

The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Getting business booming

**Report on the inquiry into barriers for small business
employment**

**House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Education and Employment**

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Canberra

Mental health as a barrier to employment

- 4.66 A mental illness is often a significant barrier in an individual's ability to gain and maintain employment. Mental illness is an invisible disability and one which can be difficult for both the sufferer and others to understand. People who suffer from mental illness are frequently discriminated against, both intentionally and unintentionally, as they are often considered too much of a risk to employ.
- 4.67 Many employers lack an understanding or tolerance for employees with a mental illness. Mr Keat Toh, the Nurse Unit Manager/Team Leader at the Parramatta Community Mental Health Service noted that this is a problem that could be addressed with training and education:
- It would be good to have regular interagency meetings with the council chambers and to get business people to have regular sessions with the mental health people. It needs a two-way understanding of where they are coming from and what their expectations are. We need to say that those people may need extra support and that they have chronic type issues; also to ensure there is more understanding to have more flexible working hours and working conditions.⁶²
- 4.68 Some headway in this area has been made with the Government's Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance's partnership with Beyond Blue. The partnership has established *Heads Up*, a campaign to support and create mentally healthy workplaces (see Chapter 2). The initiative focusses on workplace education around mental illness, as well as providing support to people suffering from mental illness in the workplace. It is an initiative aimed at creating awareness and acceptance of what is an ever-growing barrier to employment.⁶³
- 4.69 One submitter pointed out a number of deficits with Disability Employment Services (DES)⁶⁴. The deficits included the failure to provide access to jobs in professional areas such as engineers and doctors, but rather they have a focus on jobs with lower classifications such as entry level positions. The submitter stated:
- The DES is the first point of contact for Disabled Professional job seekers. The DES has not [sic] designed to cater the needs of Professional Job Seekers. The professional categories are [not limited to] engineers, doctors, accountants, project managers,
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62 Mr Keat Toh, Nurse Unit Manager/Team Leader, Parramatta Community Mental Health Service, *Committee Hansard*, Parramatta, 19 November 2015, pp. 33.

63 Heads up, 'What is Heads up?', <<https://www.headsup.org.au/>>, viewed 17 December 2015.

64 The DES is described in Chapter 2.

policy specialists, IT specialists etcetera. The DES clients fall to above categories [sic] are not assisted at all.⁶⁵

4.70 Similarly, the same submitter also demonstrated the inability for trained professionals, who most often hold university qualifications, to access funding for training for lower level qualifications, such as certificate level. This is a significant barrier for those that are no longer employable in their field of expertise due to issues such as mental illness, but wish to retrain in another field in a bid to be more employable.⁶⁶

4.71 Mental illness can also be an impediment to wanting to seek employment, particularly given the current structure of the welfare system. For example, should a mentally unwell person receiving subsidised medical and other welfare benefits obtain work, at certain wage thresholds these benefits ceases. Mr Toh of Parramatta Community Mental Health service, recognised that this cycle is often a financial impediment to seeking employment:

For a lot of people, they work to a certain financial capacity of earnings and they lose part of their disability pension or their Centrelink pension. That impacts on them – obviously their accommodation rental, food, clothing, social living expenditures and all that sort of stuff. That is a disadvantage. We have encountered individuals who had that barrier and had to decide whether to take on employment and lose out on that financial capability of sustaining themselves or their family.⁶⁷

4.72 There does need to be reassurance for people in these situations that they are able to re-access the same benefits should their employment not be successful. As Ms Maria Cassaniti of the Transcultural Mental Health Centre told the Committee:

... something as simple as a reassurance that if things go pear-shaped for their employment or their health, they can easily get back on [welfare benefits] would be great instead of just being cut-off and then having to go through the whole thing again. That reassurance would give them the security and that would also support their mental health in not having that fear of stigma of having to go through that whole process again. I would put a good bet on the point that if there was that they would probably stay in

65 Name Withheld, *Submission 45*, p. 1.

66 Name Withheld, *Submission 45*, p. 2.

67 Mr Keat Toh, Nurse Unit Manager/Team Leader, Parramatta Community Mental Health Service, *Committee Hansard*, Parramatta, 19 November 2015, pp. 32-33.