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Supporting Employment Transitions for People with Intellectual Disabilities: Disability Enterprises and the WISE-Ability Model

Perri Campbell ^{1,*}, Andrew Joyce ¹, Erin Wilson ² and Jenny Crosbie ²

¹ Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne 3122, Australia; ajoyce@swin.edu.au

² Centre for Inclusive Employment, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne 3122, Australia; ewilson@swin.edu.au (E.W.); jcrosbie@swin.edu.au (J.C.)

* Correspondence: pcampbell@swin.edu.au

Abstract

Disability Enterprises have the potential to address employment barriers that people with an intellectual disability experience as they move into open employment. Disability Enterprises are able to facilitate this transition through strategic organisational design, but it is unknown the extent to which organisations are following what could be considered best practice. Utilising a survey and interview approach, we aimed to understand how well organisations align with the ‘WISE-Ability’ model and the ongoing challenges they face in supporting open employment pathways for people with a disability working at the enterprise. Staff (94) from Disability Enterprises completed a survey where they rated their own organisation against a number of criteria related to organisational design and operation related to transitioning supported employees to open employment. After completing the survey, organisational staff (19) participated in a semi-structured interview. Disability Enterprises provide training and life skills development options with the end goal of employment transition. Training is adapted to the needs of individuals and there is flexibility in the pace of learning and rostering of shifts. Disability Enterprises develop industry-specific work skills and independent life skills. Pathways to employment are offered in most cases; however, there is variation in the success and scale of employment pathways. Organisations continue to face challenges that exist in the disability service system and open labour market. Organisations are confident that they are able to offer a culture of support and respect, choice and variety of employment options, busy and quiet spaces, and areas for rest and accessible workspaces where individuals feel empowered and safe to try new tasks. Many organisations developed relationships with external stakeholders and employers to facilitate financial sustainability and employment pathways. However, organisations face challenges in the following areas: resourcing pathways to employment and offering certified training options for people working in a Disability Enterprise. Employment pathways were often carved out on a case-by-case basis relying on significant staff support and after-hour work.



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1. Introduction

People with a disability have worked in different jobs throughout history; however, they are often marginalised from the mainstream labour market [1]. This is due in part to a

history of segregating people with disability into separate work settings since the 1950s in Australia when sheltered workshops were established. This continued in the 1970s with the funding of work preparation centres to provide vocational training for school leavers with intellectual disability [1]. Over time, more advanced separate work settings have emerged and are now called Disability Enterprises.

It is estimated that there are 16,000 people with disability working in Disability Enterprises [2]. While working in a Disability Enterprise is considered an employment outcome, for many people with disabilities and families, community-facing employment options are preferred. There has been a lot of debate surrounding these Disability Enterprises, especially after the Disability Royal Commission, where people reported continuing segregation and low pay [3]. However, some Disability Enterprises provide important services, including work experience, on-the-job training and employment. Historically, Disability Enterprises had not been designed to transition people into open or community-facing employment, so only around 1% of people transition into other forms of employment [4]. Disability Enterprises have the potential to increase employment opportunities for people with an intellectual disability. Staff working in Disability Enterprises have in-depth knowledge of individual work style, customisation of jobs and support style that work in a range of employment settings.

Some individuals with intellectual disabilities may prefer to remain in Disability Enterprises for work rather than pursuing community-facing work [5]. However, it is still important to explore ways to facilitate the transition to open employment, allowing people with intellectual disabilities greater access to diverse job options [6]. Recent research has identified the organisational factors that enable Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE) to support the health and well-being of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who have previously been excluded from the job market. These factors play a crucial role in facilitating their transition into open employment opportunities [7]. Key organisational elements include an operational structure that offers diverse employment and training opportunities, flexible use of space to accommodate individuals' varying needs for social interaction or solitude, and a culture that prioritises the well-being of its members [8]. The enterprises also align their activities with local industry needs and place a strong emphasis on networking with other local businesses to create transition opportunities [7]. Although this research particularly focused on organisations employing young people with mental health issues and other vulnerabilities, it did not consider individuals with intellectual disabilities.

The research in this paper is based on a two-year project exploring how Disability Enterprises can create sustainable, supportive pathways to open employment by learning from Work Integration Social Enterprise approaches. The project resulted in an organisational design model that facilitates employment pathways [7,8]. This model is derived from the Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE) approach, which is used by several social enterprises in Australia. The model aligns with the goals of many Disability Enterprises who are in the process of re-envisioning themselves as Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE). The purpose of this study was to test how well Disability Enterprises align with the WISE-Ability model and to identify gaps in the model. We engaged with Disability Enterprises focused on transitioning individuals with intellectual disabilities into open employment. By describing these features, the study aims to help other social enterprises and disability organisations adopt similar characteristics, ultimately improving the transition rates between supported and open employment. This is particularly important given the low rate of open employment for people with intellectual disabilities, both in Australia and internationally [9,10]. Utilising a survey and interview approach, we aimed to understand how well organisations align with the WISE-Ability model and the ongoing challenges

they face in supporting open employment pathways for people with disability working at the enterprise.

2. Background: Work Integration Social Enterprise and Australian Disability Enterprises

The stigmatisation and segregation of individuals with disabilities became entrenched in social institutions during the 1900s due to government policies aimed at managing disability and protecting society from disabled individuals [11,12]. The 1950s marked a period when these policies particularly favoured the segregation of people with disabilities, leading to their institutionalisation in places known as sheltered workshops. In the 1960s, the Australian Commonwealth government began funding sheltered workshops and work preparation centres to provide vocational training for school leavers with intellectual disabilities. As the emphasis on inclusion grew in the following decades, criticism of sheltered workshops increased. In 1986, the Disability Services Act was enacted in response to the emerging inclusion movement.

This legislation established two broad types of employment services: open employment and supported employment services [3]. The Act essentially created a bifurcated model where open employment was considered suitable only for those able to work without ongoing support. Supported employment services were designated for individuals deemed 'unlikely' to compete in the open labour market and who would require ongoing support in a workplace setting [3]. Supported employment services continued throughout the 1990s, though funding for new services was limited as government policy increasingly favoured open employment over segregated options. During this time, supported employment services were referred to as 'disability business services' or 'business enterprises'. In 2008, these services were rebranded as Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs).

After the enactment of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2013, records indicated that there were 194 not-for-profit organisations operating ADEs, employing about 20,000 individuals, most of whom had intellectual disabilities and received the Disability Support Pension [13]. The 2013 NDIS Act initiated substantial changes in the disability employment sector. Funding for employment support within an ADE was incorporated into the new NDIS, allowing ADEs to transition from Department of Social Services (DSS) funding to NDIS funding. In 2021, Australian Disability Enterprise services were discontinued as a government-funded programme [14], following the full transition of all employees to NDIS funding. As a result, many ADE organisations sought to rebrand and reposition themselves within the employment landscape. Some pursued formal certification as Social Enterprises (e.g., Social Traders Certified Social Enterprise), while others began using the terms 'social enterprise' or 'business enterprise' without formal certification. This shift has created challenges in understanding current employment rates for individuals with intellectual disabilities. There is no national dataset for supported employment, nor is there an agreed-upon terminology for organisational types. This confusion has been exacerbated by the former ADEs self-identifying as social enterprises.

Current estimates are derived from NDIS data and statistics on social enterprises. As of 2022, there were 477 ADEs in Australia operated by 147 organisations, employing approximately 16,000 supported employees in this sector [2]. Data from the NDIS indicate minimal movement from ADEs to other employment opportunities. In 2020, only 4% of individuals aged 15–24 transitioned from an ADE to open employment, while 3% moved from open employment to ADEs [15]. Among those older than 25, the movement to open employment was even lower, with only 1% making the transition from ADEs to open employment, while 3% moved from open employment to ADEs [15]. These findings reflect studies from other countries that also demonstrate low employment transition rates for

individuals with intellectual disabilities [16]. While individuals with intellectual disabilities express a desire for social enterprises and open employment [10,17], the data suggest they continue to face significant exclusion.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) aims to improve employment rates for individuals with disabilities, focusing on increasing their choice [18]. Despite the ongoing development of Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) and the implementation of individualised funding through the NDIS, there remains a significant challenge in transitioning from ADEs to other employment opportunities. Research from over a decade ago demonstrates that these transitions are still difficult [19], and it is unclear why, despite reforms, transition rates remain low. Recent studies indicate that family support plays a crucial role in these transitions [16], but there is a lack of understanding regarding broader policy and organisational factors that hinder employment opportunities [9]. In Australia, the employment landscape for people with intellectual disabilities is currently undergoing significant policy reforms. What was once called sheltered employment has been rebranded as Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) for the past twenty years, and these have been the primary employers for individuals with intellectual disabilities in Australia [17]. Funding for the ADE programme ended in 2021, and many former ADE organisations are evolving into accredited social enterprises. The combination of new policies aligned with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the NDIS has shifted focus towards ensuring that all people with disabilities have access to a wider range of employment outcomes, including those previously viewed as having limited work capacity. Consequently, there is a greater emphasis on open employment outcomes, which involve transitioning from former ADE settings to positions that offer regular wages alongside coworkers without disabilities [9]. Open employers can include social enterprises, particularly Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE), which often prioritise social inclusion by creating meaningful job opportunities. Many of these enterprises aim to transition individuals who have been excluded from the labour market into open employment [8]. For many individuals with intellectual disabilities in Australia, securing open employment opportunities, including those in social enterprises, remains a significant goal [17]. Reforms within the ADE sector and the introduction of the NDIS over the past ten years were intended to facilitate higher participation rates and smoother transitions from ADEs to open employment opportunities. However, a review of current data on employment trajectories for people with intellectual disabilities indicates that transitions to open employment from ADEs are still very low, despite the limitations of the available data.

3. Work Integration Social Enterprises

Defourny and Nyssens [20] describe the objectives of Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) as supporting those who are ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘unemployed’, and potentially at risk of ‘permanent exclusion from the labour market’. These enterprises aim to assist individuals in reintegrating into “work and society” through employment and productive activities. The Emergence of Social Enterprise in Europe (EMES) network has identified 44 different types of WISEs, but it is generally accepted that they fall into four main categories. Across the four categories, we see aspects of Disability Enterprises.

- The first category includes enterprises that offer work integration services funded by permanent subsidies. These organisations represent the oldest form of WISEs and aim to bridge the gap where workers with disabilities are often seen as less productive than labour market demands. Consequently, positions in this category are subsidised by public entities. This group comprises most ‘sheltered’ workshops, day centres, and social workshops [20] (p. 15).

- The second category consists of organisations that provide ‘permanent, self-subsidised employment’. These organisations offer relatively stable jobs to disadvantaged or marginalised individuals in an economically sustainable manner. Typically, they start with grants or subsidies but strive to achieve self-sufficiency, with employee wages funded through revenue. This model represents social firms, and as such, these WISEs face greater pressure to be profitable.
- The third category includes organisations focused on ‘resocializing’ individuals into various forms of productive engagement [20] (p. 15). These WISEs primarily serve able-bodied workers with significant psycho-social challenges or other disabilities.
- The fourth and largest category comprises organisations offering ‘transitional employment or traineeships’ [20] (p. 16). While these firms share the common goal of helping individuals secure jobs in open employment, they employ diverse methods to achieve this. In Belgium, it was common to offer on-the-job traineeships, while in France, one-year jobs were prevalent.

Disability Enterprises in Australia often fall between these categories, with some resembling the WISE approach more closely than others. Not all Disability Enterprises that have adapted to a WISE approach provide training and education opportunities or pathways to open employment. Many organisations provide employment and support with some hands-on learning, but few focus on training with a view to external employment or internal promotion. This research and practice gap was identified prompting the need for an organisational design model that could capture approaches which combine employment, support and training and options for movement within and outside the organisation.

Based on previous research [7,21], a WISE-Ability model was developed to move beyond ‘good practice’ at the level of individual job coaching, and instead specify the organisational design features a Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE) needs if it is to reliably transition supported employees into open employment. This research showed how a social enterprise can be deliberately structured to make transition possible, including variety of roles and workplace environments, dedicated staff support roles, and active networking with open employers to build fit and feasibility for individual transitions. It also highlights why this work is not simply ‘placement’: staff often take on advocacy and coordination roles to manage funding and financial risks that can otherwise destabilise transitions.

Successful pathways depend on purposeful brokerage between the supported employment setting and open employers to create bespoke, tailored opportunities, supported by both employee preparation and employer preparation. This research highlights the gap between supported and open employment environments and the need for time, psychological preparation, and staged skill development before entry (rather than assuming skills can be built once someone starts in open employment). In parallel, it shows that employers often need hands-on support to shape an inclusive environment (including tools, resources, and on-site support where funded), reinforcing that transition is a co-produced process rather than an individual leap.

These studies provided the basis to specify the eight elements of a WISE model designed for transition so that pathways are built into the organisation, not added on. The WISE-Ability framing makes explicit that successful transition requires aligned design across: (1) Structure (e.g., reliable routines, staffing visibility, and wraparound supports that hold people steady while they stretch), (2) Space and Environment (a mix of calm/busy spaces, safe areas, and match between person and setting), (3) Culture (care, psychological safety, learning from mistakes, belonging), (4) External Relationships (trusting, in-depth partnerships that can host and shape roles), (5) Finance and Funding (commercial sustainability while absorbing ‘impact cost’ and the transition of skilled workers), (6) Industry

(choosing sectors that fit social purpose, wage prospects, and stress/pacing realities), (7) Policy, Procedure and Process (HR capacity, induction/intake, risk management, accessible systems), and (8) Pathways to Employment as a defined organisational function rather than an informal aspiration. The overall contribution is a model that treats transition as an organisational capability, integrating brokerage, employer capacity building, and staged supports, while recognising that sustainable scaling depends on resourcing, funding flexibility, and fit-for-purpose workplace design.

Building on the eight-element WISE-Ability model, the research team translated each element (and its sub-themes) into a structured self-assessment survey with concrete indicator statements so that staff and managers could rate their own organisation against this model. The survey presents the model as a set of statements organised under each element using a Likert rating scale. The aim of the study was then to use these ratings to identify the current strengths and limitations of participating organisations against the model.

4. Method

The data analysed for this paper comes from a 12-month research project funded by the Department of Social Services through its Information Linkages and Capacity Building Scheme. The aim of this research project was to understand the specific features of social enterprise workplace design and structure that enable the transition to open employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The method for evaluation uses a project survey (described below) and interviews to test organisational alignment with the WISE-Ability model [22].

The selected Disability Enterprises were located in Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, Western Australia, South Australia. The organisations provide a variety of workplace models, including traditional supported employment, which is typical of Disability Enterprises, as well as community-facing social enterprises that trade goods and services in the open market. This diversity is common among Disability Enterprises in the sector, where organisations offer various services and employment models for individuals with intellectual disabilities [5]. Staff were asked to complete the WISE-Ability organisational assessment survey and participate in a follow-up interview to validate survey results. Most support staff work in roles such as employment pathways practitioner, support staff, training staff, and Disability Enterprise manager. The interviews conducted focused on the operations of the social enterprise and how these may facilitate the transition to open employment.

Staff from each organisation were asked to complete a WISE-Ability Survey Assessment (Appendix A). The survey was designed to test how well organisations align to the WISE-Ability model and where there are gaps that organisations can work on according to the eight domains: Organisational structure, Space and Environment, Culture, Relationships, Finance and Funding, Industry, Policy and Procedure, and Pathways to Employment. Under each domain was listed a series of indicators. Staff assessed their organisation against each of these indicators which provides an assessment of whether they are delivering quality services and providing employment transition opportunities. For each item, people could respond to seven different categories:

- Strongly Agree;
- Agree;
- Somewhat Agree;
- Somewhat Disagree;
- Disagree;
- Strongly Disagree;
- Don't Know or Not Applicable.

Another way the data was analysed was to combine the answers of ‘Strongly Agree’ and ‘Agree’ for each item. These results are shown in Appendices B and C. This provides a single data point for each question and enabled comparison between organisations. In total 94 Disability Enterprise Staff participated in the survey.

After completing the WISE-Ability Self-Assessment survey, organisational staff were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview to reflect on survey results, and to provide context to better understand challenges in implementing the model. In total, 19 Disability Enterprise Staff were interviewed. Interviewees included employment pathways practitioners, support staff, training staff, and Disability Enterprise managers. All interview participants were provided with a Plain Language Information and Consent form. Each participant provided informed consent, and the study was approved by the Human Research Ethics committee of Swinburne University of Technology.

All interviews were conducted online via videoconference. Participants were asked about the strengths of the organisation and areas for improvement. Elements of the model were discussed to provide context to survey responses about, for instance, organisational Employment Pathways and the approaches that supported good outcomes. Interviews were used to verify survey results and also analysed thematically to identify areas of alignment and/or challenge regarding organisational implementation of the WISE-Ability model. The WISE-Ability model elements provided the framework for the thematic analysis.

5. Results: Disability Enterprises Alignment with the WISE-Ability Model

In the following sections, we discuss how organisations aligned to the WISE-Ability model and where they identified challenges in doing so. As mentioned in the Introduction, some Disability Enterprises have taken on the form of a social enterprise with a focus on enabling transition to open employment for some of their supported employees. The research focus was the organisations’ alignment to the WISE-Ability model to support the transition of people with an intellectual disability into open employment.

The WISE-Ability Self-Assessment survey and interviews revealed that Disability Enterprises are meeting many of the WISE-Ability model indicators (see Table 1 below). Most Disability Enterprises provide training and life skills development options with the end goal of employment transition. Training is adapted to the needs of individuals and there is flexibility in the pace of learning and rostering of shifts. Disability Enterprises develop industry-specific work skills and independent life skills. Pathways to employment are offered in most cases; however, there is variation in the success and scale of employment pathways.

There were 94 responses to the survey across nine organisations. The demographic data collected provide insights into the age, gender, tenure with the current organisation, and industry experience of the survey respondents. The largest age group was 50–59 years (25.8%), followed by 30–39 years (22.7%) and 18–29 years (21.2%). Participation from those aged 60 years and over was low, with only 1.5% of respondents aged 70 or older.

Gender responses showed a majority identifying as women (57.6%), with 31.8% identifying as men. A small number (1.5%) identified as non-binary, and 9.1% preferred not to disclose their gender. Regarding tenure with their current organisation, the most common response was one year (26.6%), while the average was approximately 3.76 years. Experience within the broader industry was higher, with an average of 8.59 years and responses ranging up to 30 years.

The survey responses provide insight into how employees perceive various aspects of their organisation against the domains of the WISE-Ability model (see Appendix B for the full list of results). Under the Structure category, the most positively rated statement was that the organisation provides flexible rosters for supported employees, with 50%

strongly agreeing and 30.8% agreeing. High levels of agreement were also evident in statements related to accessible work practices and matching work tasks to employee skills and interests. However, comparatively lower ratings were given to opportunities for certified learning, with only 15.4% strongly agreeing and 26.9% agreeing, indicating this may be an area needing further development across a number of organisations.

Table 1. Results summary—Disability Enterprises alignment with the WISE-Ability Model.

Strengths across all organisations, from most to least frequent	
STRUCTURE	providing diverse work opportunities, scope and encouragement for supported employees to try new work roles; skill development and on-the-job training; flexible support with an accessible layout; developing trusted relationships with supported employees, families and service planners and providers, strong sense of purpose for work roles
CULTURE	strong culture related to health and well-being, culture of respect, culture of respect
EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS	partnerships with industry and families
PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT	pathways to employment/community-focused employment /focus on open employment opportunities
Areas for improvement across all organisations, from most to least frequent	
POLICY	retainment of award staff, staff retention, access to healthy food, access to healthy food, greater consideration of caseloads and the time it takes to support employment transition, communication between teams and between executive and operational staff
EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS	engagement with external stakeholders, expanding external relationships into different industries
FINANCE AND FUNDING	improving business processes; challenges for scaling employment programme
PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT	hybrid employment opportunities and open employment, Pathways to employment

In the Space and Environment domain, feedback was mixed. While a majority agreed that flexible workspaces and opportunities for physical activity were available, fewer respondents endorsed the availability of healthy food options at work. Only 8.6% strongly agreed and 22.9% agreed with this statement. In the Culture category, employees generally perceived their organisation positively. A majority agreed that their organisation takes a holistic approach to well-being and provides tailored emotional and practical support, although retention of skilled support staff received more moderate agreement, possibly indicating room for improvement.

The Relationships domain stood out as a strength. Over 88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the organisation creates respectful and trusting relationships with supported employees, families, and service providers. However, efforts to build the capacity of open employers and create external employment networks were rated more modestly. Responses in the Finance and Industry sections showed greater variability with some organisations.

Finally, in Pathways to Employment, results were generally positive. A majority of respondents agreed that the organisation has procedures for job customisation and supports people to access employment services and develop personalised employment pathways. However, hybrid employment opportunities (roles shared between supported and open employment) received lower levels of agreement, indicating a potential gap in bridging supported and open employment settings.

The data reveals substantial variability between organisations in the implementation of the WISE-Ability indicators (see Appendix C), with many items showing extreme

gaps between the highest- and lowest-performing organisations. For example, in some organisations the agreement was at 100% for practices such as providing diverse work roles, matching tasks to employee strengths, and ensuring purposeful roles whereas for other organisations, scores were much lower. This pattern of disparity is particularly evident in areas such as training and skill development. These discrepancies highlight a significant gap in how organisations prioritise and invest in the long-term development of their employees, especially in relation to formal and transferable skills. Differences are also stark in workplace culture and environmental supports such as access to healthy food at work (ranged from 0% to 80%), and opportunities for physical activity varied from 21.4% to 80%. Finally, in the area of employment pathways, the variation also remains striking. For instance, in the hybrid employment question the range of agreement varied from 71.4% to 0%. Similarly, initiatives to build capacity in open employment contexts ranged from 14.3% to 100%. This broad disparity underscores inconsistency between organisations and areas where a number of organisations could improve what they are delivering.

5.1. Barriers to Implementation/Areas for Improvement

External Relationships and Industry: There was a sense that expanding external relationships into different industries could provide benefits to both organisations and individuals (i.e., supporting varied employment pathways and financial sustainability). However, many organisations were operating in specific industries which aligned with their training, products and services (i.e., Office and Administrative work, Warehousing, or Hospitality). As such, varied industry engagement was not always an option or a sound strategic choice for all organisations:

“Our social enterprise focuses primarily on digitisation services, digitisation of paper documents, and a lot of people, at face value, will see that as not very diverse, and it’s very admin- and computer-focused, and “What if me, or my person, don’t want to do admin office environment?”

“Some people might see that as a lack of diversity, and sure we can’t teach coffee skills and hospitality, and things like that, but we do try to mix it up and teach the customer service skills, and things like that, that they can then take into retail and hospitality, and things like that.

So, I do think, when you think about it at a bit of a deeper level, that we do offer quite a diverse range, but perhaps not everyone sees it that way.” (Organisation 6)

Finance and Funding: Areas for improvement related to building greater financial sustainability. In pursuit of this goal organisations focused on tender submissions, social procurement, expansion of current business offerings, and, in some cases reform to business processes to align with the changes that have already taken place with the business model and offerings.

Pathways: Developing open employment options for those interested in transitioning, and planning adequately for transitions was a challenge due to limited resourcing (i.e., staffing) required to match the person’s interests, strengths and needs to an appropriate employer. The challenge was also to find enough open employers that were experienced, could provide an accessible, understanding, supportive and inclusive working environment, particularly one that is similar to that of Disability Enterprises.

Policy and Process: Staff retention and improved communication between teams and between executive and operational staff was a common challenge for organisations. Respondents noted that there needed to be greater consideration of the workload required in supporting individuals with open employment goals and pathways. This included greater recognition of the work required to support people and their families to maintain

open employment roles. In many cases, staff feedback was that Disability Enterprises needed to:

“Provide more reasonable caseload numbers for employment pathways team so participants can be supported to actively work towards open employment goals instead of sitting in supported employment.” (Organisation 2)

5.2. Organisational Strengths

Structure: Many organisations provided choice regarding work opportunities, skill development, on-the-job training and flexible, tailored support. Training is adapted to the needs of individuals and there was flexibility in the pace of learning and rostering of shifts. In addition to work skills, many organisations supported the development of independent life skills which played a key role in their success of their pathways programme:

“The combination of deep, immersive combination of living on site, learning independent living skills, work skills, paid work, and then support to secure ongoing employment, is the reason why there is that success. Because there’s a cross-fertilisation between independent living skills, life skills and work skills and vice versa.”

Culture: The organisational culture of participating Disability Enterprises was seen as one of the greatest areas of strength. The strengths related to strong culture of support and respect, choice and control for people with a disability working in the organisation, a sense of belonging and diversity of supported work opportunities. A culture of wraparound support and a healthy working life balance was highlighted, alongside caring relationships:

“NDIS participants and their families comment that we care about our workers more than other companies they have been with previously.” (Organisation 5)

This culture meant that, in some cases, supported employees did not want to leave the Disability Enterprise or their associated Social Enterprises:

“... it’s community facing, but really a lot of the folks who work at the Copy Centre love it so much they don’t want to leave.” (Organisation 7)

External Relationships: Organisational relationships with families, networks/peers, service providers, were strong. In many cases organisations had strong relationships in the sector and with select employers, but many were looking to grow external relationships within particular industries (i.e., as part of plans for growth) and/or relationships with relevant employers. Some organisations focused on building deep relationships with employers and networks to provide wraparound support for employees as they transition. One organisation explained how important communication was in this process and how communication overlaps with employment pathways success:

“Because if we have that clear communication and they’re willing to have that relationship with us, then there’s virtually no problems.” (Organisation 4)

Employment Pathways: Purpose designed Disability Enterprises provided comprehensive training and life skills development with the end goal of employment transition. Pathways were tailored to individual needs as organisations spent considerable time ensuring a good fit between the needs of individuals and the needs of the employer:

“We don’t have a set time limit on the program, everyone’s journey is very individualised and tailored, and based on their needs and where they’re at in life.

We have our learning curriculum that is based around 20 of those foundational workplace skills that we all need to succeed in any job and in any industry, and we’ll support the participants to develop those skills through a combination of one-on-one mentoring sessions and group learning sessions.” (Organisation 6)

Some organisations reflected on the potential role of Disability Employment Services (now Inclusive Employment Australia) in their employment pathways design:

“So the idea of the DES partnership is to leverage the best of both organisations, employer relationships and the job coach externally, but also then the experience of intellectual disability, the discovery process, the volunteering process, the initial onboarding processes.”
(Organisation 7)

While some organisations felt confident engaging with DES/IEA, for others the role of DES was not clear, particularly given pending changes to the DES/IEA at this time. The current challenges included changes to the system, and the amount of support DES/IEA are able to provide individuals.

6. Discussion

This study set out to test how closely participating Disability Enterprises align with the WISE-Ability organisational design model, and to identify where system and organisational constraints are limiting implementation. The findings are important in the Australian context, where supported employment emerged historically through segregated work settings and, despite repeated reforms, transitions from Disability Enterprise settings to open employment remain low [9,10]. Previous research has shown that transition is not achieved through individual job coaching alone, but through integrated organisational conditions (e.g., structure, culture, workplace environment, external relationships, and viable pathway infrastructure) that make open employment feasible and sustainable [7].

Across the domains, organisations demonstrated strong alignment with the model in areas that sit closest to the core supported employment setting, particularly Structure and Culture. Many organisations reported offering choice and variety in work opportunities, flexible and tailored support, and individualised training with a pace of learning and rostering that can be adjusted to the person. This matters because the literature suggests that people with intellectual disability often face cumulative labour market barriers [23], and that supported employment settings are uniquely positioned to provide sustained training and scaffolding as a step toward open employment [16]. Organisational culture was a particular strength, characterised by respect, care, belonging and wraparound support; however, the findings also reveal a predictable tension in the transition agenda: in some cases the quality and safety of the Disability Enterprise environment can reduce motivation to leave, particularly when prior experiences of open employment have involved exclusion or bullying. In other words, strong culture is a necessary foundation for pathways but may also create ‘stickiness’ unless transition is framed as a choice from the outset (with safe return options and hybrid arrangements), rather than a one-way exit.

The results also show promising alignment with External Relationships and Employment Pathways, but with clear limits in scale and coverage. Relationships with families, peers/networks and other service providers were consistently strong, and many organisations reported established relationships with selected employers and sector partners. At the same time, organisations often described employer engagement as something they were still growing, particularly within specific industries relevant to their future pathway ambitions. This aligns with prior research emphasising that pathways rely on purposeful brokerage and capacity building with open employers, alongside preparation of employees, because mainstream workplaces frequently require support to become genuinely inclusive for people with intellectual disability [7,24]. Joyce et al. [21] similarly point to the need for strong inter-organisational relationships, employer capacity building, and funding coordination to enable movement in-between settings.

The main implementation barriers sit in the model domains that require the most external coordination and the most discretionary resourcing: Industry, Finance and Funding,

Pathways capacity, and Policy/Process. On industry, many organisations operate in a small number of sectors aligned to their existing products, services and training infrastructure; for some, diversifying industry exposure is not a realistic or strategically sound choice and expanding into new industries requires investment in facilities and staff capability. On finance and funding, organisations described growth ambitions (to broaden work opportunities and settings) but noted that this is difficult without consistent, predictable funding and stronger business sustainability, an issue that is amplified when organisations succeed in transitioning skilled supported employees out of the enterprise, thereby reducing internal productivity capacity.

Pathways themselves were often described as feasible, but hard to deliver at scale: developing open employment options and ensuring fit requires significant staff time to match the person's interests, strengths and needs to an employer, and to support the employer to provide an accessible and supportive environment. This is consistent with the conclusion that pathway activity is frequently 'hand-built' on a case-by-case basis and can rely on after-hours work, which raises questions about sustainability without stronger resourcing and clearer system roles. Finally, policy/process issues, particularly staff retention and communication between operational and executive teams, appear to constrain pathway delivery by limiting continuity, shared practice standards, and realistic caseload allocation for pathway-focused staff.

These concerns point to a practical implication consistent with WISE-Ability framing: participating organisations appear to have many of the 'inside the enterprise' ingredients needed for transition (structure, flexibility, culture and foundational training), but face the hardest constraints where transition becomes a cross-boundary function, requiring reliable brokerage capacity, employer readiness work, and funding arrangements that can travel with the person across supported, hybrid and open employment settings [7,25]. The uncertainty described by some participants about the role of Disability Employment Services/Inclusive Employment Australia, further reinforces the need for clearer delineation (and coordination) between enterprise-based pathway teams and mainstream employment service systems, particularly during periods of policy change.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the survey was a self-assessment completed by organisational staff, which may be influenced by social desirability, variable knowledge of organisational systems, and differences in how respondents interpreted the indicator statements. Second, the participating organisations and respondents were not intended to be statistically representative of the broader Disability Enterprise sector; therefore, the observed variation between organisations should be read as indicative rather than generalisable. Third, the study design was cross-sectional and focused on perceived alignment with the WISE-Ability domains rather than independently verified practices or outcomes; we did not link survey ratings to objective indicators such as administrative transition data, job tenure, wages, or longer-term employment sustainability. Fourth, interviews were conducted with a relatively small number of staff and did not include supported employees, families, or open employers, limiting triangulation across stakeholder perspectives. Finally, because the research was conducted within a specific Australian policy and funding context, transferability to other jurisdictions (or to periods of policy change) may be constrained.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the approach provides a pragmatic, low-burden self-rating that organisations can use to benchmark current practice and identify priority areas for quality improvement over time. The patterns observed across domains also broadly align with themes identified in previous research on disability employment transitions, strengthening confidence in the relevance of the survey despite this study's measurement constraints.

7. Conclusions

Survey and interview results testing organisational alignment with the model showed that organisations continue to face challenges that exist in the disability service system and open labour market. These challenges are outlined in our previous reports as inadequate NDIS funding for pathways, delays in NDIS plan changes and barriers in the open labour market. Organisations are confident that they are able to offer a culture of support and respect, choice and variety of employment options, busy and quiet spaces, and areas for rest and accessible workspaces where individuals feel empowered and safe to try new tasks. There was still work to be done regarding Pathways to Employment; organisations had developed relationships with employers to facilitate pathways; however, this was on a case-by-case basis relying on significant staff support and sometimes after-hour work. Finance and funding remained a consistent challenge for organisations that relied on grant funding and business revenue to support their work. Organisations are working towards securing consistent funding to enable forward planning for growth and scaling of operations, and for in-house training programmes. It is worth noting that offering certified training remains a challenge for some organisations due to the costs associated and accessibility issues.

Further research could explore funding policies and mechanisms that can support Disability Enterprises' financial sustainability if they are to provide employment pathways support. Ideally policy and funding would support the brokerage work that organisational staff are undertaking to pursue external employment pathways. Currently, staff members are meeting individually with potential employers to provide tailored capacity-building efforts that align the employment needs of individuals with the requirements of specific employers. However, this intensive approach, where staff from the social enterprise work closely to match individual employers with suitable employees, is not a sustainable model for transition without adequate resources. It underscores the further work needed to ensure that all workplaces offer an inclusive environment for people with intellectual disabilities.

This effort could allow individuals with intellectual disabilities to benefit fully from open employment and the advantages of social enterprise, avoiding any trade-offs between supported employment and community-integrated employment [5]. There are currently several policy-related disincentives that hinder the transition to open employment, as these policies can jeopardise individuals' existing funding plans and support. Additionally, there is insufficient funding to provide open employers with the level of support necessary for meaningful employment opportunities.

At present, staff from the social enterprise are addressing the support needs of individuals as they transition to open employment, often offering ongoing support to the employers as well. However, this arrangement is not sustainable for the organisation since it frequently occurs without adequate funding. More efforts are needed to ensure that the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) can support the employment journeys observed in this study, as well as to fund the utilisation of the skills possessed by social enterprise staff to achieve better open employment outcomes.

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Appendix A. WISE-Ability Self-Assessment Survey

Work Integration Social Enterprise and Ability Model Self-Assessment Tool for Organisations

The model and items below are based on research conducted on what makes an inclusive workplace and enables people wherever appropriate, to be able to transition to open employment. Each individual is unique and not everyone is interested or able to work in an open employment context. For each question though, please reflect on average whether you think your organisation provides the best possible environment for people to succeed and develop.

By completing this self-assessment tool, you consent for your responses to be collected by the research team and aggregated in the analysis process. All information is collected in non-identifiable format and will be anonymised.

1. What organisation do you work for?
2. Please rate your organisation against the following statements.

Structure	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Our organisation provides diverse work opportunities and roles for our employees.							
Our organisation matches work tasks to the particular skills and interests of our employees.							
Our organisation ensures appropriate workloads for support staff.							
Our organisation provides accredited/ training and professional development opportunities for support staff.							
Our organisation provides support staff with debriefing and mentoring.							
Our organisation regularly rotates employees around tasks to build diverse skills.							
Our organisation ensures that each work role has a strong sense of purpose.							

Our organisation provides flexible rosters with respect to hours and days for supported employees.

Our organisation modifies work practices, layout, and provides accessible equipment.

Our organisation provides customised training and development with in-house training and on-the-job learning for supported employees.

Our organisation provides opportunities for certified learning.

Space and Environment	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
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Our organisation provides flexible workspaces: i.e., busy versus calm environments.

Our organisation ensures there is access to healthy food options while at work.

Our organisation ensures that people have the opportunity to be physically active during the workday.

Culture	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
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Our organisation strives to ensure there is a healthy work–life balance.

Our organisation provides tailored emotional and practical support.

Our organisation has a holistic approach to well-being (inclusive of mental, social and physical well-being).

Our organisation is good at retaining highly skilled support staff which have developed strong networks and knowledge of individual employees.

Our organisation is ‘externally facing’, developing opportunities for supported employees to be in community settings.

Our organisation is inclusive of diversity with respect to disability, age, gender, culture, heritage, language, faith, sexual identity, relationship status, and other relevant factors.

Relationships	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Our organisation creates respectful and trusting relationships with supported employees, families and service planners and providers.							
Our organisation identifies opportunities for employment in other organisations through its networks with suppliers, contractors and other employers.							
Our organisation builds capacity of open employers to provide an inclusive workplace environment.							
Finance and Funding	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Our organisation builds its financial sustainability through diverse funding and engagement across a range of industry/business opportunities.							
Industry	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Our organisation provides opportunities to try out, learn and gain experience in different work roles and industry types either inside or outside the organisation through different work trials and work experience.							
Pathways to Employment	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Our organisation has procedures in place for job customisation and workplace adjustment.							
Our organisation works with people to plan employment pathways to match the person's interests, strengths and needs.							
Wherever appropriate our employees have open employment goals.							
Our organisation provides hybrid employment opportunities (i.e., roles shared across supported and open employers).							
Our organisation supports people to access relevant employment services/supports and funding, i.e., NDIS and mainstream services.							

Comments

3. In what area has your organisation most improved in the last 12 months?
4. What do you think your organisation needs to improve on in the next 12 months?
5. Any other comments on strengths and areas needing improvement in your organisation?

Demographic Questions

6. What is your age?
-
- 18–29 years
-
- 30–39 years
-
- 40–49 years
-
- 50–59 years
-
- 60–69 years
-
- 70+ years
-
7. How do you describe your gender?
-
- Man or male
-
- Woman or female
-
- Non-binary
-
- [I/They] use a different term (please specify)
-
- Prefer not to answer
-
8. How many years have you been with your current organisation? _____
9. How many years have you worked in this industry? _____

Appendix B. Full List of Results

Percentage of Responses to the Following Statements (blue represents highest rated items and orange represents lowest rated items).

<i>Structure</i>	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable/Don't Know
Our organisation provides diverse work opportunities and roles for our employees.	29.5	30.8	29.5	7.7	2.6		
Our organisation matches work tasks to the particular skills and interests of our employees.	24.4	34.6	29.5	3.8	7.7		
Our organisation regularly rotates employees around tasks to build diverse skills.	20.5	25.6	33.3	7.7	10.3	2.6	
Our organisation ensures that each work role has a strong sense of purpose.	34.6	29.5	21.8	9.0	3.8	1.3	

Our organisation provides flexible rosters with respect to hours and days for supported employees.	50.0	30.8	16.7	1.3	1.3		
Our organisation modifies work practices, layout, and provides accessible equipment.	39.7	42.3	15.4	1.3	1.3		
Our organisation provides customised training and development with in-house training staff and on-the-job learning.	28.2	33.3	28.2	6.4	2.6	1.3	
Our organisation provides opportunities for certified learning.	15.4	26.9	25.6	14.1	5.1	9.0	3.8
Space and Environment							
Our organisation provides flexible workspaces: i.e., busy versus calm environments.	18.6	34.3	31.4	7.1	5.7	2.9	
Our organisation ensures there is access to healthy food options while at work.	8.6	22.9	28.6	18.6	8.6	5.7	7.1
Our organisation ensures that people have the opportunity to be physically active during the workday.	24.3	37.1	18.6	12.9	4.3	1.4	1.4
Culture							
Our organisation strives to ensure there is a healthy work–life balance.	28.2	29.6	33.8	5.6	2.8		
Our organisation provides tailored emotional and practical support.	22.5	40.8	25.4	4.2	4.2	1.4	1.4
Our organisation has a holistic approach to well-being (inclusive of mental, social and physical well-being).	23.9	39.4	19.7	8.5	5.6	1.4	1.4

Our organisation is good at retaining highly skilled support staff which have developed strong networks and knowledge of individual employees.	21.1	23.9	29.6	7.0	9.9	8.5	
Our organisation is 'externally facing', developing opportunities for supported employees to be in community settings.	19.7	33.8	23.9	9.9	7.0	4.2	1.4
Relationships							
Our organisation creates respectful and trusting relationships with supported employees, families and service planners and providers.	42.3	46.5	9.9	1.4			
Our organisation identifies opportunities for employment in other organisations through its networks with suppliers, contractors and other employers.	28.2	25.4	25.4	9.9	7.0	1.4	2.8
Our organisation builds capacity of open employers to provide an inclusive workplace environment.	19.7	33.8	19.7	8.5	8.5	2.8	7.0
Finance and Funding							
Our organisation builds its financial sustainability through diverse funding and engagement across a range of industry/business opportunities.	14.3	35.7	22.9	5.7	7.1	4.3	10.0
Industry							
Our organisation provides opportunities to try out, learn and gain experience in different work roles and industry types either inside or outside the organisation through different work trials and work experience.	20.0	22.9	27.1	7.1	14.3	4.3	4.3

Pathways to Employment							
Our organisation has procedures in place for job customisation and workplace adjustment.	18.3	40.8	22.5	12.7	1.4	1.4	2.8
Our organisation works with people to plan employment pathways to match the person’s interests, strengths and needs.	28.6	32.9	24.3	7.1	2.9	2.9	1.4
Wherever appropriate our employees have open employment goals.	21.4	38.6	32.9	1.4	1.4	2.9	1.4
Our organisation provides hybrid employment opportunities (i.e., roles shared across supported and open employers).	20.0	18.6	28.6	11.4	8.6	7.1	5.8
Our organisation supports people to access relevant employment services/supports and funding, i.e., NDIS and mainstream services.	30.0	35.7	21.4	4.3	2.9		5.7

Appendix C. Percentage of Strongly Agree or Agree Responses to the Following Statements

<i>Structure</i>	Percentage All Organisations Combined	Highest Organisation Percentage	Lowest Organisation Percentage
Our organisation provides diverse work opportunities and roles for our employees.	60.3	100.0	41.2
Our organisation matches work tasks to the particular skills and interests of our employees.	59.0	100.0	27.3
Our organisation regularly rotates employees around tasks to build diverse skills.	46.2	80.0	18.2
Our organisation ensures that each work role has a strong sense of purpose.	64.1	100.0	27.3
Our organisation provides flexible rosters with respect to hours and days for supported employees.	80.8	100.0	57.1
Our organisation modifies work practices, layout, and provides accessible equipment.	82.1	100.0	54.5

Our organisation provides customised training and development with in-house training staff and on-the-job learning.	61.5	80.0	14.3
Our organisation provides opportunities for certified learning.	44.0	75.0	0.0
<i>Space and Environment</i>			
Our organisation provides flexible workspaces: i.e., busy versus calm environments.	52.9	100.0	20.0
Our organisation ensures there is access to healthy food options while at work.	33.8	80.0	0.0
Our organisation ensures that people have the opportunity to be physically active during the workday.	62.3	80.0	21.4
<i>Culture</i>			
Our organisation strives to ensure there is a healthy work–life balance.	57.7	100.0	20.0
Our organisation provides tailored emotional and practical support.	63.4	87.5	20.0
Our organisation has a holistic approach to well-being (inclusive of mental, social and physical well-being).	64.3	88.9	20.0
Our organisation is good at retaining highly skilled support staff which have developed strong networks and knowledge of individual employees.	45.1	80.0	10.0
Our organisation is ‘externally facing’, developing opportunities for supported employees to be in community settings.	53.5	100.0	7.1
<i>Relationships</i>			
Our organisation creates respectful and trusting relationships with supported employees, families and service planners and providers.	88.7	100.0	50.0
Our organisation identifies opportunities for employment in other organisations through its networks with suppliers, contractors and other employers.	53.5	100.0	14.3
Our organisation builds capacity of open employers to provide an inclusive workplace environment.	53.5	100.0	14.3
<i>Finance and Funding</i>			
Our organisation builds its financial sustainability through diverse funding and engagement across a range of industry/business opportunities.	50.0	90.9	21.4
<i>Industry</i>			
Our organisation provides opportunities to try out, learn and gain experience in different work roles and industry types either inside or outside the organisation through different work trials and work experience.	42.9	81.8	7.1
<i>Pathways to Employment</i>			
Our organisation has procedures in place for job customisation and workplace adjustment.	59.2	100.0	30.0
Our organisation works with people to plan employment pathways to match the person’s interests, strengths and needs.	61.4	100.0	28.6

Wherever appropriate our employees have open employment goals.	60.0	100.0	28.6
Our organisation provides hybrid employment opportunities (i.e., roles shared across supported and open employers.	39.7	71.4	0.0
Our organisation supports people to access relevant employment services/supports and funding, i.e., NDIS and mainstream services.	65.7	100.0	35.7

Appendix D. Interview Script

Review organisations survey results and verify/discuss results, including:

1. Overall strengths of the organisation
2. Areas for improvement
3. Positive results from the survey and reasons for this
4. Items from the survey that were rated lower and reasons for this
5. Does the WISE-survey help as a quality assessment in comparison to these other methods? How/Why?
6. Any further comments

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