

VICTORIAN NON-GOVERNMENT DISABILITY SECTOR

WORKFORCE ANALYSIS & DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

This project, conducted in 2002, profiled the non-government Disability Workforce. Initiated by VICRAID, ACROD and CIDA with funding from DHS and work by Precision Consultancy, the findings are widely available to the sector. The full report from the project is available on CD ROM and this paper sets out some of the key findings. These results will help us to better plan for service delivery and development of the sector.

Data collection

The project collected and analysed quantitative and qualitative data from employers and their staff through two surveys. As well, focus groups and interviews held across the state in 2002. Approximately 45% of funded agencies (representing 61% of funding provided to the sector) returned employer surveys providing data about their workforce. 1475 individual members (approximately 17% of the workforce completed individual questionnaires.

In addition, more than forty agencies participated in focus groups or worksite visits and interviews. The profile of staff completing the individual staff survey is similar to that of the overall staffing profile of the sector, however returns were proportionately lower from casual staff.

Characteristics of the workforce

Numbers of staff and mode of employment

In July 2002, there were 5799 people employed by the 164 agencies that returned surveys. Using data provided by DHS, we can extrapolate that there are approximately 8650 people working in the non-government Disability services sector in Victoria. The majority work in either day programs or shared supported accommodation. Approximately 26% of employees are full time (about 2340), 47% part time (about 4230) and 27% casual (about 2430). The largest numbers of full time staff are in day programs, while the largest numbers of part time and casual staff can be found in accommodation services and in home support services. Definitions of 'part-time' and 'casual' are inconsistent across the sector.

Gender and age

75% of the workforce is female and this 3:1 ratio of women to men is fairly consistent across all service types. Of the 1475 staff who completed the survey 22% of women

are over the age of 45, while 41% of men are in this age group. There is however a four to one ratio of women to men in the under 30 age group suggesting that as time goes on the imbalance between numbers of men and women in the workforce will become even more accentuated. Alternatively the work may be more attractive to more mature men. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) women make up 77% of the community services workforce nationally so the figures for this workforce are similar to that found elsewhere in the industry.

Educational background and achievement

Almost 15% of staff have a pass at Year 10, or less, at secondary school as their highest qualification. 65% of the workforce have completed some post school qualification, 16% have partially completed some post school qualification while 19% have no post school qualification. According to the ABS approximately 46% of people working in the community services field nationally have no post school qualifications. Many of the qualifications achieved are in an area related to disability but individual workers also have a range of other qualifications.

Industrial awards and agreements

The Residential Support Services Award covers the largest numbers of individuals of any of the industrial instruments surveyed. It covers 36% of the staff employed in participating agencies. 37% of staff in the sector are not directly covered by any industrial award, but rather by an enterprise agreement or an individual contract.

Recruiting, managing, retaining and developing staff

Recruitment

Recruitment was seen to be an extremely time-consuming and costly process - particularly for smaller agencies without dedicated human resource practitioners. Many agencies reported difficulties in recruiting quality candidates. The low wages in the sector, the lack of parity of remuneration with other people doing similar work in government, or even less skilled work in other employment contexts, were consistently cited as major problems. Many agencies preferred to fill full time positions from their existing pool of part time or casual staff.

Retention

Approximately one third of the survey group had been working in the sector for more than ten years, with 9% of them involved for more than twenty years. Almost 20% had been working in the field for less than two years.

20% of employees have been with their current employer for twelve months or less, 37% have less than two years service with their employer. Shared supported accommodation, respite and day programs all have high percentages of long serving employees.

30% of respondents to the staff survey believed they would still be working with the same agency in two years time. Approximately 10% of full time staff left their employer in the last twelve months, with 9% of part time employees and 7% of casuals also leaving. About one third of staff leaving, left the Disability sector altogether.

The fact that 20% have been working in the field for less than 2 years may indicate a high level of 'churn' or turnover occurring predominantly among inexperienced staff. This could indicate a mismatch between their perception of the job and its reality, but further work would need to be undertaken to clarify this point.

What staff like about their work

Passion, dedication, a 'calling' and feeling of making a difference in peoples lives were the common reasons given by staff for working in the sector. Many individuals stated that working for a relatively small agency had significant advantages compared with a large one (or DHS) in that they could identify decision makers, get things done quickly and felt more empowered within their own work environment. Most agencies were using some sort of salary packaging with many if not all of their staff, and state that the main reason for doing so is to attract and retain staff.

What staff dislike about their work

Poor wages, high stress, high expectation levels, the lack of recognition of some qualifications, and the inability to put together sufficient part time hours to make a viable income, were cited as the main reasons individuals were leaving the sector. Funding arrangements, which meant it was difficult to offer good staff long-term contracts, were also cited by agencies as key factors for staff leaving. The need for staff to

use their own vehicles to travel to clients' residences in the case of the increasing number of in home support services, hours, shifts, and lack of guarantee of regular work for casuals were other issues mentioned in relation to the reasons why people may leave the sector.

The nature of the work itself, the lack of a career structure and the absence of any compensation or benefit for working with more demanding or challenging clients, the lack of status and lack of training and development opportunities were those most often mentioned amongst a long list of disincentives.

Vacancies

The largest numbers of vacancies in agencies are for community and home support and for shared accommodation services. These are predominantly part time and casual positions.

Management and supervision

Many concerns were raised by individual staff about a lack of appropriate supervision, both in terms of their own ability to develop as staff and the quality of services provided to clients. Comments in focus groups and on the surveys included criticisms about staff being given a night shift alone in a house 'full of clients' after just a few hours of training or being asked to provide in home support alone to a client after only one paired visit with another worker. Many staff also mentioned the link between training and supervision stating that in the absence of formal induction training, closer supervision by an experienced worker would go some way to meeting their needs.

Staff development

There was very strong criticism from staff about the training offered to them by their employer. 24% of staff claimed that they did not believe they were adequately trained to perform effectively and efficiently in their current role. 32% had received no staff development or training within the previous twelve months although all employers claimed that they had spent more than their allocated training budget, by an average of 36% in the previous year. One of the issues may be an unclear definition of training with staff not including in-house training, on the job training or conferences as 'training days'. The lack of a state wide strategic approach to staff development was keenly felt in some agencies. Agency employers

state that the amount of funding received for training is insufficient to meet the needs of a diverse workforce. However if the agencies are on average spending 36% more than their allocation in this area, and yet one third of their workforce is still not receiving any training and a quarter of their workforce believe they are inadequately trained to perform their current role, it appears that either the amount is still woefully inadequate or it is being poorly spent. No analysis of how the training funds were spent by the agency was undertaken as part of this project.

Comparability of research data between DHS and the non government sector

The research methodology was referenced against a DHS workforce analysis project undertaken in 2000 to ensure final data could be compared. It was not part of the brief of this project to make comparisons between the data produced within each project. However, it should be noted that 6% of the NGO workforce or more than 400 people appear to work in both sectors. The vast majority of DHS employees work in the accommodation sector, while this is only one of the many areas of employment in the non-government sector.

Issues to think about

Gender imbalance

Is a three to one ratio of women to men a problem in a service area where a majority of the clients are male? If it is an issue what strategies can be implemented to address it?

Casualisation

Is the high proportion of casual and part time work in the sector a problem or an asset? If it is a problem what sectoral changes need to be made to change the staffing balance so that more full time positions are created? Or, can the high number of part time and casual staff positions be seen as an asset and recruitment and retention strategies devised to suit this group?

Rates of pay

What rate of pay would encourage more people to apply for, accept and be retained in the sector?

Pay rates in the non-government sector are lower than the government sector for similar work.

To what extent does this factor, combined with other related issues, influence turnover in the NGO sector?

To what extent does salary packaging alleviate issues with poor pay rates?

Management, supervision and training

What strategies provide effective supervision and training in a client centred program area, such as in home support, where individual workers often work alone?

If employers spend 30% more than they are funded to train staff, why do a quarter of staff believe they are inadequately trained to fulfil their current role?

Is there an issue about the definition and value of training by staff?

To what extent are qualifications held by staff relevant to their work?

To what extent does the broad range of job titles in use in the field and the wide range of services provided to clients make it difficult for new entrants to the field?

Summary

In summary, the research found that there were more people working in the sector than previously imagined (8650 rather than 7000), they are working across a wide variety of agencies, types of work and modes of employment. As employees they talk about their dedication to the work and their clients but raise many issues of dissatisfaction. Employers in the field mentioned recruitment and retention as key issues, the lack of parity of wages between NGOs and government, the plethora of different service offerings, and the challenge of providing quality services for clients across different service areas as challenges for the future. They wanted greater access to high quality just-in-time training and methods for determining quality in training and staff development providers.

More information on the project findings is available on the CD ROM with the full report. Keep in touch with ACROD, CIDA and VICRAID for information about new activities and initiatives.



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