

National Disability Services Workforce Retention Project

Factors affecting Disability Support Worker Retention within the Disability Sector

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Abstract

The attraction and retention of support workers is an ongoing issue for the disability sector. It has impacted the ability of service providers to deliver timely and high-quality support. The turnover or “churn” of workers in the sector is costly and there are competing demands for workers in aligned sectors such as aged care and community services.

This paper highlights four key areas:

1. Organisational culture

Key issues include:

- The importance of organisations aligning values with practice
- Ensuring staff feel appreciated
- Support for worker wellbeing

2. Importance of supervision

Key issues include:

- Supervision being implemented as a regular process to value and support staff
- It had a development focus
- It is available as needed in crisis but also is regularly scheduled

3. Impact of workload and burnout

Key issues include:

- Rostering provides a balanced workload
- Selecting people who are best suited to different job demands
- Supporting workers to have autonomy in their work

4. Job security and opportunities for career progression

Key issues include:

- Staff engaged on a casual basis viewed work as insecure
- Staff did not see many opportunities for growth in their role and limited opportunities to progress in their career

Factors affecting Disability Support Worker Retention within the Disability Sector

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has as its key objectives to “support the independence and social and economic participation of people with disability,” and to “provide reasonable and necessary supports for participants.” A key guiding principle of the scheme is that people with disability are able to exercise choice and control in the pursuit of their goals and the planning and delivery of their supports¹.

The availability of a skilled workforce to deliver supports is a critical element in achieving the promise of the NDIS. Recruitment, onboarding, and training of new workers is costly; and it is therefore important to understand the factors that positively and negatively impact work retention to enable delivery of high-quality supports. The rate of disability support worker staff turnover is high, with several studies reporting average lengths of service of between two and five years². This is challenging in times of high competition for workers across the community, aged care, mental health, and disability sectors

Workers are drawn to the disability sector for many reasons. The vocational training sector^{3,4} promotes disability sector roles as opportunities within which workers can make a difference and undertake meaningful work that, whilst challenging, offers variety, job security and opportunities for career progression. Workers often do not experience this reality. Instead, many experience stress and burn out, do not feel secure in their employment, and see limited opportunities for career progression⁵.

The [2021 National Disability Services State of the Sector Report](#) highlighted increasing difficulty associated with staff retention, with key drivers including the lack of permanent positions, availability of better working conditions in other sectors, and staff burnout.⁶ This short paper will highlight emerging themes in academic literature and from recent Victorian based studies to understand how we can be successful in recruiting and retaining workers in the disability sector in the longer term.

1. Organisational Culture

The organisational culture in which work is undertaken has an impact on staff retention. Organisational culture is defined as the combination of “values, expectations, and practices that an organisation has in place to guide and inform the actions of workers”⁷.

¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2022C00206>

² Cookson, P. (2014). ‘Why would you want to be a Disability Support Worker (DSW)?’: A qualitative study of ‘long-term’ Disability Support Workers in accommodation services for people with Intellectual Disabilities. PhD Thesis, Flinders University.

³ <https://www.upskilled.edu.au/skillstalk/why-you-should-work-in-disability-support>

⁴ <https://www.opencolleges.edu.au/blog/2020/03/06/career-in-disability-services/#:~:text=When%20you%20work%20in%20disability,different%20and%20make%20a%20differenc>

⁵ HESTA. (2021). State of the sector: 2021: Community and disability services workforce insights.

⁶ National Disability Services (NDS). (2021). State of the Disability Sector Report 2021.

⁷ <https://www.achievers.com/blog/organizational-culture-definition/#:~:text=Organizational%20culture%20is%20the%20collection,your%20company%20what%20it%20is>. 24 July 2022

When there is a lack of clarity or misalignment with values, expectations, and practices, this increases worker stress and potential for abandonment of employment.

The sector offers a wide variety of roles for workers from personal care support, home maintenance, community access, through to supporting people with complex health and/or behavioural needs. It is vital that the workers are supported in their work and that job roles are suited not only to individual's skills (capabilities -skills and knowledge), but also matched with their personality traits (attitudes) and their capacity to deliver high quality supports (workload). Workers also need to have a balanced case load over their work week.

Scenario to illustrate values and practice misalignment:

Situation: Support for people living in Specialist Disability Accommodation (SDA) and receiving support from a supported independent living provider. Each NDIS participant has a goal to live as independently as possible and has requested support to be person centered and use the principles of active support.

Practice: If this approach to providing supports is not used by all staff delivering support and new team members are not supported in this approach, there is a conflict with values, individual rights of people being supported, the organisation's values and the capacity of the team to work together in harmony.

There are many competing factors in retention. Whilst pay and conditions are important, their impact can be lessened if workers feel they were recognised and appreciated for the work they do, were supported in their work, and had opportunities to develop their skills. HESTA's State of the Sector 2021: Community and Disability Workforce Insights report⁸ found many workers were planning to leave the sector, particularly workers over 39 years. The report also found that 30% of workers would not recommend their organisational leadership and management, that a quarter did not feel appreciated by their employers, and that one in five did not feel their skills and experiences were valued by the community.

Recent NDS engagement via the NDS Workforce Network has explored simple but important measures that organisations have made to show employees they are valued. These include both setting up and extending access to employee assistance programs (this was felt to be especially critical in COVID lockdown periods), acknowledging employees of the month, having face to face team meetings, and using apps/text to keep workers informed about what is happening in the organisation.

2. Importance of Regular Supervision

Supervision should be available to all employees, including disability support workers. Supervisors should ensure it is scheduled regularly and available as needed, for example to debrief after an incident. Supervision needs to provide constructive feedback about what

⁸ <https://www.hesta.com.au/campaigns/community-and-disability-services-sector-insights>

is going well and address areas where development is needed and should provide support for staff to develop skills. Supervision is an essential element to support for worker wellbeing, throughout the employment relationship and at critical points.⁹ Research has shown a relationship between effective supervision and retention. It is an investment in keeping staff, that recoups investment in onboarding and recruitment. However, there is still work needed to upskill supervisors, and to develop a culture where workers view supervision positively and experience it as described above, rather than only when there is an issue with performance.

The NDS¹⁰ and VCOSS¹¹ submissions to the Joint Standing Committee on the NDIS Workforce Inquiry, April 2020 highlighted service provider concerns that NDIS pricing was not adequate to provide effective supervision and professional development. They stated the view that funding was not sufficient to implement best-practice models of support for people with complex needs.^{11,12}

Building on the importance of supervision, studies have found the value of workers receiving feedback about what was going well and having acknowledgement by their organisation that their work was appreciated. This is particularly important for disability workers working remotely. Job feedback has been found to positively influence engagement, principally vigour and dedication to the role¹². Improved job descriptions, on-the-job feedback and the creation of specialist support workers are offered as recommendations to improve the psychosocial health of DSWs.

3. Impact of Workload and Burnout

Research in associated industries has found that a sense of 'making a difference' in conjunction with having variety and job autonomy were positive influences on coping with workload. Conversely, stress at an organizational and in the external environmental level, administrative requirements and unsupportive colleagues were identified as negative influences on workload management.¹³

The factors internal and external to an organisation impact staff burnout. Studies have found organisations can assist with the provision of strong work-based social support

⁹ Chiller, P., & Crisp, B. R. (2012). Professional supervision: a workforce retention strategy for social work? *Australian Social Work*, 65(2), 232–242

¹⁰ <https://www.nds.org.au/images/Policy/NDS%20Submission%20NDIS%20Workforce.pdf>

¹¹ <https://vcoss.org.au/disability-aging-carers/2020/04/skilled-valued-and-supported-disability-workforce/>

¹² Vassos, M., Nankervis, K., Skerry, T. & Lante, K. (2013). Work engagement and job burnout within the disability support worker population. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 34, 3884–3895.

¹³ Schelbe, L., Radey, M., & Panisch, L. S. (2017). Satisfactions and stressors experienced by recently hired frontline child welfare workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 78, 56–63.

networks and stress management resources for disability support workers.¹⁴ There has also been research investigating the impact of different personality traits on the degree of burnout and well-being, particularly when working with people who have behaviours of concern. This study has recommended training for staff on personality traits and well-being, with a focus on building resilience.¹⁵ Other studies support improving wellbeing through reviewing job demands, having support available and reassessing the level of control workers have within their job.¹⁶

4. Job security and Opportunities for Career Progression

There is a large churn in the disability support worker sector, which has also been increased over the period of the pandemic. This loss of workers has been associated with low job satisfaction, which in turn can affect the quality of support provided¹⁷. Whilst there is a need to recruit new workers to the sector, many early entrants into the sector, particularly those employed on casual contracts, perceived their employment to be tenuous.

A survey by HESTA found the top three reasons community sector workers left the industry were that there were not enough opportunities for career progression, low rates of pay and dissatisfaction with the employing organisation¹⁸.

Improving career opportunities for the sector is critical – and more positive sentiment towards employers, leaders and the broader sector may have created an opportunity to implement workforce strategies now that improve talent attraction and retention rates.

- There was a strong correlation between how positive respondents felt about career opportunities and whether they would recommend their employer. Those who did not feel positive about career opportunities in their industry were significantly more likely to be detractors of their employer.
- As well as a lack of career opportunities, wanting to develop new skills and try something different were also top reasons behind community services sector professionals wanting to leave their employers.
- Salary was one of the top three most-disliked aspects of community services roles, as well as a lack of opportunities for growth (promotions) and benefits.

¹⁴ Gray-Stanley J.A. & Muramatsu N. (2011). Work stress, burnout, and social and personal resources among direct care workers. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 32, 1065–1074.

¹⁵ Chung, M. C., & Harding, C. (2009). Investigating burnout and psychological well-being of staff working with people with intellectual disabilities and challenging behaviour: The role of personality. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 22, 549–560.

¹⁶ Harries, J., Ng, K.Y.Y., Wilson, L., Kirby, N. & Ford, J. (2015). Evaluation of the work safety and psychosocial wellbeing of disability support workers. *Australasian Journal of Organisational Psychology*, 8, 1–13.

¹⁷ Chou, R. J. A., & Robert, S. A. (2008). Workplace support, role overload, and job satisfaction of direct care workers in assisted living. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 49, 208–222.

¹⁸ <https://www.hesta.com.au/campaigns/community-and-disability-services-sector-insights>

- Industry representatives agreed the structure of community services work – relatively low pay for increasingly complex, demanding work and long unpaid breaks between irregular working hours – was also contributing to workforce dissatisfaction”

HESTA. (2021). State of the sector: 2021: Community and disability services workforce insights¹⁹.

Conclusion

The retention of disability support workers is impacted by many factors. Positive strategies to further explore include strengthening the supervision relationship, addressing worker wellbeing, ensuring workers feel appreciated, and reviewing individual job design and workloads. The issue has long been an issue in the sector however, the changed nature of engagement of NDIS services, low rate of unemployment in the Australia and competition across industries means a multi-pronged approach to the issue is required, now more than ever.

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