

How to attract & retain good staff in the disability sector



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Introduction

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has turned the disability support workforce on its head. By increasing funding, consumer control and the number of services available, the NDIS has expanded competition in the industry, sparking a period of immense growth.

However, according to the **2017 State of the Disability Sector report**, only 43 per cent of disability service providers expect to meet demand in 2018, due in part to an inability to recruit the workers they need or to provide additional services within the scheme's lean price points.

This eBook provides some context around the recent changes to the workforce profile, as well as some practical suggestions on how to adapt your recruitment approach to attract and retain a high-quality support team.



Only 43% of disability service providers expect to meet demand in 2018.



The current state of play

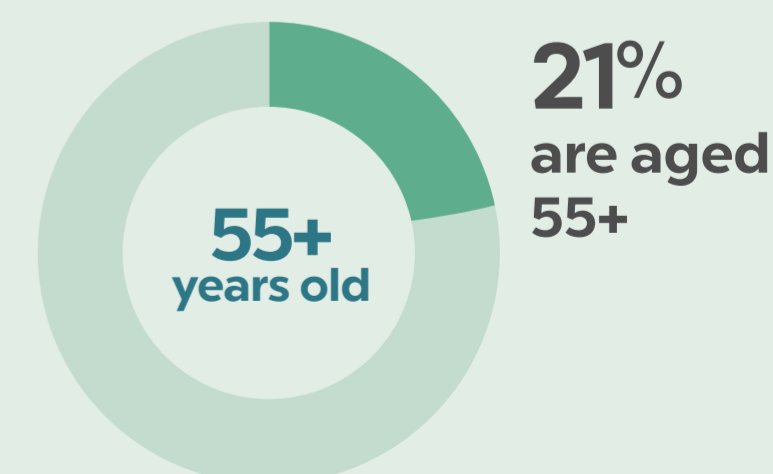
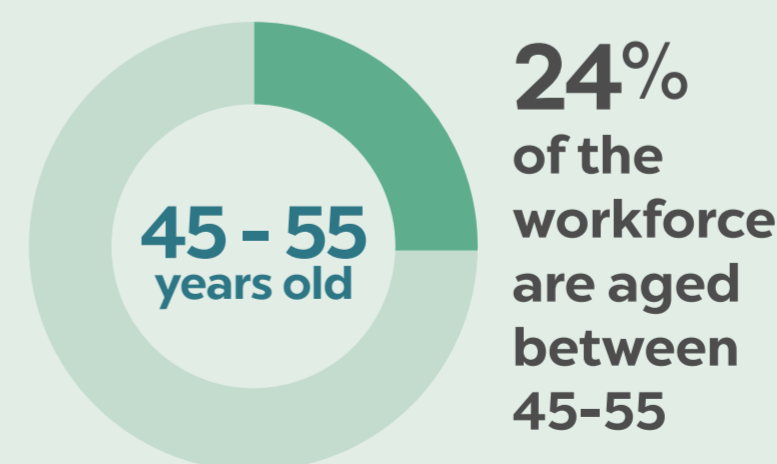
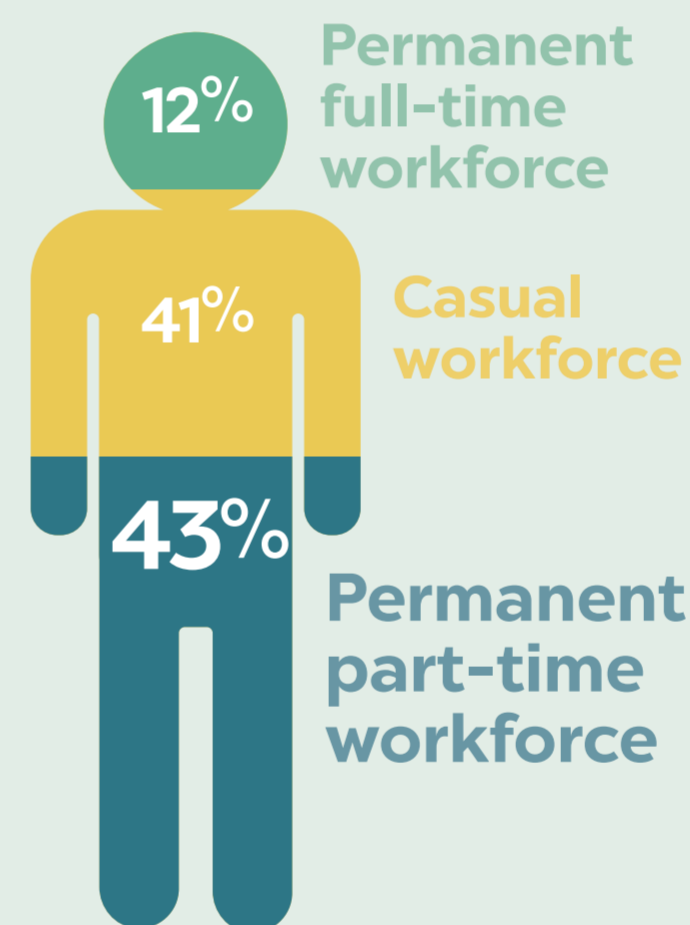
According to the **Australian Disability Workforce Report** – which collects data from disability providers directly via **Workforce Wizard**, an online benchmarking tool – organisations are growing their disability support workforces by 11.1 per cent year-on-year, compared to 1.6 per cent in the workforce as a whole.

This was primarily driven by an increase in casual workers, who now make up 41 per cent of the workforce. Permanent part-time employees account for 43 per cent of the workforce, and full-timers just 12 per cent.

The majority (70 per cent) of disability support workers are female, and nearly one-quarter (24 per cent) of the workforce are aged between 45 and 54, while 21 per cent are 55 or older.

However, there has been a spike in 15 to 24-year-old workers since 2015, and the disability sector is more age and gender balanced than other areas of social care. For example, less than 3 per cent of the workers in community care are aged 16 to 24, compared to 11 per cent of disability support workers.

INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT



A shifting employment landscape

Since **it started being rolled out in July 2016**, the NDIS has dramatically altered the way disability services are offered around Australia. Now, instead of the providers receiving funding from the government, budgets are allocated directly to the people with disabilities.

By putting the control of funds in the hands of people with disabilities (around **460,000 Australians** under the age of 65 with permanent and serious disability), the NDIS has sparked a consumer-driven trend towards greater diversity among support workers. Providers are making radical organisational changes – they’re improving their customer service and products, and offering more flexible working arrangements (i.e. casual positions), which may explain the small uplift in 16 to 24-year-olds.



The NDIS has dramatically altered the way disability services are offered around Australia.



A shifting employment landscape

Caroline Alcorso, National Manager (Workforce Development) at **National Disability Services** (NDS), says consumers look for support workers who share their passions, interests and life experiences, and the workforce profile is changing in light of these specialised requirements.

“I think what we’re seeing is a move towards a more age-balanced workforce, which reflects the fact that people with disability have more ability to say who they want to support them, and I think it’s one of the really positive things about the scheme,” she says.

“People can specify what kind of service they want and what interests that they would like the worker to share with them, and they are looking for more men, younger people, more people from diverse cultural backgrounds and so on.”



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High turnover, less interest

However, according to the State of the Disability Sector report, the demand for disability support workers continues to outstrip market supply.

Recruiting issues abound, with **around 60 per cent of providers reporting “moderate to extreme difficulty”**, due in part to an inability to offer competitive employment benefits and secure positions, to meet the changing structure of demand with limited labour supply.

Geographic location can also impact a provider’s ability to recruit quality candidates.

“In some places there are definitely shortages, and that applies to many rural and remote regions, but also some parts of metro Australia,” Alcorso says.

“In some areas like the ACT, for example, where many people are highly educated and there’s a lot of white-collar work, you don’t have such a big population of people willing to do relatively low-paid work.”

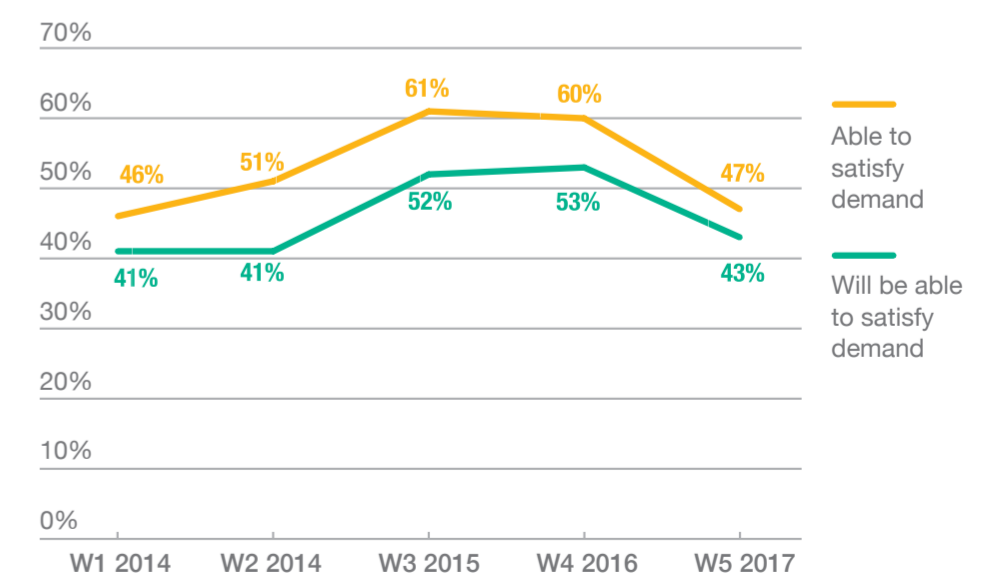


The gap between demand and supply continues to grow

Growth in demand for disability services continues to outstrip supply. During 2017, less than half of disability service providers (47 per cent) could meet all demand. While 2018 figures are yet to be determined, it seems

the supply gap will continue to widen with only 43 per cent (compared with 53 per cent in 2016) of disability service providers expecting to meet demand.

Capacity to meet demand during 2017



Source: The State of the Disability Sector Report, December 2017, page 7.

High turnover, less interest

Turnover rates for casual workers are much higher and less predictable than rates for permanent staff, which sit between **4.2 and 4.7 per cent each quarter**. In fact, the average turnover rate for casual workers is 8.5 per cent, nearly twice that of permanent employees.

“It is common for up to 80 per cent of the people answering a service’s job ad to be already working in the sector, and there is evidence that a lot of internal movement in the sector comes from people looking for more hours or slightly more pay,” Alcorso says.

8.5%

The average turnover rate for casual workers – nearly twice that of permanent employees.



High turnover, less interest



ALMOST 4 Million
people in Australia have a
disability. That's 1 in 5.

However, how to address these issues is the “million-dollar question”, as the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) funding comes for specific types and amounts of services, set out in a ‘Plan’. It’s more cost-effective and convenient for providers to just pay workers for the required hours – i.e. one hour in the morning, or two hours in the afternoon – and things like travel time, low client numbers, and requests for certain workers can make it difficult to stitch together jobs and create longer shifts.

There are also perennial shortages in some of those areas that are less popular or that require more specialised skills. For example, supporting people with complex needs or behaviour-management challenges as well as in the number of allied health professionals working in the sector, especially outside metropolitan areas.



“There is unevenness in the extent to which disability is studied by allied health professionals at university, and placements in disability can be less popular than areas with acute injuries, hospital wards and sports rehab” Alcorso says. “Graduates also look for industries where they can access a lot of professional development, difficult in a cash-strapped industry like disability. “Under the NDIS, the hours you get paid for are close to the hours of service you deliver, so therapy services find it hard to find the time and resources to supervise student placements and to fund expensive development opportunities.”

Reasons for unfilled vacancies



Specific skill requirements

(e.g. suitability to work with challenging behaviours).



Demographic characteristics

(e.g. age, gender, cultural background).



Personality attributes

(e.g. having an orientation suited to the interpersonal demands of disability work).



Poor employment conditions

(e.g. low pay, short hours and a lack of permanent roles).



Geographic location

(e.g. regions where the labour force is small).



Organisational factors

(e.g. reputation, internal recruitment policies).



Limited labour supply of non-professional workers

What to look for in support workers

According to Alcorso, the ideal disability support worker will have good interpersonal and listening skills, and be open, willing to learn, empathetic and passionate about helping people achieve as much independence as possible.

“Disability work is very much about active support and empowerment – capacity-building,” she says. “Workers need to understand that, and it’s really important that they also understand that people with disabilities have fought for decades for certain rights and the context around that.”

Key qualities to look for in candidates



Good interpersonal skills



Highly empathetic



Willingness to listen and learn



A passion for helping people



How to attract great candidates

Despite financial constraints and an uncertain policy environment, the **2017 Australian Disability Workforce Report** says many providers are managing to recruit in high numbers, with **around 11 times as many positions filled as unfilled in the first quarter of the year.**

According to Alcorso, it's critical for service providers to diversify their approach.

“Providers are using very targeted recruitment methods that are really adapted to groups that they want to attract,” she says.

“For example, a service in Cairns opened a rehabilitation centre primarily for Aboriginal people, and they wanted to attract Aboriginal workers. So instead of their normal recruiting practices, they held a forum where anyone was welcome to come and see the centre, to learn about it and to understand the philosophy of what was going to happen there.

“They had people there who could talk about the jobs to anyone who was interested, and help them then and there, or get back to them later about an application. It was a well-aligned recruitment process to the target audience, and they recruited nine highly suitable Aboriginal workers.”



Alcorso recommends employers take a more active approach and consider targeting new audiences to reveal untapped pools of talent – for example, recruiting drives at university career fairs, allied health schools or recently arrived immigrant or refugee populations.

Look for people who can bring a mix of skills to your workforce, and use a combination of modern and traditional advertising strategies, including social media campaigns and newsletter listings.

Staying ahead of the recruitment curve

Use a specialised and reliable industrial relations advice service – e.g. **Jobs Australia**.



- Use a combination of advertising strategies, including traditional job boards, newsletter ads, employment centres and social media platforms.
- Look for untapped pools of talent within the local community.
- The **NDS workforce hub** has a range of resources and information, most of it freely available.
- Use a specialised and reliable industrial relations advice service – e.g. **Jobs Australia**.



How to retain great candidates

The next step is to retain your best talent.

While there's no easy solution, Alcorso says a focus on training and working to create a supportive environment where staff can grow and learn new skills could help. However, this approach would need to be cleverly designed to be affordable within the NDIS pricing system.

“HR managers need to focus on how to utilise people better, how to offer rewarding, well-paid jobs or jobs that at least can provide a living wage,” she says. “It’s difficult to do in a very fragmented market, but I think that’s the big challenge at the moment.

“Looking for innovative ways to provide training and really high-quality blended learning opportunities is very important, but remember to assess the quality of that training, especially if you’re doing it online.”

Looking for innovative ways to provide training and really high-quality blended learning opportunities is very important.



Conclusion

- By 2019, the NDIS will support **nearly half a million Australians with disability**. Consumers having more choice means providers need to build strong and diverse workforces to meet a growing demand for more specialised services.
- For many, new recruitment techniques will be necessary in order to attract a wider range of candidates, while innovative ways to provide training and upskill employees may be one way of addressing the high turnover rates of casual workers.
- A great deal of organisational change is required, but providers are now at the frontier of reform, a transformation is key to realising the world-leading potential of the NDIS.



Innovative ways to provide training and upskill employees may be one way of addressing the high turnover rates of casual workers.

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