

# National Disability Workforce Project

## Pilot Site Report

### HEADSTART A CAREER IN DISABILITY WORK



#### Workforce issues targeted:

- **Very few young people considered a career in disability work**
- **Current demographics of workforce**
- **Age appropriate activities for young PWD**
- **Need more male support workers**

In terms of future planning we anticipated a skill shortage in the sense that the sector seems to attract a lot of mature employees but very few young people. Our current workforce is predominantly women aged 40 – 54 years of age and given that we have young adults with a disability entering the system we need to attract younger workers to ensure age appropriate activities and support – lets face it, an 18yo PWD would rather go to a football match or a dance with someone closer to their own age, than say with a middle aged woman.

As part of our project we wanted to broaden the gender profile of our support staff, however we have not yet achieved that. Although, through our work of raising the profile of disability work as a career choice in schools, there has been an increased awareness and careers advisors have told us that some male students have expressed interest in learning more about working for Valmar.

This is just the start for us, as we are now committed to continuing to develop our links with local high schools to ensure that Valmar and career options in disabilities stay on their radar.

#### Our assumptions:

- **Demographic Funnel**
- **Career is not the focus of employment**
- **Career Opportunities**

What we mean by a demographic funnel is that we have a relatively narrow age and gender profile of our employees. That is to say that our workforce is predominantly made up of women in the 40 – 54 years age bracket.

The presiding assumption was that many employees in this demographic are considering work with us more for the sake of getting a job that fits in with their home life, rather than seeking a career.

Now while we value these workers immensely and they are critical to providing support to PWD, we are also very focused on promoting the professionalism of Disability Work and the Career Opportunities that are available in the sector. We identified a need to attract young people to consider a career rather than just a job and that in turn will ensure the long term sustainability of the disability sector workforce.

### **Strategies trialled:**

- **Create NSW School-based Traineeship Disability work**
- **Navigating the Maze**
- **Promoting Disability Work as a Career Option**

As SBT in Disability Work in NSW has never been trialled before our first step was to identify the key stakeholders who could assist us to achieve the outcome that we wanted. These stakeholders included BOS, VETIS, 4 Regional schools, TAFE NSW, Regional VET office and CSH-ITAB whose support was critical in ensuring this project went ahead. ITAB indicated that they would require the support of NDS in order for them to give approval for the SBT to go ahead. After several weeks we were notified that ITAB had received support from NDS and suddenly, after many months of chasing, the SBT project was approved.

Navigating the maze was a very challenging period for us because we were working with so many different stakeholders and during a period of about 3 months we had many ups and downs. We would get so far only to be told it could not happen. Our initial thoughts were to offer a traineeship in Community Services however after many conversations with TAFE, VETIS & BOS we were informed that this would not be possible. Although we felt a bit disheartened we refused to give up. We then made an application to commence a SBT in Cert 3 Disability Work, however the BOS rejected our application stating that ITAB did not approve a SBT in Disability Work.

Again, we refused to give up so we then contacted ITAB and asked them why the idea was being rejected. We requested a face to face meeting with Susan Scowcroft Exec. Director of CSH-ITAB; to put our case forward for why a SBT in Disability Work should be approved. When we explained our involvement in this pilot project and our aspirations to see a SBT Disability work in NSW she was very supportive of our cause and offered her full assistance to get this project off the ground.

Susan contacted us at the end of October last year to inform us we had received approval to run the pilot and at this time she asked us to run a best practice pilot for the ITAB as well. Over the coming months we will be working closely with ITAB to help in the development of promotional materials to support students and employers, and this is also with thanks to the support of NDS as well.

With final approval we commenced promotion to Year 10 students in 4 regional schools. The SBT's were advertised in school newsletters and on careers noticeboards. We also wrote an article for the local newspaper's to accompany our advertisements.

The careers advisors found this approach to be the most effective form of promotion and were surprised by the level of interest.

#### **How we measured the impact of our strategies:**

- **NSW First – School-based Traineeship in Disability Work**
- **Made the process easier for other organisations to follow**
- **Increased interest from students towards career options in the sector**

The greatest positive impact to come out of this project for us is that we have been instrumental in creating the first SBT in Disability Work in NSW. When we commenced this project we presented our plan to the Board of Directors and Managers who gave us their unanimous support, and subsequently we found we had the support of all of Valmar staff.

The impact on staff of having 16 year old trainees working one full day a week has increased their own skills and self esteem as they have taken on a mentoring role to ensure the students have support and are learning in the workplace. This has been an empowering experience for our staff and this is demonstrated in the observable changes we have seen in their demeanour. And when I say this, I am talking about those staff who we mentioned before as working in disabilities more for the sake of having a job and meeting their home obligations rather than for professional development. They are now displaying more pride in their work as disability support workers and the trainees are picking up on this professionalism.

The other really important impact is evident within the schools. The careers advisors have reported an increase in the number of enquiries about career paths in the disability sector and our promotional work has really raised the profile of Valmar and disability work in general. To reinforce this, we seem to be getting more inquiry from young people who have just left school and want to find out more about the opportunities working in disabilities can offer them.

#### **Conclusions & Implications:**

- **Qualification Title**
- **Course subjects**
- **Mentor Training**
- **Debrief Sessions**
- **A complex process**
- **SBT Obligations**
- **UAI**
- **IBL**

The qualification used to be Cert 3 Community Services Disability Work and was changed to Cert 3 Disability Work. The only thing around this title is that the word “work” does not really reflect a professional image. We don’t know what the title could be but it is one of our findings that maybe the sector could consider.

We developed the training plan in consultation with TAFE and were heavily involved in the selection of electives. We did this because we wanted to ensure that the trainees are doing subjects that are relevant to the areas they are working in.

We negotiated with TAFE to deliver Mentor training to our staff who were working with the trainees. TAFE had a course which ran for 4 hours per week for 18 weeks, however in truth this is not really practical us, nor would I imagine for many disability organisations. So we sat down and discussed our concerns with the head TAFE teacher and she developed a 1 day Mentor training package specifically designed for staff working with our SBT’s. The trainees also attended that training and it was a highly effective exercise because both staff and trainees were able to communicate their expectations to each other. The one day course covered topics such as communication, interpersonal styles and generational differences in communication as well as exercises in exploring expectations of the organisation, individual staff members as well as those of the trainees.

The trainees work one day a week on a Wednesday as well as doing occasional weekend work with these additional days being mainly in the group houses. At no time does the trainee work alone, they must always have a support worker with them. Each Wednesday the trainee’s come to us for the last hour of their working day and this is so they can talk about their day and experiences through the day and ask questions. It is also a good opportunity for us to keep track of where they are up to with their course work and discuss any difficulties they may be having; and it allows them to talk about their course work with each other. The TAFE teacher also uses this time when she visits the trainees each 3 weeks.

We found this a very complex process and really this probably only got off the ground this year because of Gaye’s experience and network within the school sector. If she did not have that, we still would have succeeded but I image this would not have happened until 2010. There were a lot of stakeholders involved in us getting this off the ground and now that it is a reality we would like to see the whole process of starting a SBT simplified for Disability Services.

The traineeship requires students to work 100 days over the 2 year period. Now this might not sound like a lot on the face of it, but when you consider school holidays, excursions and the fact that they are simultaneously studying for their HSC which is demanding in its own right we feel that it is absolutely necessary the students complete 60 days in the first year, so they only have 40 days to complete in their Year 12. The reasoning behind this is so they can complete the course at least 2 weeks prior to their HSC exams. This seriously needs to be a consideration so that students do not have the additional stress directly prior to their exams.

This course currently cannot be used to count toward a student's UAI and we both believe that needs to be changed – particularly if students are wanting to pursue tertiary study and a career in the sector. I think that without a UAI rating it puts additional pressure on the students that do want to go on to uni because it means they have to carry the extra subjects through two already stressful years.

Of our two trainees one is very committed to tertiary study and is therefore carrying quite a heavy workload having dropped only one subject, but she seems to be coping quite well so

far. The other trainee would have most likely left school at the end of Year 10 until the opportunity arose for her to complete this traineeship. In this case she is finding the HSC going tough and has dropped two subjects and has taken on an IBL subject. Interestingly, she is doing very well with the Certificate 3 Disability Work subjects and is showing the potential to be well placed to work in the Disability Sector.

The IBL or Industry Based Learning subject requires the student to keep a journal of their activities while they are at work.