

Background of the responding Organisation

Community Employment Options Inc's Board, Management and Staff desire to ensure equal access to the workforce for people who experience a disability or other barriers in regional Queensland.

We commenced in 1990, in response to concerned people in the community who saw major gaps in employment service delivery for people who experience a disability and other disadvantaged job seekers.

We work with people who experience barriers to employment. A large proportion of job seekers who seek our service have a disability including people who have intellectual, physical, psychiatric, neurological and sensory disabilities. Additionally, we work with 'at risk' and disengaged young people in Education, homeless youth, indigenous people and people who are long-termed unemployed.

Our interest is providing access to career pathways to those most vulnerable in the labour market through – effective assessment, access to training and education, best possible job match and appropriate on-the-job supports, to ensure good outcome for our job seeker and employer customers.

Our DEN Services operate from 6 outlets in 8 locations in Central Queensland and Wide Bay. Our DEN Services employ 40 staff. We operate a number of other activities with Local Government, State Government and other Community Organisations. In all, CEO Inc employs nearly 80 people.

We are an Equal Opportunity Employer and employ PWD (20%) and Indigenous Australians (3%).

General Comments

The Organisation agrees with the general commitments of the Australian Government's Social Reforms in relation to the employment market. We especially appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on issues we have been directly associated with for 17 years and indirectly, for many more years.

The writer has been involved with a number of employment programs – School leaver Pilot program to Community Youth Support Scheme; CYSS to SkillShare; Skillshare to Job Network; and; Commonwealth Employment Service to Job Network (Employment National).

Each iteration of the Employment Services Market has been positive. The latest has the potential to coordinate Education, Training, Employment and Workplace Relations to gain even more enduring employment results for the most disadvantaged in the labour market.

Current and Emerging Environment

It is anticipated that the employment market may be significantly different by 2010.

Already, we are seeing the impact of skilled labour shortages¹ and we anticipate general labour shortages (all things remaining equal). These labour market conditions have not been seen for thirty-five years.

Approximately, 1.7 million Australians experience barriers to the labour market due to disability, parental status, age, length of unemployment, underemployment and/or cultural heritage.

As labour supply tightens, the Welfare to Work target group remains segregated from the workforce. This group has been, largely, unwelcome in workplaces over many years because of the perception that their barriers are “too hard” to deal with.

As a result, many have given up or actively resist the invitation to participate in the workforce at a time when **they are needed**. And, they will need careful and individualized attention to be coaxed back into the market place ensuring appropriate supports and safe guards are in place.

In the changing employment market, the group now represents a significantly under-utilised human resource. Many lack appropriate education/training, access to clear pathways and support to be competitive in the employment market.

Other significant barriers (from our perspective) include –

- Pervading Community and Employer view limits opportunity eg. often we hear reference to “the bottom of the barrel”
- High potential demand for employment services leading to further erosion of required levels of funding and support
- Appropriateness of access points to options for assessment, treatment, training, employment placement and support for those most disadvantaged due, in large, to the divide and confusion between State and Federal Government, but, more importantly, between State and Federal Government Departments

We know, from experience that **job seekers with disabilities and other disadvantaged job seekers can participate in work with support** and many **want to**. Even though accessing, motivating and supporting this group can be hard work, we need to make the effort to ensure labour availability in the future market together with a range of better outcomes for the Australian community (health, family incomes, individual self worth and improved community participation)

We know that underpinning disadvantage are a range of negative environmental experiences including family, school, legal, housing and employment. These

¹ National Centre for Vocational Education and Research's (NCVER) recent survey of employers revealed that over 80% of large employers had difficulty in recruiting skilled employees in the last twelve.

Response to
The Hon Brendan O'Connor MP
Minister for Employment Participation

experiences have the potential severely affect people's whole lives and their ability to participate in the community.

For example –

- Some peoples' whole School experience is defined by being taught in the Special Needs Unit or "VEGIE CLASS"
- If you use a wheelchair you cannot access many workplaces
- We exclude prisoners from society even when they have 'paid their debt'
- In some areas, housing is so unaffordable that basic services are under threat because shop assistants, administration officers, child care workers, youth workers etc can't rent/buy in the town – creating a low-income 'class' in our society
- Young people are paid less to do a similar or the same job (as are women in some cases)
- Some low income earners are lucky enough to live in a housing commission house – in regional Queensland, Housing Commission areas are established and known as "where the 'poor' live"
- Low Income families are less healthy and less educated than the mean in our society
- Many Indigenous Australians still live on 'reserves' that were established early last century in response to the housing and education needs of the group

Breaking out of the 'disadvantage mould' is not impossible with the right supports and the right intentions by Governments, service providers and the community. However, it is an inter-generational challenge.

Some general suggestions –

Flexible, accessible and coordinated approaches to service delivery and funding targeting people's need and their changing life situations

- Recognition of the wide range of issues that impact on employability and the support required to re-engage Welfare to Work target groups
- Build a simple funding structure that meet people's need; supports their changing needs and circumstances; and tolerates easy movement between education, employment and training options
- Improved synchronization between DEEWR and State Governments employment, education and training programs to maximize the benefits of funds currently in the system
- Incentives for and engagement of Business in partnership with individuals who experience barriers to accessing the labour market (with PAGES when required)
- Incentives for and engagement of Welfare to Work target groups with generic services including employment agents and labour supply operations² in partnership with PAGES (when required)

² Labour outsourcing is emerging as a significant strategy for workforce supply. The market is now worth \$16 billion in Australia (RCSA Ltd).

- Better coordination of programs at the Regional and community level

“Virtual” One-Stop-Shop for those identified with barriers

- A single EA3000 type data system across education, training, employment and employment related programs (Commonwealth and State) to support early interventions, assessments, referral, engagement and support at any point along a continuum where disadvantage is identified and maintains a history of circumstances
- Implement a single set of Industry Service Standards (incorporating the Disability Service Standards) across EE & T sectors

Case Management processes along the continuum of school, employment (career), child protection, housing, health and retirement – incorporating Federal and State Government Departments

- Utilise and coordinate existing PAGES (and the range of existing other) resources for assessment, coaching or mentoring and engagement interventions based on the ‘best interest of the person’

Early intervention from initial engagement with the ‘system’ (where disadvantage is identified)

- The cornerstone of early intervention should be assessment that is needs and future focused (where disadvantage is identified involve the families and/or key support people in the assessment activity)
- EI should incorporate long-termed, flexible re-assessment and re-engagement strategies

Comments of DEN Capped and Uncapped

Generally, the employment services system is perceived by job seekers as too complex and/or too inflexible to navigate and meet needs. We often see potential participant giving up before they start or resisting because they are forced to participate. (The writer is also aware of the converse, where job seekers use the complexity to their own advantage)

DEN is one of the 100’s of organisation’s in our community, funded by a variety of Commonwealth and State Agencies, providing employment placement and employment associated services including work experience placements/coordination, School to work transition, School retrieval, post-School options, Apprenticeship placement and support, Apprenticeship training, Vocational training, assessment, employment placement and support, skills and labour shortage analysis and planning, employment market coordination etc

When job seekers do engage, they experience multiple assessments (Centrelink, JCA and Service), inappropriate referring, re-referring, time delays (waiting lists and/or gathering information) and service lags in trying to access employment.

Response to
The Hon Brendan O'Connor MP
Minister for Employment Participation

For Service Providers too, providing Employment Services is reasonably complex and staff struggle with maintaining knowledge of their local communities, assisting job seekers and providing administrative accuracy –

- 70% (approx) of Site Managers time is spent on initial interviews, checking and authorising
- Administration Officers are fully occupied at each Site auditing participant files to ensure we don't get 'pinged'
- Employment Consultants complain that they feel pressured to think more about accurate entries to EA3000 than the participant's needs
- Often staff complain that it is difficult to maintain knowledge when the environment is so dynamic (multiple services and system changes)

DEN Program suggestions –

- Combine DEN Capped with Uncapped
- Build simple funding structures around the needs of the individual rather than the various service systems
- Credit Training and Education as an outcome
- Identify and eliminate disincentives in the system eg DSP review for voluntary participants; up-front judgements about potential hours of work to determine program type; difficulties with moving between service types
- Stimulate innovation in the market place especially, community/Organisation/business partnerships
- Positive promotion focused on the pathways and services to assist Business access the DEN labour pool

STAR Ratings –

STAR ratings provide organisational benchmarking and a basis for continual performance improvement. Additionally, it is a good tool for judging Service Provider effectiveness.

Possible improvements –

- Annual ratings
- Apply to Education, training and employment industry sectors

Conclusion

We thank you for the opportunity to provide our opinions and have input to the future of the industry.

Peter Callaghan
Chief Executive Officer
Community Employment Options Inc