

Assisting people with disabilities to find employment

Parliamentary Library Lecture

Speaker: Craig Wallace, President of People with Disability Australia

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I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to deliver this talk at the Parliamentary Library and to acknowledge that we meet on the lands of indigenous people and we respect their elders. I'd like to acknowledge members, senators and officials.

Last year we saw a landmark social reform passed with bipartisan agreement in an otherwise fraught parliamentary term with the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

The Scheme is step towards the social and economic independence that Australians with disability crave.

It completes the safety net and recognises that disability is a slip in the bath away or an accident of genetics away from any family at any time.

Now sometimes we say things like that so often they become rhetoric.

But just to give you an example if you visit rehab units and ask how many people wind up with catastrophic spinal injury it's not diving off a surfbeach or during a footy match - it is a bad fall in the home. Your mum putting up some curtains.

Yet the lifeline of an NDIS **does not complete** our reform task when we have so many people outside of the real economy; outside of jobs, not consuming and not paying taxes.

Australia has a *troubling* record on jobs and disability.

We rank **21st out of 29 OECD countries** in employment participation rates for those with a disability. We rank **27th of the 27** in terms of the correlation between disability and poverty.

45 percent of people with a disability live in, or near, poverty; that is more than double the OECD average of 22 percent.

At its height during the Great Depression around 1 in 3 Australians were unemployed with many more underemployed. In the US the rate was about 25%.

Faced with a problem of that magnitude the response of the US President during the Depression was to mandate **continuous innovation** in policy until things began to change:

“It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something”

I believe that disability employment is an area where **we haven’t innovated enough**.

We have plodded along with the same tools and messages for too long. Discrimination law, an old service model and eligibility requirements for income support. We haven’t digged deep or asked why people fail.

Last year I was part of a launch of the ACOSS poverty report which revealed that more than 620,000 people with disability are living in poverty. And that was using an internationally conservative measure.

And just over a year ago the Centre for Independent Studies released an article which said the real solution to poverty was: J-O-B-S, J-O-B-S and J-O-B-S¹.

It ended by saying that anti-poverty campaigners miss the principal cause of poverty, which is joblessness, not low benefits.

Now it’s a bit of a trek from ACOSS to the CIS, but the article was right to take aim at the focus that we’ve sometimes had on benefits rather than jobs as the engines of poverty.

¹ <https://www.cis.org.au/media-information/opinion-pieces/article/4595-the-real-solution-to-poverty-jobs-jobs-jobs>

But I would ask if joblessness causes poverty, then do we really know *what causes and sustains joblessness* amongst people with disability?

We can say this – it certainly *isn't* income support. My organisation PWDA has a cumulative reach of 10,000 people and we have now held two social media forums on employment and income support that have attracted thousands of comments from people with disability and a common thread was how hard it is living on a pension.

No one would choose to worry incessantly about the rent, light, gas, food, clothes and to have disability costs like taxi's and equipment pile up. Remember that for most people the NDIS is till a long way away so these are costs which no one covers.

DSP is the lever we see pulled time and time again on jobs and yet:

- It does not create a single job
- It does not support employers to create jobs
- It does not make workplaces accessible or remove discrimination
- It does not give people more skills or resilience
- AND it **certainly** doesn't create better employer attitudes; in fact some of our conversations about DSP makes attitudes worse.
 - You've just labelled someone a "bludger" do we really think canny employers are going to leap up and give them a job?

None of this means, we should be happy with having over 800,000 people on DSP. I'm not. It means we are cresting toward a million Australians locked out of the real economy; not spending, not consuming, not paying taxes, not having decent lives.

I do not believe that the project of the disability right movement is to ring fence people into DSP. If anything we need a better safety net for people on DSP but more people in jobs.

It's time we **talked about numbers of jobs** and PWDA endorses a national challenge to create jobs for people with disabilities over the next decade.

What might that target be?

Deloitte Access Economics in their report for the Australian Network for Disability *The economic benefits of increasing employment for people with disability* (2011), identify a \$43 billion increase in GDP if Australia can increase the participation rate by one-third and refer to this as achievable, perhaps even modest.

The modelling used in the report points to an increase of between 191,000 and 203,000 additional people with disability participating in the labour market should the participation rate increase by 10 per cent. It also implies an increase of around 20,000 people participating in the labour force each year over the next ten years.

I think a target like that is reasonable but it requires some policy ambition. It needs big ideas and a joined up project that ideally should be lead by First Ministers through COAG.

And here are some big ideas to start with.

I think it's time we asked **whether policy is still in the right place**.

In the 1990's - when the Commonwealth and the State and Territories assembled arrangements for disability policy under what was then called the Commonwealth State Disability Agreement - they struck a deal that pushed disability support services to the States and income support and employment programs to the Australian Government.

The NDIS is dismantling this division – it will see the Commonwealth stepping into the role of providing disability support services.

I think it's also the moment to ask whether employment is still in the right place or whether there is more that States, Territories and Local Government might do, especially under the the National Disability Strategy.

I have worked in disability policy for some time some the most exciting and innovative work on jobs has happened in the States - an area where they have no mandate.

There are inclusion awards, there are project incubation hubs, there are cut through awareness campaigns and there are social ventures and successful public sector campaigns. The ACT is currently trialing incentives using payroll tax & has some great social venture programs.

State and local gov't's *live where entry level jobs are*. They procure in the sorts of industries which provide many base level jobs.

Tying employment and income support together at the Federal level maintains the view that the only lever that Government has is the Newstart/DSP interface. My gut tells me that this upside down - jobs are local. Especially entry level jobs.

The second really bid idea is that I think that **we need a new model for employment services** for people with disability. Disability employment needs a red tape repeal day.

As its stands the services which support people with disabilities to purchase social participation outcomes are being progressively unbundled through NDIS so that market forces and demand can drive these services into shapes of our choosing.

I think it's time that we looked at **applying the principles underlying the NDIS to employment services** so that people can unbundle supports and directly purchase economic participation outcomes.

If you want a gun resume writer or a coach you go to a private firm that does this, not necessarily to a disability service.

Some people might even broker directly with an employer to purchase supports, modifications and other assistance.

If we don't do this then we are going to have people with disabilities purchasing choice and control in their support while lining up for block funded employment services that look much as they did in the 1980's.

The effect will be like something out of Dr Who with antiques clocks sitting alongside gleaming computer banks.

I mentioned the idea of a national challenge and want to touch on some ideas from overseas that might give you a sense of how something like that might come together.

In **British Columbia** a few years ago they had a program called the 10 by 10 challenge which was a whole of community commitment to increase the employment of people with disability by 10% by 2010.

It was a nifty title for a nifty program. There were tools, there were proforma media releases, success stories, how to guides and statements of commitment and you could register individual communities and sign up to the challenge.

There **was something like a dozen cities** signed up to this thing by the end of it and committing to legacy projects beyond. There were job creator targets for the regions and everytime they surpassed a target they made a big deal of it.

The idea was to have a cumulative wave of local communities and kick that off through high level commitment.

That high commitment is important and it is happening around the world.

In the United States President Obama issued an [Executive Order](#) to make the federal government a model employer of persons with disabilities. The Order requires agencies to create hiring plans and holds agencies accountable for their hiring practices.

In Australia things have gotten so bad that they need a kick start so I support **a public sector employment target in the APS**.

I commend the entry level traineeship programs which have been run by Depts like DSS, but we need **some high profile signature measures** to show the whole community that this time Government is serious.

In the US there have been programs which support people with disabilities to serve as interns in the White House and on Capitol Hill.

I would like to see Senators and Members in this place utilising the skills of people with disabilities in the work of the Parliament or in electorate offices.

It's a drop in the ocean. But what an effective way to walk the talk to show every constituent, bureaucrat and lobbyist who deals with their representatives, that this time we are serious and here is what employee's with disabilities can do.

This may surprise people – I have written about this in the AFR - but I do not agree with **mandatory targets for private business**. I think they would be counterproductive and we'd be arguing about them to the crack of doom.

But we should be using the leverage we already have to reward businesses and consultancies who demonstrate good practice as they procure to govt.

This might be powerful if combined with **annual reporting** by employers.

Yet – targets and reporting do not tackle the **underlying questions**

Why are people not getting jobs? *Why* are people falling out of jobs?
Why are people under-employed? *Why* do we get stuck at base level?

We need to **look beyond simply “parachuting people into jobs”** to the heart of disconnection and how we set people up to fail.

It has been noted by Infrastructure Australia (2010) that there is a link between **disability and social isolation**. The 2010 GSS found that people with disability participate less across *all* life domains from being part of a sporting team, to spectating at a sporting event, from volunteering to the arts and to even visiting a library².

The **evidence is that disconnection is ubiquitous** but there is also evidence that reconnecting people in one area of life can help to reconnect in *others*.

You really have to hunt for work on this, but it's there.

In 2009 the U.S. Department of Labor, veterans organisations and disability sports organisations looked at the interface between participation in sports and employment.

² <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/program-services/government-international/national-disability-strategy-discussion-paper-easy-english-version/national-disability-strategy-2010-2020-evidence-base>

The survey found that **participants in sport are twice as likely to be employed as the general population of adults with disabilities** (68% vs. 33%)³. That's not the sort of work that can be dismissed but I wish we had more **work linking different kinds of participation** in Australia.

What we do know from sources like the Hays Quarterly Report is that Australian employers want to hire people with "soft skills" as much as hard technical skills.⁴

We know that resilience in a job is often about more than just the technical side it's about employers who can become part of workplace culture and who can have those water cooler conversations.

Our project should not just be to parachute people into jobs.

So what could be done about this?

PWDA believes that **Disability Employment Services should be given a broader brief** to work across people's lives to build friendship networks, involvement in recreation, sport, arts and strengthen community connection, personal capacity and independence. Their focus should be on resilience and capacity, outcomes not throughput.

We also need dedicated money for innovation to find out what works. Much of the funding pipeline in Australia goes straight to Disability Employment Services or to income support. Our record on jobs and disability has been consistently poor over a period of time – even during the skills shortage - and this mandates an approach of continuous innovation.

Australia **lacks an innovation fund** along the lines of funds in the United States that might enable us to trial and test new approaches.

An innovation fund might allow us to explore approaches like *Mentoring, jobshadowing and career exploration*:

³ <http://www.disabledsportsusa.org/survey-finds-disabled-sports-usa-participants-twice-as-likely-to-be-employed-as-adults-with-disabilities/>

⁴ http://www.hays.com.au/press-releases/HAYS_085437

In the United States each October there is a Govt sponsored [Disability Mentoring Day](#) (DMD).

On that day, young people with disabilities throughout the country spend a day finding out about the skills and education needed to succeed in different kinds of careers.

There are serious employers involved such as Microsoft, Boeing, and the Federal Administration.

I think that approaches like this make sense for people who might not know what their needs, capabilities and capacities are.

Career exploration could be powerful for people with disability as it allows people to “**come and try**” **an employment experience**. It means that people can find out more about the supports they might need in a job.

They can also find out what doesn't work – sometimes it's about helping people eliminate options and you can't do that unless you are allowed to explore them.

Australia does not have nationally organised career exploration programs for people with disability with employers and the concept is not well understood.

Some organisations like the Australian Network on Disability are doing good work directly with employers. They are where the innovation sits.

We need to do more on developing “soft skills” and volunteering

In the United States there is a [summer program](#) for high school graduates with disabilities run through Volunteers of America that focuses on the soft skills—communication skills, interpersonal skills, decision making skills, and lifelong learning skills—necessary for the workplace.

The focus is on job readiness, goals, and strategies. By the end of the program students have an awareness of what it takes to be employed, prepare the necessary tools to search for employment, and effectively present at an interview.

Here in Australia we are starting to talk about this. Last week in an article on disability and employment for The Conversation Jenny Green from the School of Management at UTS, highlighted that the pathway to employment for many people with disability, involved work in community organisation.

Instead of taking the traditional route of looking at the obstacles to employment, a study by UTS Business School talked to 30 people with disability who have successfully landed a career worked in a range of occupations, including law, journalism, politics, IT, academia and management, in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors.

The study found the most common experience shared by the 27 participants was work with not-for-profit disability organisations– paid and unpaid. These organisations weren't employment services but, in the main, user-led services with briefs ranging from advocacy and research to arts and direct services.

In the United States there is a very evolved focus on young people with disability being developed through service and not just with disability organisations. There are programs which include people with disability in youth development and [dedicated programs](#) for International exchange and [youth leadership development](#).

In Australia there seems to be little work building these soft skills and experiences, especially for young people with disability.

We also need to **make it worthwhile to work** and *address the working poverty trap*. People with disabilities can add up. If we're using taxis every day – people I know pay over \$60 a day - we can work out that it is more expensive to travel to a base level job than to stay at home.

The Federal government does have some levers and there are some big things that they could do on the income support and tax side.

Government should work the one area of income support that *could* help people sustain a job as they build assets and financial capacity by **allowing people with disability entering the workforce in entry level positions to retain their DSP for a period of at least 6 months.**

It seems quite appropriate as we are here in the library to end this by talking about evidence.

At the start I asked whether we knew what causes joblessness and I want to be straight with you that there are too many things we don't know:

- We don't know enough about what employers think and what might change behaviour
- We don't know enough about why people fail and what is it that allows some people to succeed
- We don't have a good longitudinal study on people with disability that asks what's happening to young people and what's allowing some young people to succeed
- We really don't know enough about the relationship between disability income support and employment. Especially the idea that removing supports as people enter work is a perverse incentive to stay away.
- Lastly we don't even have good figures – we are mainly reliant on the six yearly SDAC for figures on labour force participation and unemployment, while the United States Department of Labor issues *monthly* comparable figures.

Despite all of that I am optimistic. Under the NDIS some of us will become independent for the first time, some of us will even become employers and I guarantee that some of us will surprise you.

Thank you

Questions?