Nb. * one organisation noted it had day option and accommodation services but not in the SE region.
tenancy support provided as an adjunct to DEN & Day Option activities

Staffing Profile – the average number of staff per provider was 9 (actual) and 6 fte; staff numbers ranged from 3 to 12.

Management : Support Staff ratios varied though a lower ratio tended to be more common viz 5 providers had a ratio of ~1:3 ; 2 @ 1:8 ; 1 @ 1:16

Client numbers varied considerably, DEN ranging from 25 to nearly 50, ADEs from 13 to 45, while Day Option numbers were an average of only 3-4; 1 service also provided some tenancy support to several clients in their township

Turnover Data – There were a total of 13 departures in the previous year, 11 of which had been instigated by the worker.

Of interest was the fact that 2 providers accounted for 9 of the 13 departures.

Several of these had been due to the level of competition from other (non disability) organisations seeking cleaning staff with pay and working hours more attractive than the cleaner-support staff roles for one provider, while several departures ex another provider were felt due to the non-suitability/compatibility with the skill set required for DEN support work.

Turnover (raw no. of departures):	0	1	2	4 or 5
No of providers:	3	2	1	2

The average (overall) turnover rate ex the survey was 20%, a rate comparable to other surveys conducted eg Graffam's 2005 study posited a rate of ~24% (Keeping Quality People Engaged, Deakin University EASE Research Group, May 2005, Graffam J et al)

In terms of specific functional areas, the results were also similar to Graffam's findings viz for DENS 28% cf Graffam's DEN rate of 27%; ADE of ~17% cf Graffam's ADE rate of 16%.

Difficulty Attracting/Retaining Staff

Responses to the survey indicated the following

DIFFICULTY ATTRACTING (1 na response)	YES	5	NO	2
DIFFICULTY RETAINING (1 na response)	YES	3	NO	4

The reasons (and associated number of responses) put forward re the difficulties experienced yielded the results below:

Attracting:		Retaining	
Nature of work	1	Burnout	1
Lack of Disability experience	2	Competing pressures	1
Lack Disability qualification	2	("care"vs "commercial")	
Attitude	1	Lack of Head Office support	2
Competition	1	Wages	1
Status of regional (full) employment	1	Attitude	1
Geography/distance	3	Organisational bureacracy	1
Wages	3	Training	1
		Frustration	1
		(no client transport, limited funds for support/activities)	

Disability Studies Students, Destination Data

Part of the project sought to establish the rationale for students undertaking Disability Studies and the "why/where/how's" they would use their qualification. The intention was that this would take place with 2009 students.

However, discussions with the local TAFE Disability Studies Co-ordinator early in 2009 indicated that there had been a lower than expected intake of students, with only a handful enrolling. Given this low number, and as there was no comprehensive destination data available for students, accompanied by logistical difficulties and other priorities, it was agreed that this component of the project might need to be further explored later in 2009.

The Co-ordinator was not able to provide any specific reason why enrolments had been lower than expected.

Review of Position Descriptions

A selection of Position Descriptions was obtained from 4 services, covering DEN support worker and direct support and operational/support roles in ADEs.

It was considered that there was (understandably) considerable similarity in like roles from different organisations.

One matter noted in the review was that there were skill and expertise/experience expectations associated with some roles which might preclude certain applicants, especially those coming directly from school and arguably external to the community services sector.

To illustrate this point (and not doubting the desirability and/or need to secure workers with relevant skill sets and backgrounds), one DEN role required:

- Tertiary qualifications
- A Drivers Licence
- A diverse range of Personal Abilities – covering sensitivity, team work, high level communication – promotional – mentoring skills, demonstrable relationship building and customer service expertise, high level interpersonal and negotiation skills, organizational and entrepreneurial skills
- Values embracing professionalism, a commitment to learning, equity, dignity, building self esteem
- Skills/Knowledge/Experience in
 - Human Services, with people with a disability, job design
 - Report Writing, Case management, community resources
 - Disability Service Standards, Job Network, the Labour Market (LM) and LM trends.

with a good percentage of the above being listed as essential.

One might imagine such “entry criteria” would be daunting to some prospective applicants.

In terms of joint/collegiate staff training & development activities, one example illustrating the potential for such ventures related to a 2 day Mental Health 1st Aid programme in May 2009, with attendees from 7 providers. Such a strategy enabled the conduct of resource effective programmes to be held which would normally be problematic for providers in the region.

Conclusions:

Findings/conclusions drawn from the survey, meetings & discussions, included:

- Reasons for difficulties attracting & retaining staff were not as consistent as predicted - it had been assumed there would have been a few “common” reasons proposed by many/most respondents. However as reflected above, responses were quite spread, with the most frequent (wages, geography/distance) only attracting 37% response rates ex the survey.
- There was considerable similarity amongst Position Descriptions for staff in like roles in different organisations; it was considered that the depth & breadth of experience, skill set and qualifications for some roles may prove a disincentive to school leavers or those seeking to enter the field.

- Roles & financial incentives eg FBT-Salary Packaging were not necessarily promoted well to prospective applicants – some managers surveyed felt this may have impacted on the overall perceptions of work to be undertaken and the scope of rewards available.
- Managers indicated it was not uncommon to find some workers undertaking more than 1 job (in different organisations) viz there was a common staff resource across organisations, reflecting the impact of casualisation/part time work often available.
- Filling vacancies wasn't as much of concern in recent times, possibly due to the global financial/economic situation – there had tended to be an attitude of “battening down the hatches”, “having to do more with less”, given the downturn.
- Further to the preceding, there had been apprehension & some unsettling within the workforce due to recent changes in the Employment Services arrangements.
- The more competitive environment of recent years has presented a unique challenge for regional services where there is a far more intimate awareness of relationships, local demographics, commercial activity and the like – including the need to source and retain the best staff available in the locality, another “competitive” pressure.
- The low community services/disability studies uptake requires further investigation – this should be undertaken in a holistic sense viz embracing current students, considering whether any upsurge or higher numbers in earlier years was associated with a SA Government mandatory criteria for staff in State-funded Disability Service providers, and exploring the opportunity and means to involve “former” students for whom destination data is not available.
- Joint training activities were beneficial and a cost effective means of addressing skill development given the availability (or limitations) of local resources

Implications:

- It was generally agreed that some form of joint expo promotion would be valuable, in lieu the traditional way by which individual services would promote their activities; there was a need to work together to promote opportunities in the disability / community services sector for potential workers.
- Further to the above & in particular, promotion of the sector in a more positive light in the secondary education system would be worthy of consideration.
- Collegiate relationships were also important to ensure the maximum use of available resources to meet client needs – means of collaboration to address regional specific issues needed exploration, including the conduct of joint training programmes, client transport and the like.
- Further work understanding the reasons why students enrolled in Disability Studies, their career plans, associated destination data & similar would prove beneficial in terms of workforce planning strategies, training & development activities & student expectations; this might also inform the sector's “mandatory qualifications” debate.

- Services may need to review and assess whether their expectations of applicant skill sets and expertise may be a disincentive to prospective applicants, especially in terms of “essential” criteria; it may be possible for some such criteria to be learned on-job or post engagement, rather than having as a pre-requisite for employment.
- Smaller service structures did not always lend themselves to providing scope for full time work, let alone career progression opportunities.
- There may be a need for NDS (in conjunction with Government) to engage in the promotion of the nature, scope and diversity of employment in the sector; similarly, NDS (and its members) need to lobby Government re the enhancement of FBT arrangements to provide greater financial incentives for those working in (or considering working in) the sector. In this regard, there may be value in having a resource document explaining (in easily understandable terms), how salary packaging/FBT works and the benefit of same to one’s total remuneration package.
- In conclusion, there would be value in continuing this site project and linking it with related research/projects eg by Prof. Bill Martin/NILS; one completed a year or so ago by SACOSS; the NDS branding – Attraction & Retention project in NSW; and a SA NDS workforce project, as this may well help to progress Attraction & Retention Strategies for Staff in Regional settings in the future.