Evidence review: Strategies to increase employment and economic participation for people with a cognitive disability

Summary Report

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**Full reports:**   
The full research reports for this research project are available [**here**](https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/research-groups/centre-for-health-equity/disability-and-health-unit/strategies-to-increase-employment-and-economic-participation-for-people-with-a-cognitive-disability)**.**

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Purpose of this research

About two thirds of all NDIS participants of working age have intellectual disability, autism[[1]](#footnote-2) and/or psychosocial disability. One of the aims of the NDIS is to give people with disability the same opportunities to work as other Australians including people with intellectual disability, autism and/or psychosocial disability.

This research was funded to help the NDIA understand what works to help people with intellectual disability, autism, and/or psychosocial disability to find and keep a job. It involved reviewing journal articles and reports to see what employment programs help people with autism, intellectual disability and/or psychosocial disability to find and keep a job. The review would identify where more research is needed.

What did the research involve?

The research included four parts:

1. A review of how employment programs are described
2. A structured review of national and international trials of employment programs to find out which programs work best.
3. Identification of current employment programs in Australia.
4. Interviews with academics and senior government and non-government staff working in employment for people with disability.

The review included programs designed to increase participation in paid employment for people with autism, intellectual disability and/or psychosocial disability aged over 16 or under 65 years.

The full research reports for each part are [**here**](https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/research-groups/centre-for-health-equity/disability-and-health-unit/strategies-to-increase-employment-and-economic-participation-for-people-with-a-cognitive-disability)**.**

Research findings

A total of 161 journal articles and reports were included in this review. We found research on 14 different types of employment programs designed to help people with disability find or keep a job. We grouped them into three categories:

1. Supply side: programs designed to build the skills of the person looking for work so they can be (more) ready and able to find a job. These type of programs may also provide support to the employer to help them employ a person with disability.
2. Demand side: programs that aim to create work opportunities for people with disability.
3. Bridging: programs that are designed to match a person with disability to appropriate work opportunities and provide support to the person and their employer.

Some employment programs may sit in more than one category.

Most research related to building the capacity of the person with a disability or the employer (supply-side programs) and involved people with psychosocial disability. Most of the supply-side programs identified were vocational programs. Vocational programs teach a person with a disability work-related skills that prepare them for work so they are better placed to find a job and keep a job.

The review found many programs that are successful in helping people find a job.

* Individualised Placement Support (IPS), a program for people with psychosocial disability had the most evidence of benefit. IPS combines vocational training and employment support with mental health support. Sometimes IPS works best when extra support is provided. This extra support may include:
  + Career advice, building a person’s knowledge of job opportunities and looking for work. This is sometimes called Job Coach.
  + Career mentoring that helps people with psychosocial disability to find a job and feel positive about work.
  + Online support for young people with psychosocial disability so they can progress towards a work or study goal.
* There was some evidence that programs that integrate work training into a person’s final years of school can help young people with autism get ready for work.
* We did not find any research trials of employment programs for people with intellectual disability.

Other programs that may have benefits but where there is less research include:

* Vocational programs that are integrated into workplaces and provide training and skill development relevant to the job. Ongoing support to both the person with a disability and the employer is also provided.
* Social enterprises that focus on building skills of a person with disability to help them enter the mainstream job market. They provide structured training and paid employment. They also help people to join the workforce through work experience or work placement.
* Customised employment, which involves working with the person with an intellectual disability and the employer to create jobs that are best matched to the skills and goals of the person. These programs focus on how a person’s strengths and interests may benefit an employer. These programs are becoming more common in Australia but haven’t been evaluated.

Academics and senior government and non-government staff took part in interviews and focus groups. They told us that improving employment outcomes needs a combination of supply, demand and bridging approaches. This may include:

* ensure programs are guided by principles that put the person at the centre.
* have inclusive workplaces designed together by employers and people with disability.
* build the capacity of people with disability to find work and the capacity of employers to match or create job opportunities.
* promote programs where people learn the job skills they need in their workplace, rather than training people in another setting.
* offer flexible working conditions that consider the changing needs of people with a psychosocial disability.
* offer opportunity for service providers to share with each other about what works.

Insights and considerations

The review found many programs aim to help people with disability find and keep a job work, but their impacts have not been tested. The research also found many ways of measuring employment outcomes. Most studies measured if a person found work, but the hours of work or the length of time in the job was different across the research. This makes comparing outcomes across different employment programs difficult.

Most research looked at the effects of supply-side programs. But the experts told us that programs will have a greater effect if supply, demand and bridging features are combined. This means programs can help build the capacity of the person with a disability, meet the needs of employers, and also help shape new or existing job opportunities that are accessible to people with disability.

The research talks about the importance of working across the employment pathway, taking a ‘total life’ approach. The academics and senior government and non-government staff identified some basic principles that are important to consider. These include:

* having high expectations (of the jobseeker and the employer)
* ensuring support is adapted to an individual’s needs
* starting the conversation about work early to help people with disability get the support they need

More research will help us to understand how strategies can help people with autism, intellectual disability and/or psychosocial disability to find and/ keep a job.

We need to continue to work with people with disability, employers, government departments, and other stakeholders to generate high quality evidence and foster best practice.

**Further information**

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1. We note many people with autism use the term autistic person because autism is a critical part of their identity. We have used person first language to be consistent with how we refer to the other target populations in this review yet we acknowledge the contested nature of person first and identity language. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)