



Submission to the *Shaping the Future of Employment Services Discussion Paper*

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Why I Am Making This Submission

Over the years, I have considered responding to several Employment Services reform consultations, as many raised issues similar to those discussed in this submission. However, I chose not to, as I was conscious that my work in Employer Engagement Capability Development could create the perception that my views were motivated by commercial interests rather than a genuine desire to contribute to sector reform.

What prompted me to make this submission is a recurring observation: while successive reform discussions have focused heavily on service models, funding arrangements, compliance settings and participant support, the capability of the frontline workforce responsible for delivering those reforms has often received comparatively little attention.

In my view, this represents one of the most significant opportunities for improving Employment Services. Policies, funding models and service design are all important, but their success ultimately depends on the capability of the practitioners and leaders responsible for engaging employers, supporting job seekers and creating employment opportunities.

It is for this reason that I have chosen to make this submission. My intention is not to advocate for any particular organisation or training provider, but to contribute a perspective that I believe has been underrepresented in previous reform discussions.

Introduction

I welcome the opportunity to provide feedback on the *Shaping the Future of Employment Services* discussion paper.

This submission draws on extensive experience working alongside Employment Services providers across Australia, together with evidence gathered through practitioner capability development programs delivered across the sector.

The submission is structured as follows:

1. **Background and experience in Employment Services** – outlining my experience working in the sector and the recurring workforce capability challenges I have observed throughout my career.
2. **Emerging and consistent workforce capability gaps** – highlighting the common Employer Engagement capability gaps that have persisted across providers, contracts and regions over many years.
3. **Response to the Shaping the Future of Employment Services Discussion Paper** – providing observations and recommendations in the context of the capability gaps identified and the proposed reform agenda.
4. **Evidence from Employment Practitioner Learning Needs Surveys**– presenting findings from a representative sample of pre-training surveys completed by Employment Practitioners, and Employer Engagement Specialists across multiple employment service providers.
5. **Recommendations** – outlining practical recommendations to strengthen Employer Engagement capability, leadership capability and workforce development as key enablers of future Employment Services reform.

Background and experience in Employment Services

I began my career on the frontline in Employment Services in Sydney in 2006. Since then, I have worked alongside Employment Services providers across Australia, designing and delivering capability development programs focused on Employer Engagement, Reverse Marketing, business development, sales leadership and job creation.

Over that time, I have trained and coached thousands of frontline practitioners and leaders, including Employment Consultants, Employer Engagement Consultants, Employment Services Managers and senior leaders across Workforce Australia (WFA), Disability Employment Services (DES, now Inclusive Employment Australia (IEA)), Transition to Work (TtW), and related employment programs.

Before establishing **Employment Services Training** in 2013, I worked as an Employment Practitioner and later in Learning and Development within the Employment Services sector.

During this time, four recurring themes consistently emerged:

1. **Many Employment Practitioners avoided employer engagement.** This was rarely due to a lack of commitment; rather, many lacked the confidence and

capability to proactively engage employers and create employment opportunities.

2. **Many practitioners were expected to perform Employer Engagement without structured capability development.** They were often expected to "wing it", despite Employer Engagement requiring specialist skills in business development, consultative communication, relationship building and influencing. This was not limited to Employment Consultants, even Employer Engagement Specialists were often expected to learn these skills on the job without any structured training.
3. **Performance pressure was significant.** In one organisation where I worked, approximately 50% of the frontline team was placed on Performance Improvement Plans (PIPs) because they were unable to achieve their job placement targets.
4. **High staff turnover was common.** Many organisations I worked for experienced significant staff turnover, often driven by the pressures associated with Employer Engagement and meeting job placement KPIs.

My own experience was different. Having come from a business development background and received intensive sales training in previous roles, I felt confident engaging employers and creating employment opportunities. It quickly became apparent that Employer Engagement was not simply a personal strength, it was a specialised capability that could be taught, developed and coached.

I was often the go-to person when it came to Employer Engagement best practices. It became clear to me that while Employer Engagement was one of the most important components of the role, it was also one of the least intentionally developed.

With this in mind, I established **Employment Services Training** in November 2013 (originally registered under Limitless Minds and now operating under The Selling Academy). Its purpose was simple: to equip Employment Practitioners with the Employer Engagement capability needed to create meaningful employment opportunities for job seekers.

At the time, my business mentor advised me that I would be more profitable if I focused on job seeker training, as providers could more readily access funding through the Employment Fund to support participant capability development. However, I deliberately chose a different path. I believed that unless Employment Practitioners were equipped with the skills, confidence and capability to engage employers effectively, job seeker outcomes would continue to be limited, particularly for those facing higher barriers to employment.

Now, almost 20 years after beginning my career in Employment Services, the same themes continue to emerge. Many practitioners still lack the confidence, skills and structured capability development needed to engage employers effectively, and as a result, job seekers, particularly those facing higher barriers, often struggle to secure employment despite being work-ready. These long-standing capability gaps also contribute to persistent patterns across the sector, including high numbers of Performance Improvement Plans (PIPs) and ongoing staff turnover, which have remained remarkably consistent despite significant changes to the service model over the past two decades.

Response to the Shaping the Future of Employment Services Discussion Paper

Drawing on the experiences outlined above, I would like to offer the following observations and recommendations in response to the discussion paper.

Firstly, I commend the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, the Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, together with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, for their leadership in developing the *Shaping the Future of Employment Services* discussion paper and undertaking this important reform process.

The discussion paper demonstrates a genuine commitment to creating a more personalised, responsive and effective employment services system. In particular, I strongly support the increased focus on reducing unnecessary compliance, delivering more tailored support to job seekers, recognising the importance of employer engagement, and acknowledging that workforce capability is an important enabler of better employment outcomes.

These reforms represent a significant opportunity to strengthen the sector and improve outcomes for job seekers, employers and providers alike.

However, I believe one area deserves greater prominence.

While workforce capability is acknowledged throughout the discussion paper, there is limited focus on the specific capability required for practitioners to effectively engage employers and create employment opportunities. Given its direct impact on employment outcomes, Employer Engagement capability should be explicitly recognised as a core expectation for frontline staff.

The discussion paper also acknowledges that the current service does not consistently meet employer needs. In my experience, one contributing factor is that many Employment Practitioners have never received structured capability development in employer engagement, despite being expected to undertake what is fundamentally a business development and relationship management function.

The discussion paper also states that *"Employer Engagement will be strengthened, as the current service does not consistently meet employer needs."* I strongly support this direction. However, strengthening Employer Engagement requires more than changes to service design. It also requires investment in the capability of the practitioners and leaders responsible for engaging employers every day.

Employer Engagement Is a Specialist Professional Capability

Employer Engagement is not simply another task within the Employment Practitioner role. It is a specialist capability requiring practitioners to identify opportunities, engage employers, understand workforce needs, influence hiring decisions and broker employment outcomes. These responsibilities draw on business development, consultative communication, relationship management and commercial problem-solving skills.

Unlike traditional case management, these capabilities do not typically develop through experience in the human services sector alone. As a result, activities such as initiating employer conversations, building new business relationships, handling objections and creating employment opportunities are often among the most challenging aspects of the role. This should not be viewed as a lack of commitment or motivation, but rather as a capability gap for which access to structured capability development has remained inconsistent across the sector.

This challenge also extends beyond Employment Practitioners to Employer Engagement Specialists, whose primary role is to build employer relationships and create employment opportunities. Across the many Employment Services providers I have worked with over the past decade, I have consistently observed that only around 20-30% of Employer Engagement Specialists consistently achieved their placement targets over sustained periods. In my experience, this was rarely due to a lack of motivation or commitment. More often, it reflected a capability gap in proactively engaging employers with relevance, context and a compelling reason for employers to continue the conversation.

One provider I worked with illustrates this well. They recruited several Employer Engagement Specialists from highly successful retail sales backgrounds. Their previous employers regarded them as top performers, and there was every reason to believe they would excel in Employer Engagement. However, despite one full year in the role, none were able to consistently achieve their placement targets.

The issue was not their ability to build rapport, understand customer needs or close a sale. Those were capabilities they had already demonstrated. The challenge was that their previous roles relied largely on customers entering a retail environment or showroom, where opportunities already existed. Employer Engagement required a fundamentally different capability set: identifying prospective employers, initiating

unsolicited conversations, gaining attention, generating interest, overcoming objections and creating opportunities where none previously existed. These top-of-the-funnel business development capabilities are rarely developed in traditional retail or customer-facing sales roles, yet they are fundamental to successful Employer Engagement.

This example highlights that previous sales success does not automatically translate into effective Employer Engagement. Unlike many customer-facing sales roles, Employer Engagement requires practitioners to create opportunities from scratch through proactive business development rather than responding to existing customer demand.

These observations are particularly relevant to the proposed reforms. The discussion paper rightly places greater emphasis on strengthening Employer Engagement and connections with local labour markets. However, achieving this ambition will require practitioners and leaders with the capability to proactively engage employers and create employment opportunities.

If the future Employment Services system is to deliver stronger Employer Engagement and more sustainable employment outcomes, Employer Engagement capability should be recognised as a core workforce capability and embedded as a central pillar of future reform.

Recognising Existing Capability Development Initiatives

It is important to acknowledge that some Employment Services providers are already investing in Employer Engagement capability through internal learning and development teams, external training providers, coaching and mentoring initiatives. These organisations recognise the importance of equipping practitioners to build employer relationships and create employment opportunities.

However, the level of capability development remains inconsistent across the sector, and access to structured Employer Engagement training varies considerably between providers.

Where training is provided, it is often delivered as a one-off workshop or short intervention. In many cases, practitioners receive training without their leaders receiving the capability development needed to coach, reinforce and embed these behaviours within day-to-day practice. While these initiatives provide value, they are unlikely to produce sustained behavioural change without ongoing leadership coaching, practical application, reinforcement and continuous professional development.

Evidence from Employment Practitioner Learning Needs Analyses

Over the past decade, I have surveyed more than **2,000 Anonymous Employment Practitioners, Employer Engagement Specialists and leaders** from employment service providers across Australia as part of pre-training learning needs analyses conducted prior to Employer Engagement capability programs.

To provide a representative snapshot of these findings, I reviewed a sample of **100 respondents** drawn from multiple providers, contracts and geographical locations. The purpose of this sample was to examine whether consistent themes emerged regarding Employer Engagement capability across the sector.

Despite being collected across different providers, contracts, geographical locations and over several years, the findings were remarkably consistent.

Key Finding 1: Limited Formal Employer Engagement Capability Development

Across the 100 Employment Services practitioners included in the sample:

- 81% reported they had never received formal training in Employer Engagement or Sales.
- Only 19% reported receiving any previous training.

Importantly, even among the 19% who had received previous training, many described it as:

- having occurred many years earlier;
- being brief or introductory in nature;
- being difficult to recall; or
- focusing on basic concepts rather than structured Employer Engagement development.

These findings suggest that structured Employer Engagement capability development has not been consistently available across the sector. While some providers were now investing in capability development, many practitioners reported that they had never undertaken formal Employer Engagement or sales training, despite having worked in Employment Services for several years. This included many practitioners with more than 5 years and in some cases more than 10 years of experience in the sector.

Key Finding 2: Consistent Employer Engagement Capability Gaps

Practitioners who identified lower confidence levels were asked what would help improve their Employer Engagement capability. Their responses revealed remarkably consistent themes relating to confidence, capability, communication and practical application.

Confidence, Knowledge and Employer Engagement Challenges

Capability Gap	Practitioner Responses
Lack of Training	<i>"I need training that will allow me to be more confident when reverse marketing."</i>
Low confidence initiating employer conversations	<i>"More experience and knowledge regarding how to conduct a call with the employer..."</i>
Lack of confidence without conversation frameworks	<i>"Feeling more secure with a well-written script." "Lack of confidence in what I am saying/speaking about."</i>
Fear of rejection	<i>"I'm afraid of rejection." "The idea of calling strangers on the phone makes me uneasy."</i>
Uncertainty about how to start conversations	<i>"Not sure how to approach the employer conversation."</i>
Low confidence approaching employers in person	<i>"How and what to say does not come naturally."</i>
Desire for practical demonstration	<i>"Seeing it done successfully so I can see what it looks like."</i>

Employer Engagement Capability and Skill Gaps

Capability Gap	Practitioner Responses
Reverse marketing methodology	<i>"Unsure on 'how' to do the Reverse Marketing."</i>
Sales and influencing skills	<i>"More selling points to encourage employers to take the incentives on offer."</i>
Objection handling	<i>"Handling knock backs."</i>

Employer Engagement conversations	<i>"How to keep the caller and employer engaged in the conversation."</i>
Structured conversation frameworks	<i>"Need a system that I am comfortable with to ensure I can focus on key points."</i>
Scripts and conversation guides	<i>"If I know a basic script and can go from there I am fine."</i> <i>"I need a spell, what is the most common spell used?"</i>
Understanding employer motivations	<i>"Understand motives of why an employer would use our services."</i>
Asking effective questions	<i>"Knowing what questions to ask."</i>
Getting past the gatekeeper and closing	<i>"Need help passing the gate keepers, closing and marketing."</i>

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that Employment Practitioners were not simply asking for more information. They were consistently identifying the specific capabilities they believed were necessary to engage employers effectively and create employment opportunities.

The recurring themes centred on confidence, communication, business development, consultative selling, conversation frameworks, objection handling, coaching and practical application. These are specialist commercial capabilities that underpin effective employer engagement, yet they are not typically developed through traditional case management or human services experience.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Recognise Employer Engagement Capability Development as a Core Workforce Responsibility

Future reforms should recognise Employer Engagement capability development as a core workforce responsibility rather than an optional learning activity.

Employment providers should be supported and encouraged to establish structured capability development pathways that build Employer Engagement skills throughout a practitioner's employment. This may include comprehensive onboarding programs, practical Employer Engagement training delivered through internal learning teams or external providers, workplace coaching, observation, feedback and ongoing professional development.

Creating employment opportunities requires specialised capabilities that cannot be assumed or developed through experience alone. Recognising Employer Engagement as a core professional competency will help providers build consistent capability, strengthen employer relationships and improve employment outcomes for job seekers.

Recommendation 2: Recognise Employer Engagement Leadership Capability as a Core Workforce Responsibility

Building practitioner capability alone is not sufficient. Leaders play a critical role in embedding Employer Engagement behaviours through coaching, observation, feedback, accountability and ongoing reinforcement.

Throughout my experience coaching leaders across Australia, I have worked with many managers who were highly capable Employer Engagement practitioners themselves. However, leading Employer Engagement across a team requires a different capability than performing the role individually.

Employment providers should be supported and encouraged to develop Employer Engagement leadership capability through structured internal leadership programs or external capability development initiatives. This should equip leaders to coach practitioners, embed Employer Engagement practices, interpret Employer Engagement KPIs, review pipeline activity, create accountability and foster employer-focused team cultures.

Strengthening leadership capability will help ensure Employer Engagement becomes embedded in everyday practice and is sustained well beyond initial training.

Recommendation 3: Consider a Dedicated Employer Engagement Capability Fund

The Employment Services system rightly provides funding to support job seeker capability. Consideration should also be given to establishing a dedicated capability fund that providers can access when they choose to engage external specialist organisations to strengthen Employer Engagement capability.

This funding could support specialist capability development in areas such as employer engagement, business development, job creation, leadership development and capability embedment. Access to external expertise would complement, rather than replace, providers' existing internal learning and development functions.

Many providers have highly capable internal Learning and Development teams responsible for onboarding, compliance, systems training and broader professional development. However, Employer Engagement is a specialist discipline requiring expertise in business development, consultative communication, labour market

engagement, job creation, and employer relationship management. Where providers identify capability gaps in these areas, they should have the option to access external specialist support without diverting resources from frontline service delivery.

Finally, in the interests of transparency, I acknowledge that Employment Services Training operates in this field and, as such, this recommendation could be perceived as benefiting my organisation. I believe it is important to acknowledge this openly.

However, this recommendation is not about advocating for any one training provider. Besides **Employment Services Training**, Australia has a number of experienced organisations that deliver high-quality Employer Engagement and workforce capability development across the sector, including **GenU**, **Prospert**, **Bounce Global**, and industry peak bodies such as **NESA**, **IEP** and **DEA**. My recommendation is simply that providers have greater access to structured Employer Engagement capability development with an external specialist, regardless of which suitably qualified organisation delivers it.

Recommendation 4: Recognise workforce stability as a key enabler of employment outcomes

The success of employment services reform depends not only on policy design, or workforce capability building, but also on the stability and capability of the workforce delivering it.

High levels of frontline staff turnover disrupt relationships with job seekers and employers, reduce service continuity, increase recruitment and training costs, and make it difficult for providers to embed consistent practices and achieve sustainable employment outcomes.

This issue also affects the return on investment in capability development. Providers may invest significant resources in developing Employer Engagement capability through structured training, coaching and professional development. However, where workforce turnover remains high, those investments are often lost before new knowledge and behaviours can be embedded into everyday practice.

Throughout my work with Employment Services providers, I have observed Employer Engagement capability initiatives that showed strong early momentum but ultimately failed to deliver sustained organisational change because of high staff turnover. For example, one provider that invested heavily in Employer Engagement capability development lost approximately 35% of its Employment Practitioners within a three-month period, making it extremely difficult to embed consistent Employer Engagement practices despite a significant investment in training, coaching and capability development.

Consideration should therefore be given to incorporating workforce stability into future quality and performance frameworks. This could include monitoring workforce turnover, retention, onboarding and capability development as indicators of a provider's capacity to deliver high-quality, consistent services.

By recognising workforce stability as an important performance measure, the Employment Services system would encourage providers to invest not only in employment outcomes, but also in building and retaining a capable, confident and experienced workforce. Doing so would help ensure that investments in capability development translate into sustained practice improvement and better long-term outcomes for both job seekers and employers.

Implementation Pathway

As the Employment Services reforms are implemented, consideration could be given to implementing Employer Engagement capability development through a staged approach that complements existing workforce capability initiatives and supports a more personalised, responsive and employer-focused employment services system.

Stage 1: Recognise Employer Engagement as a Core Workforce Capability

Explicitly recognise employer engagement, reverse marketing and employer relationship management as core professional capabilities within future Employment Services. This should be supported by clear capability expectations for frontline practitioners and leaders, ensuring Employer Engagement is understood as a specialised discipline rather than an ad-hoc activity.

Stage 2: Invest in Practitioner and Leadership Capability

Provide dedicated funding or capability support that enables providers to develop both frontline practitioners and leaders through structured Employer Engagement capability development, including training, coaching and ongoing embedment. This investment should recognise the complementary roles of practitioners and leaders, ensuring practitioners develop the capability to engage employers effectively while leaders have the capability to coach, reinforce and sustain Employer Engagement behaviours over time.

Stage 3: Embed Capability into Everyday Practice

Support providers to move beyond one-off training by encouraging coaching, observation, practical application, peer learning and continuous capability development. Embedding Employer Engagement into day-to-day practice ensures capability uplift translates into consistent behaviours, stronger employer relationships and improved employment outcomes.

Stage 4: Monitor Capability and Workforce Sustainability

Incorporate workforce capability and workforce stability into broader quality and performance discussions. Recognising practitioner capability, leadership capability and workforce retention as key enablers of sustainable employment outcomes will encourage providers to invest in building and maintaining a confident, capable and stable workforce.

Conclusion

The proposed reforms present an important opportunity to reshape Employment Services in Australia.

I strongly support the overall direction of the discussion paper and commend the Government for placing greater emphasis on personalised support, reducing unnecessary compliance and strengthening employer engagement.

My recommendation is that workforce capability, particularly Employer Engagement capability, be recognised as a foundational enabler of these reforms.

For many years, the sector has rightly invested in improving job seeker capability. I believe the next evolution of Employment Services is to place equal importance on the capability of the practitioners responsible for supporting those job seekers facing significant or complex barriers to work, including long-term unemployed individuals, First Nations people, people with disability, and mature-aged job seekers.

Ultimately, employment outcomes are not achieved through policy alone. They are achieved through capable practitioners who possess the confidence, skills and support to build employer relationships, create opportunities and connect people with sustainable employment.