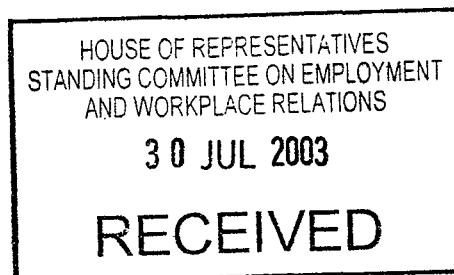


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The Secretary
Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear Secretary

Submission to the inquiry into employment: Increasing participation in paid work

My submission to your committee addresses the term of reference, Measures that can be implemented to increase the level of participation in paid work in Australia.

I have been on Centrelink Newstart allowance 3 times since 1999, and while I understand the government's efforts to ensure that unemployed people actively seek work in return for their benefit, I do not believe that the Job Network is providing the best service to help unemployed people re-enter the workforce.

My comments and recommendations are based on my own experience with the Job Network agencies I have had to deal with. I am 45 years old, male, and a qualified librarian with cataloguing as my main area of work experience.

Job Network agencies and the employment market

The job market is very competitive and the vast majority of employers demand experienced job applicants. But what happens when an unemployed worker finds that their skills have become dated and their experience is no longer sharp enough to compete with other applicants?

I found myself in this situation during the first of my periods of unemployment in 1999. The national cataloguing database, ABN, which was a major tool used by cataloguers such as myself, was replaced with Kinetica. All cataloguers were sent by their employers to be re-trained on it. But I did not have access to an employer's sponsorship, so I obtained a letter from my professional employment agency, Library Locums, advising Centrelink of my need for re-training in order to gain further work with Library Locums. A copy of the letter is enclosed.

Centrelink referred me to the Job Network provider I was registered with, Lang's Business College in Werribee, because it was their role to provide the required assistance to me. They refused to help and simply referred me back to Centrelink. I spent many months on Newstart before I was able to afford the \$300 needed to re-train on Kinetica. Meanwhile jobs requiring that particular training came and went and I missed out.

The point made by the above example is that the Job Network agencies are not always in the best position to understand a particular worker's needs. My professional employment agency is in the best position to know the job market for my field of work; Lang's Business College is not. In all the months of my 3 periods of unemployment since 1999, I have never found the Job Network agencies to be of use. They see my resume, that of a cataloguing librarian, and do not seem to know what to do with it. There has been no job matching and no interviews to determine my needs and thus what assistance they might offer.

The professional employment agencies are in the best position to know the job market in my field, agencies such as Library Locums and Zenith Management. They can suggest skills training programs and advise on what employers are currently demanding. Library Locums, for example, offers a *hot skills* link on their website. They know who is offering professional development short courses.

My recommendation to you is:

Allow Centrelink clients to register with job agencies who are the experts in the field of work being sought. Pay the government commission to those who know the market.

Job experience training

One of the biggest obstacles I am faced with is lack of current experience to compete. The Centrelink Job Network system seems too focused on techniques of finding work. There needs to be a way found to give unemployed people the opportunity to gain the experience that employers demand of their applicants. Nothing beats on the job experience to equip a job seeker to gain a job. As Annabel Crabb in *The Age* on Saturday 19 July said, "The issue should be about creating *real* opportunities for people to work" [emphasis mine].

My recommendation to you is:

The Job Network's budget is about \$2.5 billion over the next 3 years. Use it to create schemes where employers are given incentives to take on unemployed people and give them valuable on-the-job experience. Let there be 2 schemes working together: job training where people are referred to short courses such as TAFE, and job experience where people can sharpen old experience or gain new areas of experience. Job experience will allow voluntary work of any type as long as it is vocationally driven, not restricted to not-for-profit community work as is the rule now.

Job search program design

The government's current strategy of equipping people to find work for themselves is good, but there are restrictions imposed on what a job seeker can do, for example having to be unemployed for 12 months before becoming eligible for intensive assistance. Waiting for time to pass before being eligible can result in lost opportunities if a course of study is taking enrolments *now* for a whole semester, for example, or a particular skills needs upgrading *now*, or an opportunity comes up for volunteer work in a job seeker's own field which does not fit Centrelink's current eligibility criteria.

Sometimes Centrelink makes inappropriate appointments for a job seeker with a Job Network agency. For example, I have just been referred to Matchworks for an Intensive Support job search training interview. It is a standard template letter with name and interview times inserted. The letter template assumes all job seekers, after 3 months on Newstart, do not know the basics of job search technique. Centrelink and Matchworks cannot assume one size fits all. The individual needs of the job seeker must be determined at the initial Centrelink interview for Newstart application. If a job seeker needs basic training, give it to him *now* and not in 3 months time. If a job seeker knows the basics but needs job experience or re-training in a particular area, give it to him *now* and not in so many months time when he passes some eligibility test.

My recommendation to you is:

Allow job seekers to design their own job search program with a case manager. There will be no eligibility tests to restrict what a job seeker can and cannot do. The job seeker will, for example, decide when and if study is necessary, or if a volunteer position is suitable as vocational experience, or whether career counselling is appropriate. The Centrelink case manager will advise possible strategies, and the job seeker will submit to the case manager for approval a strategy according to current vocational and experience needs.

The above 3 recommendations are aimed at:

- continuing the government's policy of self-reliance of the unemployed person to find work themselves,
- addressing the problem of gaining sufficient experience on the job to satisfy the demands for experience employers make,
- move Centrelink clients from the Job Network system that cannot know the job market requirements in all fields to those professional employment agencies that operate in a clients' particular field of work,
- allow maximum flexibility in structuring assistance to Centrelink clients.

I trust my comments and suggestions will be helpful to your inquiry.

Yours faithfully



Philip Starks

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