



The evolution of the Workplace Modifications Scheme

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Introduction

Multiple Solutions is a Disability Employment Network initiative of The Multiple Sclerosis Society of SA & NT Inc.

- Formed in 1992
- Generalist in Capped, Specialist in Uncapped (Physical & Neurological)

Multiple Solutions Assessment Services performs the following fee for service activities:

- Workplace Modifications Scheme panel assessors
- Job Capacity Assessment
- Functional Capacity Assessments / worksite assessments etc.
- Other fee for service (eg: DVA, EPC)

Outline of the presentation

- Historical overview
- Current guidelines
- Case studies
- Changes from 01/03/10

Briefest history of disability employment support services

1919: *Vocational training* was introduced in Australia. This coincides with the history of the development of the OT profession, specifically to provide rehab to ex-servicemen.

1948: *The Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service* commenced, & I believe the intent was to assist veterans, but other PwD as well.

1950's: 'Sheltered Workshops' emerged, initially set up by non profit organizations, then with Federal Government funding assistance.

1985: *The "Handicapped Programs Review, New Directions"*, reviewed services & provided recommendations. This review led to:

1986: *The Disability Services Act* was passed, which provided formal legislation & funding allocation for disability services, including employment. Employment assistance was now formally defined & funded under the streams of CRS Australia, Business Services, as well as the introduction of Open Employment Services to assist job seekers with a disability.

The Workplace Modifications Scheme commencement

1988: The scheme commenced with funding of less than \$1 million per year.

To provide reimbursement to employers and providers of employment services of the costs of workplace modifications and special or adaptive equipment.

2004: The Scheme was transferred to the former DEWR from the former FaCSIA

The Disability Discrimination Act 1992

For the first time clearly defined the term Reasonable adjustment, & provided guidelines how they applied to the workplace:

- to work area design, eg: structural modifications to workplace and altering the physical layout of the office or work site (eg installing ramps, modifying toilets, adjusting lighting; provision of parking space close to the workplace, re-arrangement of office furniture to allow wheelchair access, re-arranging height of furniture, removal to another room of noisy office equipment)
- Providing equipment to enable the person to perform the essential functions of a job
- to job design eg: exchanging some tasks of a job for tasks of another position
- flexible work practices eg flexible work start and finish times
- to work-related information and communication (form or format in which information is made available) eg providing information in alternate and appropriate formats such as Braille, large print, plain English, Auslan etc
- adjustments to training and development eg courses conducted in accessible locations, a signing interpreter or hearing loop for a person with hearing impairment, course materials provided in appropriate formats such as large print
- to recruitment and selection processes

WMS Approvals 1998 – 2002

The Workplace Modifications Scheme was last reviewed Department of Family and Community Services in 2002 as part of the Review of the Employer Incentives Strategy, in a report titled "*Improving Employment Opportunities for People with a Disability*"

- Total = 1228
- Total funding = \$2.7 Million

- Average funding = \$2200.00
- Highest 20 reimbursements \$7815 to \$14636

Reimbursements by disability 1998 – 2002

- Visual: 37%
- Physical: 33%
- Hearing: 10%
- Intellectual: 7%
- Neurological: 3%
- Other: 10%

WMS process prior 01/07/06

The submission consisted of:

- Application for Funds for Workplace Modifications/Special Equipment form
- A worksite assessment report
- Supporting letter from the employer advisable
- Justification if an employer is unable to make a co contribution
- 3 x quotes for each item of equipment

Then:

- A letter is received from the DEWR Minister's delegate
- Equipment is purchased, & reimbursement is requested with presentation of the original tax invoice, receipt/proof of payment & a copy of the original approval letter (advisable)

The FACS review observed that:

- the Scheme had relatively high administrative costs and
- recommended improvements to the administration of the Scheme, particularly to implement efficiencies around the processing of small claims.

Overall disability statistics in Australia

Statistics taken from the *HREOC 2005 National Enquiry into Employment & Disability indicated:*

- Almost 20% of Australians have a disability.
- Of these individuals, 86% experience some limitations in "core activities" (eg: self care, mobility &/or communication) or restrictions in schooling or employment, with
- 6.3% assessed as having a profound or severe core-activity limitation.
- Disability by primary functional impact:
 - 83.9% relate to physical condition
 - 11.3% related to mental or behavioral disorders,
 - 4.8% related to intellectual or developmental disorders.

Employment Participation rates

- 53.2% of PwD participated in the labor force, compared to 82.5% of Australians of working age
- 30.9% of PwD are reported to be in full time employment (population average 67.4%);
- 17.9% of PwD are in part time employment (11.0%);

	PwD	Oz Average
Participation	53.2 %	82.5%
Full time	30.9 %	67.4%
Part Time	17.9%	11.0%

By disability

Participation rates vary related to the type of disability

Trends for lower participation rates for:

- people with psychiatric conditions (people receiving DSP have a 29% participation rate)
- People with an "invisible disability", (eg: 78% of those with chronic pain)
- Trends for lower participation rates for people with profound or severe core activity limitations, or people with the presence of more than one disability or impairment
- Conversely, People with hearing loss have the lowest rate of employment restriction (45.7%)

By Gender

- Overall, women with disabilities have comparatively lower workforce participation rates,
- This trend has been decreasing since 1998

Participation trends

- Participation rate for PwD have fallen compared to 1993 levels
- Australia has the 7th lowest employment participation rate for PwD in the OECD
- Of those PwD of working age not in employment, 58% identified as being "permanently unable to work"

Income implications

- Australia has the lowest average personal income for PwD in the OECD
- Wages for PwD are overall lower on average, but influenced by gender, with 24% less than the average wage for females, & 17% for males
- Income levels vary between disability types, with sensory & mobility disabilities on average recording higher income than people with psychiatric disability

Participation summary:

- Australia's participation rate is comparatively low.
- Average wages are lower. Wages are influenced by factors such as gender & type of disability.
- As with all of us, education/qualifications influences income levels, & the capacity to engage in training is likely to be influenced by the type & severity of disability.
- The type of employment engaged by disability types has statistical trends, which is likely to be linked to functional impacts & residual capacity

Employment participation rates decrease with increased severity of symptoms & the presence of multiple symptoms.

3 principle barriers to PwD participating in employment, summarized in the HREOC 2005 report:

- **cost,**
- **risk &**
- **information**

Cost

- Transport
- loss or decrease in concessions and subsidies
- DSP
- Increased cost of additional personal care requirements
- Perceived potential costs to prospective employers
additional Workcover claims, reduced productivity or additional supervision requirements, or expenses associated with workplace accommodations.

Risk (perceived)

For the employer

- increased OHS&W & productivity risks,
- discrimination within a workplace
- inadequate supports being available.

For the employee

- Potential difficulties with having social security entitlements reinstated if employment ceases.
- Concerns regarding potentially temporarily or permanently exacerbating symptoms as a result of engaging in employment.

Perceived risk of failure, and the impact this may have on self esteem.

The Disability Council of NSW notes:

“Many employers are still wary, however, of hiring people with disability or do not even consider the possibility, simply because they are fearful of the perceived risks involved”.

Information

Employer

- OHS&W
- Financial support available
- Benefits of employing PwD
- Access to services such as the WMS.

Employee

- Impact on symptoms
- Financial implications
- Options of supports available

Inadequate information

- Therefore may result in difficulties to accurately determine costs & risks.
- Presents obstacles in pre employment, & maintenance phase

The National Enquiry into Employment and Disability

Reviewing information such as the HREOC report, recommended that:

- DEWR develop and promote a service for employers and people with disability, offering them all the information they need in one place, including the full range of services and supports across all levels of government.
- The report also called for easier access to employer incentives such as the Workplace Modifications Scheme

JobAccess

- Developed following the enquiry and the JobAccess service commenced in July 2006.
- WorkFocus Australia Pty Ltd was the successful tenderer for the Service.
- It comprises a telephone and email enquiry service on disability employment related matters, a web site with comprehensive information and administration of the Workplace Modifications Scheme and the Auslan for Employment program.
- The Scheme has had an injection of \$25 million over four years

Changes to the WMS included:

- Eligibility expanded to include PwD who were self-employed or already workers (changes to position description, upgrading existing WMS equipment eg: software). Individuals no longer were required to be a client of an employment service such as JNS, VRS or DEN.
- Applicants no longer were required to be DSP recipients.

- The funding limit per eligible worker was significantly increased to \$25 000 (+ GST), but consideration was given to accommodations above this amount.
- Modifications totaling less than \$10 000 did not automatically require a workplace assessment, & an application could be presented by an employer, employee or service provider. This assisted in overall quicker processing of applications for funding.

The Job Access website was designed to be an easy to access "one stop shop"

- Providing information accessible to all stakeholders
- For example information on skills required for specific tasks
- Information related to types of disabilities
- Information on products relevant to PwD in employment
- Contact details of suppliers & assessors that have registered with Job Access
- Information pitched to employers, including a range of publications
- A wide range of advice for job seekers, including supports available
- Information relevant to service providers, including a range of publications
- As well as information for co-workers / colleagues
- Support is also available via email & a 1800 464 800 number
- & the website provides access to WMS, SWS & Auslan applications
- Including requesting a WMS worksite assessment from a panel assessor

International recognition

The 2007 OECD research report, *Sickness, Disability and Work: Breaking the Barriers* recognised the JobAccess service as a good practice example of providing information on disability employment.

The JobAccess service won a 2008 UN Public Service Award in the category of improving service delivery. This recognised the improvements in administration of the Workplace Modifications Scheme applications through the JobAccess service and the efficiency of the JobAccess service.

Job Access enquiries

Since commencing operation, the service has processed over **25000 enquiries**, from (in order from highest)

1. Disability Employment Network members
2. Workers with disability
3. Job seekers with disability

4. Employers and employer bodies
5. Workplace Modifications scheme assessors
6. Vocational Rehabilitation Service providers
7. Other Support Services
8. Government Departments
9. Job Network members
10. Parents of people with disability

It is interesting to note the encouraging uptake of enquiries to the service by workers, job seekers & employers.

Multiple Solutions has provided 89 panel assessments, & the DEN service has received 143 application acceptances

Funding examples

Funding is provided for a wide range of disability – specific accommodations

- There is a wide range of mouse options to address difficulties with hand function, upper arm, shoulder & neck pain etc
- Including specialized mouse options for significant functional limitations
- There is a wide range of other ergonomic equipment, if sufficient clinical justification can be provided to demonstrate that it addresses functional limitations (eg: pain, limitations in movement, fatigue)
- The Guidelines indicate that general equipment that can reasonably be expected to be provided by the employer is not funded by the WMS, but specialized ergonomic equipment generally is worth presenting for funding consideration.
- There is a wide range of seating options involving dynamic & static seating. Generally it is a good idea for a client to trial a chair. Once again, a specialty chair, either dynamic or static, may be required to address issues such as pain, fatigue & in some cases providing adequate safe weight ratings
- Other common equipment that may be considered include: headsets, height adjustable tables, multi function centers
- & a range of other equipment unique for the client or workplace, including safety evacuation, emergency warning systems, coin & note counters etc.

Case Studies

- Specialised equipment available for funding consideration
Job Access sometimes provide equipment that is not even available through state disability funding, if there is adequate justification

- On the other hand, accommodations can be small, but relevant to address functional limitations:

The WMS, including the web site is managed by DEEWR, to

- create and maintain content, on-line application forms and data base.
- Provide overall editorial control
- Provide ongoing maintenance of the site and its
- Receive and address feedback
- 01/07/07, DEST transferred the Australian Apprenticeship Programme's Workplace Modification Scheme to DEWR's Workplace Modifications Scheme.

Statistics on current WMS allocations

DEEWR does not provide separate details of the funding allocations for the Workplace Modifications Scheme, as it is part of a wider budget allocation. However, the Workplace Modifications Scheme is now considered to be a significant Australian government program of assistance.

DEEWR's 2007-08 annual report indicates a 53% increase in applications. The 2008-09 report is not available yet, but is expected to report a further moderate increase.

DEEWR also conducts an Outcome Surveys, completed 13 weeks after assistance has been provided. However, the Department does not release this information publicly.

Recent reviews

The Government's October 2008 discussion paper "*Developing a National Disability Strategy for Australia*" highlighted that factors that significantly contribute to labour force participation were:

- Gender
- age
- English language skills,
- education,
- provision of training/on the job work training
- geographic location,
- cultural & linguistic background &
- Indigenous status.

The Australian Safety & Compensation Council's March 2007 report "*Are People with Disability at Risk at Work: A Review of the Evidence*" indicted that:

- employers reported accommodations for approximately 12% of people with disability in the workplace

- 6% of employees were provided with special equipment and 3% were allocated different duties

The research indicates that employers report that the cost/benefit of workplace adjustments for employees with disability

- 65 per cent of employers rated the financial effect to be cost neutral and
- 20 per cent identified an overall financial benefit.

It was concluded that:

“Physical modification to a workplace had a small positive but significant impact on labour force participation”

Review of the WMS

Feedback provided through *2008 National Mental Health and Disability Employment review* raised concerns including:

- A perception that the rules for using WMS funds were too restrictive, eg: only available for physical modifications to the workplace or assistive technology, with limited scope to support people with mental health conditions.
- Perceived restrictions that apply to individuals (for example, accessing Auslan for Employment resources for job interviews) often made independent job search seem impossible.
- Low recognition of the services and support available through the existing measures.

Employer Incentives Scheme (EIS)

From 01/03/10, the EIS will consist of the following components:

- Employment Assistance Fund
- Job Access advisory service
- National Disability Recruitment Coordinator
- Supported Wages System
- Wages Subsidy Scheme

Employment Assistance Fund (EAF)

The Employment Assistance Fund commencing 01/03/10 combines the WMS & Auslan for Employment programs, with the intention of addressing these concerns by:

- What is currently available in the WMS and AFE will continue to be available in the Employment Assistance Fund.

- The JobAccess Service Provider will continue to receive and approve EAF applications.

Responses to the review

- The Online application form will be improved (made simpler), particularly for people applying for Auslan interpreting assistance.
- Removing the individual \$5000 cap on Auslan services.
- Individuals, including those already in work or looking for work, will be able to access assistance along with employers and employment service providers. People who are registered with a disability employment service provider will be able to get assistance for adaptive technology to help them look for and prepare (eg. develop proficiency in use of software) for work.
- Funding up to \$1500.00 is also likely to be available for disability awareness training within a workplace.
- New promotional material will provide comprehensive information on the scope of assistance for which this fund can be used.
- Draft Guidelines for the EAF are expected to become available in late 2009.

*Presentation delivered accompanied by PowerPoint Presentation
By Wayne Allen at the ACE conference on the Gold Coast
on 30/09/09*

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