Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities

EmployAbility Service Submission

Strand 3

"Make Work Pay"

INTRODUCTION

The National EmployAbility Service provides employment support services to people with disabilities and support needs throughout Ireland and has a reputation for quality service provision with a strong focus on achieving desired results in each of its twenty three centres. Its vision is "*Supporting people with a disability to secure and maintain employment"* and each centre is a limited company governed by a voluntary Board of Directors.

The National EmployAbility Service mission is to help stem the flow of people with disabilities and extra support needs into long-term unemployment by facilitating integration into suitable and fulfilling mainstream paid employment.

In addition, its mission entails;

- Forming alliances and working partnerships with other organisations and service providers throughout Ireland to meet organisational objectives.
- Playing an active and leading role in informing and influencing employers with regard to the benefits of employing people with disabilities.
- Setting and promoting world class standards in employment and placement services within a framework of total quality and continuous improvement.

EmployAbility provides a range of supports to employers and people with disabilities through a team of Job Coaches and professional support staff. These supports include;

- Individual Needs Assessment
- Vocational Profiling and Career Planning
- Individual Employment Plan
- Job Sourcing and Job Matching
- On-the-Job Support and Coaching
- Advice and Support to Employers
- Follow-up Support and Mentoring to both Employers and Employees

Employment support is available to jobseekers over the age of 18, who may have different types of disabilities such as intellectual, mental health, physical, sensory, hidden and/or medical.

In 2015**, 5,659** people with disabilities and support needs received services from Employability; of this number **2,314** were placed into their new mainstream jobs, and the majority were employed by small and medium sized Irish companies. The EmployAbility Service aims to place 50% of participants into their new jobs while active with the service and the remainder who do not immediately find work progress, in the main, to further skills training to enhance their chances of becoming employed.

The Business Management and Human Resource Policies, Procedures, and Practices, of the EmployAbility Service audited during a 2016 external National Standards Association of Ireland (NSAI) assessment reflect good practice. This external NSAI report states: *"There is a culture of high quality service provision and equally high people engagement that creates a vertically integrated service with a strong focus on achieving the organisation's stated objectives".*

Employer Experience of the Employability Service

In a recently published Indecon International Consultants report (2016), prepared for the Department of Social Protection, one thousand two hundred employers were surveyed:

The report states: *"98% of the employers agreed that EmployAbility enabled their organisations to play a role in supporting people with a disability and 96% agreed that EmployAbility made it easier for their organisation to support the transition of people with disabilities into their own workforce. 90% of employers agreed that the Employability Service delivered on their overall expectations".*

Participant Experience of EmployAbility Service

The 2016 Indecon International Consultants report also surveyed one thousand two hundred EmployAbility Service participants.

Here Indecon Consultants identified that: *"Significant numbers of participants showed satisfaction with the helpfulness of staff (92%) the availability of a local EmployAbility Service (89%) the application process (88%) the service overall (88%) and opportunities to gain work experience and employment (81%)".*

The EmployAbility Service is a free service to both Employers and Participants and is funded by the Department of Social Protection.

Financial In-Work Supports

Each of the DSP financial supports is of significant importance for Pwd's and those with support needs when taking up work or returning to work. However, some adjustments would be helpful.

The Disability Allowance Earning Disregard allows a degree of flexibility in the amount of hours worked and number of days of work which is particularly helpful. However, the level of disregard is restrictive when related to the national minimum wage. The allowance itself is particularly difficulty to obtain.

The Partial Capacity Benefit Scheme comes with a great deal of uncertainty. It has the potential to be a very good scheme, however Pwd's are unsure if they will be better off if they return to work due to the nature of the assessment process. A simple Earnings Disregard may be more useful. It would also be helpful if PCB and WSS could be used in tandem.

Retention of the Medical Card for 3 years, this restriction causes significant worry. It would be best if the retention period could be extended.

Secondary Benefits, Household Benefits and Family Income Supplement along with Tax Credits and reliefs all play a significant part of the supports needed for people with disabilities.

In most cases the ability of individuals to understand the rules relating to DSP Allowances and Benefits and their related payments is extremely limited. It is desirable therefore that Pwd's have access to clear information that will assist them to make decisions about their involvement in the world of work.

Financial Barriers

It is not practical or helpful to try to rank loss of payments as one being more important that the other. These payments run concurrently for people. For example the loss of a DA is just as important as a loss of secondary benefits or medical card. Each has the capacity to raise the bar so that person is prevented from entering the labour force.

Most payments and allowances were not specifically designed for Pwd's. So a degree of flexibility will be helpful when encouraging people to take up work. For instance work trials are needed without effecting payments. People with support needs who are NOT on a DA need some flexibility to work part time, for example people on a JA/IB. This can be easily accommodated by allowing registered participants with the Employability Service that level of flexibility.

Pwd's on DA are generally better off when working, once the rules are clear and circumstances explained. However, this is not always the case when dealing with people with a disability or support need who are on a PCB, JA or IB.

Length of Time out of the Workforce will impact on individuals in that they are more likely to have become dependent on Benefits and the consequent fear of losing them, "Benefits Trap". These individuals will also be more likely to suffer from a lack of confidence re-entering the workforce and are likely to have lost marketable skills. Here again the EmployAbility Service is the appropriate service to address these deficits.

The Wage Subsidy Scheme is a very useful tool for Employers. However it needs to be made more flexible for Pwd's. The hours worked currently set at a minimum of 21 hours excludes many people with support needs and productivity shortfalls who could take up meaningful part-time employment. The minimum hourly rate should be reduced to 8 hours. Another way to address this difficulty is to allow all the participants referred by DSP and registered with Employability Service to avail of WSS regardless of their productivity limitations. Further the WSS should be extended to individuals on PCB.

Communication and accurate information for people returning to work is one of the more difficult areas to address. However, the Employability Service, which provides people with disability and support needs with an individualised and specialised service, is very well placed to assist the Department overcome communications difficulties.

Pwd's are reluctant to contact the Department. The first question that will be asked is likely to be - what is your PPS number? People are fearful if they enquire about work they will be told they will lose their benefits if they are fit for work. There can also be lack of privacy in the general DSP office setting which can also be a barrier for Pwd's.

In addition to individual skills level attained, the factors that are likely to impact on Individuals who do transition successfully from welfare to work will be as a result of the supports provided by the EmployAbility Service Job Coaches. EmployAbility successfully placed two thousand three hundred Pwd's into open mainstream employment in 2015. The main reason that people will remain employed is that they meet employer expectations and can do the job. Additionally, the job retention strategies of the Employability Service will also help to keep people employed after placement when difficulties arise.

It will be helpful if DSP could enhance their Intero services by providing local DSP staff will disability awareness training. Improvement could also be made to the Jobs Ireland web site. Importantly however, early referral to the EmployAbility Service has proved to be the best way to provide Pwd's with mainstream employment. The needs of Pwd's are both varied and complex and individualised attention and support is a critical ingredient that can best be provided by an EmployAbility Service Job Coach delivered by a specialised service in order to achieve tangible results.

Employers

The focus of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for Pwd's strand 3 appears to have been in the main directed at the needs of making work pay for job seekers. It will also be important to consider the needs of making work pay for Employers. The WSS is currently the best tool that employers have available. However, the WSS is very cumbersome and is poorly managed the scheme was designed by FAS. Employers can be left waiting for long periods before they receive refunds. This directly results in a loss of jobs particularly within smaller companies. The WSS needs to be reviewed on a number of levels. The EmployAbility Service is ready to input into such a review and put forward practical solutions to enhance the scheme and aid its efficiently.

National EmployAbility Service Directors Forum
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