

Not Just Any Job ... The Right Job In a Sustainable Community

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This paper looks back at the evolution of the Government's employment policy model over the past 10 years and comments on how it may continue to evolve in the future. It outlines the changing government policy focus through the period, and the impact of the changes on organisations delivering Job Network services, job seekers and on the wider community.

These changes are of particular interest to Job Futures, as we have an ongoing commitment to providing high quality, equitable and tailored services to some of the most disadvantaged people in society, with Job Futures holding approximately one third of Job Network specialist contracts nationally. Through the expertise the Job Futures network has developed through serving the needs of highly disadvantaged job seekers we believe we are well placed to provide feedback and advice on where employment policy needs to move in the future.

There is no doubt that Government employment policy has undergone some dramatic changes during this period, which have led to considerable improvements in outcomes for unemployed people. However, the argument I will be advancing is that it needs to further adapt in order to successfully serve those job seekers who are the most disadvantaged. It is our position that future Government employment policies and programs will need to acknowledge and reward outcomes for unemployed people beyond just the economic outcome of getting a job. The system will also need to respond to community expectations by incorporating social and environmental outcomes which not only assist individual job seekers but which also play a crucial role in strengthening communities.

Looking Back: where have we come from?

In 1998 a fundamental shift in Government employment policy took place when the Government contracted out employment services, creating a competitive market place for their delivery. Essentially, a market model was applied to a service area that had always been seen as a core public service. Australia was one of the first OECD countries to introduce market-type mechanisms into job-broking and related services. Job Network services are now

delivered by private companies and community based not-for-profit organisations, with the Government no longer involved in direct service delivery.

Since the introduction of Job Network, employment policy, programs and service delivery have continued to change with each of the three employment services contracts with the aim of providing better services to unemployed people generally, and an ever increasing focus on providing quality services to those job seekers who are classified as particularly disadvantaged.

Essentially, the system has changed from one which was not particularly outcome focussed and to a large extent did not take into account the special needs of disadvantaged job seekers, to a model that has sustainable employment outcomes for job seekers who have been unemployed for longer than 12 months as its primary focus. It is interesting to trace how the Government has used alterations to performance measures and payment regimes for Job Network providers to effect the implementation of policy changes.

The payment structure of the first contract, ESC1 rewarded Job Network service providers through high payments for the commencement of job seekers into the service, and for placing job seekers in employment – the sustainability of that employment placement was a secondary consideration. The payment for an outcome ¹ within ESC1 was relatively small when compared to the payments for the commencement and placement of job seekers. Job Network providers therefore focussed their energy and resources on getting the job seeker in the door and then placing them in a job, without the due concern and effort that is necessary to place people in sustainable employment. The payment structure allowed providers to remain financially viable without achieving decent outcomes for their clients.

Additionally, the set up of ESC1 did not serve the needs of disadvantaged job seekers particularly well. A job seeker would be signed up with a provider, that provider would then make an assessment of each individual job seeker's 'job readiness' or employability. In many cases, this meant that job seekers with multiple barriers to employment were assessed as being too difficult to place in a job. The Job Network provider was then able to 'park' particular clients on their case load, provide them with very limited or no support, comfortable with the knowledge that at the end of the 12 month Intensive Assistance period, these people would simply drop off their case load. In many cases these job seekers had received virtually no assistance with overcoming their barriers to employment and after 12 months in the system were no closer to an employment outcome.

¹ an interim outcome is paid to the Job Network provider when the job seeker has maintained their employment for 13 weeks and a final outcome is paid when the job seeker has maintained employment for 26 weeks

This practice continued within the second employment services contract (ESC2), however within this second contract the government began to recognise the prevalence of this practice of 'parking' and the detrimental impact it was having on the most disadvantaged, long term unemployed jobs seekers. This prompted the Government to further adjust its policy in order to eradicate this practice, and with the third Employment Services Contract (ESC3), the concept of a provider for 'unemployed life' was introduced. So providers are now required to service the needs of their disadvantaged clients far better, a great amount of time and resources are now concentrated on placing disadvantaged, long term unemployed job seekers in sustainable employment, as job seekers now remain active on the providers case load until a final employment outcome is achieved.

Perhaps most importantly, the payment structure was overhauled to create a system where the economic outcome of getting the most disadvantaged clients into sustainable employment attracts the most significant financial reward. In fact, providers who do not successfully achieve this goal not only find it difficult to remain financially viable but also find it increasingly difficult to keep their service provision contract with DEWR.

Several other progressive policy changes were also introduced within the third employment contract, including the Job Seeker Account (JSKA), which encourages providers to spend money directly on clients, based on their individual employment needs, with those who are classified as the most highly disadvantaged having the most money attached to them.

These policy and payment shifts have had the desired effect of encouraging providers to ensure that the job is the right job for the job seeker and to focus the most effort on the most highly disadvantaged.

Government Arrangements

The way in which the Government has managed its employment and related services programs over the past 10 years has also undergone major changes and this has also had a significant effect on the delivery of these programs.

Originally, employment programs were spread across several different Federal Government Departments (or their predecessors). The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) was responsible for the delivery of employment programs; the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) was responsible for programs with a more welfare or social orientation; the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSI) administered programs specifically directed towards indigenous people; and the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) administered education and training-related programs.

This silo-based system created significant impediments for clients, primarily due to a lack of connectedness between programs, making it difficult for them to access the benefits of different programs. There were also financial disincentives to providers moving clients from one program to another which might have been more suitable and there was no coherence around which programs were focussed on employment and which were seen to be delivering personal and social outcomes.

The spread of programs across departments also meant a level of ignorance existed amongst staff members as to what programs were available in other areas so that in many cases clients were not referred to the most appropriate program in the first place.

In short, the machinery of government arrangements were hindering rather than supporting the implementation of the Government's employment policy agenda.

The Government recognised this with significant changes after the October 2004 election when it transferred all employment related programs from FACS and ATSI to DEWR. However, there is still a level of disconnectedness between programs as DEST still retains its programs with their focus on education and training and there still exists an ongoing challenge to link these DEST programs more closely with both industry and client needs. This will necessitate close links between DEWR and DEST and the fostering of a greater relationship between industry bodies, employer groups and job network providers, particularly given the current skills shortages.

Current Model – Welfare to Work Reforms

With the introduction of the Government's new welfare to work reforms in the May 2005 Budget and the development of the parameters for employment services tenders later this year, all roads increasingly lead to the goal of employment. The machinery of government and policy changes are now beginning to be reflected in proposed changes to performance indicators and payment regimes and a DEWR policy position of ensuring that these programs will be more clearly linked to employment outcomes and more closely aligned to each other. Whilst this is in many ways a good thing, as essentially the aim of employment programs should be the achievement of employment outcomes, the current system still needs further refinement in order to accommodate the special needs of the most highly disadvantaged job seekers.

The 'Active Participation Model' (APM), which is the centrepiece of the 'welfare to work' model, represents a continuum of servicing, so that job seekers remain engaged with the system and retain a link with one provider. The majority of people enter the system on job

search support, after 3 months they move into job search training, then after 12 months they move into the first stage of 'Intensive Support Customised Assistance' (ISCA), after completion of 6 months of ISCA, most job seekers are required to complete 6 months of mutual obligation usually a work for the dole activity, and so on and so on until an outcome is reached. Most clients attain employment at some stage, leaving the most highly disadvantaged clients on the case load.

The APM is premised on the assumption that job seekers follow the model and remain engaged with the system. However we know that many job seekers are not able to follow this linear pattern, and that the reality for many people is that they move in and out of the system. This is particularly true for those people with a mental illness. The Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997 survey showed a high incidence of mental health issues among those whose sole source of income was a Centrelink Benefit. Due to the episodic nature of the majority of mental illnesses we often see a pattern of people moving from work, then back to a benefit and then out of the system all together.

We need to ask the question what happens to these people when they do drop out of the system? One of the many challenges facing Job Network is how do we support people through periods where they simply can't work, when employment outcomes seem at times to be the sole driver of the system.

Another issue for consideration within the current system is its inability to acknowledge outcomes beyond the economic. Whilst the changes to the system will no doubt assist many clients making the transition from one program to another or from a benefit to an employment outcome, there are indications that, with the increased focus on employment outcomes, there will be a loss of focus on the personal and social outcomes of some of the programs which were previously administered by FACS. This is of concern because many of those who have been referred to these programs in the past require a great deal of support in dealing with personal issues before they are ready to join an employment program.

Job Network providers may make a significant input in terms of resources and time into working with clients who face multiple barriers to employment including very long term unemployed, people who have a mental or physical disability, ex-offenders and others who are involved in the criminal justice system and people who are experiencing family violence and child protection issues. This work may include sourcing appropriate training and/or educational opportunities (including numeracy and literacy courses), providing intensive support and counselling, providing job search training, etc. then placing the job seeker into a job – only to have that employment placement fail due to the possible episodic nature of a person's illness or through a persons inability to adjust to the demands of work, which is particularly common when people may have been out of the work force for 5, 10 or even 15

years. Under the current system if the placement is not sustained for 13 weeks there is no acknowledgement financial or otherwise of the effort and resources involved on the part of the Job Network provider or on the job seeker.

For many people, attaining social outcomes such as finishing a course, attending an interview, even attending appointments at their Job Network provider are all huge achievements and deserve to be recognised in some way – particularly as they represent significant steps towards eventually achieving a sustainable employment outcome. This needs to be recognised as such in the performance and payment regimes.

For some people the journey to employment may be a long one, with setbacks and successes along the way, and along this journey both service providers and clients need to have the steps they are taking to employment acknowledged and rewarded. This will become increasingly important as the proportion of difficult to place job seekers continues to grow.

What we want to suggest is that programs and service delivery needs to be more flexible, and the policy parameters of performance indicators and attendant payment regimes need to have the capacity to acknowledge and reward a range of outcomes outside of the purely economic ones if they are to accommodate the needs of the most highly disadvantaged job seekers.

Looking forwards: where to from here?

So where does Government employment policy need to move in the future? Essentially the policies in place at present are aimed at focusing more and more on employment outcomes and integrating programs more closely. This is certainly an improvement over the previous more disjointed system however I would argue that in the longer term it will not be sufficient. While it may fulfill the government's policy goal of moving people off welfare benefits and into work, it will fall short of meeting community expectations.

Increasingly communities are concerned with issues of place, community involvement and benefit, social capital and social entrepreneurship. They are also increasingly aware of environmental sustainability, particularly in relation to resources such as water and energy, and to the preservation of natural habitat and the protection of green spaces and endangered flora and fauna. Communities are expecting and indeed, demanding, that governments at all levels address these wider concerns through an increasingly holistic approach to all they do. The growing expectations of triple bottom line reporting and social and environmental impact assessments in addition to more traditional financial and economic reporting and assessment is evidence of this trend. It is only a matter of time before they expect and insist on, employment programs that recognize and embed social and environmental outcomes in addition to the focus on employment.

Programs will need to provide sustainable economic outcomes for individual clients - a job; social outcomes - a meaningful job, improvement in self-esteem and motivation, health; and environmental outcomes - contributing to peoples' sense of place, feeling of being part of a vibrant and environmentally sustainable community. In short, employment programs of the future will need to deliver more than just a job. They will need to deliver the right job in a sustainable community

So is it possible? Does any model exist? Happily it does in the Green Corps program.

Green Corps

The Green Corps program is funded by the Australian Government and gives young people the opportunity to participate in projects designed to preserve and restore Australia's natural environment and heritage. Participants gain improved career and employment prospects through accredited training, structured work activities and work experience. They receive assistance in preparation for employment, personal development opportunities and also provide an opportunity to contribute to the well being of the community.

Job Futures delivers Green Corps in partnership with Greening Australia, a national environmental organisation. This brings together Job Futures expertise in training and youth development and the natural resource management expertise of Greening Australia.

Each Green Corps project is initiated and supported by a locally based partner organisation including landcare groups, Indigenous and youth organisations; local councils, state and federal government agencies, educational institutions and private companies. Every year 1,700 young people (17-20 years old) participate in Green Corps projects across the country.

Green Corps projects make a significant contribution to rural and regional areas, with approximately 85% of projects based in those areas. It provides an opportunity for many young people (60% of participants are early school leavers) to engage in an educational and training program which will provide them with new skills and a qualification. The high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (11%) participants demonstrates the program's ability to be adaptive of the particular needs of different participant groups.

The following information clearly demonstrates the positive impact Green Corps has had on the lives of the many young Australians who have completed the program.

- 87 percent of participants thought their self esteem had improved;
- 81 percent of participants indicated that their chances of getting a job had improved as a direct result of participating in Green Corps;

- 86 percent of participants thought their desire to find a job had improved as a direct result of participating in Green Corps: and
- 60% were in employment, education or training 3 months after the end of the project.

The Green Corps program in many ways exemplifies a model of service delivery that has a focus on helping disadvantaged people, whilst also having the ability to be more flexible and innovative, as compared to Job Network services. The implementation of Green Corps projects arise from genuine and identified community need. Green Corps delivery organisations are generally well connected with other organisations within their communities, and have formed partnerships with many. Green Corps programs have a focus beyond economic outcomes, and are able to report on social, cultural and environmental outcomes.

CASE STUDY

The Mia Mia Revegetation Project

JobCo Templestowe, Victoria

The Mia Mia Aboriginal Art Gallery, situated in Westerfold's Park in Templestowe is on Wurundjeri land. It is an Indigenous Art Gallery that promotes Aboriginal artists as well as educating the community about the historical importance of the park and the customs of the traditional owners of the land.

The Mia Mia Gallery and surrounding parklands constitute a significant spatial element within the urban landscape. The entire area contains valuable historical, cultural and botanical information about the history of the Indigenous communities that once inhabited the lands. The local community identified a need to improve, beautify and restore the Westerfold Park and surrounding areas.

The Director of the Gallery initiated the project by approaching JobCo, to discuss the possibility of developing and implementing a revegetation project. Subsequent to that meeting JobCo successfully applied for Green Corps funding. The Green Corps Project Team consulted with and engaged the community throughout the entire planning, development and implementation of the project.

The initial phase of the project focused on informing the project participants of the environmental, cultural, historical, Indigenous and sociological significance of the Gallery and the Park. This induction process was delivered by local Indigenous speakers, the Director of the Mia Mia Gallery and experts from Parks Victoria. Throughout the project there was a focus on increasing the participants' employability skills and prospects through encouraging the development of self-esteem, confidence and motivation. There was also a significant focus on improving the verbal and written communication skills of participants, through the

use of group problem solving activities, conflict resolution training and interpersonal relationship skills development.

In addition, the project achieved environmental, social and cultural outcomes. Indigenous plants, shrubs and trees were planted and all non-Indigenous plants were removed. A disability access walkway was designed and constructed in the theme of a 'serpent dreaming'. This walkway will eventually encircle the land around the Gallery encouraging and allowing for all community members to enter. Additional outcomes of the project included the design and construction of signs to promote the cultural and sociological significance of the areas to visitors and community members. A large deck was also designed and constructed, with the purpose of viewing cultural performances and providing outdoor seating for the cafe.

This project provides an excellent example of what is achievable when a genuine community development approach is utilised – an approach which ensures that the project provides positive and measurable outcomes for the young people participating as well as for the environment and the community as a whole.

Conclusion

Over the past ten years the employment policy landscape has changed significantly, with an increasing focus on employment outcomes. However in the future it is likely that the community will increasingly demand that employment programs also deliver social and environmental outcomes.

The Green Corps program provides one example of how this can be achieved. It has the flexibility to deliver economic, social and environmental outcomes, whilst also maintaining the flexibility to adapt to the local community. We believe that the features of the Green Corps program may be relevant to a number of other employment programs, and that the future of employment policy and service delivery should be looking towards such models to create employment programs that deliver the right jobs in sustainable communities.