



Towards better practice in employment services

A study to identify the
factors that contribute to
high performance in
Intensive Assistance



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1. Introducing the study

Job Network performance matters

Performance matters in Job Network and, overall, Job Network is performing very well¹. A recent OECD report *Innovations in Labour Market Policies - The Australian Way*² finds that Job Network delivers comparable results to those obtained under previous systems but at considerably less cost overall.

In undertaking its significant reforms of employment services and establishing Job Network, one of the Commonwealth Government's clear objectives was, first and foremost, to deliver a better quality of assistance to unemployed people, leading to better and more sustainable outcomes³.

The Government has endorsed an Evaluation Strategy for Job Network which will evaluate Job Network's success in achieving its objectives.

The Evaluation Strategy includes three evaluation reports. Two reports have been released to date. The first examined implementation issues and early market experiences. The second, released earlier in 2001, was a report on progress. The third report, on the effectiveness of Job Network in securing sustainable employment for job seekers, is due to be finalised at the end of 2001⁴.

High performance in Intensive Assistance services

As part of its continuous improvement programme for Job Network, the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business has undertaken a qualitative study, focussed on Intensive Assistance services, to identify the factors that contribute to sustainable high performance in Job Network. While not formally part of the Job Network Evaluation Strategy, the study adds to and complements other publicly available information about Job Network performance.

Job Network performance data shows that some Job Network sites consistently achieve much higher rates of outcomes for job seekers than others, even when compared to other sites operating in the same or similar labour markets and providing services to a caseload of job seekers with similar characteristics. This study seeks to identify whether there are practices or processes, common to high performing sites which are not evident, or are less well defined in lower performing sites, and which can therefore be identified as contributing to high performance in Job Network.

This report documents the findings of that study.

¹ See Appendix A for a description of Job Network and its services

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development *Innovations in Labour Market Policies - The Australian Way* Paris 2001

³ Vanstone, the Hon Amanda *Reforming Employment Assistance - Helping Australians into Real Jobs* Ministerial Statement AGPS Canberra August 1996

⁴ DEWRSB *Job Network Evaluation Stage 2* EPPB Report 2/2001 DEWRSB Canberra 2001
<http://www.dewrsb.gov.au/employment/publications/JobNetworkEval/Stage2/JN2report.asp>

While the study is, by its nature, exploratory, it nevertheless identifies a number of key factors which are clearly associated with high performance. These factors should be taken into consideration by Job Network members seeking to improve their delivery of Intensive Assistance services. The findings will also be of interest to other employment service providers and those seeking to enter the market.

While many Job Network members are performing well and achieving high outcome rates for job seekers, all organisations can do whatever they do better. In presenting the findings, it is not the Department's intention to give advice or directions to Job Network members about how they should deliver Intensive Assistance services, but rather to make available to Job Network members information that they may choose to consider in their efforts to continuously improve their performance. It is up to Job Network members (and others) to decide whether or how to use the information contained in this report in their own business improvement processes.

Main findings of the study

The study identified a number of factors that appear to distinguish the practices of high performing Job Network Intensive Assistance providers from those of lower performers and impact on their effectiveness in achieving sustainable employment outcomes for their Intensive Assistance clients. These include:

- the skills, knowledge, attributes and experience of staff;
- a comprehensive and inclusive approach to organisational performance monitoring;
- a strong focus on outcomes;
- a wide range of interventions and tailored assistance for job seekers supported by employment consultant autonomy;
- a clear business orientation and a strong commitment to working with disadvantaged job seekers;
- effective mechanisms for internal communication and information sharing; and
- strong external linkages and networks.

2. Methodology

Project objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- identify factors that are common to all or most high performing organisations and which can therefore be identified as contributing to high performance;
- identify whether there are characteristics that are a necessary condition of high performance in Job Network; and
- to disseminate the findings of the study widely to assist Job Network members and other interested parties to improve their performance.

Sample selection and data collection

Sites were selected to participate in the study on the basis of performance. In developing the sampling frame for the study, all Job Network members with sites delivering Intensive Assistance were ranked according to their performance by Employment Services Area (ESA). The Job Network Performance Ratings⁵ released in March 2001 were used as the basis for determining performance. Only the ratings achieved for Intensive Assistance were considered.

For comparative purposes the sample population was classified into three performance groups – *high, medium and low* performance⁶.

The survey population was further stratified by size, by location and by the strength of the labour market.

A sample of sites from the sampling frame was then randomly selected. In making the final selection, additional performance information was taken into consideration to classify a site appropriately if a Job Network member had more than one site operating in an ESA. Other factors such as state distribution and respondent burden were also considered.

Of the sites selected to participate in the study, 24 were defined as high performing sites. As a comparison group and to enable **differences** between the practices and characteristics of high and lower performers to be identified, a further 10 sites from the ‘medium’ and ‘low’ groups were also selected to participate.

Detailed questionnaires were developed and in-depth, on-site interviews were conducted at all 34 sites selected in the sample. For each site, a face-to-face interview was conducted with a principal or senior manager of the organisation, the relevant site manager and a number of Intensive Assistance and Job Matching consultants employed at the site.

To assist in the data collection and analysis phases of this study, the Department engaged a consultant, Worthington Di Marzio. The project methodology, including the selection of the sample, is explained in more detail in Appendix B.

⁵ The Job Network Performance Ratings are released publicly biannually. On the basis of a one to five star system, they comparatively rate the performance of Job Network members by service at the regional level. A regression model which takes into account a range of performance indicators is used to rate performance.

⁶ For more information about the performance classification system used, see Appendix B

3. General observations

The Job Network members selected to participate in the study gave generously of their time and knowledge. The Department gratefully acknowledges the support and assistance that was provided in the course of this study by those Job Network members involved. The vast majority of staff and managers interviewed for this project displayed a passion and enthusiasm for their work with disadvantaged job seekers and a commitment to the organisation for which they worked. They participated fully in the interviews and their frankness and candor was appreciated and their commitment to their work was a highlight. The Job Network members that participated in this study are listed on page 23.

In any qualitative study there is a degree of subjectivity in how responses are interpreted. This study involves a small sample of sites delivering Intensive Assistance services in Job Network. While the methodology used to select the sample is sound, care should be taken in assuming that the findings of the study are reflective of what happens in **every** high performing or lower performing site.

Notwithstanding this cautionary note, the findings can be relied upon as a general guide to the characteristics that high performing sites have in common and which can be said to be correlated with high performance in Intensive Assistance. It is important to note however, that while comparisons are between high and lower performers across a range of issues, not all high performers do everything well and not all lower performers do everything less well. In general, it was found that lower performers undertake fewer of the practices that matter and, generally, do not do them as well.

This report does not identify the practices, processes or characteristics of **individual sites** or Job Network members. The purpose of the study was to identify practices which are common to high performing sites. In the interests of maintaining confidentiality, other than acknowledging their participation in the study, no individual site or Job Network member is identified in the key findings and no practice unique to any particular site in the study is highlighted.

Some of the lower performers in the study provided explanations to the interviewing team for their poorer performance. In some cases, it was explained that the cause was due to external factors beyond the site or organisation's control. This study made no attempt to analyse or take into consideration any individual factors which may have impacted on the performance of any particular site. The performance of individual sites was not the focus of this study.

The interviews for this study were conducted soon after the release of the Job Network Performance Ratings. These ratings had, in some cases, a significant impact, particularly on the lower performers. They had not realised that their comparative performance was as low as it was and their rating had come as a surprise. While many of them believed that the Performance Ratings, with their focus on employment outcomes, did not measure the quality of service provided or the improvements they had made in job seekers' personal lives, many also commented that they were only now coming to grips with the fact that they were operating in a commercial, competitive environment and they needed to focus more on business outcomes.

By the time the interviews were conducted, some lower performers had begun implementing changes designed to bring about an improvement in their performance. For example, in more than one instance, sites had recently replaced the Site Manager with a new person to help bolster performance.

4. Key findings

The skills of staff impact significantly on performance

There can be no doubt that in a labour intensive service sector such as Job Network, the skills and experience of staff contribute significantly to performance. Overwhelmingly, the study found that the quality of staff is the single most important factor in contributing to high performance in Job Network.

High performing employment consultants have skills and qualities in common

Interestingly, when asked to identify the skills and qualities an employment consultant needed to perform well in Job Network, there was strong consistency in the responses from all participants in the study. However, interview teams observed that staff at high performing sites are more likely to display more of the attributes that are considered necessary for high performance and more likely to display the attributes at a higher level.

The study found that employment consultants at high performing sites:

- have excellent people and communication skills and network effectively;
- have strong customer service skills and are able to work effectively with job seekers – managing the often delicate balance between empathy, problem solving, negotiation and motivation;
- are organised and innovative and are able to obtain resources for their clients and to use them effectively;
- demonstrate strong commitment to the organisation in which they work and its objectives; and
- are team players with a strong commitment to working with unemployed people.

High performing sites adopt a strategic approach to staff selection

While no firm conclusion can be drawn from the data collected in this study, high performing organisations appear to adopt a more thorough and strategic approach to staff selection than lower performers. High performers recognise that their investment in human resources is critical to the success of their business and they invest accordingly in the staff selection process. They identify the traits, skills and characteristics that they require and they seek staff who meet these requirements and who will ‘fit’ with the team and with the organisational culture and values. They seek staff who will complement the skills of other staff members. They may invite applicants to team meetings or other staff events to see how they interact with the team and to enable existing team members to participate in the staff selection process. They may keep searching for the right person rather than accepting the best applicant when this person does not meet their identified requirements.

Innovation is dependent on skills and expertise of staff

Lower performing sites are more likely than high performing sites to value previous experience in employment services in staff selection. While high performers view previous experience as desirable, they value other skills and personal characteristics more. It is clear from research conducted elsewhere⁷, that innovation in services is dependent on the skills and expertise of staff. That lower performers value previous experience more highly than high performers may indicate that lower performers are more likely to persist with more established or traditional approaches to working with unemployed job seekers while high performers are more likely to be trying new and innovative ways of addressing client barriers and preparing them for work.

Site manager is pivotal to success

While overall, the qualities, attributes and skills of staff are identified as the most important factor contributing to performance, the skills, attributes and experience of the site manager in particular are seen as critical to performance.

Staff at high performing sites recognise and value the role of the site manager in contributing to the site's success. Site managers at high performing sites have excellent human resource management skills and display strong leadership. They are enthusiastic, motivated and energetic. They foster a supportive environment of mutual trust and respect that encourages others to contribute and they provide appropriate autonomy to staff. They invest time and energy in building a team and a positive team spirit. They encourage and support innovation, they establish effective channels of communication and they recognise and reward performance.

Perhaps most importantly, in circumstances where the site is part of a wider organisation, and senior organisational management is not located at the site, site managers at high performing sites maintain good relationships and channels of communication with off-site management and act as an effective conduit of information between off-site management and site staff.

Training and development lead to innovation but there is room for improvement

Overall, the study found that while Job Network members recognise that investment in on-going staff training and development may impact on performance, these activities, generally, do not appear to be a high priority. A number of factors may be at play here, not least that Job Network members seek to recruit staff who already have the skills necessary to do the job.

In addition, many sites indicated that organisational policy supports staff training and development but rather than offer training or development opportunities or actively encourage staff to undertake on-going development activities, management leave it up to staff to take the initiative and seek organisational support for training or development they want to undertake. Pressure of work was often the reason given by staff for not being more proactive in this area.

⁷ Pilat, Dirk *Innovation and Productivity in Services: State of the Art* OECD Economic Analysis and Statistics Division Paper prepared for the OECD/Australia workshop on Innovation and Productivity in Services Oct/Nov 2000, p25

Overall, high performing sites do appear to be more committed to on-going staff training and development than lower-performing sites. In particular, high performing sites offer more structured induction training for new staff. Most high performing sites included in the study offer structured induction programmes that last between two days and two weeks and which involve a mix of on-the-job and off-the-job learning. Lower performing sites tend to adopt a more ad-hoc and on-the-job approach to induction.

Commitment to staff development may be an area where Job Network members seeking to continuously improve their performance could do more. Investment in human resources is arguably critical to continuous improvement and innovation in employment services. In this labour intensive industry, new ideas, new ways of addressing old problems and innovations are likely to come from skilled staff who work closely with customers.

High performers recognise the value of organisational performance monitoring

Performance monitoring and measurement has been identified as critical to organisational success. High performing sites are more likely to have a consistent and persistent focus on performance measurement, to focus on a wide range of indicators that address various aspects of the organisation's business and to use performance monitoring to drive organisational improvement.

High performing sites actively monitor their performance and involve staff in this process. It is apparent that other Job Network sites are taking a stronger interest in their performance, and in monitoring their performance since the release of the Job Network Performance Ratings in March 2001.

High performers are more likely to have identified their own internal Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which they monitor on a systematic and regular basis. They have a range of KPIs which not only focus on outcomes but are directed at key aspects of the organisation's business.

High performers communicate openly about performance and involve staff in identifying performance benchmarks and in monitoring and measuring their own performance and that of the site. Staff at high performing sites appear to be more aware of the performance expected of them and more aware of how the site is tracking against expectations.

High performers monitor performance at a number of levels

High performers monitor performance at a number of levels – they may identify KPIs and measure performance at team, site, group and individual level. The wide range of performance data collected by high performing sites allows for a more comprehensive view of performance and provides a more accurate picture of overall performance trends. The high performers' ability to accurately assess their own performance is a significant factor in their continued success.

Lower performers are less likely to adopt a systemic approach to performance measurement and monitoring. Those lower performers that monitor performance seem to focus more narrowly. As an example, lower performers tend to monitor individual performance but do not seem to correlate it to overall site performance. In many cases, staff seemed not to be aware of what was expected of them until they were told they were not performing at a satisfactory level.

Some lower performers appear to do little monitoring of their own performance. Some indicated that they had been surprised by their low star ratings. They had assumed they were performing better. It is the experience of other industry sectors that organisations that do not monitor their performance against indicators critical to their business success often tend to believe that they are performing comparatively better than they actually are.

High performers are also more likely to undertake effective analysis of performance data to identify their particular strengths and weaknesses. The analysis is used to assist with the identification of areas for improvement. High performers appear to be more aware of the need to continuously improve if they want to remain high performers.

A team versus individual focus for performance appraisal

Individual performance appraisals seem to be commonplace across the study sample. There is a difference between the high performers and the lower performers in the way these schemes are administered.

High performers conduct reviews less frequently and focus on team achievements rather than individual targets. An individual's assessment is usually made in the context of how they work within a team. Staff working at high performing sites appear to value performance appraisal as a means of recognition for their efforts.

Lower performers are more likely to conduct reviews/assessments more frequently with some organisations claiming they monitored individual performance on a weekly basis. Assessments are often focussed on individual performance rather than team performance.

Use of incentives

Recognition of high performance is important to staff. Staff do not necessarily seek financial reward but do value being recognised for performing well. While many organisations have reward schemes that vary from bonuses to profit sharing to trips to dinners or movie tickets, staff at the sites are not always satisfied that the schemes work properly. Many of the high performing sites prefer to give team rewards rather than individual rewards because they see individual rewards as potentially divisive.

A strong focus on outcomes

Intensive Assistance contracts are inarguably the most keenly contested in Job Network. It is clear that high performing Job Network members which deliver Intensive Assistance are focussing their organisational effort on obtaining outcomes for their Intensive Assistance clients. This focus may have intensified since the release of the Job Network Performance Ratings in March 2001.

This study found that high performers firmly focus their efforts on achieving outcomes for job seekers, particularly their Intensive Assistance clients. They deliver quality service – they tailor individualised, personalised service to meet the particular circumstances of the job seeker. They undertake assessment and identify job seekers’ barriers to employment. They address those barriers, often innovatively, but their focus remains fixed on achieving an employment outcome for the job seeker and their efforts are directed to that purpose.

The study found that this focus on outcomes is one of the more distinguishing characteristics between high and lower performing sites and supports the findings of the Job Network Evaluation Stage 2⁸. Lower performing sites appear to be more likely to focus on the job seeker’s barriers to employment and to perhaps try to address them. It appears that sometimes they focus their efforts on the barriers rather than on the objective of working through (or around) the barriers to place the job seeker in a job. High performing sites, on the other hand, deal with the barriers to the extent necessary to return the job seeker to the workforce.

In the course of undertaking the study, the issue of ‘quality’ and its measurement in Job Network arose frequently. The ability to deliver quality employment services is the key assessment criteria used in the selection of Job Network providers and the prime measure of ‘quality’ is the ability of the provider to achieve employment outcomes for the target group.

It appears that some lower performers deliver quality personalised and individualised service to job seekers referred to them for Intensive Assistance – but do not have the same focus as the high performers on obtaining employment outcomes. While it is apparent that there are some job seekers referred to Intensive Assistance who have very severe barriers to employment, and also apparent that a proportion of job seekers exit Intensive Assistance without having obtained an outcome, it is also apparent that high performing sites are able to achieve outcomes for a higher percentage of their caseload than other sites. The study highlights that there needs to be further discussion about what constitutes quality in Job Network and poses the following question: *‘Are job seekers in Intensive Assistance getting quality service if efforts to assist them are not directed towards obtaining an employment outcome?’*

High performing sites have a range of strategies and processes in place to maximise outcomes for job seekers.

High performers have effective linkages between services

High performing Job Network members have strong linkages between Intensive Assistance and Job Matching. Intensive Assistance job seekers are given priority for Job Matching vacancies, often being ‘matched’ to the vacancy before any other job seekers are considered.

Intensive Assistance consultants at high performing sites work closely with their Job Matching counterparts.

⁸ DEWRSB *Job Network Evaluation Stage 2* EPPB Report 2/2001 DEWRSB Canberra 2001, p 58

Often the teams are co-located or situated in offices which are open plan. This allows staff to have quick and easy access to each other and facilitates exchange of information and ideas and fosters a team approach to problem solving. High performing sites are also more likely to hold regular meetings where Intensive Assistance and Job Matching staff discuss Intensive Assistance clients and their job requirements. These arrangements ensure that Job Matching staff are aware of individual Intensive Assistance clients who are job ready. Often 'job ready' job seekers are introduced to the Job Matching consultants, perhaps at an informal morning tea for example, to enable the Job Matching consultant to have established personal contact with the person they will be marketing to employers.

'Reverse marketing' is an effective strategy that leads to better outcomes

The study also revealed that high performers are more likely to undertake 'reverse marketing'. 'Reverse marketing' involves a highly targeted intensive canvassing of employers to find jobs for particular Intensive Assistance clients. 'Reverse marketing' requires employment consultants to have a strong knowledge of their local labour market and to have developed effective working relationships with particular employers in the area.

'Reverse marketing' involves promoting a particular job seeker to an employer and perhaps negotiating with the employer to modify a vacancy so that there is a 'fit' between the skills and personal characteristics of the job seeker and the particular vacancy. This highly targeted marketing and negotiation with employers about the requirements for a particular vacancy can only work where the relationship between employer and consultant is well-established and where the employer has confidence that the consultant understands the nature of the employer's business and his or her requirements and confidence that effective post-placement support will be available.

Many high performing sites claim that 'reverse marketing' is an effective way of finding jobs for job seekers who are ready to enter the workforce and is a significant means of obtaining employment outcomes.

High performers equip job seekers with skills to find their own job

While high performers appear to be adopting 'reverse marketing' as a strategy to assist them to place Intensive Assistance job seekers, it appears that intensive efforts with this strategy may be time limited. 'Reverse marketing' for a particular client may be limited to a two or three month period immediately after a job seeker is assessed as 'job ready'. If 'reverse marketing' does not achieve a job placement for the client in this period, the consultants' efforts in this regard may taper off. Their efforts to achieve an outcome for the job seeker, however, do not.

High performing sites also work closely with their job seekers to develop their job search skills and to empower them and provide them with confidence to find their own jobs. As discussed later in this report, they provide 'drop-in' job search facilities and often provide job search training for their 'job-ready' Intensive Assistance clients; they develop positive, supportive working relationships, they seek to improve, sometimes through formal personal development training, job seekers' self-confidence and self-esteem; they prepare them for interviews. They also provide job seekers with a 'reality check' – they help job seekers focus their job search activities on realistic jobs and prepare them for, and provide support through, disappointments.

Job Matching and Intensive Assistance are specialist roles

A strong focus on achieving outcomes for the client group is supported by role specialisation. High performers recognise that the skills required to excel as a Job Matching consultant are not the same as those required by a high performing Intensive Assistance consultant. High performing sites have specialist consultants in each role and the roles are clearly defined.

While high performing sites delivering Intensive Assistance may focus on achieving outcomes for this group, their commitment to the Job Matching function is strong – it is the Job Matching consultants who assess the kind of job required for individual job seekers and who liaise and negotiate with employers to obtain vacancies and place job seekers. Role specialisation is supported by strong linkages between the services as outlined elsewhere in this report.

High performers provide a wide range of interventions and tailored assistance supported by employment consultant autonomy

There are significant differences between high and lower performers in relation to the range of interventions and the individualised service provided to Intensive Assistance job seekers.

Staff at high performing sites have greater flexibility and autonomy

High performing sites provide a wide range of assistance and tailor service to individual needs. Consultants at these sites have greater autonomy to decide – with the job seeker – the most appropriate assistance that will help the particular job seeker find a job.

High performing sites appear to spend more on purchasing goods or services to meet identified job seeker needs than lower performing sites and individual consultants have more autonomy about what can be purchased and the amount to be spent. While all consultants appear to have a limit on how much expenditure they can approve without reference to a supervisor, it is apparent that employment consultants at high performing sites have greater autonomy in this regard than do their counterparts at lower performing sites.

It is also clear that purchasing goods and services for job seekers is not indiscriminate – expenditure is firmly tied to obtaining an employment outcome. However, the result is that high performers are much more flexible and innovative in the assistance they provide to job seekers.

Tailored, individualised assistance is a key factor in performance

Closely linked to the flexibility and autonomy to purchase goods and services for job seekers, high performing sites tailor assistance to meet the needs of individual job seekers. Considerable variations may exist in the package of assistance provided to different clients. Lower performing sites are much more likely to develop a more standardised and limited range of assistance that is provided to job seekers. While there is no inference here that this ‘standard’ range of assistance is not adequate, it appears clear that there is a strong link between flexibility in tailoring assistance to individual needs and higher performance.

High Performers make more of an effort with their job seekers

High performers appear to make much more of an effort with their Intensive Assistance job seekers. They have a culture of ‘going the extra yard’. They try a wider range of interventions and strategies. Rather than focus on the job seekers’ barriers, they focus on the positives. They find ways to work around the barriers if they cannot be addressed or overcome in the short term. They appear to adopt an attitude that few job seekers are too difficult to place and recognise that many people with serious barriers, for example, alcohol and substance abuse, do find and retain jobs.

Lower performers on the other hand appear more likely to identify job seekers with serious barriers as too ‘hard to place’. This does not necessarily mean that they do not provide quality service to these job seekers but their efforts are not focussed on obtaining an employment outcome for the client.

It was observed in this study that a surprising number of lower performers offered as an excuse for their lower performance that they receive high numbers of inappropriate referrals from Centrelink. Client characteristics, in fact, do not influence the comparative performance rating achieved by any Job Network member. The Job Network Performance Ratings take account of labour market conditions and client characteristics. As discussed, this study found that there is a significant difference in approach between high performers and lower performers in working with ‘harder to place’ clients. This tendency to identify job seekers with barriers as ‘too hard’ may also be a reflection of the differences in skill levels of staff that was observed, generally, between higher and lower performing sites.

Post-placement support matters

High performers appear to place more emphasis on post-placement support and undertake it as a standard practice. They have systems in place for routinely tracking their Intensive Assistance clients in employment.

In some instances, higher performing sites employ an employment consultant for this specific purpose. Investing resources in post-placement support appears to have several benefits. Firstly, it ensures that the site maintains some relationship with job seekers who have ‘found their own employment’, and means that the site can then track and (where appropriate) claim an outcome fee. Secondly, it means that the site may be given early warning of any problem with a placement and may be able to intervene to solve the problem before the placement is lost.

Smaller caseloads lead to better results

There were significant observable differences in caseload size between high and lower performing sites. While caseload size varied significantly between sites that participated in this study, high performing sites, on average, have smaller caseloads than lower performing sites. In addition, high performing sites also tend to have access to other resources which increase the time they have available to work with their clients and more flexibility to work with clients who need high levels of support. For example, they may have specialist staff to undertake post-placement support, to undertake assessments of clients (particularly those with severe barriers) or to provide job search training for Intensive Assistance clients. Lower performing sites simply may not make available the level of resources needed to work with the less motivated client or the not immediately work-ready client.

The study found evidence that both high and lower performers are becoming aware that caseload size may be a factor that influences performance and many sites seem to be moving towards decreasing the average number of job seekers in each consultant's caseload.

Frequency of contact with job seekers

High performers see their job seekers more frequently in person and, overall, have more contact with them than lower performers. Even in regional and rural areas, high performing sites are more likely to have more frequent and regular contact with their Intensive Assistance clients.

High performing sites encourage job seekers to use 'drop-in' facilities

Another characteristic that distinguishes high performers from lower performers is that higher performers tend to make available to job seekers a higher level of facilities to help them undertake job search activity. High performers frequently have available a 'drop-in' room or a space where equipment such as computers, touch screens, photocopiers, telephones, fax machines and newspapers were readily available and easily accessible. Job seekers are encouraged (and sometimes required) to 'drop-in' to use the facilities. Staff are usually available to assist job seekers with their job search at particular times.

Feedback can be a source of ideas for improvement

The study showed that high performers pay more attention to the feedback and complaints handling process by using it as a means of identifying areas for improvement. This positive attitude toward the difficulties that job seekers are experiencing appears to result in an improved level of service. High performers also provide a more open environment for job seekers to lodge complaints and set up complaints mechanisms that are perceived by job seekers as being impartial and capable of resolving the problem.

High performers have a clear business orientation and a commitment to job seekers

This is an area where there are observable differences between high performers and lower performers, but they are somewhat difficult to define.

Organisational culture and business orientation

Organisational culture has an impact on performance. There is a dynamism about high performing sites which is less apparent at most lower performing sites. High performing sites have a very positive attitude to unemployment and unemployed people and are committed to getting people jobs. They have a strong customer focus. They are clear and positive in their attitude to the work they do, why they do it and how they go about it.

High performing sites have a very clear business orientation – and this appears to apply equally to not-for-profit and for-profit high performers. They have a clear commitment to working with disadvantaged job seekers and this commitment may be based in ideology or simply a business decision. However their focus is very practically oriented – they recognise that they are in business, they know their business and they understand what is needed to succeed in that business. These high performers have accepted the challenge of working in a competitive employment services market and they organise their business to succeed in this market. They are flexible and adaptable; they understand how their business fits within the market, the community and (where relevant) within the broader organisation of which they are a part.

High performing sites are first and foremost business enterprises that are committed to succeeding. They are also businesses which are committed to working with disadvantaged job seekers. High performing sites demonstrate that they deliver quality, ethical, supportive and relevant assistance to disadvantaged job seekers while remaining firmly focussed on the objective of helping them achieve the goal of sustainable employment.

Strong personal relationship with job seekers

High performing Job Network members work hard to establish a good rapport with their job seekers. They work to develop a ‘professional mentor’ relationship with their clients. They use ‘one-on-one’ relationships to establish trust and respect and to motivate job seekers and kept them focussed on finding a job. They support the job seeker through the frustrations and disappointments of job search. A ‘professional mentor’ employment consultant helps the job seeker prepare for an interview, undertakes ‘post-mortems’ of interviews with the job seeker to find what can be learned for next time, shares the disappointment of a ‘rejection’ and the excitement of a job offer. While they have regular appointments with job seekers, they also maintain informal contact so they can provide support at appropriate times.

Effective information sharing is a key to high performance

Internal communication is an important process in the day-to-day operation of a Job Network member site. The strength and quality of the communication is a determining factor in the ability to respond to challenges and to provide a quality service.

Effective internal communication contributes significantly to staff job satisfaction and morale. It improves decision making and facilitates innovation through the exchange of ideas. It assists staff to stay focussed on organisational goals and to be aware of how their role contributes to the success of the organisation.

High performers appear to employ a wider range of mechanisms to facilitate internal communication and to use them more effectively.

A variety of media for internal communication

Established lines of communication between all levels of the organisation are a consistent feature of high performing sites. The study shows that high performers tend to use a variety of media for internal communication including e-mail, newsletters, teleconferences, meetings and inter-office visits. High performers also ensure that systems exist for disseminating information throughout the organisation. Information that is essential in day-to-day business is quickly and easily available, while less critical information is channelled elsewhere, allowing staff to follow it up when the opportunity arises. The high performing sites' ability to better manage the information stream is clearly a factor that contributes to their performance.

Meetings are an effective way to share information

High performing sites are good at sharing information and consulting with and involving staff in making decisions about work related matters. Regular staff and team meetings are commonplace. However, not all meetings are formal. High performing sites understand the need to operate flexibly and are able to react accordingly and often conduct quick informal 'chats' to share information or consult on particular issues. 'Open door' management policies and open plan offices also contribute to effective open internal communications.

Regular contact with site and off-site senior management (where relevant) is also seen as important. Senior management have a leadership role that has been identified as having an influence on the success of the organisation. With the high performing organisations, senior management are visible and make themselves available to all staff. This has a positive impact on morale and gives staff access to higher-level information. Staff at high performing sites usually expressed a degree of satisfaction at the way in which they are provided with information by management and involved in the decision making process.

Information technology helps maintain a competitive edge

Information technology has a significant influence on performance in Job Network. High performing sites appear to invest more in information technology, adopt a wider range of and more sophisticated information technology and use it more effectively to assist them in their day-to-day activities. High performing sites use information technology to provide easy access to information and to improve communication flows between staff on-site and across the organisation.

High performing sites have robust, well-resourced IT systems which support their commitment to information dissemination. High performing sites ensure that they have skilled staff who scan the rapidly changing information technology environment for recent developments and enhancements that may assist the organisation in retaining its competitive edge.

Strong external linkages and networks lead to improved performance

High performing sites develop and maintain strong linkages with a range of organisations in their local area, including the local business community, Centrelink, training and human service organisations and other Job Network members. They place priority on establishing and maintaining these relationships because they are vital to the site's success. High performing sites appear to be more open to establishing relationships with other organisations in their environment and to persist in nurturing and improving relationships that may not be positive.

Establishing relationships with a range of external organisations

High performing sites value good relationships with the following broad groupings of external organisations:

- relationships with Job Network partners, e.g. Centrelink, DEWRSB, Area Consultative Committees, other Job Network members;
- relationships with the business community, including local employers, Chambers of Commerce, local government;
- community links with training providers, community service providers, sporting bodies;
- personal networks established by employment consultants; and
- especially in rural/regional areas, relationships with local State and Federal Members of Parliament.

Relationships with employers are critical to performance

High performers work hard to develop strong relationships with employers in their local area. They are 'in-tune' with their local labour market and work well within it, understanding the opportunities it provides as well as its constraints and limitations. They maintain contact with a range of local employers and understand their requirements.

Interestingly, it appears that high performers adopt a strategic approach to vacancy collection. They do not market indiscriminately to employers – they are much more likely to work closely with a number of selected and carefully nurtured employers than to spend their efforts in randomly contacting employers in search of vacancies. As discussed elsewhere in this report, high performing sites are more likely to invest energy in seeking vacancies for specific job seekers or vacancies that they know suit their caseload rather than seeking any vacancies from employers that they may then not be able to fill.

High performing sites work hard to maintain contact with employers with whom they have developed a relationship and will do whatever they can to meet their requirements for suitable employees. Repeat business from employers is critical to success and high performing sites invest considerable effort into building a strong, quality relationship with selected employers.

External relationships are a source of new ideas

An organisation's networks and linkages with other organisations will impact on performance. High performing sites appear to be more innovative than lower performers – they are more likely to seek and try new ways of working, new strategies to assist disadvantaged job seekers find jobs. Innovation, new ways of working with old problems comes from new ideas. Linkages to other organisations and networking with external bodies provide high performing sites with access to new ideas and new approaches and can provide a spur to improve performance.

Relationship with Centrelink

All sites recognise the importance of having a good relationship with their local Centrelink office. A positive relationship is seen as essential in assisting the Job Network member to perform well.

High performing sites describe their relationship with their primary Centrelink office in positive terms and recognise that a good relationship with Centrelink improves the service quality they can provide to their job seekers. High performers are more likely than lower performing sites to regularly attend Centrelink forums and to participate in Centrelink job seeker intake sessions. They put more effort into making sure that the relationship between them and the Centrelink office is positive and effective.

Networking with other Job Network members

Interestingly, lower performers are much more likely than high performers to be concerned about sharing information and ideas with their Job Network member competitors. Lower performers are concerned that sharing information with their competitors meant giving away their competitive secrets and/or compromising their competitive advantage.

Most high performers on the other hand are prepared to share information with other providers of employment services, including their competitor Job Network members. High performers appear to be aware that competitive advantage rarely results from an organisation doing any one thing particularly well. Rather it is likely to result from an organisation doing everything it does better than its competitors.

High performers recognise that sharing information with a competitor will not necessarily result in either the competitor successfully adopting the new idea or in its improved performance. Using new ideas to improve performance requires a commitment to continuous improvement and organisational change as well as a willingness to critically analyse the organisation's existing processes and procedures to identify areas for improvement. High performers are also aware of their need to continuously improve their own performance if they are to remain ahead of their competition.

External relationships in rural and regional areas

In rural and regional areas, external relationships and strong links with the community appear to especially impact on performance. Some lower performing sites located in rural and regional areas indicated that their slowness in establishing relationships in the local community has contributed significantly to their poorer performance. The reputation and familiarity of a business, and the people who work in it, can have a significant impact on its success in smaller communities. Job Network members that may seek to open businesses in rural or regional areas where they do not have existing business may need to give priority to developing effective linkages with the local community. To be successful, sites in rural and regional areas may also need to invest more resources in contributing to community activities and being seen to be a good corporate member of the community than their counterparts in metropolitan areas.

5. Conclusions

Where to from here?

The findings of this study are very encouraging. Job Network members generally are clearly committed to delivering excellence in employment services and many of them actively strive towards ‘best practice’ in the industry.

While recognising the high levels of performance currently achieved through Job Network, the Department, the National Employment Services Association (NESA), Job Network members and other stakeholders must continue to work cooperatively and in partnership to ensure that the quality of service delivered to job seekers and employers continuously improves.

The Department, as purchaser, has a key role to play in market development and in working with its partners to facilitate on-going improvements in quality and performance in Job Network. As part of its commitment to continuous improvement in employment services, the Department has undertaken this study in cooperation with NESA and with the Job Network members who participated in it. NESA endorses the findings of the study and is committed to working with the industry to promote and facilitate on-going performance improvement.

This study is expected to be the first in a series and is part of a broader strategy which the Department will implement to foster the development of employment services. In the near future the Department, in conjunction with NESA, plans to conduct a seminar series to present the findings of the study and to enable Job Network members to discuss and consider the implications of the findings for their own businesses. The Department will conduct further similar studies to examine high performance in other Job Network fields.

The findings of this study are provided to all Job Network members and other interested stakeholders for information and appropriate follow-up action. It is neither the Department’s role nor intention to prescribe Job Network practice. Nevertheless, the report raises a number of issues which the Department and NESA encourage Job Network members to consider in the context of developing and reviewing their own performance management and improvement strategies, tailored to their individual circumstances.

While the Department and other bodies can facilitate practice improvement through the provision of tools, information and other assistance, ultimately, individual Job Network members are responsible for their own performance. All organisations can do whatever they do better. High performing Job Network members are demonstrating that a strategic approach to business improvement that addresses all aspects of the organisation’s operations will result in excellence in outcomes, quality and competitiveness.

6. Acknowledgements

This study was undertaken with the co-operation and assistance of a number of Job Network members. With their permission, the Department gratefully acknowledges their contribution and thanks them for their enthusiasm for the study and for giving so generously of their time.

Active Consulting Training Specialists, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE	IPA Personnel
AMES Employment	IPC Employment
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CHR Employment Services	Mission Australia
Communicare Inc.	Murray Mallee Training Company
Complete Personnel	Pegler Personnel
Employment Directions Australia	PVS Workfind
Employment Directions SA Country	Quest Employment Solutions
Employment Innovations Victoria	Sarina Russo Job Access
Employment National Limited	The Salvation Army Employment Plus
Indo-Chinese Employment Service	Workco Employment
	Your Employment Solutions

Steering Committee

A Steering Committee was established to provide direction and guidance to the project. While membership of the committee changed over time, the Department gratefully acknowledges the contribution to the study of all members of the Steering Committee.

Mr Bob Correll	DEWRSB, National Office
Mr Ken Douglas	DEWRSB, National Office
Ms Gail Finlay	DEWRSB National Office
Ms Leonie Green	NESA
Mr Bruce Hunter	Centrelink
Ms Lesley Longstone	DEWRSB, National Office
Ms Di McEwan	DEWRSB, SA State Office
Mr Finn Pratt	DEWRSB, National Office
Ms Leslie Riggs	DEWRSB, National Office
Ms Sally Sinclair	NESA
Ms Alison Stanley	DEWRSB, Qld State Office
Ms Joan ten Brummelaar	DEWRSB, National Office
Mr Robert Williams	Centrelink

Consultant

Worthington di Marzio was appointed to assist with the design and production of the study. Consultants from Worthington di Marzio participated in a number of interviews with Job Network members.

Interview Teams

The following staff from the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business participated in interview teams and assisted with analysis of data collected.

Stephen Baz	Hal Judge	Alison Stanley
Ida Birrell	Penne Lake	Richard Szymanski
Tanya Brown	Christine Le Grand	Joan ten Brummelaar
Sue Duckett	Jane McNamara	Kerren Thorsen
Jill Hamdorf	Stephen Powrie	John Venn
Sharron Hawkins	Michael Quinn	Catriona Vigor
Sorakha Hok	David Reynolds	Amanda Walsh
Narissa James	Richard Sara	Ron Walter
Mark Jones	Tom Shiner	Robert Wright

This report was prepared by Kerren Thorsen, Richard Szymanski, Sue Duckett, Amanda Walsh, and Robert Wright. Comments and guidance were provided by Gail Finlay.

Appendix A — What is Job Network?

Job Network is a national network of around 200 private, community and government organisations contracted by the Australian Government to deliver employment services to assist unemployed people into jobs⁹. This network replaced the publicly operated employment service (the Commonwealth Employment Service, or CES) and a range of labour market programmes that delivered short-term training, wage subsidies and work experience. Job Network contracts were awarded through a competitive tender process. The first contract ran from May 1998 until February 2000. The second contract runs from February 2000 until March 2003.

Job Network is the primary employment service administered by the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business (DEWRSB). It is complemented by other employment services, including Work for the Dole and the Indigenous Employment Policy, administered by DEWRSB, and the Apprenticeship and Traineeship System, administered by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, and employment services for job seekers with disabilities administered by the Department of Family and Community Services.

Job Network Services

Job Network provides five services:

- **Job Matching:** labour exchange services which are available to most unemployed job seekers regardless of whether they are on income support. Job Network members canvass employers for vacancies, refer suitable job seekers and assist them in preparing résumés.
- **Job Search Training:** 15 consecutive days of training in job-search techniques, which may include interview techniques and presentation, course-based assistance and other strategies. These services are mainly for job seekers unemployed for between 3 and 12 months.
- **Intensive Assistance:** individually tailored assistance to more disadvantaged job seekers. Services are provided for up to 12 months under Intensive Assistance level A and 15 months under Intensive Assistance level B, with negotiated extensions of up to six months being possible.
- **New Enterprise Incentive Scheme:** training, assessment of business plans, business advice and mentoring support over a 12 month period. An allowance (equivalent to unemployment payments) is paid to selected job seekers who have a viable business proposal leading to self-employment.
- **Project Contracting (Harvest Labour Service):** ensuring that fruit and vegetable growers have access to sufficient labour to harvest crops.

⁹ The Australian Government announced a new framework for the delivery of labour market assistance in the 1996-97 Budget. The rationale for and characteristics of the new framework are set out in *Reforming Employment Assistance – Helping Australians into Real Jobs* (Vanstone, 1996). The new system, of which Job Network is the major element, was implemented in May 1998.

Appendix B — Methodology and sample selection

Objectives of the study

The study into high performance in Job Network is an exploratory qualitative study. The study examined the practices, processes and characteristics of a sample of Job Network sites delivering Intensive Assistance.

The project's objectives were to:

- identify factors that are common to all or most high performing organisations and which can therefore be identified as contributing to high performance;
- identify whether there are characteristics that are a necessary condition of high performance in Job Network; and
- disseminate the findings of the study widely to assist Job Network members and other interested parties to improve their performance.

Focus of study—Intensive Assistance

The study focussed on sites delivering Intensive Assistance. There are a small number of sites delivering specialist Intensive Assistance services (i.e. Intensive Assistance to particular special needs groups). For the purposes of this study, specialist providers were excluded from the population. Part-time and outreach sites were also excluded.

Sample design and selection

Sites were selected to participate in the study on the basis of performance. In developing the sampling frame for the study all Job Network members with sites delivering Intensive Assistance were ranked according to performance by Employment Services Areas (ESA). The Job Network Performance Ratings released in March 2001 were used as the basis for determining performance. Only the rating achieved for Intensive Assistance was considered.

The study seeks to identify characteristics common to high performing sites. To enable **differences** between the practices and characteristics of high and lower performers to be identified, a sample that included both higher and lower performing sites was required. For comparative purposes, three specific ranges of performance within the full range were chosen to comprise the sample population. These three ranges were as follows:

- *High performers* - those organisations that had a rating of 4 and a half stars and above at the ESA level and 4 stars and above at the Labour Market Region level;
- *Medium performers* – those organisations that had a rating of between 3 and 3 and a half stars at the ESA level and 3 stars at the Labour Market Region level; and
- *Low performers* – those organisations that had a rating of between 1 and 2 stars at both the ESA and the Labour Market Region levels.

Once organisations were categorised according to performance at the ESA level, and identified as in one of these three groups, their eligible individual sites were identified. The Job Network Performance Rating model provides ratings of Job Network members at the Labour Market Region and ESA level but not at the site level. In constructing the sampling frame, additional performance information was taken into consideration to classify a site appropriately if a Job Network member had more than one site operating in an ESA.

The survey population was then further stratified by a number of variables including size, location and the strength of the labour market in which they operate.

Size of the site

The size of the site was based on its Intensive Assistance point-in-time contracted capacity. ‘Point-in-time contracted capacity’ refers to the maximum number of Intensive Assistance job seekers that a service provider is contracted to provide services to at any point in time. Based on the distribution of point-in-time contract capacity for all sites available for selection, all sites eligible for selection in the sample were classified into three groups:

- Small: Point in time contract capacity of between 0-139;
- Medium: Point in time contract capacity of between 140-319; and
- Large: Point in time contract capacity of 320 or above.

Location

The sample was stratified by location, and eligible sites were classified into two groups:

- Regional and
- Non-regional

Classification against this variable was based on postcode and was the same classification used to pay the Regional Servicing Fee for Job Matching outcomes in the first Job Network contract period.

Labour market strength

Each ESA in which an eligible site is located was allocated a rating of labour market strength. The labour market strength rating was based on an index, calculated from data provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The ESAs were designated:

- Strong;
- Medium; or
- Weak.

Sample selection

The total number of sites available for selection across the three performance classifications was:

- High: 128,
- Medium: 46,
- Low: 48.

A sample of all eligible sites from each cell in the sampling frame was then randomly selected. In making the final selection, additional factors such as state distribution and respondent burden were also considered.

A final sample of 34 sites was selected. This included 24 high performing sites and 10 lower performing sites. Job Network members with sites selected in the sample were invited to participate. One Job Network member declined. This organisation’s site was replaced in the sample by a site of another organisation selected from the same cell in the sampling frame.

Hypotheses

Based on discussions with departmental contract management and other staff and other key stakeholders, a number of hypotheses were developed about the factors that contribute to high performance for testing in the study.

The hypotheses tested were that high performing sites would display the following characteristics:

- diverse staff with a broad range of skills and experience;
- strong linkages within the organisation between services, for example between Intensive Assistance and Job Matching and Job Search Training;
- separation of the administration function from client servicing ie administrative tasks would be undertaken by staff employed for that purpose. Other specialist staff would undertake client servicing;
- regular contact between the Job Network member and job seeker;
- a commitment to internal performance monitoring, and feedback of information to management and staff at site level;
- assistance provided to job seekers is intensive, individualised and personalised;
- a positive attitude towards unemployment and unemployed persons;
- a sophisticated approach to assessing job seekers skills and barriers to employment;
- active job search is demanded from clients, which may be indicated by high participation testing and/or above average number of complaints;
- active matching of clients to vacancies;
- the site actively promotes its services to employers, for example being prepared to door knock employers in search of vacancies; and
- the Job Network member has strong links to the local business community, for example the local Chamber of Commerce.

Data source and data collection

The primary source of data and primary means of data collection was in-depth, face-to-face interviews with management and staff of the sites selected in the sample. In-depth interviews were conducted in May 2001, using structured interview discussion guides. These interview guides were designed to test the hypotheses outlined above about the factors that contribute to high performance. Three separate interview guides were developed for use with a principal or senior manager of the organisation; the site manager; and employment consultants employed at the site.

Interviews were conducted by teams. Each team consisted of two or three members – two Departmental officers conducted each interview and a third team member from Worthington Di Marzio¹⁰, the consultant to the project, participated in approximately 50 per cent of all interviews. In total 85 interviews were conducted, 78 at the 34 sites and seven separately with principals and/or senior managers.

¹⁰ On the basis of a selective tender process, the Department engaged Worthington Di Marzio as consultant to the project to provide advice on the methodology and to assist with data collection and analysis.

Glossary

Area Consultative Committees	Area Consultative Committees are the Government's key regional network and work in partnership with government, business and the community to identify and foster opportunities for jobs growth.
Employment outcome	The minimal requirement for an employment outcome is met where an Intensive Assistance job seeker in receipt of Newstart or Youth Allowance remains in employment, unsubsidised self-employment or an apprenticeship or traineeship that reduces their allowance by 70% averaged over 13 consecutive weeks. Where a job seeker is not in receipt of Newstart or Youth Allowance, an employment outcome is achieved where they maintain employment (as above) for an average of 15 hours a week or more for 13 consecutive weeks.
Employment Service Area (ESA)	A geographical area within a labour market region that corresponds closely to one or more Centrelink office boundaries. 137 ESAs were established under the second Employment Services Contract.
Labour Market Region	A geographical area closely corresponding the Australian Bureau of Statistics labour force regions and to Centrelink office boundaries. The 19 regions are further divided into Employment Service Areas.
National Employment Services Association (NESA)	The industry and professional development organisation for the employment services industry.
Point in time contract(ed) capacity	The maximum number of Intensive Assistance (or Job Search Training) job seekers that a service provider may assist at each site at any point in time.
Site	A physical location where job seekers meet Job Network members for assistance. These may operate on a full-time, part-time or outreach basis.
Specialist site	A site contracted to offer Intensive Assistance services to one or more specified client groups.
Touchscreens	Machines that display vacancies lodged on the National Vacancy Data Base and other information for job seekers and respond to touch.

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