

Submission to the Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services

Summary

Workforce Australia Employment Solutions sounds to my ears as a recently unemployed person as a place you might go to feeling down, but leave with a positive, even hopeful outlook. Sad to say, my experience over several years and various iterations of the parent company, has been anything but positive or hopeful.

Rather than help me find a job, apply for it, dress and prepare for interview and maybe pack a few lunches for the first week at work, Workforce Australia Employment Services forced me to apply for jobs I had no interest or inclination toward, hounded me on a daily basis for proof that I was looking for work and 'kept me honest' with threats of payments being stopped, should I step out of line.

By the time a job came along, my self-confidence was at an all time low, and I was terrified of being 'found out' or shamed publicly for having been 'on the dole', I'm glad I made the choice to leave the system and work, even if at the expense of finishing a degree which could have ultimately raised my earning capacity and maximized my contribution to Australian business and society.

If I didn't walk away from study to work, I reckon I would still be unemployed today.

My response to the terms of the Select Committee are informed by lived experience over the past five years during which time I have had periods of unemployment or underemployment, this time frame includes the recent pandemic.

Please find my response as follows, about ‘the extent to which Workforce Australia Employment Services delivers services in a way that’

(i) is fair

There is nothing fair about being unemployed. There are only hardships, personal, financial, professional along with negative social and health implications. Finding yourself, as I did, dependent on systems and cultures which are complex and unforgiving, meant learning quickly and conforming to a range of behaviors, mostly unhealthy, which all seemed counterintuitive to finding employment.

a) Mutual obligations

These tasks may well have first been thought of as supporting activities to help find a job but they have since become a mindless checklist at best and a weapon to force submission at the worst. By design, the tasks are meaningless and discourage creative engagement with the job seeking process.

Add to this the discretionary power assigned to Employment Services Agencies to cancel Centrelink payments creates an unhealthy power dynamic where you, as the unemployed person, live in constant fear of being cut off.

There was an expectation that these tasks would be forged or not undertaken at all. Fake application emails or applying for unrealistic jobs were commonplace. A culture of deadends and deception.

b) Robbed of time

All this administrative attention took time away from meaningfully looking for work.

If you were to look at the time demands to meet the Mutual Obligations and divide these by the income supplement qualified for, the average rate is well below the minimum wage or any wage by Australian standards.

So the unemployed person (me) ends up paying to be part of the scheme, both in real terms and what this represents in terms of lost opportunity. This hardly seems fair.

c) Allocation of resources

Fairness to me suggests some re-allocation of resources so that everyone at least starts off from a similar position. I would certainly have appreciated a working computer at home once my one broke down, or perhaps some money for the machine to be repaired. Transport is always expensive when you have nowhere to go and want to get out.

I'm now aware that there are allowances to fund exactly this, however, when I needed it and was in the 'care' of Workforce Australia Employment Solutions nothing was offered.

(ii) leaves no one behind

As much employment happenstance is completely at the mercy of timing and luck, it's impossible not to leave people behind. I would say that the systems in place are designed to leave someone behind. There are winners, so there must be losers; Some people will get access to a course or education, others won't.

You become aware of being left behind when the faces in the job searching room keep changing, or when it's suggested you move to another agency.

There was a sad resignation to this natural order of things. But no attempt to make things right and make sure no one was left behind.

(iii) respects individuals' diverse needs

Not once was I asked what I wanted, if I had employment goals, or even, what was my dream job?

I was enrolled in a Master of Communication with a full time study load, but this course was not listed for support and so was not recognised as contributing to my employability. So this was put aside as a personal hobby or interest (!).

This was completely ignored and I was instructed that I should apply for full time roles only. Despite having chronic illness, I was unable to lobby for part-time hours.

Eventually the pressure of full time work and full time study has meant an adjustment for me. It felt very strange applying for full time jobs, so I took myself off and completed a Certificate II in Individual Support and found a couple of clients through the NDIS.

I am a single gay man, who doesn't drive or own a car, and who lives in the CBD. The courses I was urged to take up as pathways to employment were in road construction in the outer suburbs, quite literally with no public transport nearby.

There was no knowledge or respect of my individual and diverse needs.

(iv) supports job seekers into secure work, in particular, its support for long term unemployed and young people

The only followup to see how things were going came from a Disability Employment Services agency - much kinder person-centered approach to the same penal system in the mainstream agencies. The process of making a claim for disability support is about 2 months, which gives the job seeker a period of reprieve. Or in my case, a window of time to find a job. Which I did.

I'm not sure of any other 'support' as none was offered to me. I don't recall anything being mentioned by the people I met along the way, some of whom were very experienced or long term unemployed as referenced here.

I'm not sure this is a rewards-based system, where good outcomes are celebrated; rather, it is a system which expects failure, not just in terms of employment but in all aspects of the unemployed person's life. There were diminishing expectations around personal appearance, ability to get along with others, drug and alcohol use and misuse, all the way through to honesty.

It felt like an inevitable decline, nothing could be done to stop nature from taking its course. There was nothing offered to feed or nurture the soul. No social events or peer support. It was always the system against us, and there was only ever going to be one winner.

I feel very sorry for anyone engaging with Centrelink for the first time after being in the workforce for a length of time. It's a rude shock. And conversely, those people who are deeply embedded in the system may need help to unlearn deeply negative responses and how to be in a culture of success again.