SOCIAL POLICY: WORKFORCE AUSTRALIA

The Commonwealth Employment Service (CES)

"The Commonwealth Employment Service was an Australian Government employment agency that was established in 1946, under the Curtin ALP government." (Wikipedia).

"The service would act like a centralised labour exchange: it would inform jobseekers of any vacancies around the country, and it would let employers survey the entire field of available labour. And it wouldn't just be used to help unemployed people find work. It would help employed people find even better work." (ABC NEWS, business reporter, Gareth Hutchens, 31 Aug 2022).

However, during the 1990's the CES was diluted, its activities outsourced and eventually disbanded.

"More than 300 private, community and government organisations will replace the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES), on May 1, 1998, the Minister for Employment, Dr David Kemp, announced today.

At least 306 organisations will form the new, nationwide Job Network. They will cover every region in Australia with about 1400 sites providing employment services. This is more than four times the number of sites under the CES system... It was the largest public tender of human services in Australia's history." (Press Releases: Parliament of Australia, parlinfo.aph.gov.au).

Employment Service Providers (ESP's)

Employment Service Providers were charged with the task of replacing CES activities. They have been controversial, seen by many as a replacement for frontline CES workers minus core CES job market activity. Now enforcing punitive social security laws: forcing unemployed workers to look for jobs that do not exist; make the unemployed accept low-paid, insecure work and other adverse outcomes.

In its important role as a large national employment agency, the CES would accept vacancies from employers, post them Australia wide and vet anyone who was interested in applying, to the employers' nominated criteria. The CES at the time of its demise was by far the largest job placement agency in the nation and nothing has come close to a replacement. The CES of course could not create jobs, but was very effective at distributing them

The onus is now almost totally on the unemployed person to undertake their own research into the job market; despite job market vacancies now being scattered far and wide across a multitude of platforms.

The term ESP seems like a misnomer as their main role is to track jobseekers' activities and report them to Department of Human Services, rather than having anything much to do with matching unemployed workers to jobs available in the market.

Reforms

As the overall unemployment rate fluctuates and sectors across the economy grow and shrink, ready and simple access to what vacancies are available, is fundamental to a proactive workforce.

A central database encompassing the vast majority of job vacancies across the economy, seems the best option. The database should be open to all citizens, work visa holders, and perhaps somewhat internationally.

Assistance should still be provided for help with essentials such as: how to access digital information; creating resumes; and other important labour market training interventions.

I imagine unemployed workers would become less depressed and more encouraged to make informed vacancy applications, from a database that has a complete list of jobs the economy has on offer. Digitalisation should not be analogous with confusion, but rather efficiency and pace.

For the past couple of months, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), job vacancy figures are hovering around 480,000. Currently the largest jobs database in Australia is Workforce Australia's, at 290,000, about 60% of the ABS figure. (At the time of writing the author is unsure whether the Workforce Australia job vacancy database is available to all Australians, or only to Centrelink registered job seekers).

So where are the remaining 40% of job vacancies identified by ABS? It may be that a great deal is hidden from view on the books of Labour Hire firms. Labour hire firms have popped up like industrial mushrooms, following in the wake of the casualisation of the workforce. Companies seeking labour often no longer need to advertise for workers, they simply place an order with a labour hire firm.

Labour hire firms and their clients know that unemployed workers need and in the vast majority, want to work; as well as having to meet their particular Dept. of Human Services payment, mutual obligation requirements. Under the mutual agreement, it should be government's obligation to make the job market as transparent as possible, whilst at the same time requiring job seekers to make a decent effort at seeking work.

A Good Overhaul

The system could do with a good overhaul. Full transparency of available jobs across the economy would be a good start. There are advantages to the economy and society to this level of transparency.

Workers can become better informed and more willingly mobile; better able to make informed career decisions; better able to identify doubtful employers due to a noticeable repetition in job vacancies; potentially negotiate for better wages and conditions.

Furthermore, rather than a system that supresses wages and reduces choice with a big stick approach, a more transparent job database can lead to a more dedicated, productive and efficient workplaces and a healthier and more vibrant economy.

Matthew Ford

Social Policy: Workforce Australia

How is the Digital Divide affecting Jobseekers and what can be done to improve the situation?

"Australia's digital divide means 2.8 million people remain 'highly excluded' from internet access. 11% do not have access to affordable internet or don't know how to use it" (ABC Regional Social Services reporter, Erin Parke, 16 October, 2022)

How would people in remote or regional Australia know there were jobs available in their region if these vacancies are only advertised on the internet, and these jobseekers do not have digital access or skills. Deeply disturbing on many fronts; disappointing for employers as well as jobseekers. Not to mention a myriad of other issues that can be solved when people are employed.

Under the current digital only - with little or no coordinated face to face contingency system - it is just as likely a labour hire firm based who knows where, may have the best internet connectivity to communicate with the employer and place the workers. This is a highly inefficient scenario, perhaps leaving more localised labour, who indeed may not need digital skills to undertake the required tasks, unemployed, whilst at the same time raising the costs of employing workers relocated to the jobsite.

This scenario is being played out across Australia, in the cities and towns, as well as 'out in the sticks.' Workers are known to be criss

crossing cities, towns and regions at the behest of Employment Service Providers (ESP's) and their brothers in arms: the Labour Hire firms. As previously suggested this brings into question whether the provision of employment services by government meets the government's side of the 'mutual obligation' equation.

John Curtin and his government of 1946 may have had a window into the future in the way they set up the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES).

The CES had approximately 350 job centres across Australia, as well as a fleet of buses to take the service outback.

The CES was open to all, regardless of employment status, and would enable people to easily access available jobs without needing to be on the sunny side of the digital divide.

The CES had a jobs board: a display of cards with jobs placed voluntarily by local employers, up in plain view on metal trim.

Jobseekers could visit as often as they liked, daily, twice daily, there were no entry restrictions. Write down the job id number, present to the front counter and if they met the employers stated requirements, a CES employment officer could provide them with the employers contact details. In those days generally a phone number or address.

The CES by some time in the 1980's had introduced very simple to use electronic job desks. These were incredibly user friendly and enabled the user to search across the nation, in a: CES region by region; within a State; across the nation, in whatever category they wished.

The privatised ESP's - who have replaced the many tasks of compliance checking previously done by CES staff on a regular basis, often fortnightly - incredibly were not given the important task of the local CES job-board. It's worth noting the CES officers running the job board and referrals only numbered a couple, which was a fraction maybe 10% of the overall staff loading in a CES office. The balance mainly: counter staff; compliance checking officers; officers solving a myriad of other financial compliance issues; and managers.

There are still computers available at some ESP offices but this is ad hoc and the jobseekers are only encouraged to attend an ESP office for compliance checking interviews. Unfortunately for the 2.8 million digitally challenged Australians they may not be able to, anything like, effectively look for work.

The removal of the Curtin government's initiative has brought on extraordinary inequalities and waste into the system.

"Of the 820,000 people in the Jobactive caseload when Labor came to government, 57 per cent were in the lowest skill category (Certificate 1 or secondary education) but just 14 per cent of advertised jobs were suitable for this cohort." (The Saturday Paper, October 8-14, 2022)

You would not have to be a clairvoyant to suspect many of the 470,000 people above, may also be digitally challenged, and would benefit from a reintroduction of a CES style job shop front.

Indeed the benefits may be felt across the entire social and economic spectrum giving: jobseekers a clear window into available jobs; employers the ability to rapidly uptake candidates that are not required to have ready access to the internet; government providing an important service to the economy.

You may well ask how many mangoes have been left to rot due to pickers not being able to search the internet & download a: resume; cover letter; photo id & so on?

Matthew Ford