WORKABILITY Qld
Building Tomorrow's NDIS Workforce

WorkAbility Queensland Evaluation
Stage 2 Report
- Mackay

WorkAbility Qld Steering Committee

July 2017

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Introduction

WorkAbility Queensland is the non-government sector workforce development strategy for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in Queensland. It has been developed by a consortium of peak industry bodies in collaboration with key government agencies. The aim of the strategy is to meet the identified workforce needs of non-government organisations providing services to people with disability in Queensland, and to build workforce supply and capability to meet consumer need and demand under the NDIS.

The approach taken by WorkAbility Queensland is to establish Local WorkAbility Network, supported by a local coordinator, in each of the 13 NDIS regions to develop and drive a workforce action plan for the region. The local networks are supported by funding and initiatives which are managed at a Statewide level.

WorkAbility Queensland is overseen by a Steering Committee comprising senior representatives from the consortium, being the Community Services and Health Workforce Council (the Workforce Council), National Disability Services (NDS), the Community Services Industry Alliance (CSIA) and the Queensland Council of Social Services (QCOSS).

Outpost Consulting has been commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the Strategy to provide information to assist the WorkAbility Queensland Steering Committee to make future policy, program and investment decisions in relation to the NDIS workforce.

The evaluation is progressing in three stages:

Stage 1: Foundation work to set up the evaluation, included developing a theory of change and agreed performance indicators, as well as undertaking a scoping study in Townsville to understand the best approaches for data collection and lessons for the roll-out in other locations. This stage was completed in February 2017.

Stage 2: Collection of baseline data occurred across two regions during the early stages of implementation – Whitsunday, Isaac, Mackay (the Mackay region) and Ipswich, Lockyer Valley, Scenic Rim and Somerset (the Ipswich region). The reports for this stage are to be completed in mid-2017.

Stage 3: Follow up of baseline data collection with outcome data collection after 12 months of implementation of WorkAbility Queensland, including sourcing and synthesising a range of secondary data sources to understand the community level impacts of the Strategy. This stage will be completed in June 2018.

This report details findings from Stage 2 of the evaluation in the Mackay region. It details the baseline status in the Mackay region against the agreed indicators and presents considerations for the next 12 months of the roll-out of the WorkAbility Strategy.

Methodology

Overview

The foundation work for the evaluation included developing a theory of change which is a comprehensive description of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. The WorkAbility Queensland theory of change was agreed by the Steering Committee in October 2016 and formed the basis for the development of the evaluation plan which was agreed to by the Steering Committee in November 2016.

Using the theory of change, 14 indicators were developed to measure progress with WorkAbility Queensland. These are:

- Choice in workers for participants
- Availability of workers to meet participants' needs

- Attributes of workers (including skills, knowledge and values)

- Understanding of NDIS work

- Awareness of pathways and career opportunities in NDIS work

- Take up of NDIS pathways

- Numbers of workers in the NDIS workforce

- Number of suitable applicants for NDIS jobs

- Availability and accessibility of training at NDIS rollout sites

- Quality of training for NDIS workforce

- Confidence in understanding skill gaps

- Sustainability of local NDIS skills ecosystems

- Strength of relationships in local ecosystems

- Influence of the WorkAbility Queensland Strategy on boundary partners

Following this foundation work, a scoping study was undertaken in Townsville and a report provided to the Steering Committee which outlined success factors, challenges and risks, and advice for other sites.

Stage 2 of the evaluation has used the 14 evaluation indicators to consider the experience in two WorkAbility Queensland sites in the early stages of implementation of the NDIS. This data forms a baseline from which to look at progress made by the WorkAbility Queensland Strategy in 12 months' time (June 2018).

The baseline data collection involved a combination of primary research with different population groups and secondary research, drawing on existing data collections, in two implementation sites – Ipswich and Mackay.

The following methods were used in both Ipswich and Mackay regions:

i) Observations and conversations with the local Network – The evaluator attended an early Network meeting, presented information about the evaluation and had discussions with members. This meeting provided data on hopes, aspirations and expectations of the Network. The conversations also provided an opportunity to gain commitment to the evaluation from local stakeholders and support in recruiting participants.

ii) Interview with Coordinator – a semi-structured interview with each local WorkAbility Coordinator provided insights on how the Networks operate, activities conducted, progress towards goals and challenges for the project.

iii) Participant interviews – in-depth face to face interviews were undertaken with NDIS participants/potential participants to gain a more detailed understanding of their experiences with and expectations of workers. Between 8 and 10 participants were interviewed in each of the evaluation sites. A $30 store voucher was offered to interview participants as a gesture of thanks for their time and contribution.

iv) Worker Survey – a survey was distributed to workers providing services funded by the NDIS to seek data on self-perceptions of skills, knowledge and values, understanding of NDIS work, reasons for entering the sector, awareness of careers pathways and opportunities. The survey was disseminated through a range of channels including the local WorkAbility Queensland Networks and industry bodies including NDS, CSIA and QCOSS.

v) Employer telephone interviews – employers were asked to participate in telephone interviews about their workforce and the local labour market. In each location 10 telephone interviews were held with employers. The interviews covered issues such as attributes of staff, understanding of NDIS work, challenges with recruitment, quality of training available, confidence in understanding skill gaps.

vi) Secondary data analysis – secondary data analysis was undertaken at each location. This involved analyzing workforce profiles prepared by coordinators at each site, Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and university enrolment data, and information about RTO and university offerings.

Mackay evaluation participants

The findings from the Mackay baseline research draw on the insights and views of about 54 individuals in the Mackay area as outlined below (Table 1).

Table 1: Mackay evaluation participants

Method	Number of participants	Subgroups
Observations and discussions of Local Network	9	Service providers x 3 Government x 3 Employment agencies x 2 Coordinator x 1
Coordinator interview	1	N/A
Participant interviews/focus group	10	Mental health x 3 Intellectual disability x 3 Physical disability x 1 Indigenous x 3 (incl. 1 parent)
Employee survey	27	Cultural background Indigenous x 1 CALD x 1 Region Isaac region x 4 Whitsunday region x 7 Mackay region x 22 Employment type Allied health / nursing x 4 Supports coordinator x 7 Management x 11 Administration x 2
Employer interviews	10	Specialist Indigenous x 1 Specialist physical x 1 Mixed client-base x 8

Limitations

The key limitation was the lack of responses to the survey from individual support workers. This is likely due to the fact that support workers are generally away from the office and would have difficulty finding the time to fill in a survey. Attempts were made to reach support workers through interview or focus group but, again, the nature of their work (direct care, away from the office) combined with the timing of the research (a busy period for organisations during the early days of the NDIS roll-out) made this unfeasible.

A participant survey was developed and distributed to try to capture more participant views. However, despite varied approaches to dissemination the respondent rate in Mackay was very low. This data has not been used for the analysis.

The intention was also to access local workforce data collected through the Workforce Wizard tool administered by NDS. Given that use of Workforce Wizard relies on organisations to 'opt-in', the data is not yet reliable at a regional level. Analysis of this data can be included if it comes available.

Findings

Overview of WorkAbility Queensland in the Mackay region

The Mackay region has 181,783 residents, with 6,888 identifying as having a need for assistance in core activities and nearly 5% identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.[i] The area has been experiencing below average population growth at 1.2% since 2011 and has had negative growth in the 12 months to 2016 (ABS, 2016).[ii]

The forecasted number of new workers needed in the region to support the NDIS is in the range of 550-988, with most of the demand predicted to be for support workers, rather than allied health roles.[iii]

The NDIS became available in Mackay from 1 November 2016. The WorkAbility Strategy began in the region about 5 months prior with the employment of the Local WorkAbility Coordinator in July 2016 and the first NDIS Workforce Forum held on 3 August 2016.

The NDIS Workforce Forum was the first opportunity for all stakeholders in the region to come together to discuss workforce opportunities and challenges likely to result from the NDIS. A list of issues, opportunities and strategies were developed under the themes of workforce supply, workforce capability and workforce utilisation. This event was also the opportunity for stakeholders to nominate to become a member of the Local WorkAbility Network.

In August 2016, a Regional Workforce Profile for the Mackay region was developed through the WorkAbility Strategy. This profile contained statistical data about population, existing workforce and the education and training pipeline. It supported WorkAbility staff and the local network in understanding the demand for and potential supply of workers to support the NDIS rollout in the region, as well as areas of opportunity and risk for delivery of services to participants.

After the Forum, the Local WorkAbility Coordinator established the WorkAbility Network from the subgroup of attendees at the Forum who had nominated to be involved in an ongoing way. The Network has about 20 members, including service providers, RTOs, Job Actives and government representatives.

The first two Network meetings were aimed at developing an Action Plan to guide the group's work for the next 10 months. One of the first activities conducted under the Action Plan was a 'pop-up' shop held in a local shopping centre. Network members contributed funding and staffed the stall. The aim was to draw attention to the NDIS and promote disability careers.

Along with coordinating the Network meetings, participating in related local groups and events, and organising WorkAbility activities (such as the pop up shop), the Coordinator spends much of her time on individual engagement with stakeholders.

Status against baseline indicators

1. Choice and availability of workers

Choice in providers

Evaluation data from Mackay indicated that while there is a reasonable choice of providers in some areas, there are locations and service types where choice is limited. A key factor limiting choice for people who have their plans managed by the NDIA is that many services are not registered with the NDIA either because the prices offered by NDIA are too low or they are put off by the 'red tape'. Many participants have transferred their plans from being agency-managed to being managed by a plan manager so they can access services from non-registered providers. This means that while they have a wider choice of providers, the cost of services is likely to be more, which reduces the amount of service they can buy with their package.

"Prices are too low so services are not getting registered [with the NDIA]. It's hard to find a psychologist or a speech pathologist that will work under NDIS prices." - service provider

Allied health workers for assessments are in short supply in Mackay, particularly occupational therapists, social workers and speech pathologists. Stakeholders advised that many were not getting registered for the reasons above. From the NDIA list of registered providers, it appears there are only about four occupational therapists based in the region, one social worker and three speech pathologists.[iv]

"Attracting allied health professionals to regional centres and keeping them there [is difficult]." - employee

Stakeholders highlighted the following services that also in lacking:

• Providers that do repairs and maintenance to wheelchairs (only 3 in the region)

• People who do building modifications

• Registered providers of domestic assistance and yard maintenance

Participants in places with small populations only have limited services to choose from. In Bowen, for example, a town of about 10,000 residents, there are only two registered providers of individual support services. There are also limited registered Indigenous service providers in the region. This point was highlighted by Indigenous participants.

"Choice and control doesn't work in a regional area, particularly if you're NDIA managed." - participant

"The big challenge is the need for there to be organisations in the region that are NDIS approved [registered]." - service provider

"I have one participant who needs specialised OT. The closest [NDIA] registered one was Canberra." - service provider

"[There's a] major lack of options for allied health assessments for NDIS clients in Mackay - [there's] huge workload stress and waiting lists." - employee

Choice in workers

Despite a limited choice in some types of services, participants indicated that providers were able to offer a choice of people to work with from their organisations, even if sometimes it meant waiting to find the right person. Participants requiring individual support have been able to trial support workers and choose whether they are happy to use their services or would like to trial another worker. Indigenous participants interviewed, while not unhappy with their choice of support workers, would like to have the option of an Indigenous worker.

"I recently told [my service provider] I wanted a different cleaner because she was prying into my personal life. That was fine." - participant

"It was my own choice. I wanted a girl about my age…it took a while." - participant

"I wanted to talk to them first." – participant

"[There's] not enough of our own [workers]. We need to get the young ones interested." - participant

Most, but not all, employers interviewed said they have processes in place to ensure participants have a say in who will be working with them. Some service providers are now recruiting based on individual participant choices. This can present challenges for employers when clients leave the service if staff members cannot be easily redeployed. It is also challenging when participants have very specific requirements.

"Clients choose their workers. Clients meet them before they even get employed." - service provider

"We've got clients now that are realising that if they don't like our quality of service, they say they'll go to another service. So we might recruit 4 staff for one individual and then they move services. What do we do with the staff?" - service provider

"Mainly what I am finding in my role is the difficulty in matching staff to new customers coming on board – they have very specific wants and needs about what they want in a support worker. [It's] very difficult to match. A lot of families are requesting male workers. It's very difficult to get males."- service provider

Choice in types of services

Many participants and their families are still reticent about exercising choice. This is a new opportunity for them and they are unsure about what they want and how much choice is reasonable to expect.

"Some families are becoming more empowered but some families are concerned about asking too much, that they might lose everything... when you say 'what are you looking for?', they say 'what do you think?'." - service provider

"People don't know they can put their foot down." - service provider

Not surprisingly in a new scheme, there is still some confusion amongst participants about what their entitlements are, especially since each person's package is different with some people receiving services that others are denied.

"[I've] noted change in behaviours of clients feeling they are "entitled" to all equipment they identify as being necessary." - employee

"I wanted to get my drivers' licence but they said no." – participant

"I don't understand the system – give me a list of what I can get. I wanted to go and see my family in New Zealand. That would help me. But they turned me down." - participant

Flexibility in the workforce

Participants in Mackay are finding that providers are able to provide workers at times that suit their needs and there is a willingness to be flexible when things change.

"Workers are flexible. They will come a different day if that's what I want. I give a day's notice if something changes." - participant

"They are good at going along with your needs." - participant

However, some service providers have found that some of their existing staff are having trouble providing the flexibility required under the NDIS.

"There's people working under the old system – they need educating that things have changed – people with disability have choice and control." service provider

"We have an older workforce – they might need more support to be more flexible and thinking outside the square – not doing what we've always done." – service provider

"There's an embedded culture of inflexibility – we're starting to get past that but we're not there yet." - participant

Rostering has become a major challenge for service providers in the region. With many participants only needing support for short periods at certain times of the day, it is a major challenge for service providers to ensure they have a nimble, flexible workforce to meet the needs of participants. The casualisation of the workforce means that people are taking up multiple jobs and this then affects their availability and commitment to one employer.

"The challenge of having suitable staff all available at the same time - when half a dozen people want services and transport between 9 and 12 and all individual." – service provider

"We want people who are flexible with hours, will stay long term and be willing to do anything." – service provider

"We've had to struggle to get people we like – people want a lot of holidays, ridiculous demands – 3 hours a day, don't want to do cleaning – a lot of people are just doing it for a job. You need more than that attitude." – service provider

"We take them on and they say they're available but then they don't turn up for shifts." – service provider

"We love choice and control but it challenges us. It's harder to plan – we can't do structured rosters with linking shifts." – service provider

2. Understanding and attributes

Mackay service providers demonstrated a strong understanding of the NDIS and what changes were required within their organisations and with their workforces. Service providers from large organisations, particularly organisations that had services in trial sites in other States or in Townsville, were well prepared and many said they had been implementing NDIS approaches (ie choice and control, individualised packages) for some time.

"You look at each person as an individual and see how they can go about helping them to achieve their goals, but we were already doing that." – service provider

Some service providers acknowledged that there was a learning curve for staff in being proactive about responding to participants' needs

"NDIS is all about the client and their needs – it's hard to get staff that understand that." – service provider

"It's a new learning curve for staff to work out what to do and bringing forward their own ideas. It's program design." – service provider

Amongst employees who completed the NDIS workforce survey, most felt they understood the NDIS 'somewhat well', which reflects the early stages of implementation and employers' feeling that there is still work to do to help workers understand what the changes mean (Figure 1).

Figure 1: How well do you understand the NDIS?
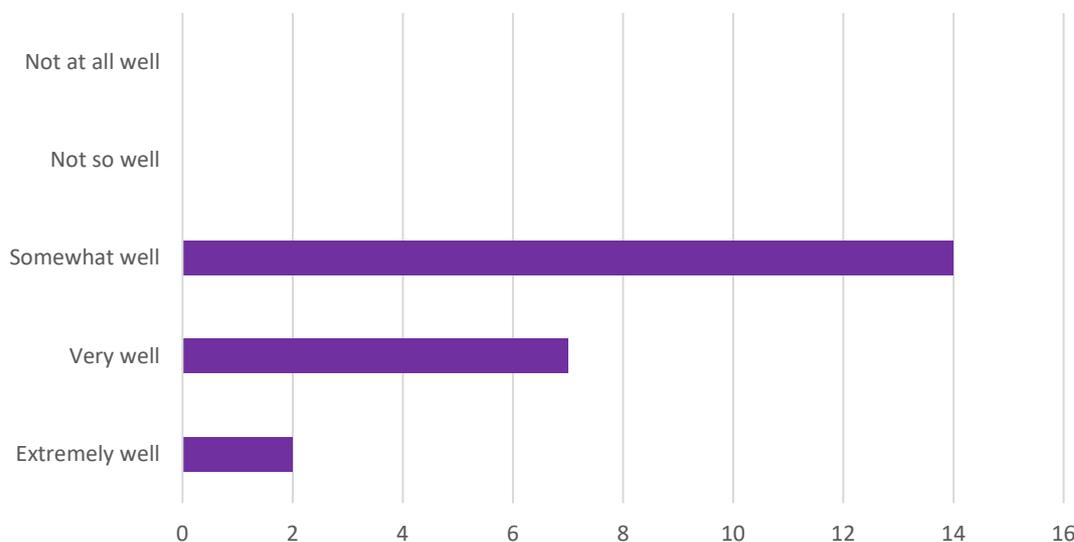
Almost all survey respondents felt they needed to improve their understanding about some aspect of the NDIS. The top five aspects of the NDIS employees felt they needed to understand better were:

- the role of Local Area Coordinators (LAC) (this is not surprising as the LAC had not commenced in Mackay at the time of the survey)
- the planning and review process
- how services are funded/new business models
- the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) component of the NDIS
- social insurance concepts and principles (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: What, if any, aspects of the NDIS do you need to understand better?
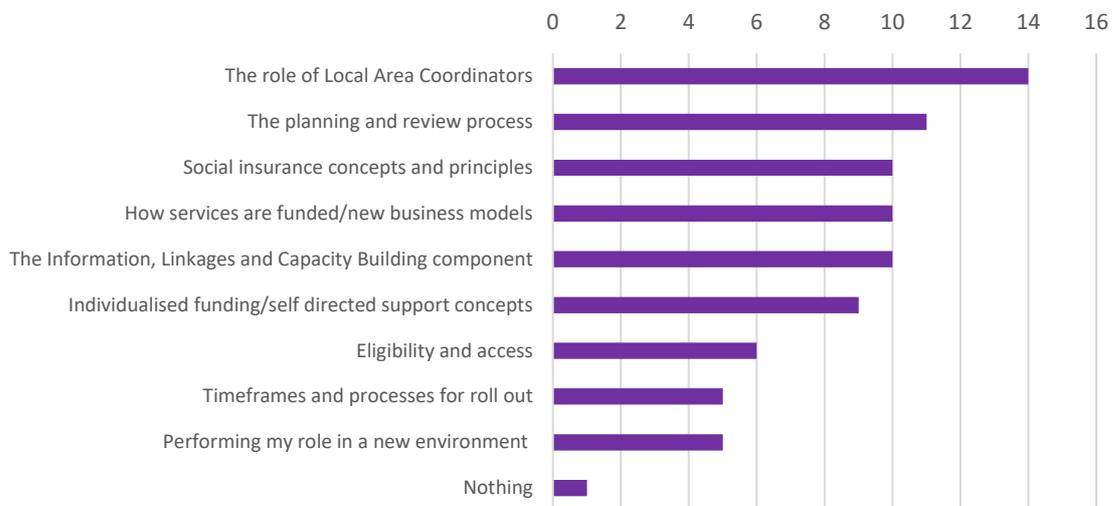
There was strong overlap in what service providers, participants and employees felt were important values and attributes in NDIS workers. Values and attributes regularly mentioned by employers, employees and participants are listed in Table 2 below. The three most frequently mentioned values and attributes by each group are in bold.

Table 2: Most important values and personality attributes for NDIS workers

NDIS participants	Service providers	Employees (top 8)
'With, not for'/provider not the expert/not patronizing or condescending/respectful Empathy / understanding Do their best to do what I want Understanding of disability/metal illness Confidentiality Flexible Interested in what I want to do Good company, friendly Has life experience	Empathy Understanding that participants have choice and control Reliability Flexibility and adaptability Confidentiality Knowledge of the disability field Honesty Good communicators Treating people with respect Professional boundaries Specific interests, hobbies	Honesty and integrity Good communicators Reliability Acceptance of individual choices Flexibility and adaptability Creative problem solving Respectfulness A genuine interest in people

Despite the overlap, employer and customer preferences don't always align, but organisations have said they are accepting of customer wishes and try to have a diverse worker base to respond to different personalities.

"It's interesting that we have 3 or 4 staff members that I wouldn't rate very high but some customers love them." – service provider

3. Pathways and career opportunities

The main reason survey respondents said they decided to work in the disability sector was because they wanted to make a difference to people's lives and they like working with people. Many also said they joined the sector because they have skills in the area due to personal experience (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Why did you decide to work in the disability sector?

Service providers are beginning to look for people from a range of different backgrounds. As noted above, service providers reported that workers' attitude and customer service skills are more important than a background in disability as these skills can be taught on the job. Some providers are cautious about employing people with a long history in the industry as they may have an entrenched mindset that does not fit with the NDIS approach.

"We employ people from retail/hotel. If they've been in those jobs for a number of years, that's good." – service provider

"A number come from the mining industry. They're looking for a change – they usually went into mining for income and now want to do something more meaningful." – service provider

"Our recruitment is based completely on values – the main value being respect for people – without that they don't get anywhere. That's been our philosophy since day one." – service provider

"If we have someone who has been in the industry a long time and think they know everything then they won't have the flexibility they need in the new environment." – service provider

Some service providers offer services to both aged care and disability customers. Workers tend to work across both customer groups. Interestingly, however, one employer said that a work background in aged care was a red flag for them. The 'aged care mindset' is very different from the 'disability support mindset' and they were cautious about having people with aged care experience working with their customers with disability.

"Aged care you do 'for' and disability you do 'with'. It's a different mindset. We want the customers to be as independent as possible." – service provider

"The girls aren't trained specifically in disability – they have aged care certificates. Some have cert III or IV in disability. But it's not a requirement." – service provider

Nine of nineteen respondents answered 'disagree' or 'neutral' in response to the statement "I am aware of different career pathways in NDIS work" and ten of nineteen respondents answered 'disagree' or 'neutral' in response to the statement "I have local opportunities to progress my career in the disability industry". These answers indicate more work might be needed to promote career pathways in the industry.

Nevertheless, survey respondents were generally satisfied or very satisfied with the career advancement opportunities available to them. Seventy per cent said they intended to stay in the disability industry for five or more years and just under half intended to stay in their current role for five or more years. This may be because career advancement is not of primary importance to these employees. 'Type of clients' was the least important aspect in career choices for employees, but this was closely followed by 'career advancement opportunities' and 'professional status' (Figure 4).

Not all respondents were unconcerned about career advancement. One person said that a lack of opportunities was the important workforce issue that needed to be addressed.

"[There's] lack of career advancement for people new to the industry and with less qualifications." - employee

When asked about the important factors in career choices for employees, 'work life balance' was most important, closely followed by 'income' and 'type of work'. Interestingly, 'profile of organisation' came in at number four. Organisations with high profiles and offering good conditions will have their pick of workers. This point was also made by employers.

Figure 4: Very important factors in career choices
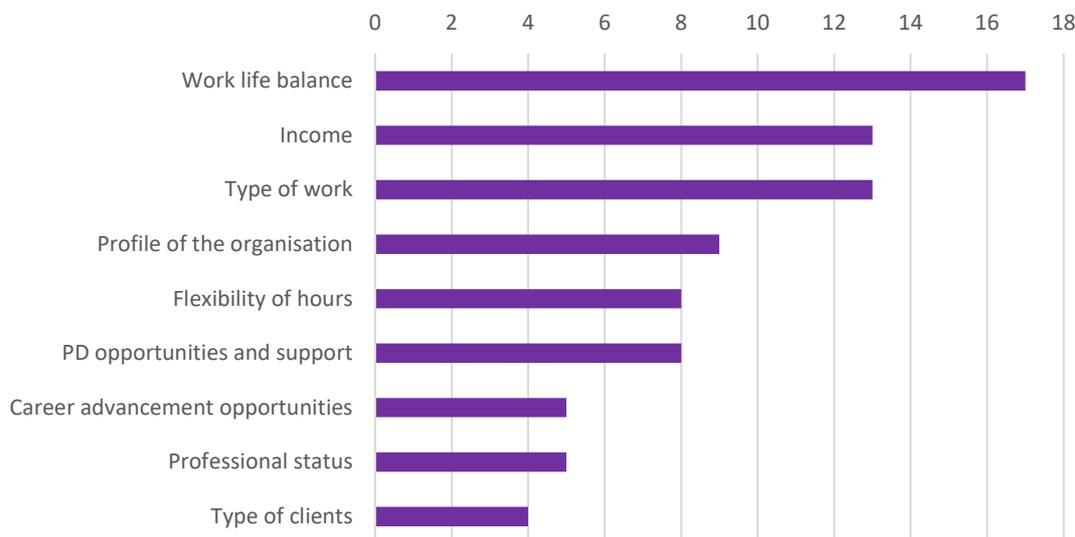
4. Numbers of workers and applicants

Despite the fact that, so far, participants are generally happy with the choice and quality of their workers, most organisations in this research said they have had difficulties recruiting the staff that they want. The larger services were better placed than the smaller ones in attracting suitable applicants.

"We're finding that it's difficult to get staff. We've been advertising since it started non-stop and the quality of staff isn't very high." – service provider

"We might recruit 4 staff for one individual [participant] and then they move to another provider." – service provider

Service providers explained that recruitment processes take a long time, are very costly and often do not produce the outcome that employers are looking for.

"On our last recruitment we had 74 applicants, we shortlisted 10 and recruited four. A huge amount were not at all suitable." – service provider

The lack of quality applicants is partly attributed to the casual nature of the work on offer.

"We had trouble recruiting and keeping them because we can only offer casual hours – that was the problem. We don't normally have many applicants when they hear it's casual, on call." – service provider

"There doesn't seem to be the high calibre of people looking for work. It might be that NDIS work isn't as secure – it's fluctuating." – service provider

"People are putting on a lot of casual workers but most people want a guaranteed income." – service provider

Pay levels and high caseloads are also issues that are likely to affect recruitment and retention in the workforce. Both employees and employers highlighted these issues, but without a change to NDIS pricing, organisations, particularly small organisations, are constrained in how they can tackle this issue.

"Support Coordination caseloads are too high to provide quality of service." – employee

"[most important workforce issue is] Hourly rate for the NDIS. Organisations are struggling under the set rate. It's almost $10 an hour less than what was previously set by Disability Services and Queensland Health." – employee

"[most important workforce issue is] Pay increases for all front-line workers." – employee

"The amount we're paying our workers – we're not going to get highly qualified people to work." – service provider

Service providers tend to use online recruitment agencies such as SEEK and Indeed.com, and some are targeting specific groups through other channels such as Facebook pages for women wanting to return to work. Some are also successfully using Disability Employment Services. Student placements are useful for service providers to assess people's skills and abilities before they employ them. A number of employers said they are more likely to take on 'walk-ins' because it shows people are proactive and keen on working in the industry. Having customers involved in the interview process is also an emerging trend amongst service providers.

"We take on people that come in and use initiative... walk-ins have more get up and go, they're not just doing it for Centrelink." – service provider

"One of our best ones is from our DES. The parents love her. She's got a lovely soft way. That was more important to them." – service provider

"As managers, we will invite customers/families to come and interview the applicant." – service provider

5. Training and understanding skill gaps

A very strong theme emerged from the research that skills and qualifications were secondary to personal attributes when it comes to support workers. This was repeated by both participants and service providers. Participants want people that do not judge them and are friendly and respectful, rather than highly qualified.

"Organisations that employ on values is a good idea." - participant

"Younger workers may not necessarily have the qualifications but may have a good attitude." – service provider

"Parents just want someone who is caring and supportive, they're not hung up on skills and qualifications." – service provider

"If they have the innate attribute of respect and active listening, then skill development is easy." – service provider

"It would be good if everyone had [a certificate] but some people are good at working with people with disability who don't have willingness or capability to do a course. Some older workers don't have the computer skills required or they're not good at writing, but they can tell you the right answers. Most important is that they work well with people." – service provider

While some organisations said that they are happy to take on support workers with no experience in disability, others preferred qualified or experienced staff.

"We're getting a lot of people applying but they don't have skills in disability." – service provider

"We would like all workers to have disability training." – service provider

Organisations that provide services for people with mental illness have a stronger need for specific mental health skills amongst mental health workers. Skills, rather than values and attitudes are also the starting point for allied health workers in line with requirements set down by their professions.

Customer-driven services, along with the casualization and streamlining of the workforce has resulted in the need for some new skillsets amongst staff. Specific areas for development mentioned by employers included:

• Communication with families

• Designing programs to fit with participant interests

• Working independently

• Boundary training

On the whole, employers felt they could fill these skill gaps with internal professional development. Most employers interviewed provided comprehensive in-house training on specific disability skills such as manual handling, medications, safety etc. That said, organisations also indicated that tighter margins under the NDIS may mean very little budget left over for training, with future upskilling costs likely to fall to Government or individuals.

"The issue we have for training is that the profit margin is minute. How do you pay for training? It's a huge issue as a provider." – service provider

"[we need] an increase in training to our support workers out in the community providing services for a range of clients." - employee

In the Mackay metropolitan area, employers were easily able to access RTOs to provide accredited training as needed. A provider outside Mackay, however, reported difficulty finding quality training providers to respond to their needs.

"There's not much available as far as I know. I've tried to get a few different things – they're happy to talk on the phone but it's different when you sit down… we need a training provider that's flexible to come at night or on the weekend – not during the day because people are working." – service provider

Most employers interviewed were not familiar with the new qualifications for individual support, so were unable to comment on the quality of training. However, there was a sense that while formal qualifications were not critical for the support worker workforce, and not the first thing employers look for, they were certainly a bonus. With the government-funded Certificate III in Individual Support attracting the fifth highest number of

commencing students in Queensland (3,735 students) of all qualifications,[v] it appears that many people are electing to gain formal qualifications for a career in the industry.

One employer interviewed had an in-depth understanding of the local VET environment. This interviewee felt the quality of RTOs was variable and while the Certificate III and IV had improved, there were areas that could be improved further. WorkAbility Network members also commented on the inconsistent quality of trainers.

> *"There are some dodgy ones [trainers]. There are people out there that shouldn't have a Cert III. If they go to a quality trainer, the Cert III is a good foundation – it needs to touch on challenging behaviours more. There's not much on autism yet." – service provider*
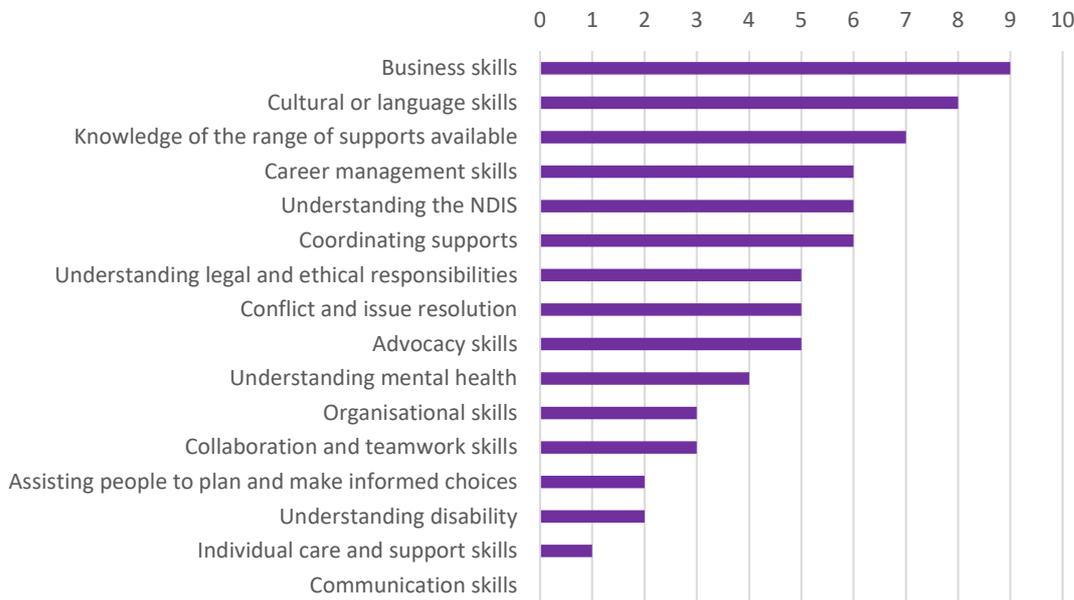
Employees who responded to the survey felt that they usually had the skills they needed to do their jobs and only occasionally felt out of their depth. They felt their strengths were communication skills, organisational skills and collaboration and team work (Figure 5).

Figure 5: What skills do you do particularly well in you role?
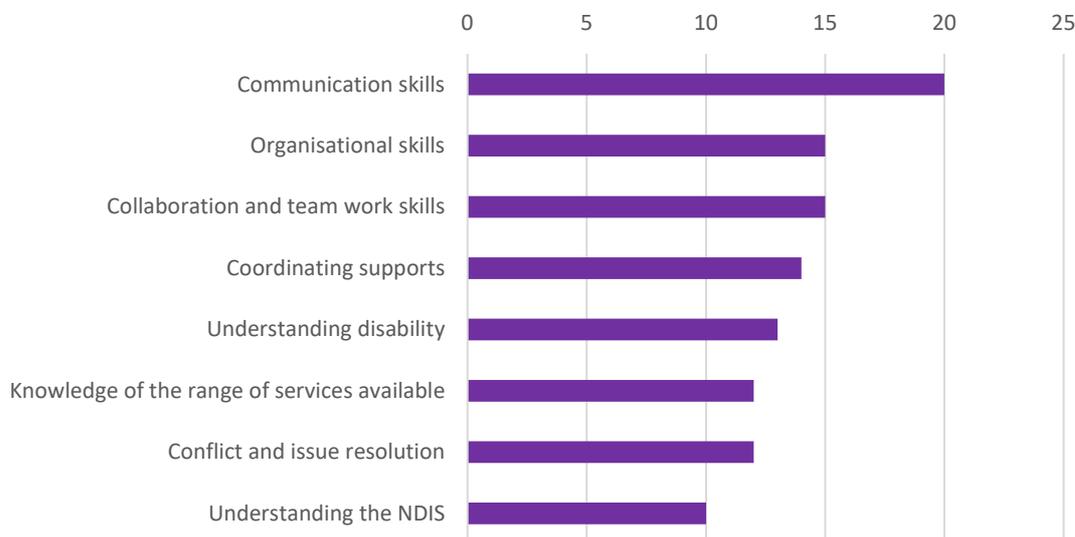
Workers highlighted a number of skills that they would like to improve to better perform their jobs. Interestingly, business skills and cultural or language skills came out on top as areas for development (Figure 6). Lowest on the list were communication skills, individual care and support, understanding disability, and assisting people plan and make informed choices.

Figure 6: What skills do you need to improve your performance as an NDIS worker?

Skill	Value
Business skills	9
Cultural or language skills	8
Knowledge of the range of supports available	7
Career management skills	6
Understanding the NDIS	6
Coordinating supports	6
Understanding legal and ethical responsibilities	5
Conflict and issue resolution	5
Advocacy skills	5
Understanding mental health	4
Organisational skills	3
Collaboration and teamwork skills	3
Assisting people to plan and make informed choices	2
Understanding disability	2
Individual care and support skills	1
Communication skills	0

6. Strength and sustainability of local Network

The Mackay WorkAbility Network is reasonably well attended, with about 20 regular members. The Network has a mix of service providers, RTOs, Job Actives, Local Council and State government departments (DATSIP and DET). Network members believe the group would be strengthened by involvement or stronger involvement by:

• CALD representatives

• Rural / remote communities

• Small service providers

• NDIA and/or Local Area Coordinator

• Specialist disability organisations

One Network member felt that the group should have a stronger service provider representation. This opinion also emerged in the Townsville scoping study. There was another view providing an avenue to engage groups outside the disability sector was an important reason for having the Network. Disability service providers need to get across the issues anyway, but stakeholders outside the sector would have limited opportunities to be exposed to the conversations about NDIS.

"There's a high number RTOs and employment services. This weakened the network. In both of those sectors involvement is driven by other reasons – income." – Network member

"Without WorkAbility people outside the disability field would know less. Job Actives, TAFEs, other mainstream providers like chemists, wouldn't have the opportunity to connect." – Network member

Unfortunately for the Mackay Network, the NDIA did not have a presence in town at the time of NDIS roll-out and the Local Area Coordinator (LAC) was not established until six months after NDIS roll-out. This presented difficulties in getting information about the NDIS and keeping stakeholders informed of changes.

DATSIP has been a regular attendee at Network meetings and has been particularly useful in keeping Indigenous issues on the table and bringing information to the group on what is happening in Aboriginal communities.

The group worked quickly to establish their action plan and begin promotional activity via the 'pop-up shop' which was considered highly successful by members. There has been a strong focus by the Coordinator on linking into related groups and events. The group has also been working closely with CQ University to make sure the qualifications provided locally are useful for the industry in the region.

> *"The pop up shop got disabilities out there in the community a bit more, it gets organisations' names out there and shows we're looking for staff to provide support." – service provider*

Network members, including the Coordinator, identified the following expectations and challenges for the work ahead.

Expectations	Challenges
A group that will stay together Strong engagement by service providers Organisational learning Promotion of disability jobs Assisting rural/remote areas Open sharing of ideas to support the local region	Keeping up with the pace of change Rural/remote engagement Focus beyond support workers – leaders/managers, allied health Getting information from NDIA (particularly with no LAC presence) Building of community interest in NDIS Keeping people enthusiastic Collecting data through Workforce Wizard

Considerations for WorkAbility Queensland implementation

Positive developments

Offering choice

The Mackay data indicates that service providers in the regional centre are providing choices to their customers about who works with them and when the services are provided. Despite challenges with rostering and matching employees to customers, and the investment needed in challenging the mindsets of some existing staff, service providers see this capacity to offer choice and flexibility as a critical element of the NDIS.

Understanding of the right values and attitudes

The importance of values and attitudes in this industry is widely understood and there is good alignment between employer, employee and customer expectations of worker values and attitudes. Most employees seem to be choosing to work in the industry for reasons that will benefit participants i.e. because they like working with people and want to make a difference. Employers are looking outside the sector to other customer-service industries and are beginning to use alternatives to traditional recruitment processes to ensure they find the right people for the job.

Training quality and availability

On the whole, employers are able to find the training they want and have it provided when they need it. Smaller communities may be less fortunate, however. With some possible exceptions, the training quality seems to be meeting the needs of the industry. The WorkAbility Network has been able to influence the quality of training delivery through engagement with providers such as CQ University.

Promoting employment opportunities

The WorkAbility Network has been focussing on practical activities to promote disability careers and grow the pool of suitable workers. The pop up shop model has been successful. Linking in with other Networks and events is also an effective strategy.

Indigenous engagement

The involvement of DATSIP in the WorkAbility Network has been critical in ensuring Indigenous issues are considered. As the Coordinator had limited opportunity to engage with stakeholders beyond the greater Mackay area, connections with organisations like DATSIP could provide a conduit to smaller communities.

Risks and challenges

Allied health

While the Mackay Workforce profile (prepared mid-2016) predicted that most of the demand for new workers would be in individual support roles, the research indicates unmet demand for allied health professionals. There appear to be serious shortages of allied health providers in the region, particularly occupational therapists and allied health professionals registered with the NDIA. The Bachelor of Occupational Therapy is not currently offered at the Mackay campus of CQ University, with the closest study options being Rockhampton and Townsville. This may have an ongoing effect on workforce supply.

Recruitment and retention challenges

Most employers are having trouble recruiting quality staff. There are two key reasons:

* Firstly, NDIS pricing does not allow organisations to offer competitive pay rates. This is an issue across the country. A recent report by the University of NSW on pricing services for decent jobs found overwhelmingly that NDIS prices are not covering the full costs of disability service provision or supporting quality services. Under-pricing of services is inherent in the key assumptions underpinning the NDIS pricing model.vi

*

* Secondly, casualisation of the support workforce is occurring and contributing to financial insecurity for staff and worker turnover. This is also potentially disrupting services and exacerbating risks for participants.vii

Given that employees rated income and work-life balance as the two most important factors in their career choices, service providers will continue to be challenged with recruitment and retention unless they find ways to provide competitive work conditions for staff.

Small communities

NDIS participants living in smaller regional communities currently have very limited say in relation to their workers. There is simply not the workforce available locally to provide choice.

The NDIA released a Rural and Remote Strategy in 2016 which highlights the need to "draw on local expertise and community knowledge to assess and build potential capacity to expand their service offerings and encourage new enterprises. This may include work to enable or encourage service providers from other sectors (health, aged care, employment) to increase their engagement with people with disability."viii The WorkAbility Strategy in the Mackay region has had little opportunity to engage outside Mackay itself. As the NDIS is beginning to attract participants from smaller towns, it will be important that a local workforce is available to provide the required services.

Suitability of aged care backgrounds

The aged care and disability sectors traditionally drew upon the same workforce and there are now common qualifications for the two sectors. However, it is interesting that some employers see a background in aged care as a negative for a disability worker, particularly with the increased focus on the NDIS of building independence. Thought will need to be given to ensuring workers understand the difference between aged care and disability support work and respond appropriately.

Areas for skill development

With the increasing casualisation of the workforce, workers are seeking to develop career management skills. Career management skills are defined as "competencies which help individuals to identify their existing skills, develop career learning goals and take action to enhance their careers."ix Under the NDIS workers are becoming less attached to organisations and more likely to work for multiple employers (both organisations and self-managed participants). As such, they will need skills in navigating their work lives and developing their careers.

In a competitive environment, business skills are becoming more important. Marketing and customer service are particularly important for workers to be able to effectively promote their, or their organisation's services to individuals and families in order to attract and retain customers. Problem solving, self-awareness, and planning skills are also important for workers working with less supervision and implementing individualised programs for customers.

The NDIS participants interviewed felt that their workers were generally flexible and able to accommodate their needs and changing requirements. Even so, service providers indicated that some staff still have some resistance to more flexible, customer-focussed arrangements. This is more common amongst staff who have worked in the sector for a long time. Effective leadership and appropriate training on implementing user-directed services and supported decision-making will help shift this mindset.

Understanding the NDIS

The Townsville scoping study found that while employers were generally well-informed about the NDIS, its guiding principles and what it means for organisations, this information was not trickling down to staff. There is some evidence of a similar situation in Mackay. Employers are reasonably confident about what the changes mean but staff are uncertain about many aspects including the planning and review process, how services are funded/new business models, the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) component of the NDIS and social insurance concepts and principles.

Management and administration

Organisations are challenged by the much more intensive matching and rostering demands under the NDIS. Organising the right people with the right skills to be in the right place at the right time can be a complex task, requiring specific skill sets and well-designed systems.

The more complicated environment also requires high level management skills, particularly around business process management, organisational change, and cultivating teamwork, creativity and responsiveness in a largely mobile workforce.

Links with the NDIA

In Mackay, WorkAbility Queensland has struggled to engage with the NDIA, partly because it had no permanent presence in Mackay and there was a significant delay in appointing a LAC. Information exchange with the NDIA

is critical for service providers to know when and how to respond to demand. It will be important for other WorkAbility sites to have strong relationships with local NDIA staff to ensure members have access to as much information as possible and they can confidently help their staff understand the practical aspects of the NDIA role.

Conclusion

The Mackay experience in the early days of the NDIS roll-out highlights a number of lessons for WorkAbility Queensland, particularly the need to foster close links with the NDIA and LAC to ensure people at all levels of organisations are across the detail of the new approaches; to assist employers support and train an increasingly casualised and mobile workforce; and provide the best possible workplace conditions and opportunities in the face of stagnant or declining pay-rates. The research indicates that individuals are requiring skill development in business skills and navigating their careers and for some existing workers, implementing user-directed services. Strong relationships with DATSIP and other agencies with a presence in small regional and remote communities is needed to ensure these areas can benefit from WorkAbility Queensland initiatives.

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