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# What Can We Learn from Disability Enterprises When Thinking About a Job Guarantee Program?

**Andrew Joyce *, Perri Campbell, Jenny Crosbie and Erin Wilson**

Centre for Social Impact, School of Business, Law and Entrepreneurship, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn 3122, Australia; pcampbell@swin.edu.au (P.C.)
* Correspondence: ajoyce@swin.edu.au

**Abstract**

The Disability Royal Commission in Australia has reinforced concerns that segregated employment settings can increase risks of exploitation, violence and abuse, including within Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs), strengthening the case for community-based employment options for people with intellectual disability. This qualitative study examined how features of supported employment might inform the design of an inclusive job guarantee (JG) model. Drawing on 77 interviews with supported employees and staff, we identified enabling conditions that support wellbeing and participation (including customised roles, structured routines, peer connection, and holistic support), alongside structural constraints that can limit inclusion and progression. While participants and staff described clear well-being benefits from supported employment, they also highlighted frustrations associated with disconnection from the wider community, low pay, and limited pathways to advancement or transition. Given that transition rates between supported and mainstream employment remain very low, the findings emphasise that any JG model seeking to include people with intellectual disability will need investment in supports and credible transition pathways. This paper concludes by outlining how these design implications intersect with the broader economic logic of unemployment and what an inclusive JG could contribute as part of a wider disability employment reform agenda.

**Keywords:** intellectual disability; inclusive employment; job guarantee

## 1. Introduction

People with intellectual disabilities remain one of the most excluded groups in the mainstream Australian labour market. Despite decades of reform across disability employment services, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), and wage-setting instruments, participation in open employment remains very low. In Australia, from the advent of the Disability Services Act of 1986, the term 'supported employment services' has been deployed by the Commonwealth government to refer to services for those people who are 'unlikely' to gain competitive employment at or above the award wage and 'need substantial ongoing support to obtain or retain paid employment' [1]. Unlike international usage of the term 'supported employment' (for example, in the United States), supported employment services were aligned with segregated employment settings. Previously termed sheltered workshops, in Australia, these settings were labelled as 'disability business services' or 'business enterprises' in the 2000s. From 2008, these services have been known as Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs). They predominantly employ people with an intellectual disability or Down syndrome on a productivity-based subminimum

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wage, and the work is typically manual [1]. While there are policy changes at present, historically, these roles operated like a guaranteed job for people diagnosed as having an intellectual disability or with Down syndrome.

A growing policy conversation is emerging around the potential for job guarantee (JG) schemes, publicly funded programs that offer employment as a right to anyone willing and able to work. Advocated by Modern Monetary Theory economists and social justice advocates alike, job guarantees are proposed as a structural response to unemployment, moving beyond welfare supports or activation programs. While job guarantees have been discussed in relation to youth unemployment, regional revitalization, and the green economy, there has been little analysis of what such models would mean for people with disability, particularly those currently in supported employment. This paper shifts the question from whether people with disabilities would want a job guarantee to what supported employment settings can teach us about how to design one. Drawing on qualitative data from a large multi-site study of ADEs (disability enterprises), we explore the perspectives of supported employees and staff to identify features that might be replicated, and those that must be avoided, if a job guarantee is to be inclusive, rights-based, and enabling of genuine economic participation for people with intellectual disability. This has broader implications for how a job guarantee program might be designed.

### *1.1. Supported Employment in Australia*

While current data are absent, it was estimated in 2022 that there were 477 ADEs in Australia, operated by 147 organisations. In total, they employ approximately 16,000 people [2]. There is very little transition from ADEs to open employment, with recent figures showing 3.1% of 15–24 year olds moving from an ADE to open employment and only 1% for people aged over 25 [3]. Similar results are found internationally, with very low employment transition rates for people with an intellectual disability [4]. While some research suggests that supported employment settings can provide an inclusive environment that caters to differing abilities and needs [5], people with an intellectual disability have expressed a preference for social enterprise and open employment opportunities rather than segregated supported employment settings [6,7].

As segregated work environments, ADEs are considered a risk setting for exploitation, violence and abuse [1]. Historically, policy settings and service delivery practices have directed school leavers with an intellectual disability into ADEs or segregated day programs as a first option, and, as data have revealed, transition out of an ADE is very unlikely [1]. The Disability Royal Commission advised that open and inclusive workplaces should be a first choice for students leaving school. Commissioners held different opinions on whether ADEs ought to be phased out completely or reformed. Although many ADEs now identify as social enterprises, the Commission believed there still has not been enough change within ADEs to consider them an inclusive, community-facing work setting with a diverse workforce and opportunities for training and transition into mainstream employment [1]. Given differences in terminology, from this point forward in this paper, we will refer to these organisations as disability enterprises.

People with a permanent physical, intellectual or psychiatric impairment deemed unable to work for at least 15 hours per week are also eligible for the Disability Support Pension [1]. Due to the low wages paid, working within a disability enterprise does not usually impact the receipt of the Disability Support Pension because the amount earned each week is below the income threshold. However, working in open employment on full award wages often reduces the pension amount received, and means that the working person is required to report their income, which has been cited as a key disincentive to working in open employment [1]. In addition, there is the possibility of job losses if supported

employment providers are required to increase wages paid to people significantly [8]. The Disability Royal Commission was adamant about the need for significant policy reform in relation to supported employment. Any changes to the Disability Support Pension and employment policies potentially impact whether people have a 'guaranteed job.'

### *1.2. Job Guarantee and Universal Basic Income Models*

Both JG and Universal Basic Income (UBI) policy ideas are presented as solving the problems of long-term unemployment and precarious employment, welfare reform, and the future challenge of job automation. While the JG and UBI are potentially addressing different but interrelated problems, unemployment and welfare reform, they are often seen as competitive policy positions and compared with each other. The UBI provides every citizen with a minimum level of income and advocates highlight the administrative efficiency of this reform and its potential to enable greater leisure time and less focus on work as such a vital component of our lives [9]. There are some who consider its reimagination of work and leisure balance as appealing relative to the JG [9]; however, it is also far more costly relative to a JG [10]. This means there would have to be far more radical change to the taxation system for such a scheme to work and not be inflationary. There is a risk that such a scheme could create inflationary pressure, which disproportionally impacts low-income families; thus, they would still be reliant on precarious employment to meet their financial needs [10]. There is also the political challenge of implementing such a scheme, given that emotional intensity is stronger for anticipated loss relative to anticipated gain [11], and so a reform in which lots of people will pay more tax will be very difficult to implement. At present, there is not a fully funded UBI model that removes any need for conditionality that would be both politically and economically palatable [12].

The main proposal of a JG provides a guaranteed job for every citizen who wants one at whatever time fraction they prefer [13–15]. All positions would be paid at the minimum wage and be entry-level positions. Unlike a UBI, it would be a counter-cyclical policy, which would automatically stabilise employment levels irrespective of the current economic conditions, whether the economy is growing or experiencing recession. It is an example of an adaptive policy with an inbuilt adaptive mechanism to address a social determinant of health in employment [16]. Critiques of the JG relate to the ability of local areas to find enough jobs [17] and how to differentiate between core government services and those roles that can be expendable as economic conditions change [18]. The challenge is that JG roles will predominantly be funded by the state, but cannot be essential services, need to be performed by unskilled workers, and need to be meaningful but expendable roles as economic conditions change and private sector employment opportunities increase. The challenges identified include determining whether a government administration could expand and contract the JG as quickly as required [18], defining whether the jobs could fulfill both a social purpose and provide personal value [18], and that the examples of JG jobs are sometimes professional roles that are not minimum wage and require university qualifications [9].

Proponents of JG contend that it stabilises the economy while enhancing equity, wellbeing, and inclusion. Critics caution that poorly designed schemes risk becoming make-work programs or displacing private employment. Importantly, few JG models have explicitly considered the needs and aspirations of people with intellectual disability, despite the group's high unemployment rates and structural exclusion from many forms of work. This is a curious omission, as many jurisdictions, including Australia, have been implementing JG-type programs for this cohort. The aim of this study was to understand the perspectives of supported employees and support staff about the experiences within a disability enterprise and some of the potential benefits and risks associated with having a

'guaranteed job.' Having firsthand experience of a JG-type program funded by the state, this cohort is well placed to provide insights on the potential benefits and pitfalls of such a scheme. This research is also timely in Australia, given the current policy reform underway.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The dataset derives from a project funded through the Department of Social Services' Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) program. This study set out to identify organisational features within supported employment services that enable successful transitions into open employment. A complementary objective was to examine structures and practices that foster inclusion and well-being. Given the need for depth, particularly in understanding how culture, structure and day-to-day operations shape employment transitions, a case-study design was adopted [19,20].

Participants from ten organisations participated in the interviews. Each of these organisations offered a spectrum of roles, from traditional supported employment typical of disability enterprises to more community-facing positions, all with varying levels of on-the-job support. These organisations were purposefully selected because they had a track record, unusual in the sector, of supporting moves into open employment. In practice, they operated more like social enterprises with outward-facing roles, aligning with evidence linking social enterprise models to health and wellbeing benefits [21]. However, for the sake of clarity, we will continue to use the term disability enterprise, as the majority of employees do have some form of intellectual disability. Some of these organisations classify themselves as social enterprises, whereas other organisations were more traditional ADEs.

Altogether, 77 semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore how each organisation supported transitions and health and well-being: 25 with supported employees, 46 with staff and managers, and six with partner-organisation representatives. One organisation had been engaged in the project for four years and one organisation for two years, and the remaining organisations had one year of involvement. Most data were collected at Organisation 1 (33 interviews), with between two and seven interviews conducted at the other organisations. While some interviews occurred on-site, the majority were held online.

Interview eligibility included managers and staff, employees with an intellectual disability, and open employers with experience employing people with an intellectual disability. Supported employees needed prior experience attempting open employment and sufficient verbal communication to participate. The research team did not access formal diagnostic records, but most supported-employee participants were understood to have intellectual disability and neurodivergent characteristics. Information about this study was shared in team meetings; interested supported employees informed their manager, who then arranged an interview time with the researcher. Staff and managers contacted the researcher directly. All participants received a Plain Language Statement, with an Easy Read version available; information could be read aloud where needed.

A semi-structured guide targeted two domains: (1) processes for moving from supported to open employment; and (2) workplace supports for health and well-being. Staff and partner-organisation interviews examined the range of structures and supports required to transition people to open employment and some of the barriers and facilitators of this process. This was the main focus of this project, and, hence, there was over-sampling of support staff and managers, as the research team was interested in organisational design, which supported employees had less knowledge about.

Questions for participants with intellectual disability were simplified and less explicitly organisational to match communication needs. These questions focused on positive and negative aspects of their jobs, what supports they think are helpful, and any experience in transition to mainstream employment. Interviews averaged one hour, were audio-

recorded, and were professionally transcribed. Co-researchers with an intellectual disability themselves helped to facilitate the interviews, with some participants in year 4 of the project.

We undertook a hybrid inductive and deductive thematic analysis, using an abductive stance to consider what the data revealed about the implementation of a JG-type program and its potential benefits and risks. Consistent with qualitative best practice, the data collection and analytic procedures are detailed [22–24]. To enhance rigour and reduce bias, two authors conducted the interviews and independently coded transcripts (researcher triangulation) [25]. Initial coding identified themes concerning organisational influences on employment transition and health and well-being outcomes [26,27] through iterative, line-by-line reading and categorisation. In phase 2, we developed an analytic frame during analysis, organising the inductive codes around emerging considerations of JG benefits and risks, refining categories as patterns accumulated [24]. The final thematic framework was refined collaboratively by all authors, and then sense-checked in a meeting with staff representatives from participating organisations who served on the project steering committee [23]. Ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee, Swinburne University of Technology.

## 3. Results

Our findings are organised into two overarching themes: (1) positive features of disability enterprises that can inform inclusive JG design, and (2) limitations of disability enterprises that highlight risks and constraints relevant to JG implementation. The subthemes of the positive features are skill development, holistic support, social connection and belonging, variety, a sense of purpose, and creating a bridge to employers. The limitations are challenges to scale, lack of demand, low expectations, lack of support in transition, and lack of pathway options, such as a two-way transition.

### *3.1. Positive Features to Inform a JG Model*

#### 3.1.1. Skill Development

Supported employment contexts can provide specialist training environments to learn specific job skills. The following quotes highlight the importance of supported, skills-based learning environments and individualised supervisory approaches. One staff member described how a young woman with autism, despite having technical skills in hair and makeup, initially struggled with social interaction and communication. Through participation in small group settings, she was able to practise and build these skills gradually. A supported employee similarly emphasised how a supervisor's tailored teaching style, aligned to his learning preferences, was critical to his success and confidence on the job. Together, these examples illustrate how adapted communication, trusted relationships, and scaffolded practice can support meaningful learning.

> *'She could do the hairdressing and makeup, but she had a lot of barriers around her interactions, communication skills and managing that side of things due to her autism. So she practised in some of our groups to begin with and learnt some skills.'* (Organisation 1, Staff 10)

> *'And as I said to [Employer] a few days ago, "Don't pull any punches with me. Give it to me straight. If I make a mistake, tell me. I'd rather hear than not hear." So, she said, "[Participant Name], I will be honest with you. And if you make a mistake, I'll tell you." And that's what she's done. So, my ultimate goal is to make her—let her do her job so I can do my job. And not have her looking over my shoulder all the time to make sure she can rely on me to do a good job.'* (Organisation 3, supported employee 15)

These examples highlight the need to ensure that JG programs invest in specialised skill development within real work settings. By embedding learning within the flow of work, supported by trusted supervisors and small group practice, participants can build both technical and interpersonal capabilities in a way that feels purposeful and tailored. This is an advantage compared with a pre-employment training program. This approach highlights that a JG program needs to offer roles that enable skill development and career development skills aligned to potential future employers. The first quote about hairdressing also highlights the need for cultural change in open employment, with workplace practices shifting to accommodate neurodiversity rather than expecting individuals to conform to standardised communication norms.

#### 3.1.2. Holistic Support

Another key element of the work of these disability enterprises is providing holistic support. There were many examples provided of doing welfare checks, more informal processes to 'check in' and structured ways of connecting socially as described in one of the following quotes. Staff also described going well beyond formal job roles to fill service gaps, supporting participants with healthcare appointments, welfare checks, and even basic needs like lunch or transport. This reflects a deep organisational commitment to well-being and continuity of care, which is often lacking in mainstream employment models. The following quotes from support staff and supported employees illustrate how they are provided support with healthcare and housing, as examples.

> *"It's really good that the support staff outside, and the supported employee staff talk and liaise together, with the client's permission, and that's really positive as part of a wraparound service . . . They get to know the clients really well, and they get to know what's happening outside their work as well."* (Organisation 2, staff 18)

> *"They may not have support coordination. They may not have some core supports in their plan . . . There's a gap. And our team do fill that. They assist with doctors' appointments. They've been assisting people with vaccination appointments and getting prepared for that."* (Organisation 1, Staff 1)

> *"They've helped me a lot, with houses and everything in the past".* (Organisation 1, Supported Employee 4)

> *"They can help us out with outside problems as well".* (Organisation 1, Supported Employee 1)

In the context of a JG, these practices suggest that embedding wraparound supports may be a critical design feature, especially for people facing complex barriers. This model sees employment as part of a broader web of care, inclusion, and life stability, which are obviously important in their own right but are also necessary components to building confidence within the workplace.

#### 3.1.3. Social Connection and Belonging

A consistent theme across the interviews is the importance of social connection, belonging, and peer relationships in supported employment settings. For many employees, one of the components of the workplace that they highly value is the sense of connection and community. Supported employees described the emotional value of working with people who support them and being part of a friendly environment. The following quotes illustrate how strong social connections have developed, and that becomes a motivating factor in wanting to stay with their current employer.

> *"But a lot of them want to stay here because it's where their friends are, they feel safe."* (Organisation 1, Staff 9)

> *"The thing that I liked about work was we all work together, and we all work in like a big family. The activities that they've got, on the weekends, on a Saturday, we go out for dinner on every second Saturday . . . And we get treated as equals, as if we're out in open employment."* (Organisation 6, supported employee 20)

> *"It's getting increasingly difficult to get our supported employees who have been there a long time to contemplate open employment because it's just such a holistic environment, and it's mainly around being able to see people like themselves."* (Organisation 11, staff 44)

As the last quote references, the desire to remain in supported employment is closely tied to social connections. Being among peers with similar experiences can reduce anxiety and increase confidence, and some participants found it difficult to contemplate open employment precisely because it might mean losing that sense of connection. In designing a JG, these insights suggest that peer connection and psychological safety are not optional extras, but core features of inclusive work. This also highlights one of the tensions about transitions, which is how a sense of community and belonging can be preserved in mainstream employment settings.

#### 3.1.4. Variety

Another important element of the disability employment experience is having a variety of roles. Participants spoke about the central role that variety and task diversity play in creating meaningful and engaging work experiences for supported employees. Several participants expressed enjoyment in being able to move between different roles, whether it was front-of-house customer service, nursery work, cooking, or occasional labelling. The following quotes highlight that choice, stimulation, and personal interest are critical to job satisfaction:

> *'The variety is probably right up there. But also being front of house, that's my main role. . . . And the customers are great. They're polite, they'll have a joke with you—yeah, they're just really good, and very respectful.'* (Organisation 1, Supported Employee 2)

> *"I like a bit of everything. I love working at [organisation] and also some of the labelling things sometimes for something different."* (Organisation 1, Supported Employee 9)

> *"I think we're really lucky in terms of we have multiple sites and different supports, we've got our centre base, we've got our in-home support, supported living."* (Organisation 2, staff 42)

Staff echoed this sentiment, noting that some individuals who trialled open employment chose to return to the supported workplace due to the monotony of mainstream roles. A supported employee also described the challenge of being bored in a previous volunteer role where there was a lack of purpose in the tasks, which is another theme that will be explored:

> *"Variety of work, when we've had people go into open employment and come back, it's because they're bored doing the same thing every day, whereas here we've got variety and upskilling. So, they see that as a barrier."* (Organisation 1, Staff 6)

> *"So this a volunteer workplace which was a small library where I was meant to be—when I first started there it was okay, but then once she got with more workers I sort of like what should I do for the hour or two . . ."Oh, just cut bookmarks for the last hour or so". . . It was really just boring."* (Organisation 11, supported employee 17)

Other staff reported getting in touch with the employer to discuss incorporating different tasks in order to avoid repetition and ensure the open employment position was successful:

> *"I did have a participant who was working in open employment and I noticed that they had become bored and disinterested at work. So I spoke with them and, obviously, sometimes they don't really talk about it. So when I spoke with their mum and that's when she said to me, 'He's becoming a bit uninterested because it's quite repetitive'. And so we got in contact with the employer and we suggested that maybe a bit more variety of tasks would be good."* (Organisation 1, staff 14)

In contrast, the supported setting offered opportunities for upskilling, rotation, and adaptation to individual preferences, features that sustained engagement over time. For a JG program to succeed, it must, therefore, avoid replicating the narrow, repetitive roles that sometimes characterise entry-level employment. Instead, the design should prioritise job crafting, cross-training, and progression pathways that respond to diverse interests and capabilities, recognising that variety is a key ingredient of inclusive work.

#### 3.1.5. Sense of Purpose

A theme related to variety is having a sense of purpose in the role. The first quote highlights the sense of purpose and intrinsic motivation that supported employees can derive from their work. They described that pride and not pay was their core motivator, describing how being trusted and receiving positive feedback from co-workers affirmed their role and contribution. The second quote from another stakeholder reflects on the importance of assigning tasks that are clearly needed and valued, rather than tokenistic activities. When individuals understand that their efforts matter to the team and to the organisation's functioning, it strengthens their engagement and identity as a capable worker:

> *"I take a lot of pride in what I do. I'm not somebody who comes to [organisation] and just goes through the motions and say, pay me . . . the money doesn't motivate me. The pride motivates me. And receiving good feedback from the people who are working for me or are working with me. To receive good feedback from them is the icing on the cake for me . . . To know that they can rely on me to do a good job, which means they don't have to look over my shoulder."* (Organisation 3, Supported Employee 15)

> *"Oh I think give them something that we do need to have, not just "you stand over there and rip the piece of paper to 50 pieces for me every day". It needs to be something that they know we need to have happen and then they know that they're contributing and they know that it is well appreciated, that what they're doing is a good job."* (Organisation 2, Employer 1)

What purposeful and meaningful work is can differ depending on the strengths and preferences of the individual. As one staff member explains:

> *"The funding we get is to support them in employment. So that's to provide a safe working area; job carving—so finding a job that they can actually do, that's meaningful. So whether that's—we have such a varied group of people. We have one guy and he stamps a number onto a brown paper bag, which is part of our assembly line. And loves it. Super excited coming to work. Absolutely loves it. So we've job carved out that one step, just for him. And then you've got other guys that we're teaching how to use a ride-on mower."* (Organisation 3, staff 24)

For a JG model, these insights reinforce the need to ensure that roles are genuinely purposeful. This means creating jobs that contribute to real outcomes, fostering mutual respect between team members, and cultivating work environments where contribution and recognition are clearly visible.

#### 3.1.6. Creating a Transition Pathway with Mainstream Employers

For a JG program to be successful, it may also need to develop a structured transition process from supported to mainstream employment. This would involve developing relationships between managers and support staff across organisations to coordinate job-matching and the transition process. Part of this also involves supporting the mainstream employer once the staff have transitioned. One staff member described how the organisation's connection with employers allows for responsive, two-way communication so that if issues arise, they can be addressed quickly and collaboratively. Another recounted the scepticism of a mainstream employer, which was overcome through concrete examples of skills (e.g., using hedgers and brush cutters), leading to an immediate job opportunity.

> *'. . . it's about [organisation] building those relationships with the employers so that if there's a hiccup, they can come to us'* (Organisation 1, staff 11)

> *'They [open employer] said "So what? Someone with disability can jump on a ride-on mower?". . . I said, "Well, they can actually—they can chop trees, they can use brush cutters, they can use petrol hedgers," and they're going, "Well, can they just start coming to mow our lawn . . . ?" Absolutely.'* (Organisation 1, staff 9)

Together, these quotes demonstrate that successful transitions depend on building organisational capacity and relationships with employers and providing continuity of support. For a JG program to enable genuine mobility, it will need to invest in the time to develop relationships and build the capacity of mainstream employers. The advantage of having staff from the disability enterprise leading this work is that they have intimate knowledge of the capabilities of their employees and can pass along this information. Given the bespoke nature of that organisational capacity building and support, the challenge is how to scale such a model.

### *3.2. Possible Limitations of a JG Model*

#### 3.2.1. Challenges to Scale

One of the challenges identified by disability enterprises that might have relevance for a JG program is the difficulty of scaling transition. The following quote highlights how, at present, training and job placement are bespoke activities around the needs of an individual:

> *"There's got to be some training around that individual. If you've got an employer that's taking on one person and giving them a role within their organisation, they can actually be specific and very tailored around what that person needs."* (Organisation 1, Staff 7)

The quote points to a potential tension for any JG program that the need for bespoke and tailored onboarding and job design does not automatically scale when dozens of employers, roles, and shift patterns are involved. A single manager can be assisted to customise tasks, pacing, and coaching for one worker, but this is not scalable across different businesses and business units. The challenge is to create a modular-type approach that still enables flexibility.

Some organisations are moving in this direction with respect to some standard training and support packages they provide, but again, they are developing these processes and training supports themselves, yet these remain locally developed and uneven, with no sector benchmarks/industry standards. The following organisations are developing these processes themselves:

> *"So we've got someone in our senior leadership team who specifically works on the employment partnerships . . . we're making sure that it's actually beneficial for the workplace culture that they have all their education upfront, and the training around supporting*

> *people who are neurodivergent and have disability, as well as specifically supporting individual employees."* (Organisation 11, staff 44)

> *"Part of my role is training employers, as well, on how to train people with disability, so I've developed content on practical guidance strategies, methodologies, strategies, all these things on actually how to train. And I delivered this to employers and the idea is that we equip them with the skills needed to successfully hire and support someone with disability."* (Organisation 8, staff 35)

This underscores the need for light fidelity standards, and clear and minimal requirements for what must happen every time, paired with explicit room for local adaptation so quality is repeatable without being rigid.

#### 3.2.2. Lack of Demand

Part of the reason for the lack of scale is that creating demand is difficult. At the moment, supported employers are trying to find mainstream employers that have a similar set of values, and this can limit how many options there are, as illustrated by this support staff member:

> *'If the employer has that quality and has a really good culture at their workplace where they are inclusive and they're open minded and they're willing to perhaps change things, . . . It very much comes down to their manager or management or the staff that work there to make sure that the person does feel included and does feel safe and happy at their workplace.'* (Organisation 1, staff 8)

The following quote shows that inclusive intent at the point of hiring does not guarantee an inclusive workplace, because day-to-day culture can become actively abusive and discriminatory. It also illustrates how a manager's values may not "filter down" when inclusion depends on one person's presence rather than being embedded in shared norms, supervision, and accountability across all staff:

> *"They employed her originally and completely well aware of who she was, her disability, her barriers, and her limitations but the employer, it was like a takeaway food café shop. But when the main person wasn't there, she was very badly bullied, she was told to get in a sink, that's where she belongs. Very discriminated against, laughed at, had food thrown at her, things like that."* (Organisation 4, staff 23)

These quotes highlight another scalability constraint: that inclusive, adaptable workplace cultures are valuable but not always easy to find. Goodwill cannot be relied on as the primary demand strategy. JG outcomes cannot depend on finding exceptional managers; otherwise, growth will stall. A JG where transition is scalable must, therefore, systematise inclusion across the JG organisations and mainstream employers that take JG employees (brief supervisor training, simple toolkits, buddy time, and rapid coaching access) and incentivise it, so acceptable practice is repeatable across all workplaces, not just the few exemplars.

#### 3.2.3. Low Expectations

Another potential risk is that a JG program reinforces a perception that people with disabilities, particularly intellectual disabilities, are not able to work in mainstream roles and should stay in a JG program. This quote relates to discriminatory attitudes with respect to receiving disability support pension as a reason not to attempt work. The same type of attitudes could prevail in a JG, and people are not encouraged to attempt mainstream employment:

> *'I have been to [DES] and they pushed me away because I was with Centrelink and they said, 'You don't need a job, you're on Centrelink [i.e., income support], so you don't need a job'.* (Organisation 1, Supported Employee 1)

This quote exposes gatekeeping and low expectations within parts of the employment services system: income support status is treated as a reason not to pursue work. It signals misaligned incentives and role confusion between government programs, and a potential culture whereby people with disabilities are not expected to work. For a JG, commissioning should make "access to work" in mainstream the default option with proactive outreach, and Key Performance Indicators (KPI)s that reward engagement and job trials rather than screening people out.

#### 3.2.4. Lack of Support in the Transition Process

Another challenge is a lack of support provided when moving to a mainstream employer, which is exemplified in the following two quotes:

> *"So personally, I only had one day for training. And they don't really care about disability. They just want to get employees straight to work. And I asked for help. No one could help me because of how many deliveries they are receiving. And I felt like—not just everyone, it's just only me. Because I told them I have an intellectual disability, I need help. I need someone to help me with this. Nobody, because they're all too busy for their own things."* (Organisation 3, supported employee 15)

> *"I thought I was selling the products but I was on cashier, which is not my strength, with money. And I was only working there for two weeks. They'd showed me one time how to use the till, but . . . I work by being shown things a couple of times. They walked in front of me and did it themselves, didn't explain what they were doing or anything . . . they didn't give me a chance, so I was only working there for two weeks . . . I wasn't really comfortable with that and I was always calling and asking, "How do I do this, how do I do that?"* (Organisation 1, Supported Employee 8)

These quotes highlight that transition can be derailed if there is not a period of intensive, hands-on support required when a person with intellectual disability transitions into a new role. In practice, early weeks often involve task redesign, on-the-job coaching, supervisor training, and problem solving across transport, routines, and communication.

A JG model should, therefore, budget for and operationalise a high-touch onboarding phase that sits "inside" the workplace. This means embedded job coaches (or "workplace inclusion specialists"), scheduled supervisor check-ins, prompt adjustments to tasks and hours, and rapid-response troubleshooting. Funding needs to be flexible enough to follow the worker across employers and provide real-time coaching, which can be tapered over time. Commissioning and accountability need to reflect this gap. JG providers would need to be contracted to deliver measurable *in-work* supports and employer capability building, not just placement activity.

The previous DES (government program) providers were not consistently funded or configured to deliver this depth of in situ support, which leaves employers and workers to carry risk at precisely the moment when confidence and capability are still forming. Some managers and support workers from disability enterprises were doing this in-kind. For example, by slowly phasing out support via a 'fade-out plan', this support was often offered in-kind:

> *". . . a fade-out plan in that, okay, as the worker builds their confidence and skills, there's less of a need for the [organisation] staff to be involved. But ideally, to still be available to jump in, especially with mental health clients, where there's episodic things."* (Organisation 2, staff 18)

Another was able to use some NDIS funding to keep a mentor relationship going at the new employer:

> *"We also see that—so what we really want to be doing when we support someone to move into a new role is that they no longer work at [social enterprise] as a trainee, they then become a graduate where they then—they're sort of like our NDIS client. So they still use their funding on the mentor, but they're no longer a staff member of ours."* (Organisation 11, staff 44)

But relying on NDIS funding was also problematic, as it can be difficult to shift plans:

> *'I got a job trial out at [organisation] and was offered a place in that, but I had to sort out my NDIS funding for it, and then that was start of November last year. Of course, I would have had to have a plan review and being so close to Christmas they sort of went, "We won't do it until next year."'* (Organisation 1, Supported Employee 3)

This quote illustrates how administrative timing and funding rigidity can derail otherwise viable transitions. The worker secured a trial and offer, but NDIS plan–review cycles introduced delays that created a risk for the job opportunity. For a JG, the lesson is to decouple commencement from external review timetables via provisional/bridge funding, presumptive eligibility for initial in-work supports, and rapid approvals so placements can begin when offers are made, not when the calendar allows.

> *"... with the clients, fear of moving out of supported employment to open employment, overcoming those fears around a big jump to—in their eyes—and getting out of their comfort zone, and all the unknowns with that, and working through that. That would be one challenge. The fear of losing the pension, potentially, as well, as a safety net financially; and what if things go wrong and it doesn't work out, then where am I, sort of thing. They're some of the challenges from that person centred approach"* (Organisation 2, staff 19)

#### 3.2.5. Need for Two-Way Transition

Staff noted that some people with intellectual disability choose to return to supported employment after trialling open employment, indicating that policy should enable flexibility, which, presently, it does not:

> *'Some people do go into open employment but they want to come back because they feel more supported and safe and it's familiar, and there is that extra support there. It can be really scary for people to go from support and employment to open employment because they may really want to do it but it's just too overwhelming. And it's for anyone that [when] you do start new work, you don't usually know the people, it's a new place environmentally.'* (Organisation 1, Staff 8)

> *"We actually placed somebody who went out externally who came back as well."* (Organisation 3, staff 20)

Part of the challenge in addressing this issue is making mainstream employment more welcoming and inclusive, which has been addressed in previous themes:

> *'They get comfortable here, they're really good, they love their job, then they go to open employment and there is no support there ... There are different expectations of them.'* (Organisation 1, Staff 4)

> *'... people don't want to leave [organisation] because it's a safe, supported environment and I get that'* (Organisation 1, Staff 12)

Another aspect is enabling ease of transition between supported and mainstream employment, and this is something that a JG program might be able to address successfully:

> *'She would work two days a week and her job was just to put paper onto the conveyor belt. That was it. I would go over there to say, "Hi," and she wouldn't make eye contact at all. Very shy and very timid. I could tell that she was more capable than what the job they had her doing. So, I started rotating. She started doing some jobs there, got to know people more . . . Now she's gone to open employment for three months and she came back and she's got some other skills now. Now she's gone into open employment again for another few months.'* (Organisation 1, Staff 6)

This quote highlights the need for flexible, reversible pathways, and that is something that could be designed within a JG program. Some people trial open employment but prefer to return to supported employment for safety, familiarity, and higher support. Policy should enable ease of re-entries, with tapered supports, handovers, and options to step up or down intensity as needed. The flexibility of a JG, combined with increased focus on making mainstream employment more inclusive, should assist in the transition process.

## 4. Discussion

This study examined how features of supported employment might inform the design of an inclusive JG model for people with intellectual disabilities and the implications for a JG model broadly. Drawing on interviews with supported employees and staff, we identified both enabling conditions and structural constraints that offer insights for policy design. Here, we reflect on these findings in relation to four interlinked considerations: the benefits of a job guarantee, design of inclusive employment settings, the risks of replicating segregation, and the need for investment in supports and transitions. This paper will conclude with what these results highlight about the broader economic logic of the employment system and job guarantees.

The findings reinforce previous research on job satisfaction among people with intellectual disabilities, particularly the importance of social ties and support [28–31]. Other important elements of well-being include having a sense of purpose, variety in tasks, and skill development [32]. These qualitative findings support previous quantitative studies, which consistently report high job satisfaction among people with intellectual disabilities across diverse employment settings [33]. However, these estimates are likely inflated by acquiescence bias, the tendency to agree with statements regardless of content, especially in structured surveys [34]. A further limitation is the absence of a validated, easy-read job-satisfaction instrument designed specifically for this cohort, leading researchers to rely on adapted tools with uncertain accessibility and validity [31].

More broadly, research has shown that unemployment is associated with poorer mental health, such as increased risk of depression [35]. Long-term unemployment, defined as being without paid work or looking for work for a year or more, is also associated with greater difficulty in finding future work, skill loss, stigma, lower incomes and financial stress [36]. From the perspective of a JG, having supported employment would seem to be preferable from a well-being perspective, which is one of the arguments put forward for such a scheme [15]. This study highlights that well-being benefits can be derived from a supported employment experience. People experiencing long-term unemployment are far more likely to cite a physical disability or ill health as their primary barrier to finding work [36]. While the cohort of this paper focused on people with intellectual disability, it does highlight that a JG scheme will need to give particular consideration to the needs of people with disabilities.

These findings highlight the type of work environment in which people with intellectual disabilities can prosper as employees. The findings align with the broader disability employment literature, highlighting the role of psychological safety, meaningful routines, and peer connection in promoting well-being and job satisfaction among this cohort [32].

For JG programs to be inclusive, they must adopt similar principles. This means creating roles that are structured in ways that support learning, confidence building, and well-being. Supervision models must be adequately resourced, with training for supervisors in disability-inclusive practice. Opportunities for peer support and social engagement should be built into workplace design. The need for embedded support structures emerged strongly in this study. Supervisors often acted as informal case managers, mentors, and counsellors. Yet these roles were often unrecognised and under-resourced. In a job guarantee model, particularly one aiming to include individuals with complex needs, such supports must be formalised and funded.

At the same time, our findings underscore the risks of replicating ADE-style segregation within a JG. While many participants found ADEs safe and supportive, they also expressed frustration at being disconnected from the wider community and offered few pathways to advance or transition. Staff echoed these concerns, pointing to structural inertia and a culture of risk aversion that can inadvertently limit people's growth. Within Westernised countries such as Australia, economic participation continues to be viewed through a neoliberal lens, which predicates a narrow and individualised view of productivity [37]. The increasingly complex labour market has resulted in fewer of the routine and manual jobs people with intellectual disability traditionally undertook, reinforcing the broad view that they are unsuitable for work in the mainstream labour market. This exclusion has been based on attitudes and discourse about their capacity and the perception of significant barriers to employment [38]. The continuing existence of segregated spaces for people with intellectual disabilities also perpetuates their absence from mainstream workplaces and reinforces community expectations. Negative views of intellectual disability are therefore particularly prominent within the context of economic participation, which can lead to segregated settings, which the Disability Royal Commission strongly opposed [1]. JG-type organisations could pose similar risks of segregation depending on how the jobs were designed, the level of community inclusion, and the pathways out of a JG role into mainstream employment.

Some disability enterprises provide the promise of a guaranteed job but may not necessarily focus on community inclusion. Bill et al. [39], like other JG authors, argue that the state should provide the quantum of JG jobs (p. 210). This reduces the risks of replacing actual jobs in industry, called 'dead weight loss' if placements that would have occurred in the absence of financial assistance are subsidised [39]. However, from a design point of view, it also has the potential risk of becoming a segregated-type model if the people with disabilities cannot transition out of a JG role and the quality of the JG roles themselves. For job guarantees to promote equity, they must resist the temptation to create parallel employment systems for people with disability. Instead, programs should prioritise integrated, community-facing roles that offer exposure to diverse environments and pathways into mainstream work.

Another potential challenge is supporting the process of transition. Currently, transition rates between supported and mainstream employment are very low [40]. Factors that increase the chances of transition include customised training, job coaching, community-facing roles, and networks with open employers [41]. Furthermore, many of these supports also need to be provided in the mainstream employment settings for a successful employment outcome. One of the tensions from a JG design is that the current disability enterprise roles are often aligned with mainstream industry positions to facilitate transition. This provides supported employees with confidence that they can succeed in those tasks. The challenge from a JG design perspective is that it should not replace mainstream employment opportunities; otherwise, this undercuts one of the central planks of a JG design, as mainstream employers are then competing with subsidised roles funded by the state.

There is also the related critique of whether the jobs could fulfill both a social purpose and provide personal value [18]. Thus, this will require a delicate balance of ensuring the roles are socially beneficial, having individual purpose, and preparing employees for mainstream employment without directly competing with or replacing mainstream roles and organisations.

A strength of this study was the use of in-depth qualitative interviews with supported employees and staff to surface the enabling conditions and structural constraints that may inform the design of an inclusive JG for people with intellectual disability. A key limitation is that the findings are derived from a specific employment context and, as such, the transferability of these design lessons to different disability employment models, or to future JG settings, cannot be assumed. Furthermore, given that transition rates between supported and mainstream employment remain very low, it is difficult to test which workplace and support features are necessary and sufficient for progression outcomes, or how these would operate at scale within a JG without reproducing segregated arrangements. Future research should, therefore, examine multiple case examples across different organisational types and regions, incorporate stronger accessible outcome measures, and test whether organisations without established transition pathways can make the operational and cultural changes required to support genuine community-facing roles and sustainable transitions.

## 5. Conclusions

This study reinforces the broader rationale for a JG model grounded in social equity rather than market efficiency. Current labour market systems rely on a reserve pool of unemployed workers to manage inflation, a logic that disproportionately excludes people with disabilities. This exclusion is not accidental; it is structured into the operation of our economic system. A JG represents a structural shift. By offering employment as a right rather than a reward, it challenges dominant narratives of productivity and worthiness. Yet to realise this potential, JG models must be co-designed with those most excluded, including people with intellectual disability. They must offer not just jobs, but meaningful roles, appropriate support, and genuine pathways.

In this sense, disability enterprises offer both cautionary and instructive lessons. They show what is possible when environments are tailored to individual needs, but also reveal the limitations of segregated, underfunded systems that lack ambition for inclusion. The challenge for JG advocates is to take the best of these insights, such as customisation, holistic support and transition pathways, and embed them in new, integrated models that expand the boundaries of what work can be. The results of this study highlight that the transition pathway needs to be of paramount importance when designing a JG program. Whether we rely on managed unemployment or implement a job guarantee, there remains a critical need for policies that reshape mainstream labour markets to build inclusive demand, removing systemic barriers, and supporting employers to engage workers with disabilities meaningfully. The goal must be equity of opportunity, not just access to employment. A well-designed JG model, co-developed with people with disabilities and aligned to broader inclusion reforms, can potentially be a powerful tool but only as one part of a wider policy suite aimed at building a truly inclusive economy.

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