

How the NDIS and Inclusive Employment Australia Can Better Work Together to Support People with Disability into Employment

ABSTRACT

Australia's two principal disability employment mechanisms, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and Inclusive Employment Australia (IEA) (which replaced Disability Employment Services (DES) in November 2025) have historically operated as disconnected systems. This paper examines the troubled history of that interface, the structural barriers that persist, the international and domestic evidence for what works, and the practical risks posed by significant NDIS budget reform signalled for 2026–27. It closes with targeted recommendations to make the NDIS–IEA interface function effectively in the lives of people with disability who want to work.

1. The Employment Gap and Why the Interface Matters

More than one in five Australians, around 5.5 million people, live with disability.¹ Despite decades of policy effort, the employment gap remains wide. In 2022, the labour force participation rate for working-age people with disability was 60.5%, compared with 84.9% for those without disability.² Within the NDIS population, 23% of working-age participants were in paid employment as at June 2024 of these, 78% were in open employment and 22% in supported employment. Separately, AIHW data for 2025–26 shows that 25% of NDIS participants aged 15–64 in the labour force were in open employment at full award wage.³

Outcomes are sharply worse for specific groups. NDIS participants with neurological or psychosocial disabilities have baseline employment rates of 7–17%.⁴ People with intellectual disability are even less likely to be in open employment; many remain in Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) and can be paid as little as \$3.12 per hour.⁵ The NDIS's original modelling assumed improved employment outcomes for people with disability, and that this would partially offset scheme costs, setting a target of 30% of NDIS participants of working age to achieve meaningful employment by 30 June 2023. This target remains unrealised.⁶

Across OECD countries, the disability employment gap averages close to 30 percentage points, a figure barely shifted in decades despite repeated reform efforts.⁷ This international context signals something structurally difficult about connecting people with significant disability to employment systems, that reaches far beyond being simply a matter of individual program design.

2. A History of Disconnect: NDIS and DES

What the two systems were designed to do

On paper, the NDIS and DES were designed as complements: the NDIS would fund the disability-specific capacity building a person needs to work (communication aids, supported transport, therapy); DES would provide job-matching, employer engagement, and ongoing support. The NDIS explicitly recognised DES as the primary assistance source for participants wanting work.⁸ In practice, the two systems were, and still remain disconnected, operating largely in isolation from one another.⁹

Structural failures at the interface

- **No shared data.** DES providers had little or no visibility of a participant's NDIS plan; NDIS planners often did not understand what DES could provide. People were required to tell their story repeatedly across services.

- **Role confusion.** Both systems funded some employment-related support, with unclear boundaries. Providers on both sides sometimes stepped back, or both stepped forward creating duplication, leaving the prospective participant worse off.
- **Incompatible time limits.** access to DES was generally limited to two years on support, with Ongoing Support only available in limited circumstances beyond that. For many NDIS participants with significant or complex disability, two years was insufficient to develop work-readiness, secure employment, and stabilise in a role. Providers were incentivised to achieve outcomes within timeframes, not necessarily to achieve the *right* outcomes.¹⁰
- **Income support rules also shape participation.** Under DES, many NDIS participants lacked automatic DES pathways, or routine referral pathways into specialist employment services because they were outside of mutual obligations. Many NDIS participants receiving the Disability Support Pension (DSP) were cautious about testing work for fear of losing income security, concessions, or access to the safety net if employment was episodic or failed.
- **Systemic cultural disconnect.** Despite operating within closely related Commonwealth policy systems, the two programs ran on different IT systems, through different Departments, with different program rules, and different cultures, and limited cross-system staff knowledge or aligned approaches.

The consequences were concrete. One documented case involved a supported employee who secured a job trial but waited months for a NDIS plan review to fund the required supports, the review delayed over the Christmas period. The trial lapsed.¹¹ This experience of bureaucratic timing mismatch was not exceptional, it was systemic.

DES performance

For multiple reasons, DES outcomes were, at best, modest. Before the 2018 reforms, just over 25% of the approximately 195,000 DES participants obtained employment lasting at least 26 weeks.¹² Despite significant additional investment, DES cost approximately \$1.4 billion per annum in 2021, up from \$850 million at the time of the 2018 reforms, yet outcomes did not improve commensurately.¹² The NDIS Review's *What We Have Heard* report was direct: the market system had "*not worked as originally imagined*", a critique that resonated strongly in the employment space, but is not unpacked in its complexity in this paper.¹³

3. Inclusive Employment Australia: Changes and Gaps

Inclusive Employment Australia launched on 1 November 2025, replacing DES with several meaningful structural reforms.¹⁴

- **No time limit.** Participants may remain with their IEA provider for as long as they need support, a significant change for people with complex disability who could not progress meaningfully within DES's two-year window.
- **Expanded eligibility.** IEA now covers people with a future work capacity of 0–7 hours per week, and voluntary participants not receiving Centrelink payments are eligible, removing a major access barrier for NDIS participants not on income support. While IEA's expanded voluntary access helps at the service-entry point, participants still need clear benefits counselling so that they can understand what work means, particularly for their DSP, concessions and financial security. Further, while IEA has sought to address the pathway barriers under DES through expanded voluntary access, practical barriers around awareness, assessment, navigation and coordination remain.
- **Tiered service model.** A tiered structure distinguishes those building toward work from those ready to find and maintain employment, enabling more targeted resourcing.
- **Specialist providers.** The IEA panel of 83 providers (reduced from the larger DES network) was selected with stated emphasis on specialist disability expertise.

- **\$10,000 wage subsidy.** Employers hiring IEA participants can access subsidies of up to \$10,000 per participant to incentivise inclusive hiring.
- **Centre for Inclusive Employment.** A new national centre has been established to develop evidence-based information and training for IEA providers.

What IEA does not resolve

IEA does not, of itself, resolve the deeper structural challenges in the interface. The two systems remain governed by different legislation and Departments, funded through different streams, operating different IT systems, and accountable to different frameworks. The machinery-of-government changes following the transfer of the NDIA and NDIS policy responsibilities into the Health, Disability and Ageing portfolio may further complicate interface coordination over time. While IEA remains within the Department of Social Services, the NDIS is now operating within a much larger health-focused system with different governance, privacy, and information-sharing cultures. This creates additional practical barriers to integrated planning, shared data systems, and cross-program coordination. Health portfolios have traditionally adopted more cautious approaches to information governance and data sharing, particularly where sensitive health and disability information is involved. Without deliberate cross-portfolio governance arrangements, there is a risk that the operational disconnect historically seen between the NDIS and DES could persist, or in some respects become more difficult to resolve under IEA.

There also remains no shared data infrastructure. IEA providers lack visibility of a participant's NDIS plan; while NDIS planners still commonly have incomplete knowledge of what IEA provides.

IEA also places much of the coordination burden on participants and their support networks. Without a robust Local Area Coordinator (LAC) or support coordination role that actively bridges both systems, participants with intellectual disability, complex communication needs, or limited social networks may continue to struggle to effectively combine NDIS and IEA supports. To address this gap, the Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice (CDERP) has suggested a specific funded NDIS line item for "*Vocational Discovery*", professional planning and job-matching should be introduced within the NDIS.¹⁵

4. What the Evidence Shows Works

Individual Placement and Support (IPS)

The most robustly evidenced employment approach for people with significant disability is Individual Placement and Support (IPS). Developed in the United States in the 1990s for people with serious mental illness, IPS has now been implemented across four continents and is considered an evidence-based practice by international health and employment bodies.¹⁶

IPS is built on eight principles: eligibility based on the client's own choice; focus on competitive open employment from the outset; integration of employment and disability/clinical support; attention to individual preferences; rapid job search; personalised benefits counselling; targeted employer development; and individualised long-term support.¹⁶ IPS consistently achieves competitive employment rates of 40–60% for people with serious mental illness (the population for which IPS evidence is most robust), compared with 20–25% for traditional vocational rehabilitation. However, while evidence for IPS effectiveness with other disability groups, including people with intellectual disability continues to develop, caution is warranted in extrapolating these rates across the full NDIS population.¹⁷ NDIA research identified IPS as having the strongest evidence of benefit among interventions to support economic participation for people with psychosocial disability.¹⁸

The integration principle is central: employment support is embedded within or closely linked to the disability or clinical support team. Employment does not happen after stabilisation, it happens

alongside it. This "place-then-train" model differs fundamentally from the "train-then-place" approach that characterise most employment services' models.¹⁸

International experience

There are some lessons to learn from other international approaches. The UK's Work and Health Programme evaluation consistently found that outcomes for people with disability improved where local partnerships with health services, housing, and community supports were strong. Where the programme operated as a standalone employment service, outcomes were weaker.¹⁹ The Netherlands has a return to work approach for people with acquired disability that embeds employer responsibility for reintegration directly in the employment relationship, with evidence of reducing flows into long-term disability benefits.²⁰ Additionally, Denmark's Flexi-job scheme aligns support with individual work capacity through a subsidised partial-productivity model that has parallels with Australia's Supported Wage System.²⁰

Domestic experience

The NDIS/DES Pathways Pilot, run in the ACT, Greater Darwin, and Outer Eastern Melbourne between December 2023 and March 2025 demonstrated that deliberate, modest investment in the connection point between systems increased NDIS participant engagement with employment services.²¹

The Pilot also identified several practical barriers that limited engagement with employment services even where participants wanted to work. According to the unpublished Closure Report, more than 1,300 NDIS participants were contacted across the pilot sites, with around 970 having employment-focused conversations through LACs. However, only 90 participants were referred into DES and 59 ultimately registered. The Pilot found that referral pathways were slowed by issues such as the absence of Centrelink Reference Numbers (CRNs), delays in Employment Services Assessments (ESAs), limited awareness of voluntary DES access, and weak information-sharing between systems. At the same time, the Pilot found that local relationships, designated contact points, and active trust-building between providers materially improved participant engagement and coordination outcomes.

The overarching lesson from both international and domestic experience is consistent: the interface between disability support and employment systems works better when it is deliberately designed, not assumed. Further, when systems share data, staff understand both programs, people have a single coordination point, and employers are active partners, outcomes improve. None of these conditions emerge naturally from parallel, separately funded programs, without proactive, direct intervention and support.

5. Pending Risks: NDIS Budget Reform

The policy context for the NDIS–IEA interface in 2026 is significantly complicated by the Australian Government's *Securing the NDIS for Future Generations* plan, announced in April 2026.²² The scale of the proposed changes may be substantial: the proposed reform directions suggest that participant numbers are proposed to reduce from approximately 760,000 to around 600,000 by end of decade, a reduction of up to 160,000 participants.²³ The reforms are expected to save \$37.8 billion over the next four years.²⁴

The 2026-27 Federal Budget confirmed the reform directions announced by the NDIS Minister Mark Butler at the National Press Club on 22 April 2026.^{24a} Two changes are directly relevant to employment pathways. First, spending on third-party intermediaries (plan managers and support coordinators), will be reduced by 30%, with services moved to a commissioned model drawing from a government vetted panel of providers. Second, average participant plan budgets will be reduced from approximately \$31,000 to \$26,000, returning to roughly 2023 levels, with social and community participation supports (the funding most directly linked to employment preparation, community

access and word-readiness activities) among those to be reset from 1 October 2026. For NDIS participants seeking employment, both changes carry risk: support coordination is a key mechanism through which participants are connected to employment services and navigate the NDIS-IEA interface, while social and community participation funding often funds the capacity-building and community engagement activities that underpin employment readiness.

The specific changes most likely to affect employment pathways include: reductions to capacity building and community participation funding, the NDIS categories most directly linked to employment preparation; tighter criteria for unscheduled plan reassessments, reducing responsiveness when participants' work situations change; changes to unspent fund rollovers; and a new standardised framework planning model from 2027 with less individual flexibility.²⁵

These changes matter for the interface in interconnected ways. If NDIS participants lose access to the therapy, skill development, and support that enables work readiness, IEA cannot compensate. IEA helps people find jobs; it cannot do the underlying disability support work the NDIS is meant to fund. As noted by researchers in 2023, when NDIS plan funding is reduced, costs flow elsewhere, to families, the healthcare system, as well as welfare payments.²⁶

There is also a displacement risk within IEA itself. Expanded eligibility may bring in participants with less complex needs who are easier to place, creating market pressures that disfavour intensive investment in harder-to-reach NDIS participants, a dynamic familiar from DES. Those potentially exited from the NDIS may include many who turn to IEA without the support base that makes employment assistance effective, or fall through the gap between systems.

One potentially positive development is the proposed "*foundational supports*" tier, disability supports outside individual NDIS packages, available to a broader population.²⁷ If well-designed and connected to IEA, this could address the 'no man's land' that has long existed for people who need some support but not a full NDIS package. However, foundational supports remain largely conceptual, with design, funding, and governance yet to be determined. A key risk is implementation of the above changes before alternative foundational supports are operational, leading to a significant gap in the supports that enable people with disability to seek and sustain work.

6. Recommendations

- **Shared data infrastructure.** Build a consent-based, shared participant record that travels with the person between the NDIS and IEA. IEA providers need visibility of NDIS plan goals and funded supports; NDIS planners need a working understanding of IEA. The NDIS Review recommended technology improvements; this should extend to employment services
- **Funded employment gateway role.** Establish a clear, resourced role within the NDIS, whether as a line item for 'Vocational Discovery' (as proposed by CDERP) or within expanded Local Area Coordination (LAC)/support coordination functions, to actively bridge NDIS participants into IEA and maintain coordination across both systems
- **Adopt IPS principles at the interface.** IEA providers working with people with complex disability should have established, regular relationships with NDIS providers and LACs for their shared participants, not ad hoc referrals, but genuine team-based planning aligned with IPS integration principles, in collaboration with the Centre for Inclusive Employment making this a core training focus
- **Protect employment-related NDIS supports.** Explicitly carve out employment-linked capacity building supports, communication therapy, social skills development, supported transport, assistive technology for work, from any broad reductions to these NDIS categories. The NDIA and DSS should jointly identify which NDIS support categories are functionally linked to employment outcomes before implementing reforms

- **Invest in governance structures that achieve greater cross-program coordination across relevant portfolios including:** leveraging a disability employment-specific sub-focus as part of broader employment services local governance reform led by the Department of Employment and Workplace relations (DEWR), that bring employment services and NDIS providers, employers, and community organisations together in specific localities; and establishment of a cross-agency Secretaries' Committee (DEWR, DSS, Department of Health, and Treasury) to achieve NDIS cost-savings while strengthening disability employment outcomes within the context of the Government's White Paper on Employment and broader productivity agenda
- **Design foundational supports for employment.** The foundational supports tier should explicitly include employment preparation support (vocational assessment, career exploration, work experience), co-designed with IEA and with people with disability, with direct transition pathways into IEA
- **Systematically co-design with people with disability.** Establish ongoing, resourced co-design mechanisms, including people with intellectual disability, psychosocial disability, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, to identify where the interface is working and where it is not, and
- **Measure the interface.** Commission systematic evaluation of the NDIS–IEA interface, including data linkage studies, longitudinal participant tracking, and provider surveys, to build the evidence base for future reform. Individual program outcomes are insufficient; the interface itself must be measured.

7. Conclusion

The relationship between the NDIS and Australia's disability employment system has been, for most of its history, characterised by hope on paper, and friction in practice. IEA is a genuine attempt to build a better system - the removal of time limits alone being a significant reform. But IEA does not, of itself, fix the interface. Two systems remain, with different: legislation, IT, cultures, governance and incentives. Making them work together requires deliberate investment in the connection points, not just better program design in each.

The international evidence strongly suggests that well integrated employment, disability and health models tend to produce stronger outcomes than standalone referral-based models. IPS has demonstrated with more than three decades of evidence, that when employment support is embedded alongside disability and health support, outcomes improve. The challenge for Australia is moving from *knowing this* to *doing it, at scale* and resourcing it appropriately. Further, broader labour market conditions, including regional job availability and employer demand, also need to be factored into how they shape disability employment outcomes where they are located, regardless of system design.

The timing is also challenging. The NDIS reform agenda, including the signalled reduction in participant numbers and plan budgets, creates real risks for people with disability who rely on both systems to find and keep work. If those reforms proceed without careful attention to their employment implications, some of the gains promised by IEA may be offset before they are realised.

The evidence about what works exists. The policy governance and structure, with IEA in DSS, and the NDIS administered through the NDIA within the Health, Disability and Ageing portfolio, means coordination requires deliberate and proactive cross-portfolio governance. The question is whether there will be sustained political will and practical investment to make the interface work for the many tens of thousands of NDIS participants who say they want to work.

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