

**KEY SUCCESS FACTORS  
IN PLACING AND SUPPORTING  
NEW APPRENTICES WITH DISABILITIES  
THROUGH GROUP TRAINING:  
FINDINGS OF A NATIONAL STUDY**

**by**

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# NOTES ON AUSTRALIAN TERMINOLOGY

## **New Apprentice**

In Australia, the term New Apprentice refers to structured work-based training courses that range from one to four years full-time and lead to a nationally recognised certificate-level qualification. New Apprenticeships include three or four year apprenticeships in traditional trades and one or two year traineeships that may or may not lead onto an apprenticeship.

## **Group Training (Organisations)**

Group Training Organisations (GTO) re funded by government to employ New Apprentices and then place them with host employers who would not be able to take them on for the full term of the New Apprenticeship or be unable to provide all aspects of the required training. Approximately one in eight New Apprentices in Australia are indentured by Group Training Organisations.

## **Registered Training (Organisations)**

Registered Training Organisations (RTO) is funded by government to plan, deliver and assess the training element of a New Apprenticeship. Public colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) provide some 90% of all New Apprenticeship related training, with the remainder being provider by private RTOs.

## FOREWORD

This research report draws from the experiences of a number of group training organisations who are making a difference for people with a disability. Nearly 23 per cent of Australia's apprentices and trainees with a disability are employed through group training arrangements, compared with 12 per cent of the total number of apprentices and trainees – a proud record for group training organisations.

*Key Success Factors In Placing And Supporting New Apprentices with Disabilities: Findings of a National Study* provides examples of best practice which alone, or in combination, contribute to achieving successful outcomes for New Apprentices with a disability.

This report has been produced as a result of the 2000 – 2005 blueprint for implementing the national strategy for people with a disability in vocational education and training, *Bridging Pathways*. In developing the blueprint, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), and the taskforce that developed the blueprint, recognised that group training organisations played a key role in providing training and employment opportunities for people with a disability.

The report presents a range of practical ideas to assist group training organisations to establish collaborative partnerships, in particular with disability employment agencies, to help create more vocational education and training opportunities for people with a disability.

The organisations showcased in this report are actively putting these ideas into practice, as well as forming strong relationships with enterprises and training providers. The best practice examples in the guide were selected from the 23 group training organisations who generously gave their time to complete surveys, and participate in in-depth interviews. One of the key messages that has emerged from this search for best practice is that group training organisations and disability employment agencies complement each other in recruiting, placing and supporting New Apprentices with a disability.

We hope that these ideas and success stories will inspire others to use this learning and follow the example of these innovative group training organisations and develop their own partnerships for success.

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# KEY SUCCESS FACTORS IN PLACING AND SUPPORTING NEW APPRENTICES WITH DISABILITIES THROUGH GROUP TRAINING

## INTRODUCTION

In 1996, 9.7% of the general working age population participated in vocational education and training. Whilst 16% of the working age population had a disability (ABS, 1998), only 1.7% participated in training in that year (NCVER, 1996).

By 1998, 11% of the general working age population was participating in vocational education and training. However, participation rates for working age people with disabilities continued to lag well behind, with just 2.4% participating in training in 1998 (NCVER, 1999).

The 'Achieving Equitable Outcomes' report, published by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA, 1998) stated that:

*'People with a disability more often enrol in educational preparation, basic employment and basic employment skills programs. They are poorly represented in higher-level award courses and contracts of training.'*

The Australian National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training (1998-2003), 'A Bridge to the Future', has as one of its five objectives '*achieving equitable outcomes in vocational education and training*'.

In 2000 ANTA published 'Bridging Pathways: A Blueprint for the National Plan of Action for Increasing Opportunities for People with a Disability in Vocational Education and Training'. This blueprint was subsequently endorsed by the ANTA Ministerial Council.

Bridging Pathways states that:

- There is a short-fall group of more than 178,000 students with a disability who are needed to match their participation rate in VET with the general population,
- People with disabilities who do participate in vocational education and training are not experiencing the same training outcomes or recording the same progress or satisfaction as other students,

- VET students with disabilities are less likely to be enrolled in higher-level courses (Certificate III and above) than other students,
- VET students with disabilities are twice as likely to be enrolled in multi-field programs (pre-employment, pre-vocational, language and literacy) than other students,
- Participation of people with disabilities in apprenticeships and traineeships is significantly lower than other students,
- The module pass rate of people with disabilities is lower than other students.

Bridging Pathways has established four banner goals to achieve its vision of creating a vocational education and training system that leads world's best practice in achieving equitable outcomes for people with disabilities:

#### GOAL 1: OPENING THE DOOR

*Increasing access to vocational education and training for people with a disability.*

#### GOAL 2: IMPROVING THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

*Improving successful participation and attainment in all fields of study and levels of vocational education and training.*

#### GOAL 3: ACHIEVING EMPLOYMENT & LIFELONG LEARNING OUTCOMES

*Achieving outcomes in employment and lifelong learning to allow people with a disability to make a greater contribution to the economic and social life of the community.*

#### GOAL 4: CREATING AN ACCOUNTABLE SYSTEM

*Creating an accountable system that provides equitable outcomes for people with a disability.*

Twenty strategies have been developed to achieve these goals. A number of these strategies are particularly relevant to the group training sector:

- Involve Industry Training Advisory Boards and other industry groups in improving the training and employment opportunities of students with a disability.

- Improve pathways for people with disabilities into New Apprenticeships through collaboration between Group Training Organisations, employers and disability employment assistance services.
- Equip training delivery staff with skills that assist the inclusion of people with disabilities.
- Strengthen the access and equity performance of Registered Training organisations in relation to opportunities provided for people with disabilities.
- Build competencies in inclusive workforce practices into relevant vocational education and training programs.
- Undertake marketing with employers about the value of investment in graduates who have a disability and the value of training employees who have a disability.

The Annual National Report of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA, 2000, Vol 1) reports a fivefold increase in New Apprentices with disabilities between 1995 and 2000. Over the same period the total number of New Apprentices doubled (NCVER, 2000). Thus, whilst the growth in New Apprentices with disabilities out-stripped that of all New Apprentices, it still equates to only 2% of all New Apprentices - when 16% of the working age population has a disability (ABS, 1998).

According to NCVER (2001),

*'Group training has been a key feature of the landscape in the Australian apprenticeship and traineeship system for more than two decades. Group training's contribution to the growth of Australia's apprenticeship and traineeship system is particularly important for giving opportunities to specific groups in the community, including young people, Indigenous apprentices and trainees, also people with a disability.'*

Group training accounted for 12.2% of all New Apprentices in training as at December 2000, compared to 82.1% employed by the private sector and 5.8% employed by the public sector. However, since 1995, group training's market share has grown faster than the other major employer types over all but one of the past five years (NCVER, 2001).

Group training has been the most successful of all the three major employer groups in indenturing New Apprentices with disabilities, with 3.3% of all current New Apprentices reporting a disability (NCVER, 2001). This represents 22.4% of all New Apprentices with disabilities currently being supported through group training arrangements – in spite of group training only indenturing 12.2% of all New Apprentices.



## METHOD

The starting point in identifying best practice in recruiting, placing and supporting New Apprentices with disabilities was to establish which Group Training Organisations (GTOs) currently had any significant involvement with New Apprentices with disabilities. An e-mail list of all GTOs operating in Australia was assembled during September 2001. Group Training Australia (GTA) was able to supply contact details for all of its approximately 120 member GTOs. The contact details for the remaining 60 GTOs operating in Australia were sources from the State vocational and educational training departments in each State or Territory.

Once the various contact lists were integrated and cross-checked each GTO was e-mailed by the researcher. The e-mail had been preceded by an article in the GTA newsletter (which is sent to all GTA members) which described the research project and encouraged members to become involved. The e-mail that was subsequently sent to all GTOs was deliberately brief: outlining the purpose of the research, introducing the researcher and asking that GTOs notify by return e-mail whether they had any current involvement with New Apprentices with disabilities. The first mail-out generated seven responses. A further 30 e-mails were returned as having incorrect addresses. The researcher telephoned all of the GTOs whose e-mails had been returned as undeliverable and updated the agency contact details.

GTA ran another article in its following newsletter in an effort to improve the response rate from its member GTOs. A second e-mail, with updated addresses, was sent by the researcher in late October, addressed to the CEO of all non-responding GTOs, asking them to simply indicate by return e-mail whether or not they had any current involvement with New Apprentices with disabilities. The second e-mail elicited a further nine responses.

Given the low response rate the researcher contacted the appropriate officer in each State/Territory vocational training and education department to request information on the disability targets that participating GTOs had entered into as part of the joint policy funding arrangements that were in place for equity groups. The GTOs with the highest disability targets were identified for telephone follow-up. The researcher also procured an e-mail list of all disability employment agencies that were members of the national Association for Competitive Employment. The agencies were asked to identify any GTOs in their area that they knew to be involved in supporting New Apprentices with disabilities.

The lists of GTOs involved with New Apprentices with disabilities that had been derived from the various sources described above were then collated, yielding a group of 23 GTOs drawn from every State of Australia. This equates to one in every eight GTOs being surveyed. Whilst it cannot be guaranteed that the GTOs selected through the

methods described above represent the 23 GTOs with the most current involvement with New Apprentices with disabilities, it is unlikely that more than two or three better performing agencies will have been excluded from the sample. Between them the surveyed GTOs were currently supporting 4,293 apprentices (average: 187, range: 25 – 617) and 4,359 trainees (average: 190, range 12 – 440). Amongst these New Apprentices they were supporting 69 apprentices with disabilities (average: 3, range: 0 – 9) and 145 trainees with disabilities (average: 6, range: 0 – 32). Thus, 214 (2.5%) out of 8,652 New Apprentices being supported by the 23 GTOs had identified disabilities. This figure may seem somewhat low, especially given that these GTOs had been determined by various means to represent all, or almost all, of the GTOs most involved with New Apprentices with disabilities.

However, when assembling the list of involved GTOs, the researcher discovered marked variations across States with regard to how disability is defined. In one episode, the State vocational education and training department provided the researcher with its joint policy disability placements database. The database indicated that one GTO was currently supporting 145 people with disabilities in apprenticeships and a further 45 in traineeships. A follow-up telephone call to the GTO revealed that it was supporting no people with disabilities in any New Apprenticeships. The error appeared to emanate from the State department interpreting the ticking of a box on the standard application form (indicating that the New Apprentice might require additional assistance during the course of training) as being a diagnosis of disability. In reality, all of the boxes so ticked related to indigenous New Apprentices who had exhibited some literacy or numeracy deficits. If national research and training organisations such as NCVET and ANTA rely on equity statistics provided by State and Territory training authorities, there is a possibility that the participation rates of people with disabilities in New Apprentices have been over-stated in national statistics.

Once the respondent GTOs had been identified, a structured interview was developed. The structured interview was intended to serve two primary purposes. The first purpose was to determine what GTOs considered to be the key success factors in placing and supporting New Apprentices with disabilities through their work and their studies. The second purpose was to select the six GTOs from amongst the GTOs interviewed that demonstrated the greatest successes or the most innovative approaches in placing and supporting New Apprentices with disabilities – the ‘disability best practice GTOs’.

The structured interview questions that were asked of respondent GTOs were drawn from two primary sources. The first was the literature review undertaken by the researcher to identify best practice models and key success factors in other apprenticeship programs for people with disabilities that were operating around the world. The other source from which material for the structured interviews was drawn was the researcher’s own apprenticeship program for people with disabilities (Lewis, Goff and Tarzia, 2002) through which 28 apprentices with disabilities and five trainees with

disabilities have been placed in 13 different trades in the two years leading up to the current research.

Six GTOs were selected from amongst the 23 GTOs that had participated in the structured interviews. The selection of the six case study GTOs was made on the basis of the extent of their involvement with New Apprentices with disabilities, the different strategies that they had successfully implemented to improve outcomes for people with disabilities, their location and their responses to the structured interview questions.

Each case study involved a two-day site visit to the GTO. Individual interviews were conducted with the CEO, key staff, two or more employers who were hosting New Apprentices with disabilities, two or more New Apprentices with disabilities, a representative from the involved disability employment agency and/or a representative from a Registered Training Organisation. The information gained from the various interviews was amalgamated into a draft case study report, which was sent back to the GTO for amendment and final approval.

## **FINDINGS FROM THE STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

### **Current performance of New Apprentices with disabilities**

The disabilities of the apprentices currently being supported by the surveyed GTOs include: intellectual disability, learning disability, dyslexia, deaf, hearing impairment, blind, vision impairment, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, Asperger's syndrome, amputee, club foot, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, haemophilia, brain tumour, epilepsy, psychiatric, and nerve disorder. The trades that they are currently completing include: chef, carpenter, plumber, pastry cook, auto repairer, electro-technology, heavy vehicle mechanic, diesel mechanic, painter, welder, spare parts interpreter, horticulture, fabrication engineering, plasterer, coach builder, locksmith, boilermaker, mould and core maker, printer, radio mechanic, turf management, auto mechanic, cabinet maker, refrigeration mechanic, spray painter and electrician. Respondent GTOs rated 65% of their current apprentices with disabilities as making good to very good progress.

The disabilities of the trainees currently being supported by the surveyed GTOs are also very broad and include: intellectual disability, learning disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, physical disability, hearing impairment, dyslexia, vision impairment, blind, amputee and respiratory. The traineeships that they are currently completing include: hospitality, retail, rural, textile, small business, information technology, office administration, media, aged care, horticulture, warehousing, child care, building, engineering production, agriculture, business administration, spare parts, aquaculture and sport and recreation. Respondent GTOs rated 85% of their trainees with disabilities as making satisfactory to very good progress.

### **Preparing staff to support New Apprentices with disabilities**

In general, respondent GTOs felt that their current staff were experienced, skilled and mature enough to be able to support New Apprentices with disabilities without the need to provide them with disability-specific training. Those GTOs that did provide training usually sent staff to a general disability awareness course that usually had an emphasis on people with disabilities in the workforce. Some GTOs sent key staff to nationally recognised disability employment training courses. Other GTOs asked the disability employment agency with which they were collaborating to talk to their Field Officers about disability employment issues and strategies. The two GTOs in the respondent group that also operated a disability employment service already had the needed disability expertise within their organisations.

## **Strategic partnerships with disability employment providers**

A significant finding to emerge from the structured interviews is that 20 of the 23 respondent GTOs had developed an ongoing partnership with one or more local disability employment agencies in their area. In all but two cases the disability employment agency was a Competitive Employment Training and Placement (CETP) agency funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. However, four GTOs also worked with their local Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service (CRS). Two GTOs were funded as both a GTO and a disability employment agency.

Fifteen of the GTOs were very satisfied with the partnership they had with their disability employment agency, three were generally satisfied and two expressed some misgivings. This finding is interesting in that there is a general impression abroad that GTOs and disability employment agencies regard each other with some degree of suspicion. Disability employment agencies perceive GTOs as being unwilling and unable to support New Apprentices with disabilities, while GTOs see disability employment agencies as unrealistic in their expectations and unreliable in providing the needed post-placement support. The experiences of GTOs and disability employment agencies that actually work together are very different – suggesting that there is much to be gained for those agencies that are willing to cast suspicions aside and establish co-operative relationships.

Naturally, there were areas where respondent GTOs felt that their respective partnerships with disability employment agencies could be further improved. Several GTOs felt that their disability employment partners could provide more relevant information (notwithstanding privacy limitations) about the likely impact of the disability at work or study and encourage candidates to disclose their disability up front. Some GTOs felt that their disability employment partner could become more informed about group training arrangements (i.e. understanding that the GTO is the legal employer), so as to better understand the complexities of New Apprenticeships and be more realistic about who might be able to successfully complete both the work and study requirements. Two GTOs stated that they would like their disability employment partner to be more forthcoming with their support resources during the post-placement phase.

As for their own contribution to improving the partnership, some GTOs felt that they needed to get to know their disability employment partner and its clients better so as to match them more closely to the most suitable New Apprenticeship with the right host employer. It was also suggested by some GTOs that they could give more information and advice to their disability employment partners about how they operate, upcoming positions and suitable host employers.

## **Strategic partnerships with registered training organisations**

The other key players in the New Apprenticeship system are the registered training organisations (RTOs), of which TAFE is the dominant training provider. The majority of respondent GTOs have semi-formal or formal arrangements in place with TAFE – some also have agreements with private RTOs that they use. Several GTOs had established formal Memoranda of Understanding with the TAFE colleges that they used. Most of the other GTOs have some more informal arrangement, which usually involves the appropriate GTO staff visiting the TAFE on a periodic basis and meeting with course lecturers and/or heads of department. The remaining third of GTOs have a fairly ad hoc relationship with TAFE, making contact when a training issue arises.

Given the highly varied nature of the relationship between GTOs and TAFEs, it is probably not surprising that the GTOs' satisfaction with TAFE is equally varied. Slightly more than half of the GTOs that had some form of relationship with TAFE were satisfied or very satisfied with TAFE. The remainder expressed fairly strong dissatisfaction. It is noteworthy that those GTOs that expressed the greatest satisfaction with the TAFE as a training partner were those that had more formal arrangements in place (i.e. Memoranda of Understanding or regular formal meetings between senior staff of both services). Suggestions for improving the relationship included: TAFE doing far more training and assessing of New Apprentices with disabilities in the workplace; TAFE developing more individualised and customised training approaches for New Apprentices with disabilities; TAFE treating clients more personally; and TAFE assessments being more thorough.

Each TAFE campus has access to a Disability Officer, who may be based at that campus or operate out of another campus. The Disability Officer is employed, among other things, to assist students with disabilities to successfully complete their courses of study. Assistance may include: providing information and advice; monitoring the progress of students with disabilities; liaising with lecturers and department heads; co-ordinating modifications to facilities or equipment; providing additional equipment; and organising a tutor, mentor, interpreter or note-taker.

Given the important co-ordination and case management role that Disability Officers play within the TAFE system, it is surprising that only six respondent GTOs (even after having been expressly questioned on their relationship) had any involvement with a TAFE Disability Officer. This is in spite of the fact that they had New Apprentices with disabilities attending various courses at TAFE. GTOs' reactions to the TAFE Disability Officers that they were involved with were very polarised, with half expressing great satisfaction and half expressing equally great dissatisfaction. Suggestions for improvement in the relationship included: Disability Officers needing to become more knowledgeable about New Apprenticeships and disability services and resources; Disability Officers needing to have a higher status at TAFE so they can confront

department heads and lecturers; and Disability Officers needing to get out and market their services better to GTOs.

Only five GTOs indicated that they used private RTOs with any of their New Apprentices with disabilities. The GTOs expressed general, but not universal, satisfaction with their relationship with private RTOs. In the main, private RTOs were perceived to be a little more flexible and responsive than TAFE, and more willing to train and assess in the workplace.

### **Recruiting people with disabilities**

Respondent GTOs were asked to identify the major hurdles that they had encountered in attracting people with disabilities to their service and what strategies they had found were successful in overcoming these hurdles. The hurdle most commonly confronted by respondent GTOs was that people with disabilities were not coming forward. GTOs felt that this may be due to a lack of self-belief or a perception (especially amongst people with learning disabilities) that New Apprenticeships involved a lot of study. Strategies that have been used by GTOs to overcome these hurdles include: encouraging people with disabilities to raise their sights; matching people with disabilities more carefully to New Apprenticeships; offering more flexible training; persuading assessors to move away from bookwork assessments towards more work-based assessments; and having some early success with a few New Apprentices with disabilities, then publicising those successes through newspaper advertorials or other means.

Another hurdle identified by a number of GTOs was the lack of reliable referral sources. Whether referrals were emanating from Centrelink, schools, Job Network providers, disability associations or disability employment agencies, they tended to be sporadic, unpredictable and often inappropriate. Successful strategies that have been implemented by various GTOs include: establishing and maintaining regular contact with referral sources; being clear about the work and study demands so that referral sources can better screen candidates; and giving feedback on the appropriateness of referred candidates.

Another hurdle confronted by some GTOs was not having anybody with disability expertise on staff and not being in a position to employ a disability or equity co-ordinator. Strategies that have been successfully used to overcome lack of disability expertise within the GTO include arranging for the local disability employment agency to provide training to GTO staff and establishing a disability portfolio which rotates through the field staff every six months.

Surveyed GTOs (who, on average, had nine New Apprentices with disabilities indentured to them) attracted candidates with disabilities from a wide variety of sources. All but three of the 23 GTOs interviewed stated that some proportion of their New Apprentices with disabilities were referred through their local disability employment agency. Usually

there was some agreement that the disability employment agency would pre-screen candidates before referring them to the GTO. Some GTOs with these arrangements in place relied almost exclusively on their local disability employment agency to supply candidates with disabilities.

The next largest source of candidates with disabilities came through general advertisements seeking New Apprentices. A number of GTOs made a point of stating that they were equal opportunity employers in their general advertisements and inviting candidates from equity groups to apply, which they felt resulted in a greater flow of enquiries from people with disabilities.

Some GTOs received referrals from Job Network providers and the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service (CRS). A number of GTOs were very active in schools in their region. This sometimes included running school-based work preparation programs or school-based traineeships, which gave GTOs the opportunity to get to know prospective New Apprentices (with and without disabilities) before making a commitment to indenturing them.

Some people with disabilities were referred by Centrelink. Other people with disabilities simply came in off the street seeking a New Apprenticeship opportunity. The remaining referrals came through host employers or TAFE colleges where a disability had become apparent during the course of a New Apprenticeship, but hadn't been disclosed or observed at commencement.

### **Placing New Apprentices with disabilities with host employers**

The most common hurdle for GTOs placing New Apprentices with disabilities centres around host employers' ignorance and misconceptions about people with disabilities in the workforce - and their subsequent capacity to do the job and complete the New Apprenticeship. Successful strategies that have been employed by GTOs to overcome this hurdle include: having a clear idea of exactly what the job requires and the host employer expects; having a good understanding of the candidate's abilities and the likely impact of the disability on the job; being able to describe other successful placements of people with similar disabilities in similar New Apprenticeships; putting host employers in contact with other host employers who have had a positive experience; offering a work trial before the host employer has to make a commitment; explaining the additional support that can be provided at work by the partner disability employment agency; explaining the specialist support that can be provided by the involved RTO to assist with the academic elements of the New Apprenticeship; and reminding the host employer that the New Apprentice with a disability can be returned to the GTO if it doesn't work out.

Another hurdle that sometimes arises is GTOs meeting many host employers' rising expectations, or even demands, for New Apprentices with increasingly higher levels of

academic accomplishments and pre-entry work skills. A successful strategy employed by at least one GTO has been to meet with all existing host employers over a period of time to explain that New Apprenticeships are training positions (not positions for people who already possess the skills) and that the GTO has a community responsibility to ensure that all people who are capable of successfully completing a New Apprenticeship (including people with disabilities) have the opportunity to do so.

Twelve of the 20 GTOs that have partnerships with local disability employment agencies jointly market their mutual clients to host employers. This usually takes the form a joint visit to the prospective host employer, at which each agency describes the services that it provides to the New Apprentices with a disability and the host employer. Sometimes the GTO and disability employment agency run group presentations on hosting New Apprentices with disabilities to a group of prospective employers. Some GTOs prefer to visit the employer separately, but still describe their own services as well as cross-sell the disability employment agency's services as part of the overall support package. Some disability employment agencies, in their turn, look for opportunities to upgrade current non-VET positions within their own employer network and bring in the GTO to help them market the group training concept to the employer.

When marketing New Apprentices with disabilities, most GTOs prefer to focus on host employers within their existing networks. This is because they already have a service relationship with these employers, they are better able to assess whether the work requirements and the workplace environment will suit the New Apprentice with a disability, and the host employers will better understand that they are taking on a 'total package'. That is, the New Apprentice backed-up by the co-ordinated support of the GTO and the partner disability employment agency.

Implicit in this approach to marketing is the concept of case management. On most occasions that the respondent GTOs market New Apprentices with disabilities, they begin with the individual and seek to match him or her to the right position with the right host employer. Thus, rather than send a host employer a number of candidates, one of whom has a disability (and is thus unlikely to be selected by the host employer), the GTO approaches a prospective host employer with just one candidate. This provides the opportunity to better represent the New Apprentice with a disability, explain the total package, address the employer's concerns and secure the host employer's commitment.

The case management approach to placing New Apprentices with disabilities does not necessarily have to take more time than the traditional placement that might be used with New Apprentices without disabilities. This is partly because the partner disability employment agency is also committing resources to locating prospective employers and promoting the partnership's services. Approximately half the GTOs that were using a case management approach stated that the time taken to secure placements for New

Apprentices with disabilities was about the same as traditional placement activities for New Apprentices without disabilities, while the other half said that it took longer.

### **Post-placement support to New Apprentices with disabilities and host employers**

When asked to identify the major hurdles that the surveyed GTOs had encountered in providing post-placement support to New Apprentices with disabilities, 15 of the 23 respondents were able to identify at least one major hurdle they had encountered. Interestingly, only six of these (just a quarter of all respondents) mentioned any hurdles associated with the New Apprentice's ability to meet the work requirements of the employer or meet the study requirements of the RTO. On each of these six occasions the respective GTO saw developing closer partnerships with the disability employment agency (on the work front) or TAFE (on the study front) as the most successful strategy to overcome these hurdles.

The most frequently occurring hurdles revolved around attitudes of co-workers to having a New Apprentice with a disability in their workplace and the attitudes of some TAFE lecturers and assessors. The most commonly used strategies to overcome negative attitudes was to speak with the host employer and supervisor or, if that failed, move the New Apprentice with a disability to an alternative host employer with a more accepting workforce. The most successful strategy with respect to overcoming the negative attitudes of TAFE staff was to work more closely with them and be available when problems arose.

Another major hurdle, raised by four GTOs, related to increased post-placement support that New Apprentices with disabilities required. Interestingly, this hurdle was reported primarily by the three respondent GTOs that did not have any partnerships with disability employment agencies. Thus, it would appear that the most successful strategy in overcoming the hurdle of increased support requirements is to develop partnerships with other relevant providers that can help to absorb any additional post-placement support demands.

Amongst the GTOs that have partnerships with disability employment agencies, two identified availability and lack of control over the partners' post-placement supports as a major hurdle. For one GTO, this was exacerbated by having a number of different disability employment agencies supporting New Apprentices with disabilities in the one workplace - each with different support strategies. Both stated that the most successful strategy in overcoming this hurdle was to be clear and up-front about the respective roles and responsibilities of the partners. This may include going so far as establishing a formal Memorandum of Understanding between the partners.

Seventeen of the 20 GTOs that had formed partnerships with local disability employment agencies jointly provide post-placement support to their New Apprentices with disabilities

and their host employers. The fact that, under group training arrangements, New Apprentices with disabilities are legally employed by the GTO, but hosted by another employer, creates potential confusion in the workplace when a partner disability employment agency becomes involved. Some disability employment agencies may view the host employer as the primary client, because that is who they have most contact with, it is where the New Apprentice with a disability has to learn to work successfully and the host employer has the power to terminate the placement. Other disability employment agencies may see the GTO as the primary client because they recognise that the GTO is the legal employer, is responsible for implementing the Training Plan and is responsible for placing the New Apprenticeship with an alternative host employer. The disability employment agencies that operate successfully in a group training environment, in partnership with GTOs, acknowledge and respond appropriately to both the GTO and the host employer.

Within a partnership arrangement, the majority of the GTOs are able to follow the same visitation cycle with the same pastoral care focus as would be the case with New Apprentices without disabilities. The remaining GTOs tend to visit sites where New Apprentices with disabilities were placed more frequently, up to twice as often.

The nature and intensity of post-placement support provided by the partner disability employment agency varies considerably. In a few of the partnership agreements the disability employment agency independently determines and delivers its support to the New Apprentice with a disability and host employer. The GTO receives regular updates from the disability employment agency about the New Apprentice's progress.

In the great majority of cases, however, the post-placement support from the GTO and disability employment agency is planned and delivered in a more co-ordinated manner. Not surprisingly, the most integrated and seamless post-placement supports were provided by the two GTOs that also operated as disability employment agencies. Some GTOs and their partner disability employment agencies schedule joint visits to work sites where New Apprentices with disabilities are placed. Some GTOs prefer to use their partner disability employment agencies for initial support, including arranging any workplace or equipment modifications and resolving any other disability-specific issues. Other GTOs with partner disability employment agencies use them on more of an on-call basis – if an issue arises at work the GTO calls in the disability employment agency to provide technical advice and support.

### **How GTOs could improve their services to New Apprentices with disabilities**

The most frequent observation by GTOs as to how all GTOs could improve their services to New Apprentices with disabilities was to develop formal partnerships with disability employment agencies – some GTOs went so far as to suggest that they develop

a Memorandum of Understanding that clearly documented the roles and responsibilities of each party.

It was suggested that services could be improved by having disability expertise amongst the GTO staff – whether this was achieved by employing a person with the relevant expertise, creating a position of equity co-ordinator within the organisation, sending existing staff to disability-specific training or utilising disability consultants.

It was also suggested that GTOs need to lose their fear of marketing and supporting New Apprentices with disabilities. They could do this by learning to treat them as individuals, getting to know their abilities and functional limitations, matching them carefully to the right host employer, and promoting them to host employers as part of a well-co-ordinated support package.

Other suggestions included: spreading New Apprentices with disabilities across the Field Officers' caseloads so that no-one is supporting more than a couple at a time; developing MOUs with key RTOs; and ensuring that New Apprentices with disabilities are adequately monitored and supported.

### **How disability employment agencies can work more effectively with GTOs**

As one respondent GTO put it, partnering with a GTO 'can be an ideal relationship for a disability employment agency because it is a good service fit, there are no financial disincentives [and] each agency can count an outcome ....'

GTOs had many suggestions as to how disability employment agencies could work more effectively with them in supporting New Apprentices with disabilities. At the top of the list was that disability employment agencies need to become much better informed about VET, group training arrangements, the GTO as the legal employer and the varying relationships that can exist between GTOs and host employers.

Disability employment agencies need to be careful to form strategic partnerships with the right GTOs – that is, like-minded, shared philosophies, similar levels of professionalism, and shared commitment to work closely together and maintain contact. However, they should be realistic about what New Apprenticeship their clients can successfully complete. This requires them to be open and honest with their clients, themselves and the GTO about the nature and likely impact of the disability on any New Apprenticeship.

Disability employment agencies should be more planned and purposeful in making their services known to GTOs and making GTOs aware that they have, or can recruit, suitable candidates for New Apprenticeships. They need to keep GTOs informed about who they have on their register looking for New Apprenticeships and the support that they can provide should a placement become available.

Disability employment agencies should be adding value to the placement and post-placement support process by sharing their own employer databases with GTOs, doing more of the employer research groundwork, sourcing prospective new host employers and jointly promoting New Apprentices with disabilities to host employers.

### **Other suggestions for improving outcomes for New Apprentices with disabilities**

The general sentiment expressed by the GTOs that were interviewed as part of this research was that everybody is entitled to a chance, regardless of who they are, and that the GTO culture should and does embrace diversity. The failures of New Apprentices with disabilities to successfully complete their training is often due to lack of communication, poor transition planning from school to work, and inadequate or unavailable information – rather than a lack of skills or commitment on the part of the person.

It was suggested that a government review of support for New Apprentices with disabilities in group training needs to be undertaken and that Group Training Australia should lobby government to fund GTOs to employ specialist disability staff. Government should consider new funding incentives for GTOs and host employers to take on New Apprentices with disabilities. Government could also assist by making the Disabled Apprentices Wage Subsidy scheme more accessible, relaxing eligibility requirements, extending it to some traineeships, reducing paperwork and simplifying re-application procedures.

It was also suggested that the way in which New Apprenticeship Centres administer the DAWS scheme varies markedly and that some NACs are very difficult to deal with in relation to DAWS.

Finally, it was felt that both GTOs and disability organisations could do more to assist New Apprentices with disabilities and that, ultimately, it comes down to the quality of the people in the agencies.

## **FINDINGS FROM THE CASE STUDIES**

### **CASE STUDY 1:**

#### **NORTHERN GROUP TRAINING, LAUNCESTON**

##### **THE GROUP TRAINING ORGANISATION THAT MERGED WITH THE DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AGENCY**

##### **History of Northern Group Training Ltd and AttainABILITY**

Northern Group Training Ltd (NGT) was established in Launceston in 1987. Since 1996 NGT has undergone significant expansion and now has offices in every State capital. NGT sees its primary focus as ‘skilling Australians’ and actively embraces all equity groups, including people with disabilities, in that vision. In 1996 NGT became an ISO 9002 Quality Endorsed Company and a Quality Endorsed Training Organisation (QETO). NGT was the first GTO to pass the Quality Arrangements for Group Training Organisations. NGT also operates a New Apprenticeship Centre.

AttainABILITY’s parent organisation was established in Launceston in 1991 as a Disability Advice and Support Unit (DASU Tasmania). In 1995 DASU Tasmania received funding to operate disability employment services in Launceston, which led to the establishment of AttainABILITY. Together, DASU Tasmania and AttainABILITY saw their purpose as providing people with disabilities with vocational skills and subsequent employment opportunities. In 1998 the federal government introduced significant changes to the training and employment sectors that saw, among other things, the establishment of the Job Network, the corporatisation of the Commonwealth Employment Services, the defunding of DASUs and the cashing out of all labour market programs. Left only with its recently acquired disability employment funding, which enabled it to retain only five staff, AttainABILITY engaged the services of a management consultant to undertake a future viability review and make recommendations. The primary recommendation was that AttainABILITY needed to merge with a larger organisation in the VET or disability employment sector to ensure the survival of its remaining program.

##### **The lead-up to the merger**

NGT and AttainABILITY had had some involvement with each other, mainly via several referrals of people with disabilities by AttainABILITY to NGT. The CEO of NGT had also played the role of an employer in some mock interviews that AttainABILITY had set up for job seekers with disabilities in its pre-vocational training program.

From AttainABILITY's perspective NGT was an attractive merger prospect because it appeared to share a similar social purpose (skilling Australians through training and employment), was committed to including people with disabilities within its group training arrangements, had a local presence (head office in Launceston), offered financial security (with a then complement of 40 staff) and was prepared to offer employment contracts to all the existing staff of AttainABILITY. Thus, an approach was made by AttainABILITY to NGT to consider a merger of the two organisations.

From NGT's perspective, management recognised that it could and should be doing more to include people with disabilities (along with other equity groups) in its services, that it also was vulnerable to funding changes if it did not widen its scope and expand its services, and that a merger with AttainABILITY offered ready access to disability expertise, disability employment specific growth funding and a pool of potential New Apprentices with disabilities.

### **Reactions of the respective Boards to the merger**

The merger proposal was strongly promoted by both CEOs and accepted by both Boards – once some of the business, legal and industrial implications had been properly investigated. The outcome of the subsequent merger was that two AttainABILITY Board members joined the Board of NGT, the former manager of AttainABILITY became the Co-ordinator, Access and Equity (albeit with a predominant focus on the disability equity group) within NGT, and the staff of AttainABILITY resigned from their CETSS Award positions within AttainABILITY and were re-employed (including full transfer of all entitlements) by NGT under its own CETSS Award enterprise agreement.

### **Reactions of staff to the merger**

Perhaps surprisingly, the most challenging aspect of the merger was assimilating the values and cultures of the two organisations. It had been assumed by both organisations that they shared a very similar values base and social purpose (which is why they entertained a merger in the first place). In reality there were as many differences as there were similarities. The staff of the two agencies came from very different backgrounds. Most of the NGT staff had trade backgrounds and strong affiliations with industry and commerce. Most of the AttainABILITY staff had tertiary qualifications in social sciences, teaching or nursing and had strong affiliations with the human services sector.

The view of some of the NGT management and staff was that AttainABILITY had a predominant welfare focus, was non-commercial in its orientation, did not use its funding effectively or efficiently, was too client-driven, had unrealistic expectations, and over-serviced many of its clients. Some NGT staff were also fearful that the AttainABILITY staff would be competing with them for placements with same host employers and would be able to offer significant additional financial inducements. In their turn, the view

of some of the AttainABILITY management and staff was that NGT was too placement-driven, had a 'best person for the job' mentality that would work against people with disabilities, didn't provide adequate post-placement support for New Apprentices, and didn't go out into the service sector or wider community to actively recruit candidates from equity groups. Whether or not these perceptions were based in reality, they significantly hampered the early merger efforts.

### **Integrating the two services**

It took at least three years for the two previously independent services to begin to properly integrate within NGT – indeed the process of integration continues today. The improved integration of the two services was probably assisted by the fact that all of the AttainABILITY staff, with the exception of the manager, resigned from the merged organisation within 18 months of merging. It was also assisted by the fact that New Apprentices with disabilities that were progressively placed post-merger were successfully completing various traineeships (including office administration, retail, and horticulture) or progressing well through their apprenticeships (including diesel mechanic and decorator/painter).

Some four years after the merger NGT is facing a new challenge – one that had to be successfully negotiated before it could be said that the two original services had fully integrated within NGT. The manager of the pre-merger AttainABILITY, who initiated the merger initiative and became the Co-ordinator Access and Equity within NGT, resigned at the end of 2001 to move interstate. The new Co-ordinator Access and Equity is a senior staff member who has come up through group training side of NGT. He admits that he was once as sceptical as the other Field Officers from the original group training arm of NGT, but has been proved wrong by a succession of successful outcomes for New Apprentices with disabilities. He has also become increasingly aware that host employers are progressively seeking the person who will best fit their company rather than simply the most technically proficient apprentice. Combined with NGT's group training expertise, the technical and training support of NGT's Access and Equity unit and the additional financial subsidies that a disability employment service can offer, this provides NGT with increasing opportunities to successfully recruit, place and support New Apprentices with disabilities. While the first few years of the merger have witnessed only modest increases in the proportion of New Apprentices with disabilities placed, there is a growing optimism across the whole of the organisation that the placement rate will increase significantly from this point forward.

### **Employers' ratings of New Apprentices with disabilities and NGT**

The real test of whether the merger has benefited both the employers and New Apprentices with disabilities is their response to the merged services. The employers who were interviewed during the case study had all used NGT's services prior to taking

on a New Apprentice with a disability. Their confidence in the services and professionalism of NGT was a critical factor in their decision to take on a New Apprentice with a disability. The opportunity to have the candidate on an unpaid work trial for one to two weeks gave them a chance to check out their reliability, skill level, work practices and work attitude before making a firm commitment. Some employers said they were strongly influenced by the offer of on-the-job support and back-up from the Access and Equity unit of NGT to ensure that the employee met the required skill and productivity levels. Other employers said that the financial subsidy package (comprising the Disabled Apprentices Wage Subsidy through DETYA and/or wage subsidies through the disability employment agency) were important inducements.

All but one employer expressed satisfaction with the additional support provided through the Access and Equity unit of NGT. The other employer would have appreciated a greater frequency of contact and support. Whilst none of the employers rated their New Apprentice with a disability as the most skilful they had working with them, and while some were seen to require a little more supervision and structure, all of the employers had observed other counterbalancing attributes. These included high quality of workmanship, attention to detail, reliability, dependability and good work attitude. All employers were committed to keeping their New Apprentices with disabilities on the payroll after they completed their training. However, this was dependent on future contracts which were secured and how well the New Apprentices' skills fitted those future contracts. All employers said they would consider taking on another New Apprentice with a disability through NGT in the future.

### **New Apprentices with disabilities ratings of themselves and NGT**

Both the New Apprentices with disabilities who were interviewed during the case study acknowledged the significant effort that staff in the NGT Access and Equity unit had put into finding an appropriate traineeship and apprenticeship respectively with a suitable employer. Both reported that they were extremely happy with their employer and felt that they were progressing well – an observation supported by both NGT staff and their employers. One had developed a close relationship with his lecturer, who provided him with some one-to-one tutoring outside regular class hours to ensure he stayed up with the theoretical elements of his diesel mechanic apprenticeship. The other had received additional funding from NGT (through its disability employment funding) to undertake additional computer studies at TAFE to maintain satisfactory progress in his Information Technology traineeship.

### **Improvements that could have been made to the merger process**

Management of NGT identified a number of mistakes that, with the benefit of hindsight, could have been avoided. NGT could have offered the staff of AttainABILITY an option of not transferring and taking a redundancy package instead. AttainABILITY and NGT

could have retained the consultant, who originally advised AttainABILITY to find a suitable organisation to merge with, to assist with co-ordinating the subsequent merger. More time could have been spent in involving the NGT staff in the merger discussions, explaining the financial and service implications and seeking their feedback and support. Specific disability awareness training, including communicating with people with disabilities, could have been provided to all NGT staff (ideally by the AttainABILITY staff) prior to the merger. The issue of AttainABILITY bringing its own funding from another federal government department, and thus paying for itself within NGT, could have been better explained at the outset to NGT staff - who thought that Access and Equity would be a drain on existing resources.

If the above initiatives had been built into the merger process, the management estimates that the four-year time-line that it has taken to properly integrate the two services could have been halved.

### **Benefits that have flowed to both agencies from the merger**

Management and key staff were quick to identify many positive outcomes from the merger – many of which have become apparent in more recent times. From a reporting standpoint, a New Apprenticeship placement effected by the Access and Equity can also be counted as a placement statistic by NGT. As a result of growing involvement with people with disabilities, all staff within NGT are more knowledgeable and confident in working with New Apprentices with disabilities. Consequently, NGT staff are able to sell the Access and Equity unit's comprehensive on-the-job support services to host employers as a value-adding service in the event of unforeseen difficulties arising post-placement. The Access and Equity unit has brought significant new funding to NGT through the transfer of its disability employment funding and its recent success in securing Targeted Initiatives Program (TIP) growth funding for 90 additional places for equity groups (a major proportion of which will be New Apprentices with disabilities) over the next two years. The Access and Equity unit has orchestrated greater contact between Job Network providers of Intensive Assistance services and NGT, which has led to improved equity outcomes for both services and increased equity group referrals from Job Network providers. The Access and Equity unit is providing 'help-desk' support to other NGT offices in other parts of Tasmania and to other disability employment agencies seeking to work co-operatively with NGT in placing and supporting New Apprentices with disabilities. The number of New Apprentices with disabilities being placed and supported by NGT has grown steadily since the merger, with signs of increased growth in more recent times. The number of people with disabilities being supported under disability employment agency funding arrangements has also grown significantly since the merger.

### **Key success factors**

A strategic merger between a group training organisation and a disability employment agency is a very innovative, practical and financially sound way of improving New Apprenticeship outcomes for people with disabilities. The GTO experiences an instant injection of disability expertise and disability clientele that ensures people with disabilities become an integral part of its future services. The disability employment agency gains immediate access to group training arrangements, which opens up greater career opportunities for people with disabilities in semi-skilled and skilled occupations. The merged entity is able to tap into a far wider array of financial subsidies and grants due to the fact that the discrete services were funded by different government departments.

The key success factors are that the CEOs of two separate organisations shared a similar vision for people with disabilities in New Apprenticeships, both were willing to combine their resources to see that vision become a reality and both were prepared to put the time and effort into forging a single organisation.

Given the increasing funding pressures being experienced in both the group training and disability employment sectors, strategic cross-sector mergers (especially in rural areas) may offer the best opportunity to for services remain financially stable, locally managed and widely accessible.

## **CASE STUDY 2:**

### **INNER EASTERN GROUP TRAINING, MELBOURNE**

#### **THE GROUP TRAINING ORGANISATION THAT ESTABLISHED PUBLIC SECTOR TRAINEESHIPS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

##### **History of Inner Eastern Group Training**

Inner Eastern Group Training Inc. (IEGT) was established in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne in 1986. Since then IEGT has become a Registered Training Organisation with quality certification (ISO 9002). IEGT operates from offices in Box Hill and the Melbourne CBD and offers traineeships in Retail, Hospitality, Finance, Office Administration, Information Technology and Telecommunications (call centres). The training can be delivered at one of IEGT's training centres or in the workplace.

IEGT has had a long-standing commitment to diversity amongst its staff and the New Apprentices that it employs. IEGT draws on a catchment of some 40 schools in the eastern suburbs in which it runs various training programs for students in years 8-10 and school-based traineeships for years 11-12. This enables IEGT to get to know prospective New Apprentices from various equity groups (including students with disabilities) well before they leave the school system. It also enables IEGT to prepare them while they are still at school for later New Apprenticeships.

IEGT's early involvements with trainees with disabilities were seen, in retrospect, as trial and error. Initially trainees with disabilities were treated and supported in the same manner as any other trainee. However, as the trainees with disabilities began to come up against various stumbling blocks, it was realised that they were going to need more on-the-job support if they were to successfully complete their traineeships.

##### **The establishment of the partnership**

IEGT's involvement with people with disabilities increased significantly at the beginning of 2001 after being approached by a disability employment marketing agency, Diversity@work, which sources and advertises vacancies to a network of some 100 disability employment outlets throughout Victoria. Diversity@work was established in 1994 by a group of disability employment agencies that were all active in the Melbourne CBD. It was decided that having a centralised marketing service representing all of the disability employment agencies would be more effective and efficient. Diversity@work markets primarily to large corporations and secures a commitment to employ people with disabilities. Once a commitment is made Diversity@work invites all of the disability employment agencies in the area to put forward candidates that it pre-screens before presenting suitable candidates to the employer (which includes GTOs). Individual

services, whose clients subsequently secure positions with the employer, then provide all post-placement support. In recent years Diversity@work has expanded its client focus to include Indigenous job seekers.

When the Labor government came to power in Victoria it launched the Youth Employment Scheme (YES) which established 640 new traineeships within the public sector each year. Eight of the nine Victorian government departments elected to secure their trainees through GTOs. One attraction of taking on trainees through GTOs is that the government department is not the legal employer and, as such, the trainees do not inflate departmental staff numbers. Another attraction was that it was seen by departments to save them time and money. The financial incentives under the YES scheme are very generous with the government covering \$12,500 of the annual salary of each trainee plus an additional incentive of \$1,250 if the trainee is from an equity group. Thus, government departments have to only find between \$6,000 - \$8,000 for each trainee.

Within the YES scheme the government sets aside 30% of all traineeships for equity groups, which are very broadly defined under the program but which includes people with disabilities. Diversity@work successfully negotiated with government to be the central referral and placement source for all indigenous people and people with disabilities wishing to secure traineeships through the YES scheme.

IEGT secured 150 of the 640 traineeships in the current financial year. IEGT was then approached by Diversity@work (which also approached the other GTOs participating in the YES scheme) to indenture a number of people with disabilities as part of the 30% set aside initiative. One government department with which Diversity@work had been involved was willing to take on an initial six trainees with disabilities in July 2001 rising to a total of 20 trainees by July 2002.

IEGT also had an ongoing relationship with another government department. This department took on some 130 of the 640 traineeship places under the YES scheme and was keen to meet the associated equity targets. This included making a commitment to set aside a number of positions for people with physical disabilities. The department then approached IEGT (with which it had had a longstanding involvement), amongst several other participating GTOs, to supply trainees with disabilities.

## **Recruiting prospective trainees with disabilities**

Almost all of the trainees with disabilities that have been referred to IEGT have come through Diversity@work. The trainees had been sourced from disability employment agencies or other disability organisations operating in the area and had been pre-screened by Diversity@work. Thus, IEGT felt more confident in taking them on as employees. The remaining trainees with disabilities that were employed by IEGT responded to periodic recruitment advertisements lodged by IEGT in local newspapers.

## **Preparing IEGT staff to support trainees with disabilities**

As part of its partnership with IEGT, Diversity@work delivered a training course on disability and employment to several key management and field staff of IEGT. Staff of other GTOs involved in the YES scheme also attended the workshop. The workshop covered topics such as disability myths and misconceptions and the importance of focussing on work capabilities. Diversity@work also offers ongoing professional development opportunities for IEGT staff, although this has not yet been taken up. There are also plans to run a joint workshop for Diversity@work, IEGT and government department staff on disability-related issues.

## **Marketing trainees with disabilities to host employers**

IEGT and Diversity@work work in close partnership when marketing prospective trainees with disabilities. Diversity@work makes its own marketing materials freely available to IEGT. The agencies hold joint information sessions for prospective host employers, they jointly visit prospective host employers and they strongly promote the value of the partnership.

IEGT now uses a 'case management' approach when marketing trainees with disabilities. That is, they work with one individual at a time and introduce that individual to host employers they consider suitable employers with suitable training positions. Whilst IEGT acknowledges that individualised marketing takes more time (whether or not the candidate has a disability), it believes that the better job matches and training outcomes that result justify the additional resources expended. Since 1999 individualised marketing has increasingly become the norm in IEGT's placements. As part of this shift to individualised marketing, IEGT progressively met with all its host employers and proposed that they began to take on a wider range of New Apprentices – on the grounds that these were indeed training positions. The great majority of host employers were willing to consider a more diverse group of trainees, but still sought a minimum level of entry competencies with appropriate post-placement support. IEGT responded by running its two-week pre-employment course to a much smaller number of trainees with disabilities than they would for trainees without disabilities. This was intended to ensure that participants with disabilities had more individualised instruction and support, so as to

increase the likelihood that they graduated with the workplace entry competencies sought by host employers.

Over the past 18 months IEGT has placed some 20 trainees with disabilities with host employers. The majority of these placements have been through its partnership with Diversity@work and most of the placements have been in the public sector. Ninety percent of these traineeships have been in office administration (IEGT runs this course itself in its capacity as an RTO) and 10% have been in information technology (which IEGT out-sources to another private RTO that had had some training experience with people with disabilities). Sixty percent of the trainees placed were described as having learning disabilities, 30% behavioural/social disabilities and 10% physical disabilities. Five of the trainees had successfully completed, 10 were making satisfactory progress and five had terminated or were unlikely to complete their traineeships.

### **Providing post-placement support to trainees with disabilities**

All of the disability employment agencies that Diversity@work represents provide post-placement on-the-job support. Each trainee with a disability that commences will have an allocated 'case worker' who will work with the host employer to assist the trainee to learn the job and settle into the workplace. Initially, disability employment agencies tended to work fairly independently of IEGT, making their own arrangements with the trainee and host employer about how often to visit the workplace and what support to provide. Because of the range of disability employment agencies and case workers involved, the quality and quantity of post-placement support varied considerably. Whilst IEGT acknowledges that this variable support can cause complications for host employers, especially if multiple agencies are supporting different trainees with disabilities on the one site, it is confident that both of the public sector host employers where trainees with disabilities work are well equipped to deal directly with case workers and make their needs and expectations known.

A number of lessons have already been learned by IEGT, Diversity@work, the disability employment agencies and the host employers – and some fine tuning implemented by one or both of the involved departments. This includes: more clearly defining and writing down the roles and responsibilities of all involved parties; developing a more specific trainee position description; screening people with disabilities more thoroughly prior to commencement; ensuring all incoming trainees with disabilities have successfully completed the IEGT two-week pre-employment training course; ensuring all trainees with disabilities have a well-matched mentor within the department (both departments already had mentoring programs in place for all new employees); providing disability training to team managers and mentors; provide mentoring training to mentors; involving mentors more closely in the training program for trainees with disabilities; arranging for the IEGT Field Officer and the disability employment agency Case Worker to meet at the outset to jointly plan the on-site support and follow-up arrangements; and improving

networking and progress reporting between IEGT, team managers, mentors and case workers. In the case of one department, it has also led to the development of a Trainee Kit that includes: an orientation program, position description, and roles and expectations of IEGT, the host employer and the team leader.

### **Host employers' ratings of the trainees with disabilities and IEGT**

Both government departments had been involved in taking on trainees with disabilities through the YES scheme for more than a year and, after a few early hiccups, both expressed general satisfaction with the endeavour and capacity of the trainees they had taken on. The greatest proof of their positive reaction was their eagerness to expand the program to include significantly more trainees with disabilities.

Both government agencies were keen to expand their relationship with IEGT, one expressing a wish that IEGT and Diversity@work were able to provide a more immediate supply of trainees with disabilities so that they could be available to start as and when needed. Both departments felt that more consistent and available support from disability employment agency case workers would benefit both the trainees with disabilities and the departments.

IEGT remains very committed to indenturing trainees with disabilities and is looking to expand the placement of trainees with disabilities into the private sector, tapping into Diversity@work's existing networks with major corporations. As the diversity of trainees with disabilities and the range of host employers increases, IEGT is fully aware that new challenges will arise. However, there is a shared confidence amongst the staff of IEGT that any such challenges will be able to be effectively addressed and overcome. As the CEO of IEGT put it, 'You've got to *want* to do something like this – or you'll give up at the first major obstacle.'

### **Key success factors**

IEGT is breaking important new ground in establishing large numbers of traineeships for people with disabilities within the public sector departments. The attraction of these traineeships is that: multiple trainees with disabilities can be supported on the one site simultaneously; there are range of traineeships from which to choose; government departments have more sophisticated human resource systems and employee support programs; and there is a guarantee of employment at the end of the traineeship (a condition of the YES scheme). The potential for expansion of traineeships for people with disabilities is huge given that IEGT is only involved with two of the nine Victorian government departments at this early stage. Beyond the public sector there are emerging opportunities to replicate the initiative in major private sector corporations.

The key success factor in IEGT's growing involvement in placing and supporting New Apprentices with disabilities is its close relationship with Diversity@work. It is unlikely that IEGT would be so actively involved in placing trainees with disabilities in the public sector if it were not for its strategic collaboration with Diversity@work. IEGT recognises that Diversity@work offers far more than just a source of New Apprenticeship candidates with disabilities, it provides possible openings to other public and private sector corporations through which IEGT can place New Apprentices with disabilities.

However, it takes two willing parties to form a partnership. The partnership that IEGT currently has with Diversity@work would not be as fruitful and mutually beneficial for the partners, host employers and people with disabilities if IEGT did not have a strong commitment to diversity and a determination to do something about it. The over-arching factor that separates the GTO disability best practice providers from the rest is the stated commitment to workforce diversity coupled with an equally strong commitment to turn rhetoric into reality.

## **CASE STUDY 3:**

### **ON-Q GROUP TRAINING, TWEED HEADS**

#### **THE DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AGENCY THAT EXPANDED TO BECOME A GROUP TRAINING ORGANISATION**

##### **History of On-Q Group Training**

On-Q Group Training is a part of On-Q Human Resources, a non-profit disability employment agency that commenced services in the Tweed Heads region in 1988. This area of northern New South Wales has long been characterised by high levels of youth unemployment, poor public transport infrastructure and a range of other labour market issues consistent with many rural and regional localities throughout Australia.

On-Q Human Resources initially focused upon placing people with intellectual disabilities into award wage jobs in the open employment industry. From its small beginnings, On-Q has grown in both size and scope, with services being available to all people with disabilities and outlets across north-eastern NSW and the Gold Coast region of south-eastern Queensland.

In 1996, On-Q established a partnership with HTN (a hospitality GTO) to place and support apprentice chefs in the Northern Rivers area. This initiative, while not focussed on apprentices with disabilities, provided the organisation with an opportunity to understand and become involved in the New Apprenticeship system.

As a direct consequence of this involvement with HTN, and the organisation's commitment to securing improved employment outcomes for the agency's clients, On-Q began to seek out New Apprenticeship opportunities for its job seekers with disabilities through the existing GTOs in the region. These efforts proved largely unsuccessful, as there was an apparent unwillingness on the part of most local GTOs to indenture people with disabilities.

According to the CEO of On-Q, other GTOs either had too much else on or couldn't be persuaded that people with disabilities would be suitable for New Apprenticeships. As a result of this lack of success, On-Q decided to become a GTO in its own right.

## **Establishment of the GTO**

Exposure to the New Apprentice system via the partnership with HTN had provided On-Q with a good overview of group training arrangements. However, gaining more detailed information about the day-to-day operations of a GTO proved to be far more difficult. Despite these difficulties a business plan was developed and implemented -and On-Q Group Training was established in 1998.

The first major step was to appoint a Regional Manager with a group training background to manage On-Q's Northern Rivers office. The Regional Manager's task was to manage both the disability employment service and the new group training service. One of the Regional Manager's first jobs was to train existing staff in group training arrangements and to develop a resource kit for further reference.

Prospective candidates are mainly referred through the disability employment arm of On-Q. A significant proportion of clients approach On-Q Group Training directly, as a result of word of mouth and on the recommendation of school teachers. A number of mainstream New Apprentices were also identified as having a disability after commencing their placements, usually as a result of difficulties emerging with course work. Other New Apprentices were aware that they had a disability, but were unwilling to disclose their disability for fear of being denied employment opportunities or being treated differently at work.

The introduction and integration of group training services was not without some teething problems. Staff who had been employed to work solely with people with disabilities were now being required to work with mainstream clients as well, and to achieve placement targets well in excess of what they were accustomed to. A number of 'older' staff chose to move on, providing the opportunity to recruit new staff. The new recruitment strategy was to target people with broader labour market experience and a strong culture of employer servicing. At the same time, disability expertise and commitment to the disability client group were preserved through the retention of core staff, the setting of disability targets within New Apprenticeship placements and On-Q's contractual obligations to continue to meet its placement outcomes under its Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services disability employment funding.

### **Staff reactions to the split focus on disability employment and group training**

On-Q staff, who witnessed the introduction and integration of group training, indicated strong support for the new cross-program service and felt that outcomes for their clients with disabilities had improved. Staff made particular mention of new opportunities for securing a follow-up placement for a person with a disability after having made a previous mainstream New Apprenticeship placement. Thus, not only has the group

training service led to improved employment and training outcomes for some clients with disabilities, it has also increased the number of employers who are prepared to offer employment to On-Q clients with disabilities.

From an organisational perspective, On-Q has seen an increase in staff morale as a result of opening up mainstream program opportunities for clients with disabilities through its group training activities. Broadening its services to include New Apprentices without disabilities and being able to indenture its own clients has enabled On-Q to broaden services to its current and future employer base. The management of On-Q is confident that increasing numbers of clients with disabilities will secure and complete New Apprenticeships over the coming years.

### **Placements of people with disabilities into New Apprenticeships**

At the time of the case study, On-Q Group Training was indenturing 163 trainees and seven apprentices. Of these, 14 (an impressive 8% of all New Apprentices) had a *significant* disability. A significant disability is defined as being eligible for disability services program funding (i.e. a Centrelink-assessed WAT score of greater than 50 – the cut-off for referral to Job Network’s Intensive Assistance services).

Nearly 45% of the indentured new apprentices with disabilities have an intellectual disability, 30% have a specific learning disability and the remainder have either a psychiatric, sensory or physical disability.

All the New Apprentices are participating in Certificate II traineeships, with 45% in Hospitality, 30% in Retail and the remainder in Textile Care, Food Procedures or Horticulture. Progress of all 14 New Apprentices with disabilities is reported as good to excellent, underscoring the importance of good on-site support and follow-up.

In addition to the 14 New Apprentices with disabilities indentured by On-Q Group Training, a further 13 New Apprentices with disabilities placed by On-Q have been indentured by employers themselves. Again, progress is described as good to excellent, with two (one with a physical disability and one with an intellectual disability) having recently completed Certificate II traineeships in Hospitality, and one (with an intellectual disability) having completed an apprenticeship in Commercial Cookery.

Five of the New Apprentices attract funding through the Disabled Apprentices Wage Subsidy (DAWS) program. Two are undertaking Commercial Cookery (in addition to the one who has completed), one is undertaking a motorcycle mechanic apprenticeship and the fifth is undertaking an apprenticeship as a panel beater. All of the apprentices in receipt of DAWS funding have an intellectual or specific learning disability.

The remaining New Apprentices with disabilities indentured by employers are undertaking Certificate II traineeships in Hospitality, Retail and Child Care.

## **Comparative resource costs**

On-Q has not found a significant increase in support costs associated with placing a person with a disability, as opposed to a person without a disability, in a traineeship. Marketing and post-placement support for people with disabilities were both effective and efficient after more than a decade of development and refinement. In fact the approach that had been developed for people with disabilities in mainstream employment (which already had a strong pastoral care component built into on-site support) was essentially replicated in supporting all New Apprentices placed through On-Q Group Training.

There were some occasions when there was a need to commit extra resources to a New Apprentice with a disability than might generally be the case for a New Apprentice without a disability. This was usually when it was the employer's first experience of taking on a New Apprentice with a disability. The increased intensity of support at the commencement of a placement has consistently been shown to result in better job retention and, as a result, improved repeat business opportunities.

The other major area of attention for staff in placing people with disabilities into New Apprenticeships was the relationship with RTOs. Both TAFE colleges and private RTOs proved to be positive partners in supporting New Apprentices with disabilities. Difficulties that did occasionally emerge with RTOs were not disability specific, but more to do with the overall training and assessment approach of the RTO. Over time the agency has developed clearer insights into which RTOs have the strongest commitment to equity and access and the operational systems to back up that commitment.

## **Employers' ratings of New Apprentices with disabilities and On-Q**

A number of employers were interviewed during the case study and all indicated that their decision to employ a New Apprentice with a disability was strongly influenced by their confidence in On-Q Group Training. All had already had involvement with On-Q through at least one mainstream New Apprenticeship placement and, therefore, had confidence that On-Q would provide the necessary support when and as required.

All the employers interviewed indicated that their experience in employing a New Apprentice with a disability had been positive and that, because of the support from On-Q, any issues identified were of no greater significance or impact than those encountered in mainstream New Apprenticeship placements.

Several employers also reported that another unexpected benefit of taking on a New Apprentice with a disability was the positive impact on co-worker attitudes and general workplace morale. One employer noted that co-workers who became involved in mentoring a New Apprentice with a disability had improved their own understanding of their jobs.

## **New Apprentices' ratings of themselves and On-Q**

A significant benefit of the group training initiative within On-Q has been the improved quality of outcomes for On-Q clients with disabilities. By accessing New Apprenticeships, these clients are not only securing mainstream employment, but are also gaining recognised qualifications that will enhance portability within a continually changing labour market.

The New Apprentices with disabilities interviewed during the case study gave very positive accounts of the post-placement support they had received from On-Q. These included that the On-Q support worker being readily available, ensuring the New Apprentices were progressing with the required course work and ensuring the RTO provided them with all the necessary support.

### **Key success factors**

On-Q has shown that it is possible for disability employment agencies to expand their services to mainstream group training activities without undermining existing services to people with disabilities. In fact, On-Q has demonstrated unequivocally that such an expansion can deliver to people with disabilities more potential employers, more job options and greater access to traineeships and apprenticeships. There is no question that future employment prospects for people with disabilities will be significantly influenced by having recognised occupational qualifications and demonstrated work competencies. Without such qualifications they will be forced to compete for only the most menial, unskilled jobs – and, in the process, join ranks of the 'working poor'.

The key success factors underpinning On-Q's exemplary performance in placing and supporting New Apprentices with disabilities can be sourced to its long-established credentials as leading employment agency for people with disabilities. Thus, On-Q had no qualms about becoming the legal employer of a significant proportion of trainees with disabilities relative to its overall group training placements (a fact that would not have been lost on host employers). On-Q has also been very planned and purposeful in ensuring that its field staff are confident and competent in placing and supporting New Apprentices with disabilities. In return, management has implemented disability targets for all field staff. Thus, New Apprentices with disabilities are fully integrated into On-Q Group Training's day-to-day operations.

## **CASE STUDY 4:**

### **EAST COAST TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT, BRISBANE**

#### **THE GROUP TRAINING ORGANISATION THAT PIONEERED INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY TRAINEESHIPS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

##### **History of East Coast Training and Employment**

East Coast Training and Employment (ECTE) is a rapidly expanding company that has a clear direction, a commitment to service and quality and workplace diversity. ECTE has a strong culture of inclusion and accommodation of diversity, which it believes is part of the role of a community-based, non-profit GTO. ECTE has a strong focus on the abilities of any person who uses their services and believes that 'dollars are not an issue if the person can do the job'. There is an obvious management ethos that strongly supports and encourages staff to accept the challenges that are presented to them.

ECTE was established in 1988 as an initiative of three local Councils. ECTE is a community-based, non-profit company with its head office in Brisbane and offices in Maroochydore and Redcliffe. The current CEO joined the company in 1998. Over the last three and a half years, ECTE has increased the number of apprentices and trainees it employs from 87 to 460. ECTE is a quality endorsed company (ISO 9002)

While group training constitutes the core business of the company, it also has two other significant enterprises. The first is Housing Industry Trade Training (HITT), which is a Queensland Department of Housing program involving the provision of public housing. The program takes ECTE New Apprentices to build public housing at commercially competitive rates, as well as providing maintenance to existing public housing stock. The second major enterprise is the Community Employment Assistance Program under which ECTE runs a number of human services programs with a focus on employment, all of which are directed at individuals who are disadvantaged in the labour market in some way.

##### **Involvement with people who have a disability**

In 1999 ECTE obtained funding from the Queensland Government, through its Breaking the Unemployment Cycle program, to develop and run a course in Information Technology specifically for people with disabilities. The aim of the program was to provide the necessary information technology training to participants to enable them to assist 40 community organisations to make appropriate provision to deal with the impending Y2K computer bug. The program was the initiative of an ECTE staff member and was testimony to the company motto of 'nobody has a monopoly on ideas'.

The 10 participants in the first course had a range of disabilities including multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy and spina bifida. All participants successfully completed the course and were eventually placed into jobs with community organisations. Some were employed by ECTE in its administration section.

ECTE learned some important lessons from information technology traineeship experience. It demonstrated the value of the company's focus on the abilities of its clients and reinforced their attitude of 'we deal with people'. This seemingly simple statement underlies a strong ethic that drives ECTE's involvement with people who have a disability. The three graduates of the first information technology traineeship still employed by ECTE are valued employees and have been instrumental in broadening the acceptance of people with disabilities within the company.

Following on from its positive experience with the information technology traineeships for people with disabilities, ECTE initiated a work experience program with a local high school's special education unit. The school has a strong VET focus in its general program. This program, known as STAR, involves Year 11 students with disabilities working one day each week in the ECTE office. An innovative feature of the program is that each work experience student has a mentor assigned to them. The mentor is a member of the ECTE staff who is willing to undertake the role of the mentor and has been suitably matched to the work experience student. The CEO also receives regular reports on the progress of the work experience students and meets with them to discuss their experiences.

In addition to the two disability-specific initiatives implemented by ECTE, people with disabilities also come to the agency by other avenues. On occasions a disability employment agency will approach the ECTE after it has posted a vacancy on the Internet. On other occasions a person with a disability will apply directly to ECTE for an apprenticeship or traineeship and it will become apparent through the assessment and registration process that the person has a disability.

### **Experience with other agencies**

ECTE has dealings with a number of disability employment agencies in their area of operation. ECTE has found some to be better organised, more professional and easier to work with than others.

One particular service is used fairly often and is well regarded by the company. ECTE management commented that the on-site support from other disability employment agencies is limited and their program ceases after a number of weeks.

ECTE has also had occasion to use several other disability employment agencies in the surrounding areas. A profoundly deaf person who applied for a position as a trainee tyre fitter was registered with a nearby disability employment agency. The agency sent an

interpreter along to the interview with ECTE and the host employer. The person had had some past experience fitting tyres and there were no apparent occupational safety or health issues. ECTE and the host employer decided to offer the candidate the traineeship. The interpreter/support worker then attended the induction with the worker, advised the person on OH&S matters, worked hand-in-hand with the employer and ECTE, and was generally available as and when needed. ECTE then organised a meeting, at which all the involved parties were present, to develop the Training Plan for the new employee. The RTO was very flexible and accommodating and this process was seen as very successful.

The new employee is working out very well and has been accepted by his co-workers. Recently a sign-language alphabet book has been obtained from the disability employment agency and been delivered to the workplace by the ECTE Field Officer. The co-workers are now learning basic signing.

Experiences with other disability employment agencies have not always been so positive. One agency with which ECTE had had dealings proved very complicated due to the agency's attitude to disclosing clients' disabilities to employers, including ECTE. It appeared that the disability employment agency believed that to disclose the nature and extent of a client's disability was discriminatory. As a consequence, clients of the agency were actively discouraged from disclosing their disability to ECTE. From ECTE's perspective as the legal employer, this attitude was potentially problematic and could create long-term problems. Thus, ECTE was reluctant to continue working with the disability employment agency.

Another disability employment agency regularly refers to ECTE and the post-placement support they provide can be useful, but at times it is unpredictable and not well co-ordinated. While it is willing to accept referrals from this agency, the problems regarding the inter-agency co-ordination of support are such that ECTE considers that it is better off providing all the post-placement support itself and bearing the extra cost.

TAFE is the primary RTO used by ECTE and has proven very flexible and accommodating in the placement of people with a disability.

ECTE management expressed some concerns about the DAWS program. These include that it is too restrictive and too difficult to access, the mandatory medical assessment requirements are inappropriate ('How can a doctor make an assessment about whether a person with a disability can be an electrician?'), and it is too administratively burdensome to complete the application and have to re-apply annually. As a result ECTE uses DAWS less than might otherwise be the case.

## **Employer ratings of New Apprentices with disabilities and ECTE**

One host employer was interviewed during the case study. The host employer that his hearing impaired trainee has a high level of productivity. He acknowledged that he has to make some accommodation arising from the trainee's disability (such as him not being able to communicate directly with customers), but there is usually someone else who can cover. The employer felt that he had to make various accommodations for other staff, not always planned or predictable, and so this is a normal part of running his business.

## **New Apprentices' ratings of ECTE**

Two trainees with disabilities were interviewed as a part of the case study. Their comments included that the company saw the value in their abilities, was flexible enough to cope with any extra demands and was generally considerate. 'The people at the top, they take the trouble to become informed', said one respondent.

## **ECTE's ratings of New Apprentices with disabilities**

ECTE has come to the realisation that attitude is sometimes a more debilitating handicap than the disability itself. ECTE has also developed a realistic insight into some of the limitations a disability may bring to the workplace. However, these experiences and insights have not dissuaded ECTE from its commitment and determination to employ and place people with disabilities in New Apprenticeships. While they have learned many lessons in their support of New Apprentices with disabilities, and accept that it will usually take longer and cost more to support them, they have found that it gets easier as time goes on.

The management believed that the company's focus on equity groups, and in particular people with disabilities, has been beneficial to their staff in that there was less staff turnover through a stronger sense of 'helping people'.

Staff expressed the belief that the extra value of working with people enhanced their own job satisfaction and created a sense of real worthiness.

In the future, ECTE believes that a seed-funding grant of 12-18 months would allow the development of a more sizeable pool of New Apprentices with disabilities. ECTE believes that this could be expanded if they were able to access the on-going funding for workers with disabilities that is currently available to disability employment agencies.

## **Key success factors**

ECTE has demonstrated that with a commitment to workplace diversity, good management and staff, and a preparedness to convert diversity principles into practice, any

GTO can establish significant New Apprenticeship opportunities for people with disabilities within its service. ECTE has also demonstrated that it is not vital to have a partner disability employment agency. Although ECTE has been involved in some fruitful joint initiatives with disability employment agencies, it conceived, developed and delivered its own information technology traineeship course for people with disabilities. It also placed all of the graduates into subsequent employment. The fact that ECTE was able to achieve these impressive outcome for people with disabilities on its own, should give comfort to many GTOs who have either no disability employment agency in their vicinity or harbour doubts as to quality of the local disability employment service.

## **CASE STUDY 5:**

### **RIVERINA GROUP TRAINING COMPANY, WAGGA WAGGA**

#### **THE GROUP TRAINING ORGANISATION THAT BUILT A COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL NETWORK OF KEY DISABILITY PROVIDERS**

##### **History of Riverina Group Training Company**

Riverina Group Training Company (RGTC) was established in 1985 as an initiative of local business people who could see the value of the group training model to their businesses and to their community. The founding Board of Management comprised representatives of local government, the Chamber of Commerce and various industry groups.

With a current complement of nine staff and approximately 300 people indentured in apprenticeships and traineeships, RGTC is a relatively small GTO that manages to cover an enormous area: from Canberra to Griffith and Albury/Wodonga to Cowra. RGTC receives no additional funding or compensation for servicing such a large rural area.

The company's vision for the future sees the maintenance of the existing New Apprentices numbers as a priority, given the economy of Wagga Wagga and its surrounding areas. It also hopes to continue to specialise in equity groups and to develop a focus in the Information Technology sector.

##### **Involvement with people who have a disability**

RGTC's involvement with New Apprentices with disabilities was well underway before the current key staff, who were interviewed for the case study, joined the organisation. Staff who had been around for a longer period attributed the company's long-term involvement with people with disabilities to its values and its community service ethos.

Generally, the referrals of candidates with disabilities came from either TAFE or the local disability employment agency. Some of the referrals also related to people who were in work and whose disability became evident after the person started experiencing difficulties either at work or at TAFE.

In 2001, RGTC recruited an Employment Consultant from the local disability employment agency. This not only brought specialist expertise into RGTC, but strengthened the relationship between the two organisations.

The staff of RGTC did not see anything particularly challenging in the work it was doing with people with a disability; a common sentiment was 'Once you do it the first time, you know it can be done'. Staff have learned to identify and then work through barriers as and

when they arise. All of the RGTC Employment Consultants have at least one apprentice with a disability on their caseload.

All of the people with disabilities indentured by RGTC are in apprenticeships and all are in receipt of DAWS funding. RGTC believes that the group training model reduces the apprehension some employers may feel about indenturing a person with a disability for four years. On occasions, when the placement becomes problematic for the employer, they have handed back the apprentice and RGTC has been able to re-place the apprentice with another host employer. RGTC finds that there is a lower drop-out rate with their disabled apprentices than there is with their non-disabled apprentices.

RGTC has not targeted traineeships for people with disabilities for a number of reasons. Traineeships do not attract the same support (mentoring, tutorial support, subsidy) that is available to apprentices with disabilities through the DAWS scheme. Traineeships generally only last for 12 months, but require the same effort to establish as an apprenticeship. If the trainee cannot attain able-bodied productivity rates within the period of the traineeship, and they are not eligible for the Supported Wage funding through a disability employment agency, it can create a problem for the GTO. Finally, it was felt that many local traineeships are in the Retail, Office Administration and Hospitality sectors, where presentation is more important, and that this constituted a barrier to placement of people with visible disabilities.

While DAWS is generally seen as a useful program, especially in the subsidy it provides to the host employer, it is also seen as problematic in some respects. Workplace modifications can only be approved at the beginning of the job. In reality, the need for a modification is often only identified after a person has started work (sometimes, well after), when they are required to perform a specific task. The annual review for the DAWS client is seen as problematic for many clients and totally unnecessary for those with a permanent disability.

### **The partner disability employment agency**

Like RGTC, the partner disability employment agency is a well-respected, community-based, non-profit organisation. It also covers similar territory to RGTC. All of the disability employment agency's field staff are qualified Workplace Assessors and Trainers and this allows it to occasionally sub-contract its own staff to the RTOs it uses. The Manager of the disability employment agency has an industry and TAFE background. He believes this helps him to both understand the culture of RGTC and the capacities of the people with a disability registered with his agency.

The disability employment agency's mission and values are seen as the 'drivers' behind their involvement with New Apprenticeships. 'We know these guys can do it so we help them to build a career - not just get them a job'.

When a person applies for registration with the disability employment agency, a determination is made regarding their suitability for an apprenticeship or a traineeship. If the disability employment agency believes that the new registrant has the potential to complete a New Apprenticeship, then it is offered as an option. If the registrant elects to take up the offer, a referral is made to RGTC.

DAWS applications are far less administratively burdensome for the disability employment agency as it has worked closely with the local New Apprenticeship Centre (NAC) to streamline the application process. The disability employment agency maintains a close relationship with TAFE, which reduces potential problems for New Apprentices with disabilities during the course of their studies.

In the 2000/2001 financial year, 40% of the disability employment agency's placements were into New Apprenticeships - and 50% of those were indentured to RGTC.

### **Marketing New Apprentices with disabilities to host employers**

RGTC and the disability employment agency will sometimes plan a joint marketing approach to prospective employers. Employers may be drawn from either RGTC's or the disability employment agency's network. By previous agreement, if the person is subsequently indentured to the employer, the disability employment agency completes the paperwork on behalf of the employer. If RGTC indentures the person, it completes the paperwork. The two organisations share the post-placement support responsibilities and, as a result of their close ties, this is relatively informal, effective and comprehensive.

RGTC is currently indenturing nine apprentices with disabilities, all of whom are also registered with the disability employment agency. The majority of the apprentices have a learning disability, one has a back injury, one is blind and one is an amputee. Apprenticeships that are currently being undertaken include heavy vehicle mechanic, welder, spare parts interpreter and horticulture.

### **Involvement with other key players**

Both RGTC and the disability employment agency were very praiseworthy of the regional TAFE in supporting students with disabilities. TAFE has implemented an innovative structure such that it has consultants specialising in each major disability group, either at one campus or across the region. TAFE has also initiated its own specialist courses to support its students with disabilities. The Senior Lecturers in the courses in which New Apprentices with disabilities were enrolled were very supportive and crucial to their academic success. All but two apprentices with disabilities were progressing well with their studies.

The New Apprenticeship Centre in Wagga Wagga is also a key player in this network. The NAC sees RGTC as a valuable local employer - 25% of all of its apprenticeship commencements are processed through RGTC. The NAC processes DAWS applications emanating from the disability employment agency very quickly because of the streamlined arrangements that have been negotiated between the two parties. The NAC believes that this quick processing and approval of DAWS application would be well-received by employers, including RGTC. The NAC finds processing of DAWS applications from other providers and employers to be much more cumbersome and time-consuming, resulting in delays in turn-around times.

### **Apprentices' ratings of RGTC**

All of the apprentices interviewed as part of the case study were jointly registered with both RGTC and the disability employment agency. The apprentices said they chose an apprenticeship over a job without the associated formal training because they felt that it was important to get a trade behind them. They also had developed a particular interest in the field in which they were training (in the case of the apprentices interviewed, Chef, Spare Parts, Horticulture and Panel Beating),

All of the apprentices interviewed were very positive about the support they received from both RGTC and the disability employment agency. While they were not always sure as to which agency the support staff belonged, they always felt well supported. 'There's always someone here to help you if you have a problem'.

### **Employers' ratings of apprentices with disabilities and RGTC**

The employers who were interviewed as part of the case study felt that they had all the support they needed. They were grateful that someone else (they generally didn't care who) did all the paperwork associated with indenturing or hosting a New Apprentice. While some felt the DAWS subsidy was useful, this was generally seen as a reasonable amount to off-set any lost productivity on the part their apprentice whilst they were in training.

Like the apprentices interviewed for the case study, employers expressed confidence that, between the various agencies involved, there was always someone who could fix any problems straight away.

One employer expressed a concern was that speed was not a part of the assessment process and that, if a person with a disability was assessed whilst receiving additional support, productivity might drop once that support was withdrawn.

### **Key success factors**

This case study revealed a very efficient, effective and well co-ordinated network operating out of Wagga Wagga, which was the key success factor in delivering successful apprenticeship outcomes for people with disabilities. While it may be tempting to stereotype this as simply the sort of thing that happens naturally in country areas because of a stronger sense of community, the fact is that it happens rarely, anywhere.

The underlying success factors that make this close network of service providers special include the common history of the key organisations, a willingness by all the parties to collaborate in the interests of their clients with disabilities, and the shared values around equity and diversity that underpin the activities of these community-based, non-profit organisations.

While these type of networks are dependent to some degree on the personalities involved, this network of people and organisations has survived the loss of several key players without diluting its shared ideals and goals.

## **CASE STUDY 6:**

### **SUNRAYSIA & MURRAY GROUP TRAINING, MILDURA**

#### **THE GROUP TRAINING ORGANISATION THAT HAS A MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING WITH TAFE TO SUPPORT NEW APPRENTICES WITH DISABILITIES**

##### **History of Sunraysia Murray Group Training**

Sunraysia Murray Group Training (SMGT) commenced operations in 1983 as a group training organisation placing apprentices with host employers. SMGT is a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and operates the Sunraysia Skill Centre, a hands-on training facility that offers programs in retail, hospitality, tourism and information technology. SMGT is also a New Apprenticeship Centre (NAC) and operates a range of school-to-work programs.

SMGT has its head office in Mildura and another office in Robinvale. SMGT services an area of approximately 50,000 square kilometres from the South Australian border to Boundary Bend in Victoria and through the shire of Wentworth in NSW. The agricultural sector is the major employer in the region, followed by retail trade and wholesale trade. There is a high proportion of small to medium businesses, many of which are family owned and operated.

SMGT is a non-profit organisation that is governed by a Board drawn locally from small and large businesses, the education sector and local government. The organisation has always been receptive to working with disadvantaged people, including those with a disability, which is due in part to the fact that there are few alternative services available.

The company is currently in the process of establishing a quality management system. It is envisaged that documentation of procedures such as recruitment and selection and monitoring and assessment will include procedures that are specifically developed to facilitate integration for disadvantaged groups.

##### **Equipping staff to support people with disabilities**

A strategic approach to staff recruitment and selection has been adopted by SMGT management in recent years, with the aim of recruiting staff who are open-minded and willing to work with a diverse client group. SMGT employs a New Apprenticeships Manager and six Field Officers – one of whom has had specific disability experience as a Personal Care Worker. The current New Apprenticeships Manager has been with the company for six years, predominantly in the role of Field Officer.

All staff are required to be trained in OH&S, Workplace Training and Assessment, and First Aid. If staff don't have certification in these areas, they receive the training early in their employment. Disability specific induction training is not comprehensive. However, as part of their general induction, new staff are given contact details of specialist service providers, including those who work with people with disabilities.

Several staff have also participated in a one-day disability awareness course 'Opening the Doors to People with a Disability' and/or attended the recent ANTA Equity Conference in Melbourne. The New Apprenticeships Manager attended both of these events.

### **Inter-agency collaboration**

The local disability employment agency was established in Mildura some 14 years ago. Currently, it is located in close proximity to the other key service providers, which has enabled management and staff to establish strategic inter-agency service connections.

The relationship between SMGT and the local disability employment agency is a fairly informal one, as there are no protocols or agreements in place. SMGT feels that the disability employment agency is able to liaise with its Field Officers directly, utilising them as a resource and as a source of information about apprenticeship vacancies. The deliberate informality of the relationship was seen as a means of minimising red tape.

Despite the close proximity and informal contact between the two services, just two apprentices with disabilities have been placed through any collaborative involvement in recent years. A third placement is currently under negotiation. On each occasion the approach was made by the disability employment agency to SMGT.

SMGT claims that it has been Sunraysia TAFE's biggest customer since 1983 and that 70% of its New Apprentices attend TAFE. Because of the importance of SMGT and TAFE to each other, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was developed to clarify and govern the roles and responsibilities of each party. The management of SMGT see the MOU, which includes specific references to people with disabilities, as being a very important device in ensuring that New Apprentices with disabilities are well supported at TAFE. As part of the MOU the SMGT New Apprenticeships Manager and the relevant SMGT Field Officer meet monthly with each TAFE Department Head to review student progress (including any students with disabilities) and address any issues that have arisen. Thus, the primary working relationship with TAFE, where students with disabilities are involved, is with the various departments rather than with the TAFE Disability Liaison Officer.

SMGT also offers work experience to TAFE students with disabilities undertaking the Certificate 1 in work preparation. Surprisingly, however, there have not been many subsequent referrals of course graduates to SMGT.

The management of SMGT expressed a high level of satisfaction with the services that TAFE provides, and considered that TAFE is a crucial partner in the successful integration of people with disabilities into apprenticeships. SMGT has had less involvement to date with private RTOs, as its needs have been adequately met by TAFE.

### **Recruiting New Apprentices with disabilities**

Whilst SMGT does not actively recruit people with disabilities, it is vigilant about not putting up any barriers that might prevent them from being placed into apprenticeships. The majority of the apprentices with disabilities have accessed SMGT's services through the mainstream application process. The exceptions are two apprentices who were placed in collaboration with the local disability employment agency and a hearing impaired apprentice who received assistance after his employer approached SMGT.

Only a few of the apprentices declared their disability on the SMGT application form, despite a specific question asking if they have a disability. In one case, the disability became apparent when the apprentice commenced training and was found to have difficulties.

SMGT successfully tendered for 25 New Apprenticeships for disadvantaged groups, including five people with a disability, under the Targeted Initiatives Program (TIP) in 2001. New Apprentices funded under TIP are ineligible for funding under the joint policy funding arrangements. However, they are still eligible for standard commencement, progression and completion payments.

Management felt that the tender was successful as the company already had a track record in working with equity groups and was able to demonstrate outcomes. TIP would provide recognition and some remuneration for the work already being undertaken by the GTO and facilitate further professional development of staff.

### **Marketing New Apprentices with disabilities to host employers**

Operating within a regional location since the early 1980s has greatly enhanced SMGT's ability to effectively place people with disabilities into apprenticeships. Staff felt the organisation has established a sound reputation with employers. It has a history of equity service provision within the community and employers are confident of SMGT's product and service. In addition, SMGT is able to identify local employers who are most likely to be receptive to hosting an apprentice with a disability (the local disability employment agency may have some useful input in this regard as both agencies operate in much the same labour market).

The use of a trial period prior to signing up an apprentice with a disability and access to financial benefits are also seen as useful tools to assist employers to make the decision to host an apprentice with a disability.

Prospective employers were often identified through the Field Officers' personal and professional networks within the community. The smallness and inter-connectedness of an isolated rural community is a strength that can work to the advantage (but equally the disadvantage) of job seekers with disabilities.

Because SMGT also operates as a New Apprenticeship Centre, it can offer apprentices with disabilities a 'one-stop shop' when it comes to making DAWS applications. This leads to greatly reduced times in submitting applications and having them approved and processed. Five of the seven apprentices with disabilities currently being supported by SMGT are in receipt of DAWS funding. Where DAWS has been utilised for apprentices with a disability, the full subsidy amount is passed on to the host employer. This is seen as a significant incentive to an employer to host and maintain a person with a disability as an apprentice.

Where a New Apprentice has been referred by the local disability employment agency, the two agencies may undertake some joint planning about how to market the individual and/or may jointly approach the host employer and present an integrated package of supports. The disability employment agency has also previously located an employer and liaised with SMGT to convert a voluntary work placement into an apprenticeship (that apprenticeship is now in its fourth year). Another apprentice with a disability was placed with a local motor body repairer as a result of a joint marketing effort.

### **Providing post-placement support to apprentices with disabilities**

SMGT takes its pastoral care responsibilities very seriously. This commitment to regular on-site involvement is welcomed by host employers. SMGT has a standard eight-week visitation cycle for each New Apprentice. A contact report is written after each visit and is signed off by the host employer, New Apprentice and Field Officer. This process is seen as being well suited to people with disabilities as well, because it locks in ongoing monitoring and support.

Few of the apprentices with disabilities placed have required workplace modifications. On one occasion equipment was purchased to facilitate the placement of the apprentice with a disability into the workplace. This was organised through the disability employment agency, which was able to utilise separate funding available to it for workplace modifications. On another occasion, where ramps and rails were required, the TAFE Engineering Department designed and constructed the modifications as a practical training exercise for its engineering students.

Where an apprentice with a disability is also registered with the disability employment agency, it provides any needed on-the-job support and arranges its own visiting schedule in consultation with the host employer. The disability employment agency updates the involved SMGT Field Officer on a regular basis to ensure he or she is aware of the apprentice's current progress. In recent times there has not been much involvement of the disability employment agency with apprentices with disabilities indentured by SMGT. This may be due to the fact that all of the current apprentices are progressing well in their workplaces.

There have been few occasions where DAWS funding has been used for additional tuition. However, probably because of the MOU that is in place with TAFE, the specific learning needs of students with disabilities are largely being accommodated within TAFE's and SMGT's existing resources.

At the time of the case study, SMGT was supporting seven apprentices with disabilities (all in receipt of DAWS funding) and one trainee with a disability. The disabilities represented amongst the apprentices are dyslexia, hearing impairment, vision impairments, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis and nervous disorder. The apprenticeships being undertaken are carpenter, plumber, pastry cook, automotive repairs and electro-technology. All of the apprentices are in years 2-4 and all were making good progress. The trainee has a learning disability and was undertaking a retail traineeship, but has been suspended.

### **Host employers' ratings of the apprentices with disabilities and SMGT**

Two employers interviewed during the case study were very supportive of their apprentices with disabilities and expressed satisfaction with SMGT's services. One employer who was interviewed currently has two apprentices, one with a disability. The apprentice with a disability is seen as reliable, hard working and having a positive attitude. The apprentice without a disability has caused significant disruption within the workplace. The employer indicated he would have no qualms about retaining the apprentice with a disability at the conclusion of his contract of training and would happily host another apprentice with a disability of the same calibre.

The other employer interviewed is the principal of a local school. She was very enthusiastic about the positive role-modelling resulting from employing an apprentice with a disability. She felt that it had a significant positive impact on the attitudes and expectations of staff, students and parents.

Both employers attached significant value to SMGT passing on the full DAWS subsidy to them as an employment incentive. Both employers were very appreciative of SMGT's Field Officers who provided pastoral care support and could also act as a neutral

third party to help the host employer and New Apprenticeship sort out occasional differences that might emerge at work.

## **Apprentices ratings of themselves and SMGT**

Apprentices with disabilities generally had a positive relationship with their Field Officers and were appreciative of the support they received from SMGT. They felt that their Field Officers treated them in a respectful and friendly manner and appeared genuinely interested in their work and study. Some apprentices with disabilities also drop into SMGT offices, often without an appointment, to catch up with their respective Field Officer.

Issues faced by apprentices with disabilities range from occasionally needing time off (which was unpredictable) and having structured breaks to manage illness; tiredness and lack of stamina; conflict with co-workers; and lack of understanding by the apprentice of workplace social behaviours.

All of the apprentices indicated a strong commitment to their jobs and studies. They recognised the positive impact upon their lives of having secured an apprenticeship. Two spoke of not wanting to be stuck at home on the disability support pension for the rest of their lives. Several spoke of now learning new skills and having goals. Others saw making new friends as an important outcome of becoming an apprentice.

## **Key success factors**

There would appear to be several key factors under-pinning SMGT's general success in recruiting, placing and supporting apprentices with disabilities. First and foremost, SMGT has a strong sense of community and a consequent commitment to being accessible and responsive to the community's diverse members. Second, it has a high profile and good reputation amongst local employers, a reputation built over almost two decades. Third, it is willing to work collaboratively with other key disability employment providers in the area. Fourth, it has developed a Memorandum of Understanding with TAFE that ensures that New Apprentices with disabilities, amongst all other New Apprentices attending TAFE, received the individualised support they need to successfully complete their studies.

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