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Latest research | Current policy priorities | Good operational practice
Dialogue and debate from the employability sector

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A note from the editor



Zac Ashkanasy FIEP
Guest Editor

I am delighted to share with you the 4th edition of the IEP Journal.

Consistent with the prior editions, this edition is an opportunity to share thoughtfully prepared articles from employability professionals. Excitingly, this edition has an added twist of including a series of articles about the Australian employment service system and the implications for employability professionals.

The articles presented in this edition reflect both the insights gained throughout this incredibly challenging period for society and give pointers to where the employability sector might be heading over the next decade. Importantly, each article relates back to the implications for employability professionals and the sector's quality underpinnings.

The first article, from Phil Ruthven (who founded IBISWorld), sets the scene. It's a must read. He postulates what the world of work will look like in the 2020s and beyond informed by some very interesting data sets. Whilst it is Australian based, his insights are relevant to the UK and will linger in your memory bank.

The next set of articles are from Australian service providers (WISE Employment, AMES Australia and Social Engine) who provide incredible insights into how their employment

programs performed, organisations adapted and employability professionals grew during Covid19.

The final set of Australian articles are from the University of Melbourne and Nous Group who provide policy insights into the digitisation of the employability sector and the implications for its professional staff. For what it is worth, the Australian government is doubling down on its investment into sector digitisation with big implications for the service model and skill requirements of employability professionals.

Complementing these antipodean articles are contributions from UK-based IEP Members. Each article helps to paint and enrich our understanding of employability, including the impact of blended learning, building a performance culture, learning from sector leaders, how the sector can improve its quality standards and the role of next generation technology.

Finally, and as prior IEP journal editors have noted, we want our articles to be a vehicle for debate. No one claims to have the definitive answer but if an article catches your eye send in your letter for the next edition - or indeed write an article. We want to hear from you!

Enjoy.

Zac Ashkanasy FIEP

Work in the 20s and beyond



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Work has historically consisted of unpaid household activities and chores, and paid external work that generated wages, bartering products (goods or services) and profits.

Little known is that for centuries the total number of hours of work in a lifetime has remained somewhat constant at around 130,000 hours for men and women, with only the split differing: men 80,000 paid; 50,000 unpaid.

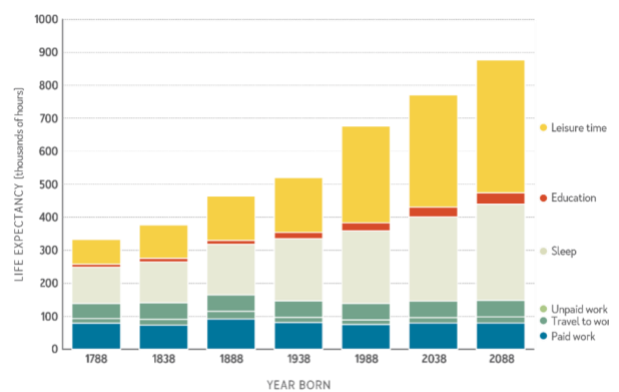
Women were once the reverse of this split, but in the 2020s they are much closer to the male split, with 72,000 paid hours in a lifetime and 58,000 unpaid hours.

These and other trends throughout this article use Australian data, but they are believed to be more common than not across developed economies.

Work and leisure

The first exhibit puts working hours in the context of much longer lives over the past several centuries.

WORK AND LEISURE OVER TIME



SOURCE: Ruthven Institute 19/01/2018

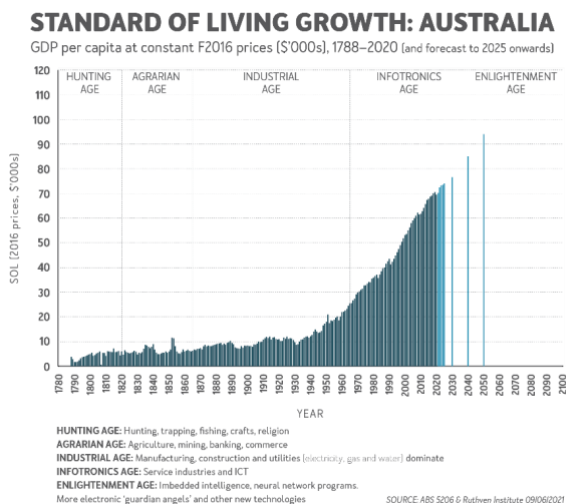
This unchanging number of working hours converts to a massive dilution of the proportion of working hours to total life. For a man, paid working hours have fallen from 24% of his lifetime in the 1800s to 11% in the 2020s. For a woman, with fewer paid hours and longer lives than men, working hours in the 2020s are now 9.5% of their lifetime. Total work, including unpaid, has dropped for both men and women from 37% to just 16% of a lifetime in those 220 years.

We now work for more than twice the number of years – living as we do for over 80 years compared with 38 years in 1800 – but working less than half the number of hours each year.

'For a woman, with fewer paid hours and longer lives than men, working hours in the 2020s are now 9.5% of their lifetime.'

Standard of living

And yet our standard of living almost doubled in the 19th Century, then rose over 5-fold in the 20th Century and could quadruple in this 21st Century. As seen below, this is all due to productivity growth.



For much of human history, household and external work were done at a family or shared tribal level. In fact, until quite recent centuries self-sufficiency at the household level was largely the norm, meaning there was not often a clear delineation between household and other work.

That changed as agriculture emerged as an industry, requiring larger tracts of land. Families began outsourcing most of their needs to that industry from the 1790s onwards. The same thing happened when the manufacturing industry really got going in the 1860s in Australia, a century after the United Kingdom. Households began outsourcing

clothing production, furniture-making, food preservation and other manufacturing activities that had hitherto been insourced within the home.

These days we treat household and paid work as quite separate. Paid work now fulfils several roles:

- income for survival and an improving quality of life
- profit, if a household owns a business (one in eleven do)
- self-esteem and socialisation
- enjoyment as a vocation or challenge.

In the post-Industrial Age, after the mid-1960s, households have been outsourcing chores to service industries; businesses are outsourcing non-core service functions; and countries are 'outsourcing' (i.e. 'getting someone else to do something for me that I used to do for myself or could do for myself) services (via imports) such as tourism (e.g. booking a flight or hiring a hotel), education (e.g. private tutoring), professional services (e.g. doing my annual tax return) and more. No wonder it is the services sectors that are growing the fastest, both in Australia and the OECD at large.

As a society, we want full employment, but we are willing to support those currently without a job. That is the mark of a civilised society: using institutionalised charity (our taxes) to help the temporarily (or longer) disadvantaged.

Nature of work

How do we predict and make sense of a fast-changing workforce in a fast-changing economy and society? And should we fear what's to come?

- Will we have enough workers in the future due to ageing?
- Will we have enough jobs due to immigration, mechanisation and the Digital Era?

'We have survived system and technology revolutions over several centuries.'

- Which jobs will be lost as we move forward?
- Where are the new jobs and how they are created?
- What are the industries and technologies of the future?

The workforce is ageing. In 1910, 11% of our workforce were over 55. In 2021, 20% were over 55. In 1910, 33% of our workforce was under 25; the figure today is less than half that (15% under 25). In 1901 the ratio of men to women workers was 78/22; in 2020 it was a better balanced 52/48.

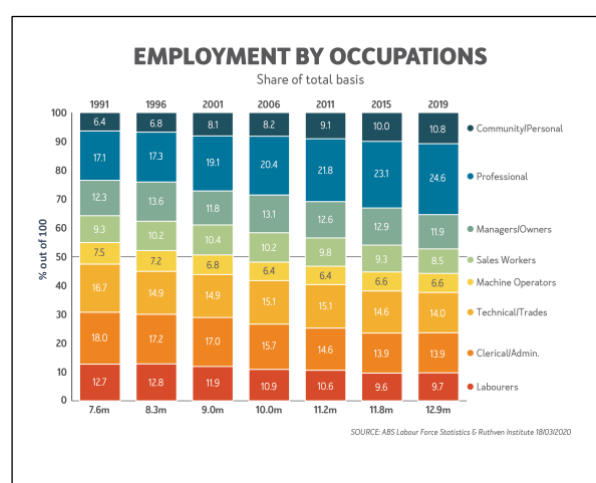
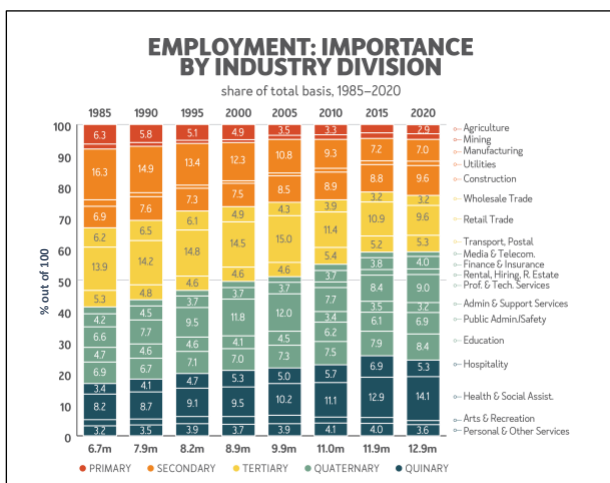
It is extraordinary how vulnerable we are to scaremongering. Industrialisation (manufacturing) initially scared the British labour force in the late 18th century, especially the craftsmen and artisans. Luddism – a movement dedicated to destroying manufacturing machinery in protest against the Industrial Revolution and its threat to employment – flourished for some time.

More recently, several decades ago dire predictions were made about the impact of computers, and it was forecast that massive unemployment could ensue. It didn't happen. Now, some warn, robots, androids, artificial intelligence and cognitive learning software are going to become smarter and more capable of performing a range of tasks than any humans, making us either subservient or unemployed as we enter the next century. This won't happen either. We have survived system and technology revolutions over several centuries.

It is often forgotten that one of the fastest declines in jobs came via the tractor and fertiliser pre- and post-WWII. The agriculture industry once employed well over 30% of the workforce in Australia. In June 2020 agriculture employed 3% of the workforce. Manufacturing employed some 30% of the workforce in 1960; now, 60 years later, it employs less than 7%, due to advances in technology and productivity, consumer saturation and import displacement. Yet our standard of living has risen more than threefold since that industry went into decline. So much for the doomsayers.

The next two charts show recent changes in the relative importance of industries and occupations.

In the process of getting to where we are today, we have radically changed our mix of industries



'The reality is that we are entering yet another leap forward into greater freedom and opportunity'.

and occupations; increased part-time and casual work to a third of the total workforce (to give jobs to those who can't work full-time); raised real wages by over 15% per decade and fourfold (400%) per century; provided two months off work each year (annual leave, public holidays and sick leave); made work safer; and introduced universal superannuation (i.e. a employer-funded pension scheme) to help provide a comfortable retirement.

We have seen married women "allowed" back in the workforce at the end of the Industrial Age in the mid-1960s, as mentioned, albeit way overdue even then. And, as said earlier, paid and unpaid working hours have been diminishing for centuries as shares of a lifetime in developed nations.

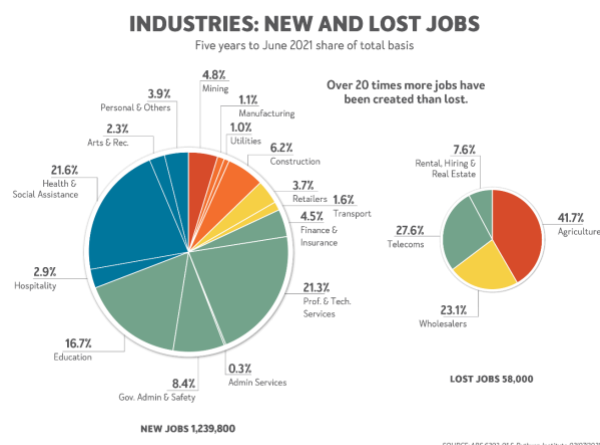
The future of work

One of the more recent evocative terms – "casualisation" – has carried ominous undertones, suggesting it is all bad news for workers whose lives and incomes are, or will be, a lottery ticket, and big business is once again an uncaring villain. However, this is yet again *luddism* reincarnated: fear of change, fear of technology, fear that incomes will be lost or reduced.

The reality is that our workforce has been in a constant state of change for centuries, and our lives, incomes and leisure have been the better for it, as the previous standard-of-living exhibit reminds us. And we are creating over 20 times more jobs than we are losing

every 5 years in this second decade of the new century, as we see below:

Note: in the chart below, the percentages are percentages of the total pie, not '41.7 per cent of agriculture jobs have been lost.'



And yet we hear from some quarters that the future is looking bleak: there are not enough jobs; not enough workers (ageing of the population); not enough long careers (when it is the workers changing jobs more than being retrenched); poorly paid jobs; the profits go to big business owners instead of the workers (even though the owners are the workers for the most part via their super!).

And now casualisation, as if it were a scourge. The reality is that we are entering yet another leap forward into greater freedom and opportunity. The major changes are:

WORKER FREEDOM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

- No "bondage" by businesses, bosses or unions...
- ... Replaced by opportunity and empowerment
- The gradual demise of the concept of an 'employee'
- Rise of contractual relationships (a worker being a business)
- Rise of business ownership (workers owning a business)
- Payment for outputs, not inputs (hours of work)
- Emergence of advisers and mentors for worker contracts
- No discrimination on any basis (gender, race, age, religion, etc.)
- More part-time and casual work
- Partial or total working from home, where practicable
- More working seasons in a life
- New industries and occupations
- Working in a borderless world
- Knowledge worker concept
- Lifetime education and training
- Rising wages and salaries

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'For those workers who have little forward planning skills for jobs or who have no negotiating skills, we will see advisers and mentors coming to the aid of the party.'

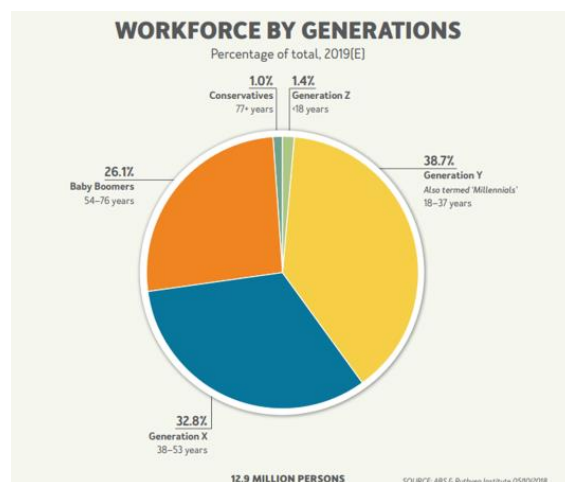
The advent of contractualism and casualisation is taking several forms, including:

- in-house workers on contracts involving payment by outputs
- external contractors on a payment by output (for example Uber)
- on-demand work a la the gig economy
- franchising, involving IP and other license fees and share of profits

For those workers who have little forward planning skills for jobs or who have no negotiating skills, we will see advisers and mentors coming to the aid of the party, so to speak, in much the same way that mortgage brokers and financial advisers emerged for house-buying and financial asset planning and management. Unions should have taken up this new age opportunity, but they haven't and, sadly, they are fading as a relevant element of the labour market. They did so in the Industrial Age but have leaned towards resistance and luddism this time around.

No, casualisation and contractualism are not steps backwards: they are (perhaps scary) steps forward. There will be setbacks and mistakes along the way; there always are. Most resistance will come from older generations that believe the 'old ways' are still the best and most humane. But it is the Gen Xers, the

Millennials (Y) and the Z-generation following them that will take to the new world of work with aplomb. These generations already dominate the nation's 13 million workforce, as we see in the final exhibit.



Implications for employability professionals

So the future is prospective, not retrospective. What does all this mean for employability professionals? In short, it means a new paradigm. Yes, a job will continue to be a means of 'paying the bills' and, very importantly, a contributor to one's dignity. In particular, increased lobbying of governments will be necessary to reduce the unacceptable level of youth unemployment, which is currently close to 1 in 6 in major economies but lower, at 1 in 9, in Australia. With the right regulations in place – the fewer the better – more acceptable levels can be achieved, as seen in Germany (1 in 12 youth are unemployed), Japan (1 in 25) and Switzerland (1 in 40).

Ageing is a challenge. There are some dire predictions that there will be too few workers to support the growing proportion of aged citizens. It is suggested that there will be only 3 workers to support 1 aged person, compared with the current 6. But that is not going to happen. We will be

‘Ageing is a challenge. There are some dire predictions that there will be too few workers to support the growing proportion of aged citizens.’

working much longer with fewer hours and less physical effort per year, and superannuation will be supporting the aged much more than now.

Employability professionals need to equip job seekers with a new modus operandi for a life of work, by letting them know:

- You will have a long working life with many more jobs than one or two long careers.
- But you will be working fewer hours each year as you progress through your working life.
- Unions won't be around to protect you (membership is heading down below 10%).
- You will need to be more self-reliant, think further ahead, and re-tread your skill base often.
- The Gig economy is here to stay, but with better rewards and conditions.
- You will need to think about rewards for output rather than hours (just turning up to work).
- Industries and occupation are in a never-ending but slow change in relative importance.
- Work will more than likely become more an interest than just a necessity as working hours in a lifetime shrink to around 10%, compared with nearly a quarter of a lifetime a few centuries ago.

Perhaps a comforting constant for employability professionals to pass on, when

it comes to work and jobs, is: there seem always to be much the same proportions of jobs in the high, medium and low skill levels that provide opportunities for the super-bright, the 'average' worker and the battler/plodder. But the industries and occupations do change for all these levels. So, again, change is the constant.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Ruthven | CEO & Founder | IBISWorld & The Ruthven Institute

Phil is the founder and continuing director of IBISWorld, an international corporation providing online business information, forecasting and strategic services. IBISWorld now operates in Australia, the United States (NY and LA), Canada, China, United Kingdom and Indonesia. In 2014, Phil became a Member of the Order of Australia, in recognition of his significant service to business, commerce and the community.

Adaptation under pressure: Delivering Australian employment services during the time of Covid-19



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The global pandemic has placed pressures on providers of public services across the world. Many service providers have experienced increased demand and have had to adapt their operations to quickly changing environments due to COVID-19.

In Australia these pressures have been increased by the different approaches taken by jurisdictions at the state and territory level. The experience in Australia has been one of continuous adaptation under pressure, with COVID-19 acting as both a catalyst and accelerator for changes that have been under development for some time. In this article, I report on the rapid adaption under pressure that WISE Employment undertook during COVID-19. WISE Employment is a leading Australian national not-for-profit employment services provider in both Jobactive and Disability Employment Services.

In Australia, state and territory governments have imposed lockdowns and internal border closures. Throughout the pandemic, these have varied from city or local government area to state-wide lockdowns. Metropolitan Melbourne in the state of Victoria, for example, endured one of the world's longest hard lockdowns of 111 straight days¹. This included a joint police and military 'ring of steel' surrounding the city, which ensured that there was minimal human movement between metropolitan and regional areas.

During the hard lockdowns people were only allowed to leave their homes for four reasons, and they could not go beyond a 5-kilometre radius from home. For those who could leave home, social distancing of 1.5 metres had to be maintained, as well as mask-wearing. People could leave home for basic reasons: grocery shopping (one person per household); one hour of exercise per day; and travel for emergency workers and for defined essential and medical reasons. This meant that the overwhelming majority of businesses needed to suspend trading or shift to working from home. This led to a sharp temporary increase in unemployment. The outsourced Australian employment services system also had to change overnight to a different model of client servicing.

The Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) and the Department of Social Services (DSS) suspended client mutual obligation requirements. They also allowed employment service providers to service clients through alternative means, in what had been a solely face-to-face, site-based servicing approach.

WISE Employment adapted quickly. We ensured that team members were equipped to provide a service via phone in addition to a variety of internet-based visual communication apps such

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/10/28/melbourne-australia-coronavirus-lockdown-111-days/>

'Given the infrastructure was already in place, the real transformation was the servicing of clients via telephone, Zoom/Skype and FaceTime'

as FaceTime, Skype or Zoom. We recognised that the pressure for changes to employment services had been building for some time in Australia: a digital approach had been under discussion for a considerable time. The COVID-19 pandemic clearly accelerated this demand and forced rapid adaptation across a range of services, including employment. The Australian Government itself has started building a online digital service delivery model, which has been fast-tracked during the pandemic. Increased usage of digital communications has been on the rise and has accelerated due to COVID-19 enforced lockdowns, where face-to-face servicing was not possible. A new generation of digital natives has also entered the employment services client base. They are seeking a new, digital hybrid model of service. During COVID-19 these pressures created a scenario where a rapid shift to a client-centred service model was needed and where interaction was determined by the client. Use of options such as telephone or an internet-based visual communication app rose exponentially.



The rapid adaptation in employment service delivery was critical to providing support for clients and delivering on government requirements. WISE Employment staff, including all frontline service delivery staff, started working from home full time. In previous years we had undergone the 'cut the copper' transformation, which meant that all staff worked from mobile phones and from laptops with direct internet connection via mobile services. This meant our service delivery team were able to adapt quickly from a technical viewpoint.

Given the infrastructure was already in place, the real transformation was the servicing of clients via telephone, Zoom/Skype and FaceTime. This participatory, flexible service approach allowed a more personal engagement model because of the convenience created by flexible locations. It was enhanced dramatically by the empathy, in many cases, of both individuals involved facing the same adversary created by COVID-19. A major benefit from this adaptation was the saving of commuting time and cost for both the client and the service delivery team members.

The scale of this adaptation by Australian employment services providers is significant. The increase of newly unemployed people on Jobactive benefits alone required adaptive servicing under the new COVID-19 environment. This is best shown by official figures for Jobactive jobseekers, which jumped from 620,000 in May 2019 to 1.44 million in May 2020², some 2 months after the initial lockdowns of March 2020.

This national increase of 822,000 Jobactive jobseekers was predominately Stream A clients, who technically required lighter touch servicing³. But for many clients that were first-time unemployed a more in-depth servicing was required, along with assistance

² <https://www.employment.gov.au/news/release-jobactive-case-load-data>

³ <https://www.dese.gov.au>

'The adaptation under pressure and flexible support during COVID-19 resulted in improved client engagement and impact.'

in navigating the unemployment system for the first time. This shift led to increased empathetic customer support, especially focussed on their current situation created by COVID-19 and how to manage under the Australian Government's expanded benefits payment offering. The psychological support provided by many of the frontline team during this period was instrumental in helping large numbers of people cope with the impact of the pandemic. The adaptation under pressure and flexible support during COVID-19 resulted in improved client engagement and impact.

Alongside this transformation, WISE has been measuring its social and economic impact through its WISE Impact Promise Report. A WISE client wellbeing survey utilises the recognised Australian Unity Wellbeing Index and uses the same questions on personal wellbeing for its

benchmark. In the surveys during the pandemic, the overall wellbeing of WISE clients was recorded at 52.9%⁴, marginally up from 52.6% in 2019. This was an unexpected positive result given the known economic and mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially to the unemployed. The same survey found that 76%⁵ of the clients valued the support they had received. This improved client satisfaction can also be cross-referenced and supported by an increased 2020 Net Promoter Score (NPS) score of 20 (N=3174) compared to 10 in 2019. This is an excellent result, as indicated in a 2020 study by The Evolved Group's⁶ analytics consultants, who found that across Australian businesses the average NPS score was 8.0. Within this sample, Employment and Recruitment services averaged an NPS score of 0.

The adaptation under pressure and flexible client support during COVID-19 also resulted in improved team engagement at WISE. The WISE Employee Wellbeing Survey 2020 told us that the wellbeing of the WISE team averaged 72.5%⁷, slightly higher than 72.0% in 2019 and close to the Australian average of 74.4%. This is a positive result given the mental health impact of living through the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges of working in employment services during the pandemic.



⁴ WISE Employment (2021): The WISE Impact Promise Report 2020

⁵ WISE Employment (2021): The WISE Impact Promise Report 2020

⁶ The Evolved Group, (April 2020) Australian B2B NPS industry benchmarks, <https://www.theevolvedgroup.com/australian-b2b-nps-industry-benchmarks-how-does-your-organisation-compare/>.

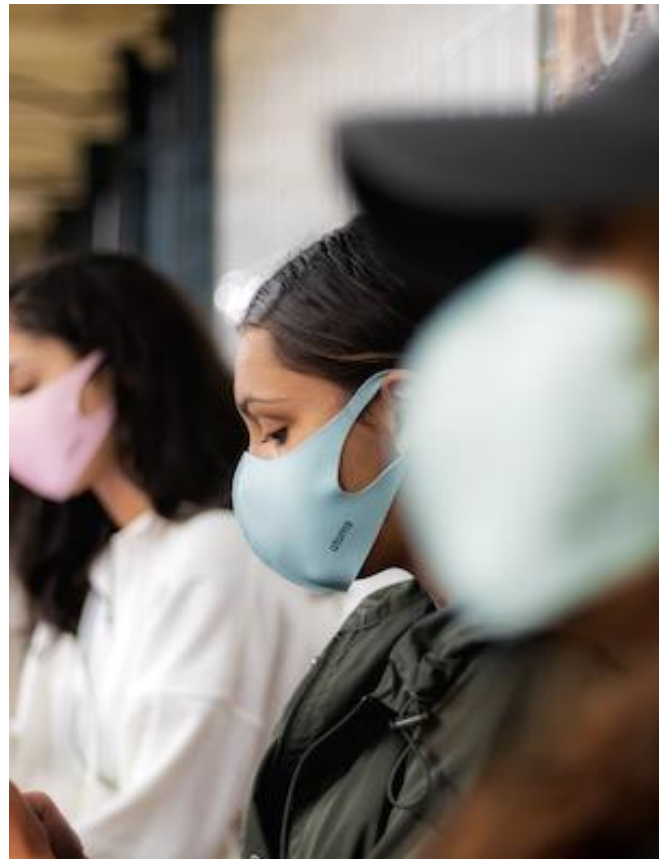
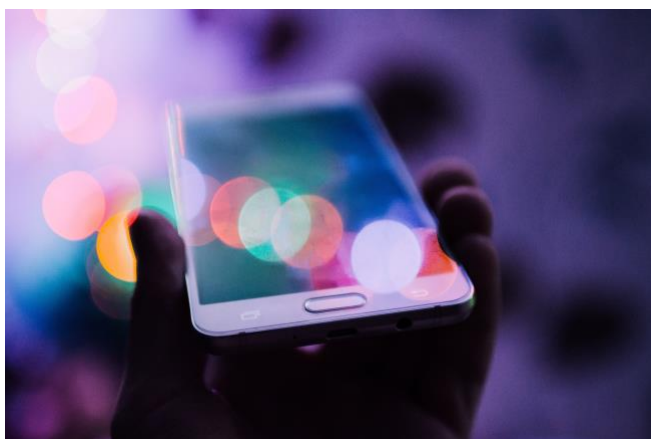
⁷ WISE Employment (2021): The WISE Impact Promise Report 2020

'The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a natural experiment on the adoption of digital delivery of employment services.'

It is an important lesson on how clients, frontline teams and employment services organisations can face adaptability, change and adversity together and yet can all benefit from improved servicing and personal engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a natural experiment on the adoption of digital delivery of employment services and, in the Australian case, a diversity of conditions depending on the geographic location of provider sites. This experiment has lessons for governments and providers that can help to shape approaches in the future. These learnings include that crises place demands on providers but also provide an opportunity for team innovation and to catalyse new approaches for clients.

It is clear that to achieve a client-focussed service it is crucial to offer a range of service options that allow clients to access services in ways that suit them and provide a platform for enhanced quality and better outcomes. Hybrid servicing models that mix digital and face to face can deliver superior outcomes for clients and staff.



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A recognised Senior Executive with strong business acumen bringing strong and diverse leadership, management and community development experience in Australia, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. A demonstrated and dynamic track record in networking, marketing, communications, partnership and business development with an in-depth understanding of working with a variety of stakeholders.

Output orientated with strong communication, financial and team building skills, with the ability to think innovatively at a macro and micro level. A people person with proficient experience in organisational strategic planning, risk management frameworks, monitoring frameworks, quantitative and qualitative evaluation and decision making systems across a variety of settings.

Maximising refugee employability by building resilience: evidence from Australia



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The COVID-19 pandemic and its economic impact have uprooted, reshaped and complicated the role of employment and employability services.

While Australia has avoided the most significant tolls of the pandemic, economic impacts have been pronounced. In the state of Victoria a major outbreak in the capital, Melbourne, led to a strict lockdown for much of 2020. Victoria is also one of the few jurisdictions in the world where COVID-19 was suppressed following a large outbreak, whereupon the local economy recovered strongly and quickly (although lagging behind other Australian states). Behind this apparent rebound, though, refugees remain disproportionately worse off, and employment rates for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people are recovering more slowly.

Research from AMES Australia, a refugee settlement services organisation, has shown that refugees who participated in an employability program known as the Career Pathways Pilot (CPP) between 2017 and 2019 are doing better than other refugees of similar backgrounds. Their resilience through the pandemic offers important lessons for the employability sector in the UK, where there is evidence that migrant communities have been more disadvantaged by the pandemic.¹

The CPP was an Australian Government-funded program for refugees with trade and specialised qualifications acquired overseas, who required support to use these in Australia. The program supported 361 recently arrived refugees to use their professional qualifications and background in (for example) medicine, pharmacy, engineering and business/accounting.

The Australian program provided intensive career advice, developed informed career pathway plans, allocated financial support for skills recognition and examinations where required, and provided assistance to refugees following an employment outcome.

While participants did not necessarily attribute their employment outcomes to CPP, we received positive feedback about the level of personalised engagement and support offered throughout the program. Participants highlighted that this led to increased confidence and stronger social networks earlier in their settlement journey in Australia. These are key elements of resilience (and of finding resilient occupations) that go some way to ultimately explaining the success of the cohort through 2020.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/16/bame-people-more-likely-to-die-from-covid-than-white-people-study>

'In this case we were also interested in understanding how this unique cohort of skilled refugees fared through the economic shock of COVID-19.'

About the research

Since the CPP program concluded in 2019, AMES Australia has remained in regular contact with many of the participants, both formally (for example through surveys and continued support) and informally (with occasional check-ins from AMES staff to better understand individual situations). In June 2021 we again surveyed the cohort and facilitated a focus group discussion with a sample of 6 former participants.

Of 361 former CPP participants, 103 (28.5%) responded to an online survey sent via SMS and email.

As always, we were interested in the career trajectory and employment status of our former participants. In this case we were also interested in understanding how this unique cohort of skilled refugees fared through the economic shock of COVID-19.

Recent work at a national level has looked to rate the most resilient industries and occupations – that is those that provide most security from job losses in recent times.² We wanted to know whether the more resilient/confident refugee jobseeker finds this more resilient work.

Key findings

1. **Overall, the sampled CPP participants have increased their employment rate through the pandemic.** Table 1. demonstrates the employment and study rate of the respondents over time.

	June 2018	June 2019	February 2020	June 2021 (n=103)
Employed	14%	28%	40%	57%
Further Studies	20%	21%	15%	17%

Table 1. N.B.- different sample size, respondents and methodologies applied at data collection points.

When asked about the challenges they experienced, the June 2021 respondents gave a number of surprising responses, indicating their resilience:

"No issues"

"Due to COVID-19 crisis, it was very challenging ... I was very overwhelmed to finish my exams ... Fortunately ... I passed my [tests] and also had my registration just at the end of April. Happily, now I'm doing my graduate program at [a] hospital."

"I was promoted during pandemic."

² The Australian National Skills Commission has recently developed a framework for assessing resilient occupations. In Australia, more than half of employment in resilient occupations is accounted for by just 3 industries – healthcare, construction and education/training. See National Skills Commission, *The shape of Australia's post COVID-19 workforce*, December 2020. Access via: <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-12/NSC%20Shape%20of%20Australias%20post%20COVID-19%20workforce.pdf>

“Data from the Centre for Policy Development demonstrates the underutilisation of refugee skills in Australia – identifying that before arrival 60% of previously employed refugees held highly skilled jobs.”



Indeed, many appear to have thrived despite the pandemic. Extending this support to the many highly skilled refugees nationwide could protect the cohort from economic shocks. Furthermore, the wider economic payoff of enabling refugees to persist and ultimately enter resilient professions could be significant. Data from the Centre for Policy Development demonstrates the underutilisation of refugee skills in Australia – identifying that before arrival 60% of previously employed refugees held highly skilled jobs. Of refugees employed in Australia, only 26% are in highly skilled positions.³

2. Overall, the survey respondents navigated the pandemic with fewer challenges than other refugees in Victoria – indicating many had found work in resilient occupations.

Any participant who had worked since leaving the CPP in 2019 was asked about if and how the pandemic had impacted their employment. 64% of respondents had not missed any time from work at all; 11% had some hours reduced; and only 5% had lost their job (refer *Figure 1.*).

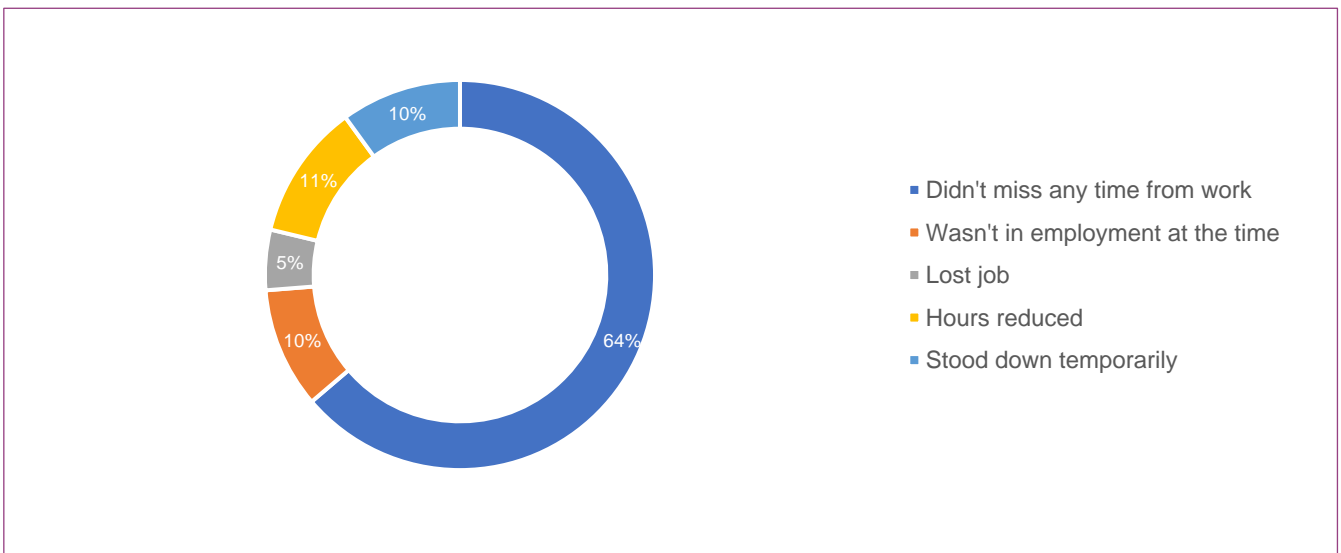


Figure 1 – Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on sampled former CPP participants

Only 11% of the respondents were not in employment well-matched to their skills and goals.

³ Centre for Policy Development, *Settling Better: Reforming refugee employment and settlement services*, 2017. Access via: <https://cpd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/New-Settling-Better-Report-18-Feb-Final-Draft.compressed.pdf>



“CPP staff made them feel valued, supported and listened to, particularly those who struggled settling in and/or who were experiencing poor mental health.”

3. Soft skills, emotional support, and personalised engagement have the most lasting impact over time.

Both survey and focus group participants expressed high satisfaction with the CPP overall, despite the lower numbers of participants who felt it had explicitly helped get them into employment. Participants highlighted the individualised support they received. CPP staff made them feel valued, supported and listened to, particularly those who struggled settling in and/or who were experiencing poor mental health. A clear finding from the survey was that the dedication and time commitment from CPP staff was as important to participants as finding employment.

“This lady was telling me ‘but he’s just doing his job right?’ I said ‘no, it’s not like he’s doing his job, it’s like helping with passion... and this was really mesmerising because once you arrive in a new country and you find nothing to help... someone from nowhere just really want to help you as much as he can...that meant so much to me, more than someone trying to find me a job.”

Participants identified that they had an Australian connection who was willing to listen and advocate for them. They did not reflect often on hard skills gained, but repeatedly redirected

conversation to the positive outlook that they had acquired through CPP.

4. Old problems persist. When respondents were asked about challenges they had faced since leaving the CPP program, by far the most common theme was a lack of social capital. 36% of those who responded to this survey question raised an issue relating to lack of local experience and limited networks in Australia. Migrant communities have persistently highlighted this issue to researchers, to government and to providers like AMES Australia:

“The problem ... was the local experience and the issue that I had not worked before in Australia as an engineer. [So] I found a job ... as a machine operator ... after I started working, I wrote in my resume that I worked as a machine operator, and I kept attending phone and face interviews and after three weeks I found a good permanent job and I have been working for two years.”

“In every job they ask about the local experience which is something that affects us as migrants.”



'Jobseekers need to understand structural barriers, anticipate the possibility of disruptions and have strategies to pivot in reaching their goals.'

"...all of them required from me to have experience in Australia. I only have been here for 2 and a half years so ... how should I get experience here if no one is employing me?"

For most focus group participants, it was apparent that the best approach to this issue was persistence: persistently adhering to mapped-out, long-term goals with interim steps like internships, volunteering and lower skilled jobs. We again want to draw a connection between persistence and the emotional resilience that refugees require to persist. We know that many never find the work they seek, so it is important that employability support for refugees acknowledges the time and scope required to build resilience, independence and persistence.

Takeaways

What are the elements of CPP that could be taken forward in other jurisdictions, where an equitable COVID-19 rebound is critical? We believe there are four key takeaways:

1. **Position early career guidance for refugees around building resilience.** Build resilient jobseekers and focus them on resilient occupations. Jobseekers need to understand structural barriers, anticipate the possibility of disruptions and have strategies to pivot in reaching their goals.

2. **Building resilient employability outcomes takes time.** The slow accrual of high-quality employment outcomes in the sample of former CPP participants shows this.
3. **De-emphasising compliance and structure and focusing on a person-centred approach creates time, flexibility and increased personal connection.**
4. **For faster, better employment outcomes, start to identify skills profiles and build employability early in a refugee settlement journey.**

While these learnings might not address underemployment issues in the short-term, the pandemic has taught us that preparedness and planning are essential. We also know that without significant funding, programs like CPP cannot exist, so we hope there are lessons here for both practitioners and policymakers.

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Conor is a researcher at AMES Australia where he conducts social research and program evaluation, and writes policy submissions to Government.

AMES Australia is a refugee and migrant settlement services organisation working across four Australian states. Currently in its 70th year, AMES delivers a range of government-funded employment, education, settlement and social participation services.

Conor has evaluated a number of AMES employability programs and has led the social impact reporting process at AMES. He has previously worked in education policy roles and as a migration researcher in Australia and South East Asia.

Employment services in Australia need to cater for disadvantaged young people



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The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected young people in the labour market, compared to the other age cohorts.

In June 2020 the youth unemployment rate in Australia reached a 23-year high of 16.4% (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2020). A factor contributing to this number is the high number of consumer-facing roles in the youth labour market, like retail and hospitality, which have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. The pandemic has also contributed to young people facing a premature end to education due to financial hardship.


Employment is crucial for young people to acquire transferrable skills like time management, critical thinking and communication. Within the youth cohort, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience unemployment and have a higher risk of being marginalised and socially excluded than their peers (International Labour Office 2011). They may experience challenges, like mental health difficulties, family violence and crime involvement, which affect their stability of employment. In addition, they tend to lack social supports to navigate challenges that arise in the workforce.

Prolonged youth unemployment can result in subsistence living, loss of personal autonomy, anger and low self-esteem. It perpetuates the cycle of generational disadvantage.

To address youth unemployment, we must give young people access to a range of support, such as on-the-job training, peer support, appropriate referral to other support services and job searching support.

A social enterprise business is one of the ways we can incorporate various levels of support to tackle youth unemployment. Social enterprises are businesses that trade to intentionally tackle social problems, improve communities and help people to access employment and training (Social Traders 2021). Although earning profits is not the specific purpose of a social enterprise, generating revenue is still important to fund their social objectives.

In Australia there are an estimated 20,000 social enterprises. They operate across all industry sectors (Finding Australia's Social Enterprise Sector, FASES 2016). 73% are small businesses, 23% are medium sized and 4% are large organisations (FASES 2016). The data



'it was the first time I felt like someone believed in me and wanted me to do well.'

outlines that 34% of them exist to create meaningful employment opportunities for people from a specific group, and 34% exist to develop new solutions to social, cultural, economic or environmental problems (FASER 2016).

Social Engine is a social enterprise in Melbourne that creates job opportunities for disadvantaged young people. We provide employment in the hospitality and warehouse and logistics industries, and we give young people extensive support to enter mainstream employment after the program. The additional support includes job searching, vocational assistance, peer support and job readiness assessments. Social Engine is a small-scale social enterprise that is continuously growing, with job sites focusing on hospitality and warehouse and logistics. The job sites that operated during the pandemic include the canteen, warehouse and coffee van.


Many young people who join Social Engine come from difficult backgrounds and have limited or no work experience. They learn about the different aspects of being an employee, and they are required to meet the same standards as other staff members. Outside of work, young people are required to use planning skills to create structure and routine in their everyday lives. This includes planning transport to attend work on time. To the average person, these skills may seem trivial, but many young people may not have had the opportunity and guidance to learn them.

Young people may experience barriers outside work that have an impact on their progress and development. A previous Social Engine participant says: "I continuously resigned on bad terms with my ex-employers, which meant I did not have references for my resume. I also experienced life challenges with alcohol and drug use that interfered with my work performance and job stability." The young person stated it was a "continuous cycle which caused my life to be inconsistent" and "I was lacking direction ... I didn't know where I was going".

Before joining Social Engine, this young person attended rehab to begin their recovery journey. They formed a meaningful connection with one of the site supervisors and thrived in the program with staff and peer support. They said, "it was the first time I felt like someone believed in me and wanted me to do well."

When working with young people, employment services need to be consistent with support and empathy and showing a genuine interest in the young person's potential, especially because many young people are familiar with inconsistency and instability. For disadvantaged young people, work becomes a safe place where they have structure, boundaries and purpose. It is crucial for employment services and employability professionals to understand that progress may be non-linear and some young people may experience fluctuations in their progress.

Due to the pandemic, young people's safe places, along with other important domains of life, had been compromised. Many young people thrive on social connection with their friends, which becomes an outlet for life stressors. Most of our young people were greatly impacted by the lockdown due to the isolation from their social supports and changes to their everyday routine. For



‘Social Engine incorporated peer support throughout the pandemic from youth support workers, who worked alongside young people at the canteen, coffee van and warehouse.’

example, one of our young people, who experiences severe anxiety, had made immense progress by attending work and taking little steps daily to sit outside their comfort zone. Unfortunately, during the lockdown their mental health took a few steps backwards, as COVID-19 provoked health anxiety at work.

This is an important reason why employment services and their staff must be patient, empathetic and persistent with young people, particularly in a post COVID-19 world. Social Engine incorporated peer support throughout the pandemic from youth support workers, who worked alongside young people at the canteen, coffee van and warehouse. The role of a youth support worker included referring young people to mental health services; creating resumes and cover letters; preparing for interviews; positive role modelling by demonstrating work ethic on shift; communicating with young people outside work through text or call to check on their overall wellbeing; and fostering a sense of belonging by acknowledging the stress and anxiety of a pandemic.

We have identified that training alone is not enough to support young people to gain long-term employment. To give young people the best chance in the labour market, services need to incorporate diverse approaches, such as job readiness training, job search assistance, career guidance and counselling and vocational support.

Additionally, we have discovered the importance of giving young people other options, such as entering tertiary education alongside entering the workforce. Employment services would benefit from giving young people mentoring or peer support to highlight their options to enter tertiary education.

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have completed secondary education. They may not have believed that they were capable or had the option to return to study. We foster mentoring and peer support in our program, which incorporates career guidance and counselling and vocational support. In practical terms, our youth support workers collaborate with young people over 3 to 8 months to explore the young person’s goals and to make an action plan to reach those goals.

A previous participant in the Social Engine program moved on to work part time at a café as a barista then completed a Certificate IV in Mental Health, which enabled an admission to study psychology at university. We have also had many past participants who returned to study after their time in the program whilst working either part time or casually in hospitality or warehouse and logistics.

Young people are experiencing challenges in the labour market. Many lack the skills, work experience, job searching abilities and support to find employment. Employment services and their staff must consider that young people are all unique individuals with varying needs and goals. Social Engine learnt that young people have various life experiences, skills and knowledge that we can draw from. We recognise the importance of building and maintaining relationships with young people that are based on trust and compassion. During the pandemic we needed to be consistent with communication and maintaining relationships, because young

‘Employability professionals need to prioritise building strong relationships with young people and showing a genuine interest in seeing them improve.’

people were affected by the lockdown and contact outside work became sporadic due to a decline in their mental health.

Employability professionals need to prioritise building strong relationships with young people and showing a genuine interest in seeing them improve. It is crucial to recognise their strengths in adversity and to consider how we can connect with them effectively.

Furthermore, supporting a young person with employment needs to be holistic. It

is not enough to focus solely on training and job searching – employability professionals must recognise and address the multidimensional factors, social, psychological, and physical, that affect young people.

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Sammy is an Australian Social Worker, working in youth mental health and the education and employment sector. Sammy has previously written articles for YACVic and Pro Bono Australia and was involved in co-designing the Department of Justice and Community Safety's youth participation strategy.



Australia's next resolution: 'digital first' employment services



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Providing a more efficient, flexible and personalised welfare system has been a long-standing focus of reforms by the Australian Government.

Recently this focus on service improvement has led to an exploration of the opportunities presented by digital technology. The Digital Transformation Agency was formed in 2015 with the goal of making government services simpler, easier and quicker to use. The COVID-19 crisis has also significantly sped up the transition to online service delivery for government, with a growing number of services now being delivered virtually. This transition has opened up more and more opportunities for people to access services from places and at times that are more suitable for them. The welfare-to-work system is one of the key areas where the Australian Government is looking to introduce these new digital service provision tools.

In Australia this transition to digital services is not entirely new. Using different information and computing technology to deliver welfare and employment services has long been a feature of active labour market policies in Australia and across the OECD. Computer terminals for job searching have been an important support for jobseekers in several countries, while digital assessment tools and case management

systems were common as early as the 2000s (Caswell et al., 2010; Marston, 2006).

In 2018 an expert advisory panel was established to develop a new model of service delivery which would better use the capabilities of digital service delivery. Panel members were appointed from across industry, academia and non-government organisations. Jobseekers, employers and providers were involved in user-centred design, and extensive consultations were held across the country (Department of Jobs and Small Business 2018). What emerged from this process was a series of key principles and an overarching system design which the Australian Government agreed to trial.

Trials of both the New Employment Services Model and the Online Employment Services have been delivered from 2019 to 2021. In July 2022 a new, two-tier system will be introduced. Some people receiving unemployment support will be serviced through a 'digital first' system, while those with less digital literacy or more significant barriers to employment will receive 'enhanced services'. The digital system will be delivered by government, while enhanced services will be provided by contracted employment service providers.



'The administering government department can access this computerised case management system and see individual client records at any time.'

A transition to digital-first services, and the new approach to servicing clients face to face, will likely lead to significant changes in how the welfare-to-work system operates. Much of the focus of the trials is on the outcomes for jobseekers and the issues that help or hinder their success. But it is also critical to understand how these changes are impacting the interactions and provision of services between government, service providers, front-line staff and jobseekers.

Based on previous research by members of our team into the history of service reforms in welfare-to-work in Australia (Considine, Lewis, and O'Sullivan 2011a; Considine et al. 2020; Considine 2001), we believe there is a need to further explore the impact of digitalisation on discretion and how discretion may play a role in shaping digitalisation.

One key consideration for the new digital system is that these interventions can take many forms. We are seeing three key approaches in Australia.

First, we are seeing the introduction of tools that allow access to services such as meetings or training through virtual provision. Second, we are seeing tools that allow for entering data online, such as online forms and digital signatures. These can improve record-keeping and make it easier to verify eligibility.

Finally, we see the use of automated decision-making and profiling tools. These profiling tools may use statistical methods or machine

learning and artificial intelligence. These profiling tools may be used to assess eligibility or risk.

These different tools and interventions will have very different impacts on how discretion operates in providing services. Understanding the different nuances behind these tools and interventions is critical for the development of training, support and business management more broadly.

We can see how the use of specific tools and interventions can shape discretion in the introduction of the IT-based case management system, ESS Web, in Australia. Since 2003 all front-line employment services staff have been required to use a prescribed information management system for recording the details of their interactions with clients, for reporting on the activities that the jobseekers they are working with are undertaking to meet their mutual obligation requirements, and for documenting all referrals to job vacancies, education and training courses, or progressions to employment.

Although computerised case management systems such as ESS Web do not eliminate street-level discretion, they make the exercise of discretion more transparent and accountable to higher-level policy officials. That, in turn, puts pressure on street-level workers to conform their administrative decisions to program rules. The administering government department can access this computerised case management system and see individual client records at any time. Front-line employment services staff therefore make decisions in a context 'where every transaction is visible' (Fowkes 2011) and 'as actors who know they are being observed' (Soss, Fording and Schram 2011).

'Digital services and automated decision-making can still make mistakes, and if neither clients nor staff understand how these mistakes have been made this can lead to disempowerment and loss of vital support services to those in need.'

How will this change in the new system – a system capable of even greater surveillance? One recent, worrying example involves a trial in Australia of the use of activity tracking by case workers for recording job placement activities (Briscese and Tan 2016). While this trial was intended to motivate and encourage competition, it is easy to imagine less optimistic outcomes.

Another existing example is the use of the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) in Australia. The JSCI is a standardised client classification instrument, administered by entering responses to questions into a computer. The instrument then generates an estimate of jobseekers' probability of long-term unemployment and their degree of distance from the labour market, based on statistics about the outcomes of jobseekers with similar profiles. It functions as a 'gateway instrument' (Caswell, Marston and Larsen 2010) by which the level of assistance and intensity of employment support is to be decided. In so doing, it aims to standardise decision-making and to streamline processes of assessing clients and targeting services. Less effort is demanded from caseworkers 'in getting to know jobseekers' (Carney 2021), while the potential for bias in rationing services is reduced by providing a more objective metric for targeting services than caseworkers' own professional judgement.

The Department of Education, Skills and Employment provide assurance that the JSCI is supported by the expertise of statistical econometricians working for and with the Australian Government. However, the modelling that supports it is not publicly

available. This raises concerns about how the system will manage the introduction of algorithmic decision making, something that has been even more heavily criticised for operating as a 'black box' and that is so heavily reliant on significant technical expertise (Reisman et al. 2018). Transparency is a critical feature for helping both clients and case workers to understand how decisions were made. How will this be impacted by an increasingly digitalised system?

The use of profiling and assessment tools like the JSCI also creates the risk of deskilling front-line services. Staff are less called upon to make case decisions based on their educated judgement and years of professional experience and training (Considine, Lewis, and O'Sullivan 2011b). As Zouridis et al. argue, screen-level workers' discretion, to the extent that it is available, is mainly applied 'in the interpretation of the information on the form and the input process itself' (Zouridis, Van Eck, and Bovens 2020).

This deskilling, combined with the decreased transparency and increased technicality of these systems, also raises concern about the ability of front-line staff to effectively challenge decisions or correct mistakes (Bovens & Zourides, 2002). Digital services and automated decision-making can still make mistakes, and if neither clients nor staff understand how these mistakes have been made this can lead to disempowerment and loss of vital support services to those in need.

Additionally, it may lead to inconsistent outcomes, favouring service users who are more able to proactively seek support when a digital system has not worked well for them. Hansen et al. (2018), for example, found that there is a divide emerging in the accessibility of public services, based on the digital literacy and self-advocacy skills of the service user.

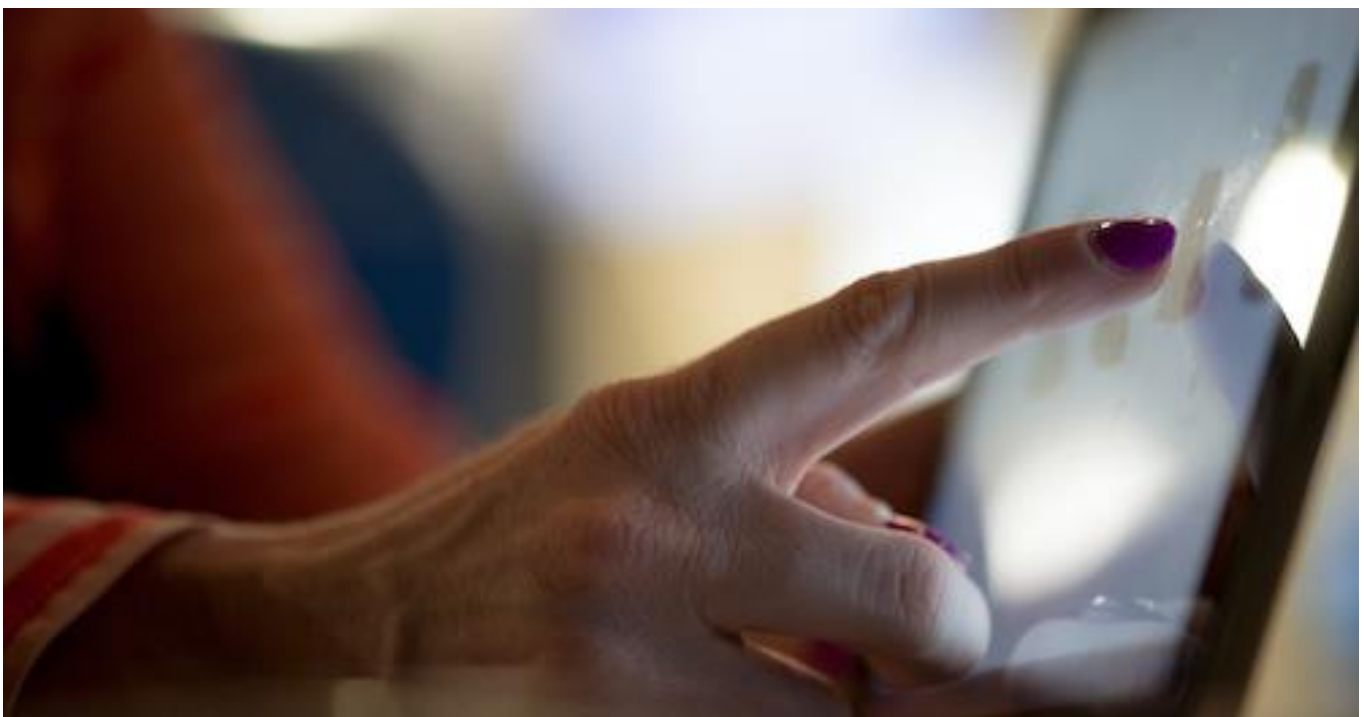
Internationally we have seen some key examples of how these systems can either enable or curtail decision-making and

'Internationally we have seen some key examples of how these systems can either enable or curtail decision-making and discretion in service provision.'

discretion in service provision. In some cases the information has served to provide more information and opportunity to support clients (Cockx, Lechner and Bollens 2019; OECD 2016). In others it served predominantly to replace case worker and front-line decision-making and discretion with automated tools (Molinuevo 2020; Carney 2020). Ultimately the challenge for Government will be in ensuring digital systems are implemented by clients and front-line service providers in a way that minimises the risks and provides the greatest benefits. We hope our research will help to shed more light on this. If you are interested in being involved or kept up to date, please feel free to contact us at <https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/school-of-social-and-political-sciences/our-research/getting-welfare-to-work>.

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The quiet revolution in Australia's employment services system



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From July 2022 Australia will move to a fully digitally enabled employment services system. Jobseekers with more complex barriers to employment will continue to be supported by employment services providers, but the majority of jobseekers will be assessed and guided and supported through an online process to connect them to employers.

This will be a significant transformation. It has been several years in the making. Its implications will be felt among employability professionals, who will be expected to provide more tailored, comprehensive advice and support as well as deeper connections into related services systems. Furthermore, the switch from a contract-based service to licensing arrangements should improve the ability of employment services to engage in longer-term planning and to contemplate options for greater specialisation.

What is behind the changes?

Australia's unemployment rate, at 5.5 per cent, is comparable to most other OECD countries, albeit a bit higher than the UK's. This is an improvement from the mid-2020 high of 7.5 per cent associated with COVID-19 lockdowns.¹ As with other developed economies, however, this general downward trend disguises a cohort of

people who have struggled to find work even after several years of job search, training, targeted programs and incentives. Indeed, the number of long-term unemployed (unemployed for a year or more) has risen to a two-decade high and now constitutes 1.8 per cent of the labour force.²

In national consultations conducted by Nous Group for the Australian Government in 2018, sector representatives called for a much more personalised approach to assisting those who were stuck in unemployment or who remained well short of being job ready. As the report noted at the time:

"Stakeholders agreed that there should be greater capacity in the system to service the needs of job seekers who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or who faced multiple barriers to employment. They appreciated the potential of online technologies to create that necessary capacity while also improving the customer experience (for employers and job seekers). There was also relatively strong support for improved assessment processes, and for a licensing system for employment service providers to replace current contract-based arrangements."³

Acting on the recommendations of an expert advisory panel, the Australian Government

'The digital platform promises a better service for employers, including the ability to filter and search for candidates.'

designed a system that would steer the more job-ready cohorts of jobseekers, and those comfortable using digital services, into an online system. Aspects of this new system have been prototyped and tested, but much remains to be done to be ready to implement the model nationally within 12 months.

Key features of the new system

The main change for jobseekers is that, rather than being required to attend an employment services provider and follow a standard process according to their relative level of employability, they will have access to different service options (including self-service) and will be supported by a range of tools, online learning and job-matching services. The service options are grouped as follows:

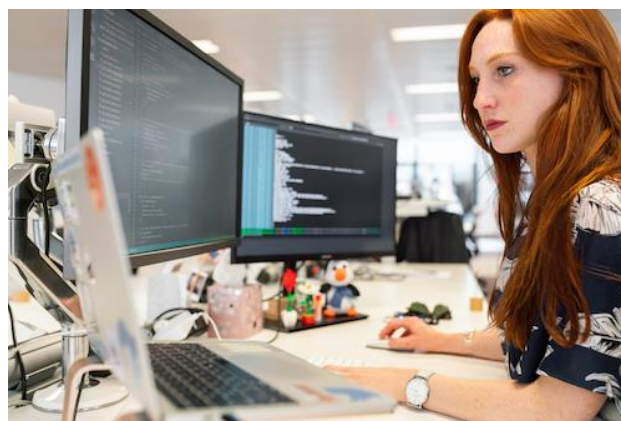
- **Digital First** – job-ready and digitally literate jobseekers go through initial and repeated online assessments that direct them to online resources. The digital platform promises a better service for employers, including the ability to filter and search for candidates.
- **Digital Plus** – those who require some additional support with skills or training will enter this service, which combines self-service online with additional support available through a Digital Services Contact Centre. Jobseekers in this service have access to funding to help with transport or employment-related expenses. They can be connected to employment services or a training provider for specific services.


- **Enhanced Services** – the most disadvantaged jobseekers receive a professional, individualised service from employment services providers, who can provide career guidance, mentoring, vocational training and assistance in accessing non-vocational services such as counselling, work experience, job placements and post-placement support. Employment services providers, including some specialist operators, will be licensed to provide these enhanced services. Their revenue will derive from a mix of up-front, progress and outcome payments. Enhanced services will offer work experience programs, better post-placement support and targeted wage subsidies to support businesses to employ job seekers.

While the new system focuses more resources towards the more complex end of the jobseekers spectrum, it does not fundamentally affect the underlying tenet of Australia's 'mutual obligations' policy, which requires jobseekers to be responsible and accountable for creating a pathway to employment. This means there will continue to be a compliance framework, although the new policy rests on a revised points system and enables more flexibility on the activities that meet 'mutual obligations' requirements.⁴

Critical success factors

The new approach makes a lot of sense. It reflects a sound process of evidence-gathering,





‘The stakes will be high for securing suitably skilled staff who can provide enhanced services, particularly in remote areas that have thin labour markets.’

trialling and building buy-in. However, the Government must get the following elements right if the new model is to succeed:

- **Market design** – moving from a national system of general service providers engaged via contract to a licensing system for providers who can offer more targeted and more comprehensive case management requires the right regulatory settings and financial incentives. In the past it has been difficult to sustain consistently high levels of quality among employment services providers. While the providers themselves have attributed this in part to funding arrangements and regulatory burden, there is an ongoing issue with workforce attraction and turnover. The stakes will be high for securing suitably skilled staff who can provide enhanced services, particularly in remote areas that have thin labour markets.
- **Employer engagement** – the employment services system has historically had low levels of engagement with employers who find it easier to look elsewhere for staff. For the Digital First and Digital Plus services to be successful, there needs to be more proactive engagement by employers and a willingness to align their own systems to the Government’s service. A compounding challenge is the need to ensure the system works for small enterprises as well as it does for larger organisations.
- **Digital functionality** – the risks of any major digital transformation are high regardless of

the quality of design, preparation and communication. User expectations will be high. The Government cannot afford to fall too short of these, particularly given the troubles that have been experienced in recent years with the national online system for welfare and other benefits management. The Government will need to continue to test and re-test prototypes to minimise teething issues and setbacks in the initial phases if it is to sustain public confidence in the new system.

These will be the key areas of focus over the next 12 months. Those in the employability services industry will be most interested in the implications for the profession. The assumption is that being able to do more value-adding work and to maintain a smaller caseload will deliver a more rewarding career – therefore helping to attract good staff and reduce turnover. While this is a welcome development – not just for employability staff but also for those interested in seeing consistently high levels of quality in employment services provision – it needs to be considered in the context of more self-management. There is a clear irony in the fact that the new model can, to some extent, be seen as another case of ‘robots taking my job’.

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Tanya is a leading public policy expert who is regarded for her well-considered advice, which is grounded in deep appreciation of government decision-making contexts and processes. She brings extensive experience at senior levels in Australian federal and state governments. A former diplomat, she works across both social and economic policy while also advising government clients on major organisational, cultural and governance challenges.

¹ <https://tradingeconomics.com/australia/unemployment-rate>

² <https://www.afr.com/policy/economy/long-term-unemployment-rate-at-two-decade-high-20210423-p571vc>





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To blend or not to blend? An analysis of blended learning



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Blended learning is the combination of online learning with traditional classroom-based methods of teaching.

Over the last year we have seen the importance of adapting to online learning as face-to-face teaching came to a halt. The COVID-19 pandemic was a challenging time for the education industry, but it can be seen as one of our 'greatest educators yet'. Traditional learning methods have always been favored, but the pandemic has really highlighted the endless possibilities there are to learning.

Statistics show that since the beginning of the pandemic all three key groups in education – teachers, leaders and students – agree that now is the time to create new and improved teaching models and to discard the idea that all teaching should be in-person. This requires employability professionals to adapt to new ways of delivery and to be able to assess the effectiveness of blended learning.

When we deliver online learning, it is essential that quality and standards do not drop. It can be a challenge for employability professionals to keep learners engaged, on track and producing results. There are a lot of things to consider to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning remains at the high standard we expect, such as individual learner styles, digital poverty and how different sectors can be transformed into the online world.

Using online assessor platforms, zoom classes and tutor support we saw great success from our learners throughout various lockdowns at Learning Curve Group. We quickly used online platforms and made our level 2 courses available online. Within the first month of moving our provision online we had over 30,000 expressions of interest to study! These numbers proved to us that people are open to online learning. This leads to a debate on whether we should incorporate more of a blended learning approach into post-pandemic life and what effect this can have on employability.

There are many myths about a blended learning approach, and these myths act as a barrier for many education providers. It is a common misconception that blended learning will reduce the human interaction between learners and trainers. In fact, if delivered correctly, blended learning can have the opposite effect: it can enhance the interaction between learners and trainers by using technologies such as instant chats, group forums and reflections. Learners can find it easier to ask questions and engage in discussion online than if they were in a classroom. This also enhances the face-to-face time that the learner has with the trainer in the classroom, as administrative tasks are relegated to the digital platform.

'...all three key groups in education – teachers, leaders and students – agree that now is the time to create new and improved teaching models and to discard the idea that all teaching should be in-person.'

Another myth about blended learning is that it is lazy teaching. In fact, the truth is the opposite. Developing attractive and effective content for a blended model requires new marketing channels, different internal processes and additional skill sets. There are many things to consider for employability professionals to ensure that high-quality standards of teaching are maintained when using blended learning.

This leads to another misconception about blended learning. It is often regarded as too time-consuming and therefore too costly to develop a good-quality blended pathway. The total hours spent on developing a quality blended learning programme may be more than a classroom model, but it can have advantages that make it worth it. The blended platform will allow you to cover more application and theory and to challenge at every level.

70:20:10 is a reference model that helps organisations extend their focus on learning and development beyond the classroom and course-based eLearning to build more resilient workforces and create cultures of continuous learning. According to the 70:20:10 model, most learning occurs in the workplace (70%). The remaining sources of learning are collaboration and feedback (20%) and training courses (10%). If this model is applied, then a blended approach should be used every time to make the most out of the learning opportunity.

It is important that trainers promote autonomy and independent learning. An autonomous learner will take more responsibility for learning and is likely to be more effective than a learner who is reliant on their trainer to push them.

The blended approach gives the learner a level of independence whilst also having the support of a tutor or trainer. Many people think that blended learning will replace the role of the trainer, but it requires the trainer to be fully involved in the learner journey, and it requires more commitment and input from trainers and tutors. It is their role to



‘Many people think that blended learning will replace the role of the trainer, but it requires the trainer to be fully involved in the learner journey, and it requires more commitment and input from trainers and tutors.’

personalise the course to suit the individual's learning style.

There are three different strategies to learning, which are cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective learning. All of these play a crucial part in the learner's experience of blended learning.

Cognitive methods involve interacting with the learner by asking them to reflect on their experience, helping them find solutions and encouraging discussions around what is being taught. Asking learners to justify and explain their thinking improves their understanding and ability to recall the information.

Metacognition plays an important role in all learning and life experiences. When faced with a task the learner will think about their existing strengths and what goals they want to achieve. They will then go through a trial-and-error stage where they can reflect on what strategy is working. Finally, they can assess what works well, what they can improve and whether they will try something different next time.

Socio-affective strategies are non-academic in nature. They involve stimulating learning by establishing a level of empathy between the trainer and the learner. They include considering the learner's emotions and attitudes.

These three strategies of learning can be used in a blended approach: the learner can review and reflect on their work on online platforms, and with the support of their trainer they can work towards their next steps.

The blended approach to learning prepares learners for the modern world of work. It



improves their confidence and independence whilst providing new opportunities and adapting to new ways of learning. Learners will experience what it is like to rely on their own initiative to learn, with the support of their trainer or tutor. They will learn the importance of decision-making and how they can change their strategies to achieve success. This provides empowerment and growth whilst also promoting lifelong learning, as the blended approach can be moulded to suit anyone at any stage in their life.

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Natalie Taylor is the Director of Employability at national training provider, Learning Curve Group. Nat has a wealth of experience within internal and external quality assurance, the development of curriculum and the delivery of education. Previously CEO of Liverpool based, Antrec Training, she developed Antrec's delivery to ensure they exceeded inspection framework guidelines and awarding body guidance. Antrec was acquired by Learning Curve Group in March 2021 where Nat now specialises in community-based provisions, ensuring some of the most hard to reach people in the country have access to the training and education they need.

The secret sauce of continuous improvement



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The secret sauce of continuous improvement is leadership.

As £5 billion of new funding is injected, it is critical that the sector delivers a demonstrable return on investment. The role of leaders within their own organisation and across the sector is critical in creating a culture of continuous improvement.

There's a science to continuous improvement, for sure. The right organisational structures, operational processes and information management systems are critical to creating employability businesses that are attractive to potential employees and that strive to continually do better. I'm sure others have written knowledgeably on these matters in this edition of the Journal.

The foundation stone of continuous improvement is found in none of the above. Continuous improvement is above all else a state of organisational mind. A commitment to challenging the status quo; always questioning what could be done better; an intellectual curiosity for the right solution and an openness to feedback and change – these are more critical than any structure, process or system could ever be.

I'm going to unpack this through the prism of the AMG Mercedes F1 Team, whose record-breaking run of successes is currently under greater threat than ever. As with all Formula 1 teams, they are

built upon engineering principles and a scientific approach. But, more than anything else, they are founded upon a culture of empowerment, responsibility, accountability and relentless self-improvement.

At the Azerbaijan Grand Prix in early June, Mercedes demonstrated everything about their culture of continuous improvement over the course of a single weekend.

Having come into 2021 under threat from a resurgent Red Bull team, Mercedes contrived to win three of the first five races and lead the championship. But, after a lacklustre race in Monaco a couple of weeks previously, the team suffered a disastrous Friday practice in Azerbaijan, ending the day with both cars outside of the top ten.

They worked late into the night and hit the track on Saturday morning. Their lead driver, Lewis Hamilton, took a car that was 'like night and day' to third place in the final practice session and then grabbed second place on the grid, qualifying for Sunday's race.

"I'm just really incredibly proud of the whole crew for their amazing work and being open-minded," said Hamilton. "We made a lot of changes, there's been so much work back at the factory overnight."

'In the rollercoaster you see every aspect of a culture that drives relentless, continuous improvement.'

CEO and Team Principal Toto Wolff expanded: "We were not shy of trying extreme things, which at the end were as extreme as we had expected and weren't a silver bullet. It was just really about crunching the numbers, trying things, getting the feedback of the drivers ... and a thorough engineering process."

Then, in the race itself, Hamilton looked set for a solid podium place until a late tyre failure for race leader Max Verstappen necessitated a restart. Finding himself with a clear run at the leader, Sergio Perez, into the first corner, Hamilton locked his brakes in a spectacular cloud of carbon dust and slithered into the escape road. He regained the track, but with only a couple of laps remaining he was stuck down in 15th at the chequered flag.

How had it happened? Under braking for the first corner, he had accidentally flicked a switch on his steering wheel – intended for use on a warm up lap – that shifts the brake balance of the car and radically shifts it forward. His first words on the radio as he rejoined in last place were "I'm sorry."

In the aftermath of the race, Wolff leapt to his defence, dismissing the idea it had been a "mistake" and terming it as "finger trouble", before moving his focus onto the fact that "this year ... we just need to perform faultlessly and all of us haven't done that over the past two races."

Would this be a better story if it had ended in a glorious, against-the-odds victory? I'm not so sure, because I think in the rollercoaster you

see every aspect of a culture that drives relentless, continuous improvement. How can we emulate this?


1. No tolerance of under performance

Mercedes set the bar high. Plainly put, finishing second isn't good enough, and that's what drives them to turn things around after a Friday like Azerbaijan. We are in the business of changing people's lives, and we should expect the best.

Many years ago, at G4S Welfare to Work we started out with a very clear goal – to be the top performing provider of the Work Programme in every area in which we delivered. That drove us to do the best job we could. The sector needs leaders who are prepared to be ambitious and courageous and set high expectations – and not just in terms of job starts and job outcomes. What about the quality of those jobs and the notion of good work for all? What about striving for exceptional service quality and evidencing it through regular feedback from job seekers and employers? What about our approach to staff recruitment, development and retention – and driving the level of talent within our sector to another level?

Without a significant drive from the top to inspire commitment at every level, there is a significant possibility that Restart stumbles into being Work Programme Redux. Whilst I'm the first to champion the





'Do you have processes in place to systematically ensure you know what the best people look like and how to bring them on board and nurture them?'

impact of the Work Programme, if we had the fire of continuous improvement burning in our hearts, wouldn't we want better this time?

2. **Best people**

Mercedes are clear it's not about superstars. "There's not one Jesus that you draft in," Wolff says. "One or two people are not going to change anything. You need to have a whole organisation that, as a whole, plays well on the various areas of competence."

One thing we'd expect employability organisations to be really good at is identifying and hiring the right people for each role. But the sector – and organisations within it – can also be extremely insular, almost incestuous, when it comes to its people. It's a challenging question to ask, but does your organisation really have the best people in every position? Do you have processes in place to systematically ensure you know what the best people look like and how to bring them on board and nurture them?

Everything we do is about people and relationships – we don't make anything, and we don't have a product to sell. Developing a properly professionalised workforce at every level and in every function is a critical element of improvement. It also creates an environment in which that improvement

can be sustained. The sector needs leaders who recognise the importance of brilliant people and develop exceptional relationships to deliver lasting results; who champion people development and talent retention; and who are committed to working with organisations like the IEP to deliver this.

3. **No hierarchy**

Mercedes operate on the basis of "see it, say it, fix it." They openly encourage feedback, input and challenge at every level. When Wolff arrived at the team in 2013, this culture wasn't fully developed. "The feedback we got was that sometimes people didn't dare speak up and didn't have the open ear of their direct bosses for the improvement of process that they were suggesting or for a fault fix", Wolff says.

James Allison, Chief Technical Officer, talks about a "supportive and open" environment in which failure is embraced as "an opportunity to get better," and how "team-mates who are quite low down the hierarchy ... take quite large amounts of responsibility."

At a simple level, in your organisation, is a front-line employment coach able to directly raise a concern with your Chief Executive or Chief Operating Officer? And be taken seriously? Or do staff, jobseekers and employers alike feel that management are detached and don't take them seriously? This is not about a compliant complaints and feedback process or a whistleblowing policy – it's about a responsive culture that actively seeks input and challenge and acts on it.

'Everything we do is about people and relationships – we don't make anything, and we don't have a product to sell.'

4. Loyalty

Mercedes knows that people won't feed back with what Wolff has called "brutal honesty and transparency" if they don't feel safe. They have created an organisation which emphasises taking responsibility without apportioning blame. Wolff knows this stems from the top: "It is my responsibility to look after everyone ... this is my tribe and I need to protect my tribe, no matter what."

This doesn't just extend to the protection he afforded his star driver in the aftermath of Azerbaijan 2021. Four years earlier, at the same race track, Mercedes were on course to win until a headrest becoming loose at a pit stop cost them the race. "I had an interview, somebody asked me who was to blame for the headrest coming off, and to name the person ... it just sent me sky-high," says Wolff. John Owen, Chief Designer, explained: "My department could have designed something that couldn't have been possible to put in wrong, or someone could have double-checked it – there's so many reasons why something happens. And to sort of try and single out one person, it's just not our culture."

This is a call out to leaders in the employability sector. The keystone of continuous improvement is *you*. It begins with culture. *You* create it, every day, through your words and your actions. "Then," Wolff says, "this will cascade down

through the organisation ... everybody's gonna follow your lead ... all the layers through the company."

Allison backs this up: "Culture is a sticky thing," he says, "and it only really sticks if you are prepared to ... go out and do it ... But if you do have a critical mass of people on the leadership side of the team that are telling and retelling the story and acting in a way that backs up the claim, then boy oh boy is it a powerful weapon by the time the whole organisation buys into that."

Final words go to Toto Wolff: "That is something that you can't simply put on a PowerPoint, but it takes many years to actually live it."

At the French Grand Prix, a fortnight later, Mercedes had put a protective cover over that pesky brake balance button, in another small step forwards on their quest to be the best they can be.

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George has been a business development and operational leader in the employability space for 20 years. He has won and delivered some of the most successful employment programmes in the UK and abroad. He is passionate about service excellence, customer experience and leadership that creates a culture of purpose.

Embracing meta skills and mental fitness to drive continuous improvement in the employability sector



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In his role as Chief Executive Officer of NCFE and Fellow of IEP, David Gallagher leads an ambitious learning organisation with a difference, dedicated to powering a more intelligent education ecosystem.

Dan Howard, as Operations Director at NCFE, is also a Fellow of IEP, and shares David's passion for the life-changing power of education.

Together, David and Dan share a history of over 25 years in employability. This spans all aspects from frontline delivery in Welfare to Work, working in the public sector for the Learning and Skills Council (now ESFA), successfully managing complex government-funded contracts, establishing new business start-ups, taking up senior positions in Further Education (FE) and training providers and more.


Through an in-depth interview, we explore lessons learnt from David and Dan's extensive experience in the sector – what good practice looks like, where the opportunities are for change and what improvements need to be made. Crucially, we focus on how meta skills and mental fitness are central in supporting individuals to become the best version of themselves, helping them to gain the motivation to take up the opportunities that come their way.

Working in the employability sector

David - I started working in recruitment, and I was initially unaware of the employment services sector, or 'welfare to work' as it was known at the time. It was only when I saw a job advertised at Reed in Partnership that I realised that I could put all the previous skills I had acquired to good use, helping people to find work and making a real difference.

Later in my career I was lucky enough to be part of setting up the Institute of Employability Professionals, having project managed its implementation. So, to have come full circle and be a fellow in an organisation like IEP is fantastic.

Dan - Like David, I also wasn't aware that there was this huge industry behind employability when I began my journey. After graduating from university, I was presented with two employment options. One was in banking, the other in welfare to work. I chose the latter and I have never looked back. It was one of the most rewarding jobs I've ever done. Helping people realise their potential has always been such a driver for me.



'Helping people realise their potential has always been such a driver for me.'

Lessons learnt along the way

Dan - Working with people from all walks of life in some of the most socially deprived areas of the country gave me the ability to look at the bigger picture and appreciate the challenges that some people are facing. I don't come from a wealthy background but seeing what people can go through and still keep their motivation made me realise how lucky I am and taught me how to approach situations with empathy and resilience. I feel so lucky to have been able to help people and make a difference in their lives. It's something I've carried with me to this day.

A key lesson I've learned about the sector is that we won't succeed if we do things in isolation. Collaboration and partnership are fundamental to the success of the sector. Further improvement is needed around consistency with the workforce. Because the sector flexes and contracts to meet the needs of the labour market, it can lead to disruption, and that means that the sector loses talented people. It takes a unique talent and skillset to support people into employment, and it takes a very diverse team of people working collectively to ensure the sector thrives.

David - Working in employment services gave me a true insight into issues that people face. I've learned to never judge a book by its cover. Often, it's those who have the least that give the most. That's hugely inspiring.

The employability sector ebbs and flows with the labour market, so it's up to us to find

ways to ensure stability so that good practice doesn't get lost in the chaos of a sector that gets 'ripped up' every 2 years or so. That's something I've learned from my time in the sector and in education – it's so important to create a stable system built for longevity, especially when we're dealing with people's livelihoods.


Vision for change: embracing meta skills and mental fitness

David - A lot of people think that this industry is about getting people jobs, but it should be so much more than that. The purpose is to find people meaningful and fulfilling work.

By giving people the skills, they need to succeed not just in work, but in life, we can make so much more of a difference. Meta skills such as critical thinking, communication and problem-solving give people the chance to think differently and to embrace change.

It's not only meta skills but also mental fitness that needs to climb the priority list and get to the top of the agenda if we're to combat the health issues we're now facing as a society. Too often we treat mental health when it reaches crisis point, but surely prevention is better than cure? We need to approach mental health like we do physical health, as something that can continually be exercised and strengthened.

Years ago, we talked about a future where technology replaced people, but I think we've all realised in the past 18 months that we need human interaction. Running a solo mental marathon throughout various lockdowns and restrictions has been incredibly challenging, and we're noticing the difference that even just a little time with people can make. Don't get me wrong – technology has been key in keeping the world turning through this time, and I've certainly embraced it. But we need to ensure



'A personal approach is irreplaceable, especially when dealing with people who have fallen on hard times or who are at a vulnerable point in their lives.'

that employability, like education, keeps its human-centred approach, where the technology supplements rather than replaces hugely important human and social interactions.

Dan - I echo David's thoughts. A personal approach is irreplaceable, especially when dealing with people who have fallen on hard times or who are at a vulnerable point in their lives. There is no better feeling in the world than when someone says thank you for helping them to change their life. That aspect of the sector should always remain.

I know from experience how important it is to instil meta and transferrable skills, not just to succeed in the world of work but also to succeed in life. We shouldn't overlook the fact that confidence and effective communication is often more important than an exam grade when you're progressing in the world of work.

It's so important that we approach employability holistically and embrace both academic achievement and meta skills equally to produce well-rounded individuals. It's in all our best interests to support people to be the best they can be.

Why quality and continuous improvement is more important now than ever

Dan - One good thing to come out of the pandemic is that it's shone a spotlight on the sector. It's encouraging to see the new

government initiatives and support such as the Kickstart scheme. What I would like to see now are measures to ensure the delivery of these contracts and what can be done to continue the work once these initiatives end. That's where quality comes in – making sure that the careers advice, guidance and support are of the highest calibre, because that's what people deserve.

David - I've seen people do so many amazing things during the past 18 months, often volunteering their time and resources to make life better for those in need. It's been so inspiring to see how many people care deeply about the sector. I'd love to see that passion, momentum and quality carry on.

We are in uncertain times, so we need to future-proof the initiatives that are currently in place and embrace innovation. We need new ideas and solutions as to how we create a fairer, more inclusive society and labour market and strive for continuous improvement. We need to be smart with our resources and make sure that initiatives not only improve the economy and society but also prove their worth as solid investments of taxpayers' money.

For me, collaboration is a big part of the answer. Educational organisations like NCFE are working with industry partners to ensure a more joined-up approach in the worlds of education and work. Only by working together can we create a system that is sustainable and will provide more stability and certainty for people in such a dynamic and ever-changing world. After all, we've got a common goal: creating opportunities and changing lives for the better.

“As the new employment support programmes roll out and advisers apply new ways of working, what more can we learn about how to best help those who need additional support?”

Five key takeaways from David and Dan for employability professionals

1. Opportunity means and motivation – people need all three to succeed. The development of meta skills and mental fitness is central to this.
2. Fantastic progress has been made, but together we need to future-proof employment initiatives, so they are sustainable.
3. Collaboration and partnership working is key.
4. Technology should supplement and enhance, not replace, a human-centred approach to employability.
5. We can often learn the most from those who have the least. This is a valuable and humbling lesson to learn.



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Dan has worked in the employability and skills sector for over 10 years. Passionate about the life-changing power of education, Dan actively collaborates with key influencers in the skills and employability industry to ensure NCFE offers the best curriculum, products and services to promote and advance learning for all.

As Director - Learning for Work at NCFE, Dan manages delivery of NCFE’s learning for work product portfolio which supports individuals to progress and excel in their careers, as well as providing employers with a highly skilled and productive workforce.

Quality matters: transforming individual's lives



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This article sets out why quality matters in a changing employability landscape and the impact this has on employability professionals.

Over the last year, millions of people's lives have been disrupted as a result of the pandemic. Growing inequalities have deeply affected individuals and communities and have consequences for wellbeing and health. Societies everywhere are undergoing a deep transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic, Industry 4.0 disruption, climate change and an ageing workforce have become realities impacting on the social and economic fabric of our society.

Changes on the horizon

The changing worlds of education and work have become a reality in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown. More individuals require signposting to suitable opportunities. Work is a central way in which race, class, gender, sexuality and health or disability are played out in our society. Waller et al (2020) confirm that COVID-19 has created social inequalities that are not limited to disability, employment or immigration status, income race and social class. Displacement from jobs and food poverty are other real concerns. Therefore, new forms of employability and career dialogue and support for people of all ages are required.


The Queen's Speech (May 2021)¹ set out a series of new legislative plans, including a lifetime skills guarantee. It is widely anticipated that quality-

assured information, advice and guidance across a wide range of services will be needed to realise this ambition. For example, a new National Centre for Family Hubs will provide expert advice, guidance and advocacy. A forthcoming Skills and Post-16 Education Bill¹ will be introduced. It will put into law the promised reforms from the Skills White Paper, including a new lifelong loan entitlement and local skills improvement plans. Employability support and quality matters will play a key role in helping to transform individuals' lives.

Five key issues that help employability professionals transform the lives of job seekers

1. Decent work

The notion of a 'new poor' forced into poverty by COVID-19 is gradually emerging (World Bank, 2020). For example, the 'new poor' will range from teenagers upwards. They are most likely to live in congested cities or coastal towns and to be those displaced from sectors in which economic activity is most affected by lockdowns and social distancing restrictions, such as travel agents, retail workers, musicians, actors, recreational services such as gyms, and accommodation and food services (pubs, cafes and restaurants), where sales were more than 50% lower than normal in the past year due to COVID-19.



‘The changing worlds of education and work have become a reality in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown. More individuals require signposting to suitable opportunities.’

Pre-pandemic, the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Goals (UN, 2018) called for sustained, inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. Rai et al highlight that the decent work agenda has been a product of “contentious debates between corporate and state actors, trade unions, no-government organisations (NGOs), women’s organisations and emerging labour groups of the informal sector” (2019:369). In a recent UK example (Financial Times, 2021), Uber lost a landmark battle in a Supreme Court judgment which ruled that its drivers are employed workers. This is one of the most significant UK employment cases for decades. For employability professionals, keeping up to date with new forms of work is essential – for example hybrid work, gig work, portfolio work, protean career¹, side-hustles etcetera.

2. Formal and informal transitions to learning and work

Increasingly, formal and informal ‘precarious work’ has emerged as a result of the neoliberal restructuring of the economy. Bluestein (2019) describes the experience of working in precarious and unstable work conditions and its psychological and social consequences for individuals and families. Decent work, inclusion and finding sustainable ways to tackle poverty, displacement and

inequalities is vital to individuals, communities and economies. New approaches to employability support are required that focus on transitions to work, transferability of knowledge and assessment of skills, career adaptability and resilience (Hughes et al, 2021). Lessons learned from the 5 Cs of career adaptability – control, curiosity, concern, confidence and commitment – outlined earlier by NESTA (Hughes et al, 2020) can be applied in practice to support practitioners with their work.

3. Digital advancements

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning are widely expected to have disruptive consequences for individuals and workplaces. The estimates of jobs under immediate threat from automation vary considerably. Even though many jobs contain tasks that will become automated, it does not follow that those entire jobs will disappear (World Economic Forum, 2020). However, digital poverty and the North/South divide are major concerns. The Lloyds Consumer Index (2020) found that 9 million people in the UK are “digitally excluded”, with limited or no access to the internet. A major challenge and opportunity for employability professionals is to advocate on behalf of individuals who are digitally excluded. Simultaneously, practitioners must increase their own digital competence to keep ahead of the digital curve and recruitment practices.

4. Foregrounding spaces and places

The concept of spaces and places, first developed by Harrison and Douris

'A major challenge and opportunity for employability professionals is to advocate on behalf of individuals who are digitally excluded.'

(1996), highlights that it is not enough to provide people with "spaces" for interaction- people need to interact in well designed, conducive "places". Spaces for career exploration can take many forms; for example, online virtual reality headsets, gaming, apps, chatbots etcetera. Effective places can be bricks and mortar environments and/or digital for service delivery.

Adopting this lens allows us to shed light on and understand the dependencies among individuals' needs, preferences, diversity and multi-culturalism. A 'wicked' question for employability professionals and partner organisations: where can people go to for quality-assured employability and careers support?

5. Quality matters

The challenge in developing an active response to mass pandemic unemployment is to find ways of supporting people's transitions. Investments made in employability systems, services and staff must demonstrate the value added for individuals, communities and societies. The aim of an effective quality-assurance and evidence-based policy system is to create transparency from the perspective of the citizen, to improve efficiency in service provision and to respond to financial accountability.

Quality matters in improving the design and responsiveness of services. This facilitates social capital and improves social cohesion: it improves networks, personalises support, builds trust and encourages civic participation. Fundamentally, employability professionals should seize every opportunity to celebrate their quality-assured achievements.

Looking ahead, new government guidelines/contracts and the impact that these will have on quality assurance are yet to be fully understood. The **matrix** Standard for information, advice and guidance, owned by the Department for Education, is currently being formally reviewed and made 'fit for purpose' over the next decade.

Quality assurance matters to employability and career development professionals working in public employment services, the national careers service, schools, colleges and in local communities.

"Quality is not act. It is a habit." - Aristotle

Conclusion

The Growth Company and I are proud to be working with The Institute of Employability Professionals on a formal review of the **matrix** Standard. A joint literature review is making a significant contribution to the future direction of the **matrix** Standard. It is a great privilege to be Chair of the Executive Group and to meet with dedicated managers and practitioners who are committed to high quality services. I hope you will join us on the discovery journey and contribute to the co-creation of the **matrix** Standard 2022–2032.

'As the new employment support programmes roll out and advisers apply new ways of working, what more can we learn about how to best help those who need additional support?'

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Dr Deidre Hughes OBE specialises in lifelong guidance policies, research and practice at an international, national and regional level. She is a UK expert in lifelong guidance and careers education (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education, 2017 – present) and OECD policy consultant (ongoing). Deidre advised the Scottish Government on its national Careers Strategy (2020) and Careers Wales on a new 5-year vision and Careers Strategy (2021-2026). She is Chair of a major review of the DfE-owned matrix quality standard for information, advice and guidance (2021 -2022) on behalf of The Growth Company. Deidre is a prolific writer and researcher.

Quality and continuous improvement. The careers chatbot revolution



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Societies everywhere are undergoing a deep transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic, Industry 4.0 disruption, climate change and an ageing workforce have become realities impacting on the fabric of our society.

Just as jobs are being disrupted by technology, so are public expectations increasing for the quality of technology in their public services. Both more local and more online places are needed for inclusive employability and career development support.

As the pandemic lockdowns increased remote interactions of all kinds, we set ourselves a challenge in 2020 to think about how chatbots might be used by employability professionals.

Chatbots are here

Talking with chatbots has become the default in a growing range of settings, particularly with large firms: booking engineers to fix faults, raising issues with a bank, or answering product questions, as well as simplifying the admin around basic interactions like ordering takeaways or checking in at airports.

Chatbots are also increasingly playing a role in education and in recruitment, moving beyond a simple “frequently asked questions” format to

more sophisticated interactions. They are becoming commonplace in universities, with some impressive results for targeted use cases. For instance, Georgia State University ran a randomised control trial for a chatbot to answer questions from incoming students. The trial reported a 20% reduction in drop-out rates and a workload of questions answered equivalent to ten full-time staff.

Some Further Education Colleges are also investigating the technology; for example, Bolton College has won praise for its Ada chatbot, which delivers personalised learning and answers queries about attendance and lessons. In recruitment, L’Oreal has used a chatbot to help engage candidates, and has reported a high satisfaction rate. Some other large employers are also starting to explore the technology.

A chatbot revolution is underway. The premise is that simple questions should be answered by technology wherever possible, to save everyone time – both in answering questions and in getting answers as fast as possible.

'A chatbot revolution is underway. The premise is that simple questions should be answered by technology wherever possible.'

What about job seekers?

There are two different, potentially complementary design philosophies in developing chatbots to help job seekers.

The first philosophy seeks to provide a public-facing platform in which job seekers can gain answers to straightforward queries. In principle, this can take some of the burden off careers advisers and public employment services. These platforms can operate as direct query interfaces, surfacing information from a range of sources; they can also operate as personalised services, powered by an individual's profile and log-in credentials, to manage activities like job searches and applications.

Nudge tactics can be employed, in the form of positive messaging and peer group success statistics, to help users engage and be proactive in their job search. These platforms are particularly well-suited to guiding digitally literate and proactive people to find work at low unit cost. An example is bob-emploi.fr in France.

The second design philosophy is built off a practitioner-facing approach. This philosophy hopes to empower employability professionals and support clients who might be facing more significant barriers to engagement, whether in confidence, digital literacy or other factors. This is the approach we have been exploring through our new prototype chatbot, CiCi.

We've been speaking with dozens of employability professionals and sector experts over the last year, particularly via the Newcastle, Bristol and Derby superuser groups that oversaw

the pilot development to date. There is an apparent enthusiasm among practitioners to explore the technology: 94% of superuser group members say that chatbots could be a helpful complement to existing careers provision. Jan Ellis, outgoing CEO of the Career Development Institute, sees great potential for such technology *"to manage the lower-level tasks, freeing up career development professionals to focus on individual career counselling and coaching."*

With the technology and use cases so new in employability and guidance, practitioners are still thinking about what it might look like in practice. Our conversations to date have suggested three levels by which a practitioner-facing chatbot might add value, each with different implications for practitioner user experience.

Level 1: Resource for employability professionals

In the first instance, a chatbot becomes a convenient repository of quality-assured information for employability professionals, who always need up-to-date labour market information, information on courses and vacancies, and useful information on regulations and application tips.

One employability manager in Derby used CiCi and saw this as a natural use case: *"I like the speedy reaction to my inputs. It's fast and I like the features which reflect many of the enquiries we receive from adults using our service."*

A chatbot is unlikely to replace all the forms of information a professional draws on, but it might usefully consolidate many of them for querying during a client session or in follow-up. Rather than

'If members of the public and practitioners were both familiar with the same platform, guidance sessions could become more targeted and efficient, with natural common reference points.'

individual practitioners or organisations developing their own knowledge banks (as most do today), time can be saved and resources improved by a single service that can be used across a wide range of organisations.

Level 2: A joint-tool for practitioner and client

Building on level one, the chatbot can become a tool that the professional can introduce to the client, providing whatever level of support is necessary to help them become comfortable with querying the chatbot directly.

When a client is exploring many careers, looking for tips on CVs or cover letters, or wishing to consider their skills against different opportunities, it may be more effective – and more empowering for the individual – to conduct such research at their own leisure supported by a chatbot and to return to the professional for review and reflection later.

For individuals who are less comfortable searching the open internet – where Google finds a million hits for the simplest questions and misinformation or vested interests dominate – a process guided by a professional, contained in a curated chatbot ecosystem, may be just the thing.

For clients who register on the platform, a chatbot could become part of an integrated suite of tools, alongside space for making notes, action plan tracking, developing and soliciting feedback on CVs, and creating more personalised conversations over time based on a user's previous dialogue with the bot.

More guidance will be needed to support practitioners to introduce different bits of chatbot functionality to different clients in different circumstances. However, this approach is a natural fit with the employability culture to empower independence among clients. Many sector experts are excited by this, as Scott Parkin, CEO of the Institute of Employability Professionals, told us: *"For employability professionals this new tool and approach could hold significant promise in supporting adults with their employability skills."*

Level 3: Integrated public-facing and practitioner-facing platforms

Thinking more ambitiously, the public-facing and professional-facing approaches to chatbots could be integrated.

Public-facing interfaces could help users with simple queries; but the conversation logic could be built around identifying individuals who might benefit from professional support and making easy referrals to different types of professionals (unpaid/paid; remote/face-to-face; specialised/introductory etc.). One trick would be building a bot that recognises when it's out of its depth and is built into the networks and practice of employability professionals, providing a safety net for more in-depth conversations.



'We're inspired by a future vision of an integrated national, regional and local system of shared information and professional collaboration, with Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) that helps meaningful development conversations to flow.'

If members of the public and practitioners were both familiar with the same platform, guidance sessions could become more targeted and efficient, with natural common reference points. Guidance conversations could become shorter but more frequent: clients could try things out on their own and then come back to check in and discuss next steps. For instance, a practitioner in Derby told us that chatbots would *"support and complement careers guidance sessions if clients have an opportunity to start building their own fundamental knowledge on these areas before they meet us in person."*

What next?

These three levels of practitioner-led use of guidance chatbots are still under development. We know the ideas make sense in principle because practitioners have told us. But we still need to figure out the details. We've launched a programme of observational interviews, initially with Adviza, Derby Adult Services and SGS College. As employability professionals experiment with using CiCi in their practice, we're working alongside them to help test and refine the ideas for chatbot usage and the kind of guidance and training that will be needed to get the most value from it.

We also know that CiCi, even in a six-month prototype mode, was intuitive enough that a majority of some 150 volunteer beta users were able to get some value out of it. The early pilot showed that over two thirds recommended CiCi to their friends and found it helpful for exploring job roles. A few users spontaneously reported benefits like revamped CVs, job offers and new career ideas.

The pilot work so far also reveals the appetite for more functionality, so there's plenty of tech development in the roadmap. This includes improvements to the look and feel, adding more information and partnering with Derby College to solve the knotty problem of connecting post-16 and post-18 courses to potential careers. We're always looking for development and pilot partners as we continue to improve the breadth of information CiCi can draw on and the breadth of conversations CiCi can have.

We're inspired by a future vision of an integrated national, regional and local system of shared information and professional collaboration, with Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) that helps meaningful development conversations to flow. Imagine using a chatbot's capacity to complement – not compete with – the work of practitioners. What a wonderful application in social technology that could be.

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Chris is a careers researcher and skills sector policy adviser via CSP Resources Ltd. Along with Graham Attwell, George Bekiaridis, and Deirdre Hughes, Chris co-founded CareerChat (CiCi) in 2020. CiCi is a prototype career guidance chatbot project shortlisted in the CDI 2021 awards and a finalist in a Department for Education innovation competition with Nesta. CiCi currently has access to profiles on some 26,000 jobs, 65,000 current course, apprenticeship, and job opportunities, and information on topics like CVs, applications, non-public job opportunities, and self-employment. At careerchat.uk, you can try a demo of the prototype and share any ideas with the team.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

The DWP Restart Scheme has begun and will have a positive impact for participants looking for sustainable work. The Restart Scheme has a big focus on compliance, audits and quality frameworks, and rightly so given it is public money. Often the focus of compliance and quality is taken from the initial starting point of the provider's ambitions or intentions for delivering an employability scheme.

The operating model set by the commissioner and the prime provider often informs the strategy and delivery approach. Intent from leadership is important; however, we should also take insights from the education and skills world and in particular Ofsted's Deep Dive approach. Ofsted inspectors have the mantra of 'let's see that in action altogether' so as managers or leaders we should gather evidence to form an accurate evaluation of how our provision flows from our intention to deliver an employability service, to its implementation and impact. However, what does this mean in reality?

In my experience of working in education and as a School Governor, it means understanding whether the participant's actual real experience of the provision is the same as what the provider has set out in its intent. During a Deep Dive, evidence is gathered from reviewing the rationale for service provision, for example is the skills audit tailored to the background of the participants, the sequencing of provision (and how flexible is it aligned to participant requirements), talking to participants and also looking at samples of participant work e.g., goals planning and how it has informed their choices as part of the provision.

We can also learn a lot from what has not worked, errors or mistakes in the provision from the perspective of our staff, volunteers and the participants. Matthew Syed, in his book *Black Box*

Thinking, talks about "cognitive dissonance occurring when mistakes are too threatening to admit to, so they are reframed or ignored, this can be thought of as the internal fear of failure: how we struggle to admit mistakes to ourselves". Providers need to take the time and create the space to allow this reflection to take place.

Therefore, in conclusion, we need the compliance and quality frameworks and procedures, however we must recognise that any provision is only as good as the participant's real experience and how we learn from what has worked, not worked, errors or mistakes in delivering the provision.

Yours sincerely

Asi Panditharatna MIEP | Divisional Director for Employment Services | The Forward Trust

Dear Editor,

Welfare support and employment support are linked: Understanding this will be critical to the Government's COVID-19 recovery.

In Issue 3 of the IEP journal, in his article *Employment Support – The policy challenge in future* Angus Gray says "there will always be people who need additional intensive help, and we are increasingly looking beyond 'into work' support". I agree, proactive support is essential to employment support.

Somebody struggling to make ends meet is less likely to engage with employment support. Assisting people to reach a stable financial footing is essential to help them to look for employment opportunities.

Yet with COVID-19 support measures coming to an end, unemployment and poverty are forecasted to rise. The Bank of England expects unemployment to rise to 5.5%, up from 4.7%.

Changes coming up:

- The furlough scheme is being phased out. This puts over 850,000 jobs at risk and the

move from furlough to Universal Credit will create a significant income shock.

- The Minimum Income Floor is being reintroduced into Universal Credit. The heaviest impacted households are set to lose £771 / month.
- The loss of the £20 uplift to Universal Credit is expected to end in September. Everyone on Universal Credit will be impacted and 683,000 households will no longer be able to meet their essential costs.

Advisors should all be aware of these changes, but there are reasons to be optimistic. The launch of the £3bn Restart programme comes alongside the economy opening up and a predicted spending boom from those that saved during the pandemic. To make the most of this, advisors will need to work proactively to help people stabilise their finances to increase their employment prospects.

Tools like our [Benefit and Budgeting Calculator](#) help employability professionals identify benefits people are missing out on, and make successful claims. The support and training our team provide helps advisors to ask the right questions to put people in the best position to find work, and to ensure that the UK successfully recovers from COVID-19.

Deven Ghelani | Director and Founder | Policy in Practice

Dear Editor,

E-Interventions - meeting clients' needs

Following on from the fascinating article about how technology can support mental health and employability by Dr Kylie Henderson FIEP I wanted to encourage the sector to think about how we can build on the approach of e-interventions.

In the past when we thought about technology and employability we tended to focus on databases and compliance, but Dr Henderson makes the point that "E-Interventions have the capacity to overcome barriers to people accessing mental health care

such as geographic location, busy schedules, and mental health stigma." I believe that e-interventions can have a broader impact beyond mental health and that those commissioning and delivering services need to embrace the value added.

My own organisation was thrown headfirst into this fast-running stream by Lockdown. We support candidates who would often be thought of as digitally excluded - women living in poverty, many without laptops and with half having English as a second language. We had to make fast decisions on how to maintain our communal approach. We have used zoom, e-learning and our new GRoW App - all of which can be used on a Smartphone. Our Mums love it because they don't have to leave home - they can do much more and they can do it when it suits them. They also want this approach to continue. We have just surveyed our candidates and only 15% wanted to go back to all face-to-face meetings; 48% wanting to stay with the e-interventions; and 36% say they would like a mixture of both,

There is so much to think about. Using e-interventions also all develops more regular contact with our candidates: 45% of our participants use the app daily and a further 25% use it at least once a week. And it is cost effective, with more adviser time for each client. I am looking forward to the IEP Digital Conference where we can all talk about what to do to improve our E-Interventions.

Liz Sewell FIEP | Director | Belina Get Ready for Work (GRoW) programme

