



National Disability Services

National Disability Workforce Project Team Report

July 2009

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Introduction

The National Disability Workforce Project has provided the exploration and research needed to strengthen our understanding of the workforce capacity challenges facing the disability sector. It has also fulfilled its objective of creating a sense of urgency about those challenges within the sector. While the labour market context has changed significantly since the work commenced, the need to undertake significant workplace reform has not diminished.

This work was intended to support disability organisations to question their own position and performance with regard to workforce capacity. Through web based resources, local delivery of workshops and direct support the project supported disability organisations to strengthen relationships with key stakeholders and review their own workplace and working arrangements in the context of attracting and keeping skilled staff. The project also facilitated 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 engaged disability organisations in a practical exploration of 'what works'. It also engaged organisations in the trialling and dissemination of workforce strategies so that organisations may better position themselves to deal with workforce capacity challenges. This occurred by establishing a total of 13 pilot sites, some of whom worked on multiple streams of work, across Australia.

The pilot sites (which included approximately 60 participants from 13 organisations) came together for an initial briefing in May of 2008 to design individual projects which would allow them to systematically trial and learn from strategies aimed at attracting and retaining the workforce they needed for high quality service delivery. They were supported by Professor Tony Shaddock from Canberra University and a capable team of project officers who monitored their progress through a series of interviews using the Most Significant Change evaluation framework. Each pilot developed their own evaluation strategies and attempted to capture evidence to support (or challenge) their chosen strategies.

The pilot participants and most of their CEOs regathered in May of 2009 and shared their successes, their frustrations and their learnings. Without exception, the pilots remained committed and developed a higher level of understanding of,

not only their own workforce situation, but the issues that have emerged in the broader group over the course of the year.

Key Project Outcomes

Data collection and analysis

A literature review, some state based workforce capacity indicator research (Rimfire Report) and a national survey of direct support staff (1200 responses) have provided a limited baseline of evidence upon which to make decisions and measure the impact of current and future workforce strategies. NB: A more comprehensive profile of our current workforce will be available in early 2010 from the National Institute of Labour Studies workforce profiling study. Strengthening capacity of our industry to collect and use data to better understand and respond to workforce challenges is a priority for NDS, moving forward from the project.

Resources

Resources developed have included:

- an awareness raising workshop (downloadable in PowerPoint and PDF formats);
- a recruitment and retention toolkit (downloadable in PDF format); and
- a range of fact sheets which reflect outcomes from the pilot projects and implications for practice.

Capacity building

The level of commitment to the project by the 13 pilot sites was outstanding. While there were many lessons learned, overall, it is the view of the project team that capacity to identify and respond to workforce challenges at a local level has increased. The value of strategies used is expected to increase further as services become more confident and skilled at capturing data to track and evaluate their progress.

Strengthened Relationships

Through the project, NDS was able to establish stronger relationships with key stakeholders around national initiatives such as the Workforce Profiling Project, the National Disability Workforce Strategy, and the review of the National Community Services and Health Training Package.

At a state level, relationships with state training authorities, industry skills councils, training providers, universities, state boards of studies, and local communities have also been strengthened.

These stronger relationships mean disability organisations are better positioned to understand and respond to workforce challenges collaboratively in their local area in the future.

Lessons Learnt

All of the project objectives have been met, evidenced by the awareness raising workshop summary of feedback and the final pilot project reports — both of which are on the national workforce project website.

With regard to the strategic questions identified in the project rationale, the following learnings have been made:

Q 1 What is the nature and extent of the workforce capacity challenges faced by the disability service sector?

It is apparent that the demand for disability support will be significantly greater than the industry capacity to supply, due primarily to the ageing population. Given the disability industry is a relatively low wage industry, its capacity to compete for workers in a shrinking labour market will need to be strengthened. The pilot projects have offered a range of strategies to address this (e.g. rebadging and redesigning jobs to make them more attractive, offering incentives, positioning themselves as employers of choice with local schools).

While there are many exceptions, on the whole, disability organisations do not appear to have a strong understanding of their existing or potential workforce. Some of the pilots addressed this in their work, and some were quite surprised by the evidence not supporting their assumptions. The results of the online survey produced some positive, if not unexpected findings about what drives our workforce and a clear message that wages, conditions and opportunities for career path movement need to be addressed. A shift in focus of organisations from direct support to addressing compliance requirements was also raised as a concern and potential threat to retaining workers.

Funding arrangements and the current policy environment do not appear to be supporting organisations to respond flexibly to changing labour market. In some jurisdictions, funding agreements are excessively prescriptive, failing to allow for pay increments or progression to reflect skills and experience. Some of the pilots specifically addressed this issue with positive results, creating a role of advanced practice worker, with wages to reflect the increased skill and experience in working with people of higher and more complex needs. The recently endorsed national community services training package offers a range of new qualifications and pathways to support this response.

Inconsistencies in access to public training funds between the states and supervision rules for traineeships provide further barriers. The lack of consistency between Commonwealth Government departments (e.g. immigration and employment) can result in inconsistent recognition of disability as a skill shortage area, and limit access to skilled disability workers as a consequence. One of the regional pilots in NSW was particularly effective in influencing recognition of a school based traineeship, lobbying peak bodies, DET and the Board of School Studies to do so.

Q 2 What have been the learnings from research to date with regard to addressing the workforce capacity challenges we have?

That a skill ecosystem approach is a reasonable paradigm for an industry to use in responding to workforce challenges (i.e. an approach that recognises complexity of the workforce sustainability issue, particularly with regard to the importance of relationships between diverse range of stakeholders that exist within the disability sector).

That workforce reform should start with an examination of job requirements, given the changing service provision environment.

That focusing on training responses doesn't necessarily result in greater productivity and that skill utilisation needs to be better understood, before assuming a skilling solution will be effective.

That current disability workforce challenges are unlikely to be resolved through increasing remuneration alone. The opportunity to be of service and the nature of disability work is a more significant attractor of workforce than remuneration. However, remuneration (along with personal and professional development) is one of the main reasons people look elsewhere for work.

That some of our assumptions about what drives our workforce are unsupported by evidence.

An effective industry response to disability sector workforce challenges will require both policy makers and service providers to have access to a much stronger evidence base than is currently available. The current investment in skilling solutions by government needs to be considered in the context of the broader workplace and workforce reforms required for the disability sector. Specifically, additional investment is required in action based research and incentives for job and service redesign. Where service providers are proactively

responding to local workforce challenges, it is critical they have access to information and tools to test their assumptions before identifying and implementing remedies.

Q 3 *What retention strategies work in which contexts?*

A key strength of the project was the flexibility to allow pilot participants to choose strategies that were relevant and meaningful to their situation. While a request was made that pilots include relationship building and job redesign in the range of strategies chosen, a wide array of strategies were trialled. Elements of success, not necessarily reported or acknowledged by the pilots, appeared to include strong staff engagement (and subsequently ownership) of the strategy and the opportunity for the organisation to check their assumptions before commencing their work.

Strategies which appear to have been particularly successful across the pilots included:

- The introduction of an advanced practice role to the workplace which provided acknowledgement of experience in the provision of support to people with high and complex needs, and a career path. *It is important to note that the revised national training package includes a qualification to support this pathway.*
- More structured, standardised approaches to induction and supervision e.g. buddy shifts, pre-scheduled supervision, competency based induction delivered in partnership with an RTO.
- More creative badging and advertising of positions, with engagement of staff in the creative process.
- Use of information sessions (and encouraging staff to invite family and friends) to build depth in the labour pool.
- Partnership with universities as a low cost way of accessing potential workers.
- Provision of incentives for retention.

A high level of commitment and tenacity was noted in all of the pilot projects, resulting in feedback from all pilots that their experience with the project was positive for their organisation.

Conclusion

In summary, there were a number of elements of good practice that emerged from the project that have implications for the broader sector. These include but are not limited to:

- the importance of checking assumptions about workforce before identifying strategies for remediation;
- the importance of engaging staff at the idea generation stage of developing strategies to respond to workforce challenges; and
- the importance of establishing indicators of progress and capturing data along the way to assist with design and evaluation of strategies used.

For many of the pilot projects, a year was insufficient to fully explore, implement and evaluate their work. They remained well engaged and committed but would have benefited from a longer pilot phase and provision of resources to assist them to extend their strategies and offset internal costs associated with the project. A number of the pilots have already indicated they are continuing with the work and committed to keep us informed of their project beyond this project.

There is significant scope to further develop the recruitment and retention toolkit and expose a broader range of service providers to its use.

With regard to the future, the outcomes from this project will also inform the development of strategic priorities for action for the NDS National Workforce Issues Group for the coming year.