



Understanding the
workforce experience of the NDIS

Longitudinal Research Project: YEAR THREE



Families,
Fairness
and Housing

Research project delivered by the Department of Families,
Fairness and Housing (formerly Department of Health
and Human Services) and conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs



Introduction

Future Research

The Victorian Disability Worker Commission may have future opportunities to pursue disability worker-related consultation and research. Notification of opportunities to participate in consultation or research will be noted in the Commission's newsletter. You can subscribe to the newsletter from the Disability Worker Commission website contact page <https://www.vdwc.vic.gov.au/about/contact-us> by selecting the 'Subscribe to periodic updates'.

For more information, events and resources to support Victoria's disability workforce visit: <https://www.vic.gov.au/victorias-workforce-plan-ndis>

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The images in this document depict actual services and recipients of services. This document may contain images of deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In this document, 'Aboriginal' refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. 'Indigenous' or 'Koori/Koorie' is retained when part of the title of a report, program or quotation.

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Understanding the workforce experience of the NDIS: longitudinal research project is a three-year study that aims to build an understanding of the disability workforce's experience of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Specifically, the research aims to understand workforce perceptions of the NDIS and the experience of transition, how the NDIS is impacting their work, and the skills and training the workforce needs under the NDIS. This helps the Victorian government to support the workforce through this time of unprecedented change. This research project forms a key component of *Keeping our sector strong - Victoria's Workforce Plan for the NDIS* (the Plan) and more specifically its objective to build intelligence on the disability workforce.

The 2020 research was the final year of the study and it expanded on findings gathered in previous years (2018 and 2019). This report is the third in the series and it presents key findings and recommendations from the third year of the longitudinal research. The results highlight both the challenges faced by the workforce in transitioning to the new scheme, and a range of opportunities to further support the workforce. The research was initially commissioned by the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet¹ and conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs, an independent research consultancy. Research has been guided by an Expert Advisory Panel, including representation from:

- The Health and Community Services Union (HACSU)
- Industrial Relations Victoria
- WorkSafe
- Office of the Victorian Skills Commissioner
- National Disability Services
- Victorian Disability Worker Commission
- 2 research participants
- The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (formerly Department of Health and Human Services)

¹ The workforce design team transitioned to the Disability and NDIS Branch within the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), currently Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, in early 2019. For the remainder the report DFFH will be referenced where relevant.

Why did we conduct the research?

In March 2013, legislation was passed in Australia to establish the NDIS, which aims to provide Australians with a permanent disability the “reasonable and necessary supports they need to live an ordinary life.” In Victoria, the NDIS was rolled out to different regions in stages, beginning in 2013 and ending in 2019.

The scheme involves a new way of funding disability services with funding being provided directly to people with a disability (NDIS participants) rather than disability support providers. Participants select who will provide their supports and services and can negotiate how these are delivered. This gives people with a disability more choice and control of their disability supports.

The NDIS has meant a big change for participants and also for people working in the disability sector. There continues to be a need for significant growth of the disability workforce to meet the increased demand for support. The NDIS also demands new skills and ways of working and it may affect the structure of the workforce and employment arrangements.

While some research about the workforce experiences of the NDIS has occurred in pockets of the sector, there was a need for broader research across Victoria on how the workforce in all disability settings and regions experienced the rollout over time. Improving the understanding of these issues means that the

Victorian Government, the National Disability Insurance Agency, and disability service providers can support the workforce during this time of unprecedented change. It will also help the Victorian Government build a workforce that is skilled, diverse and delivers high-quality, innovative support to achieve the best possible outcomes for people with disability.

How we conducted the research

The methodology and questions used in this research were designed in collaboration with experts from the sector: disability workers, service providers, the Health and Community Services Union, peak bodies, and government. Together, it was agreed that a survey was needed to measure the impact of the NDIS on the workforce over time, followed by qualitative research to understand the experiences of workers in greater depth.

A wide range of engagement strategies were used to encourage a diverse representation of disability workers. Workers registered for the study and completed an online survey via an email invitation. The survey included a range of closed and open-ended questions and gave workers the opportunity to register their interest to participate in further qualitative research. The question sets for the focus groups and in-depth interviews were more open-ended in nature, allowing workers to describe their experience in their own words.

In 2020, 752 workers participated in the survey, 334 of whom had participated in 2019 and 2018 and therefore were treated as longitudinal participants. The remaining 418 survey respondents had only participated in 2020 and were therefore deemed as new participants.

Throughout this report, findings from the survey are presented as statistics, and findings from focus groups and in-depth interviews are presented as summaries of workers’ words, and in direct quotes from workers. Qualitative research participant quotes have been included throughout the report to provide supporting data to the research findings. These quotes remain in their original form and have not been edited by the researchers, except where indicated using an ellipsis or square parentheses.

In addition to the survey, 74 workers also participated in the qualitative research in either; one of eight focus groups (n=31) or an individual in-depth interview (n=43) held online between 9 November to 4 December 2020.

A qualitative approach allows researchers to focus on the issues of most importance to research participants and probe in detail their views and experiences. Qualitative research provides an insight into the range of attitudes, behaviours and experiences that exist around a topic but does not tell researchers how common these findings are in the population as a whole.

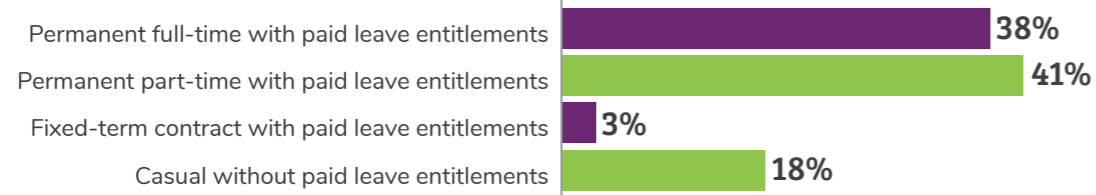


Who took part in the research in 2020?

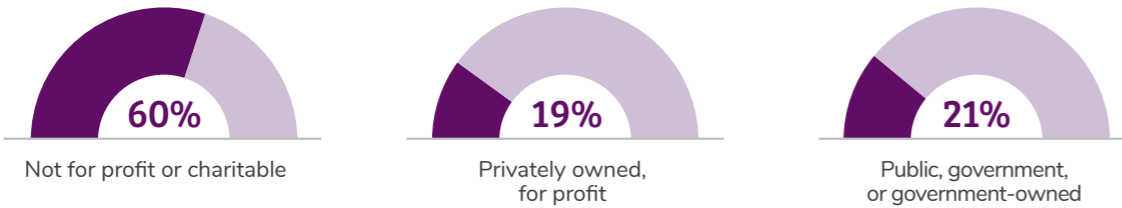
An effort was made to recruit people from all disability settings across Victoria. As in previous years, survey participants were most commonly aged 45-64. In 2020 there was a larger representation of workers located in regional Victoria than in previous years of the study. Overall, participants were more likely to be employed part-time in the non-for-profit or charitable sector. The majority worked in a residential setting and were members of the Health and Community Services Union. Key characteristics of survey participants are represented in figures below.

Who took part in the research in 2020?

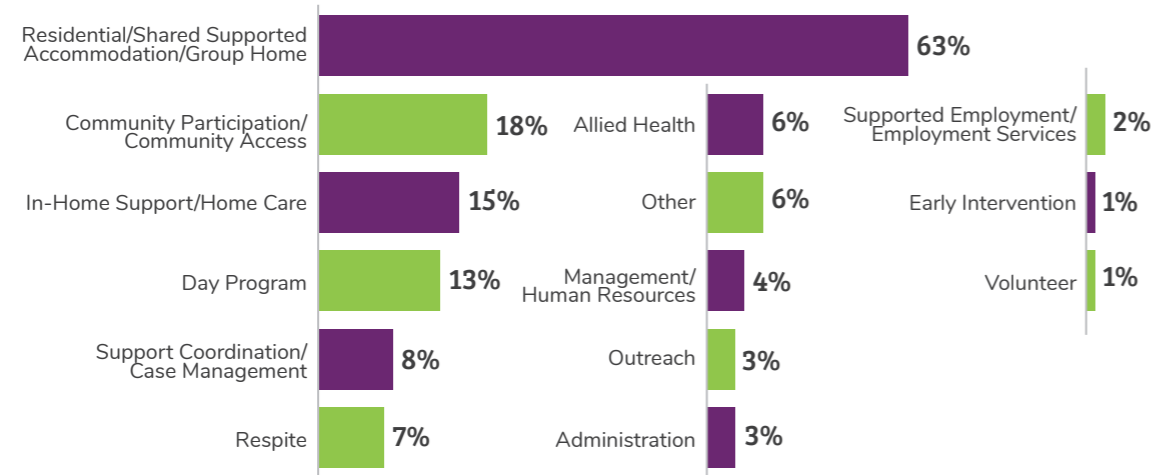
Form of Employment



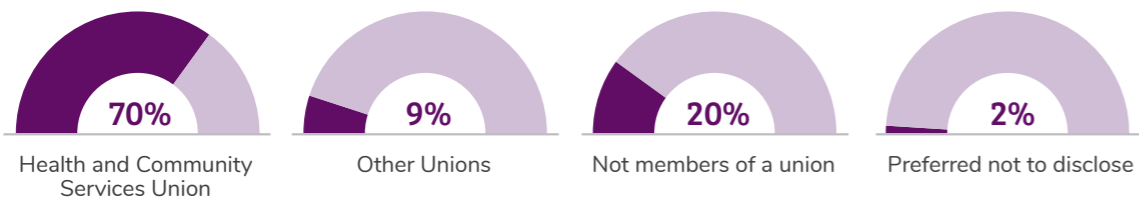
Sector



Disability Setting



Union Membership



What did we find?

Overall

The research identified positive change to the experiences of the workforce compared to 2018 and 2019. Workers continue to be passionate about their clients and their work, and there is general support for the NDIS's mission. Workers also consider that the NDIS has the potential to increase innovation and create new opportunities for workers. Self-reported levels of understanding and knowledge of the NDIS have also increased compared to previous study years. The proportion of the workforce who feel positive about the NDIS's ability to improve disability services in the future, and to enhance workers ability to support their clients has steadily increased over the life of the study.

While there have been improvements, there was some frustration expressed by workers in 2020. For instance, qualitative findings suggest that some workers believed that the NDIS model is not well-suited to certain client groups, particularly those with high support needs.

Key findings about how the workforce felt about their work in relation to the NDIS, their understanding and general perceptions of the NDIS, and workforce retention are also detailed in this report. These findings are also followed by a spotlight section on health, safety, and wellbeing.



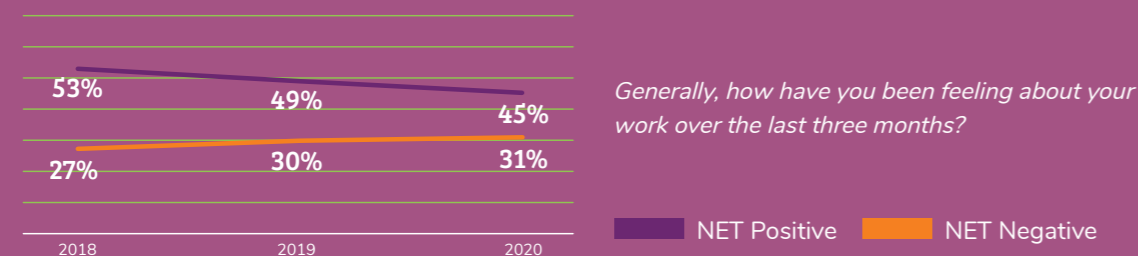
How disability workers are feeling about their work

Discontent about the NDIS was still evident amongst the workforce however anxiety and uncertainty were reducing.

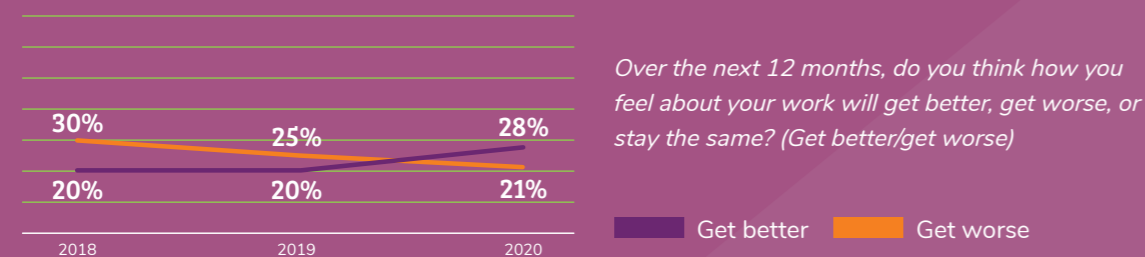
Work sentiment over time

Workers were asked two key questions to quantify their feelings about their work.

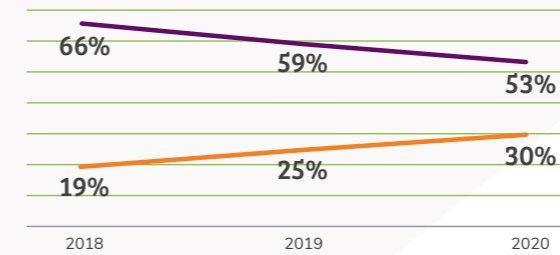
First, they were asked how they had been feeling about their work, on average, during the three months preceding the survey. Workers were less likely to report feeling positive about their work during the three months preceding the 2020 survey than they were in previous years of the survey (45% in 2020 compared to 49% in 2019 and 53% in 2018), likely as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions that were in place to respond to the second wave of infections in Victoria (primarily metropolitan Melbourne).



Workers were also asked how they felt about the future. In 2020, participants were feeling more positive about the future than in previous years. Positively, respondents in 2020 were significantly more likely to believe that their work will get better in the next 12 months (28%) compared to 2018 and 2019 results (20% each).



Worry about the future has subsided amongst workers across the life of the study. In previous years, job security was a major concern raised in both the qualitative and quantitative research findings. However, in 2020 only 37% agreed that the NDIS limited their job security (compared to 56% in 2018). This positive shift in perceptions regarding job security appeared to be mainly driven by a growing appreciation that the NDIS has meant an increased demand for disability staff across the workforce. Perceptions about what this growing demand means for workers appears to vary substantially by setting and by tenure within the industry; for example, participants in management or administrative roles often felt more secure, while direct support workers were significantly more likely to be worried about the future of their jobs.



Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: I worry about the future of my job (NET Agree)

NET Agree NET Disagree



I think if you are good they will keep you, but I've had to learn the computers, our work is direct support, we don't have a lot to do with computers, we are not given opportunity to be shown them, when they (jobs) come up they are hiring business people, they don't respect or value that DSWs have got.



I'm not very good at admin, but if I could get more training in finance and admin, (I'd) be able to step up. I (could) access information and make decisions when the supervisor's not there.



Increasing positivity about the NDIS

Unlike previous years, 2020 saw an increase in positive perceptions about the NDIS and how this impacts clients, the workforce and disability services more broadly. The proportion of the workforce who are positive about parts of the NDIS and its ability to create new opportunities for workers and improve disability services in the long term has steadily increased over the life of the study.

Qualitative research findings show that workers were observing huge demand for their services given the rapidly growing workforce under the NDIS. Additionally, those who worked in more specialised settings such as support coordination and allied health were observing an increasing range of career opportunities.

The research also suggests that staff with a greater level of involvement with the NDIS and an increased ability to see professional opportunities within it will view the NDIS as a positive change. For instance, those who agreed that the NDIS has a large impact on their work were significantly more likely to believe that the NDIS creates new opportunities for them (47%).

While there were still some frustrations regarding the NDIS, an increasing proportion of participants believed that the NDIS is a positive change for the workforce, their clients, and the disability sector.



With NDIS, it gives people more human rights and opportunities to be included and opportunities to be out and about. When I worked in [location], you never saw people with disability out and about. They were all tucked away behind closed doors.

Workers who participated in the qualitative research cited examples of clients whose lives had been improved by the NDIS with greater frequency and enthusiasm than in previous years. Being able to witness the vision of the NDIS become reality increased worker satisfaction, as this was inherently tied to seeing the people they support achieve their goals.



People we're supporting have better funding and it works better for them. Things seem to be moving a lot quicker. It's easier to get equipment.



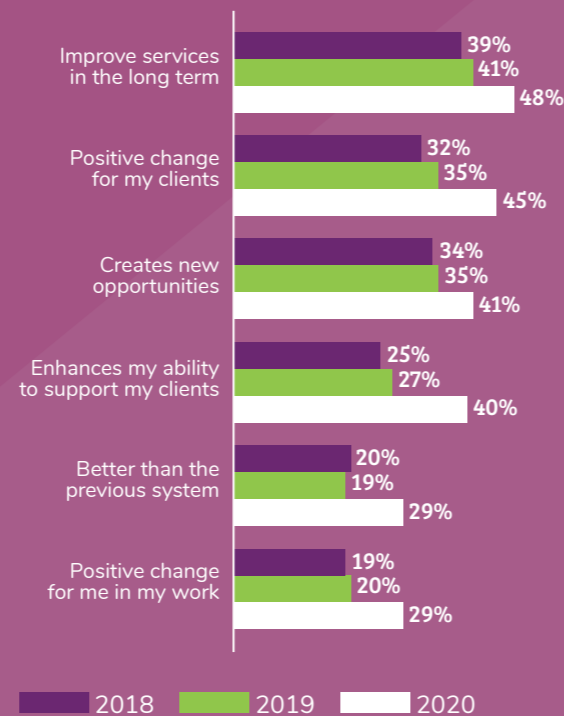
For some [of] our clients it meant they got some funding to do some one on one things, like going swimming, which is great.

Improvements in the turnaround times in planning approvals; more stability of staff in key roles such as support coordinators, Local Area Coordinators (LACs) and NDIS planners; better access to information, improved knowledge of the disability sector among NDIS Planners, shorter wait times on the NDIS helpline, and clearer and more helpful responses to questions, were mentioned as some of the main improvements that have positively impacted the workforce's understanding and familiarity with the NDIS.



I think the communication with the NDIS is improving massively. People are asking for reviews and they're getting their reviews done super quick. I think the participant experience with the NDIS, with COVID and everything they made a huge effort to make things easier for participants.

We had had a little bit of changeover of support coordinators for the guys, but in the last 6 – 12 months they've been stable, this is good because it takes support coordinators time to get across [participant's] needs. They are improving their working ways.



Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements (POSITIVE (Net Agree))

Knowledge and understanding of the NDIS is improving

The workforce understanding of the scheme has improved in the last year, which may be due to an increased exposure to the NDIS compared to previous years.

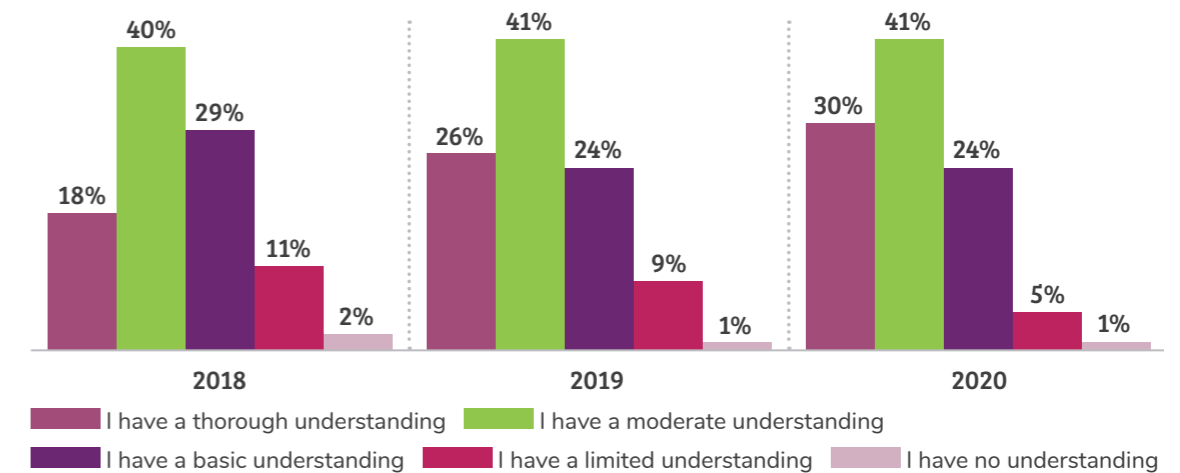
The 2020 study saw workers beginning to grow more at ease with the NDIS system and processes, becoming more adept at operating within the scheme as it moved through the transition phase. Additionally, many observed that NDIS processes and the broader disability landscape had become more standardised across the sector, allowing the workforce to work more effectively under the NDIS.



Some things have exceeded my expectations, like having more flexible funding, that makes a difference at what you can do for someone, they generally seem to have got the act together with reviewing plans sooner, very good during COVID with the amount of unscheduled reviews happening, people getting one on one support. It's still a battle – you have to justify every single little thing, but then, maybe I've matured too, maybe I've learnt to work with it better.

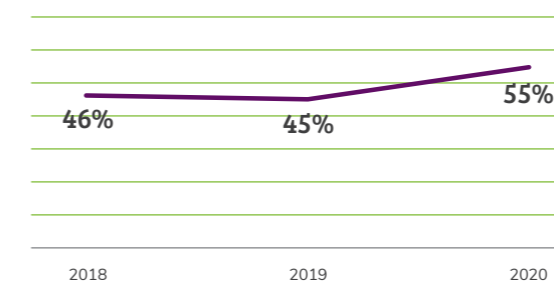
The 1800 number, I never used to ring – I had a shortcut [had the number of a contact within NDIS], but now I think, it's a process that's supposed to work, I'll go through it and I always get to where I need to.

Workers were significantly more likely to state that they had a thorough understanding of the NDIS when compared with 2018 (30% in 2020 vs 18% in 2018). Managers had the highest levels of self-reported understanding, suggesting an opportunity for greater knowledge transfer through organisations.



How would you describe your understanding of the NDIS?

A majority of workers also felt they had access to the information they need about the NDIS (55% vs. 46% in 2018). Likewise, those in management or administrative roles were more likely to report this than those in direct support roles. This is consistent with the qualitative finding in previous years that direct support workers often felt that management were failing to disseminate their knowledge about the NDIS throughout their organisation, leading to a lack of knowledge on the front lines.







Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements - I have access to the information I need about the NDIS (POSITIVE (Net Agree))

Access to the information I need about the NDIS

How is the NDIS impacting the workforce across settings?

The study has found that some of the main concerns across all settings were feelings of exclusion and devaluation, a perceived reduction in training opportunities, barriers for career progression and limitations for professional development, among others.

Although the study also found the scheme impacts workers differently depending on their work settings. The 2020 iteration focused on four settings and explored the challenges and opportunities each of them face under the NDIS:

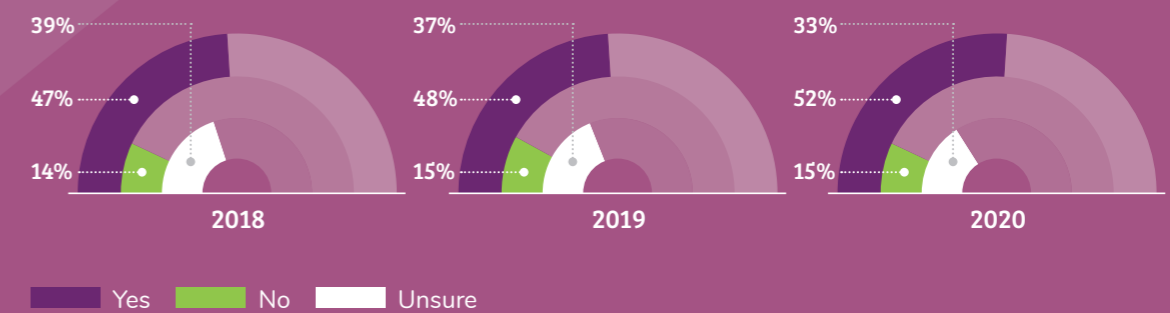
Setting	Opportunities	Challenges
 Direct support workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some see growing opportunities under the NDIS, and a high value placed on experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to feel devalued and excluded by a number of mechanisms, including weakening of their advocacy role, lack of access to plans/planning process, increase in unskilled workforce and lack of training. Those wanting to progress into other roles such as allied health or management see the need for university qualifications as a barrier.
 Support coordinators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater understanding of the NDIS. Better access to information and support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clients often fail to understand their role and see them as case managers or NDIS problem solvers. Working unpaid hours to support clients is common, and related burnout. A need for greater articulation of their role, a capability framework or accreditation pathway, and recognition of specialised roles within the support coordination field was identified.
 Manager and administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some feel they have plenty of training to offer staff. However, others are struggling to fund training under the NDIS. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited opportunities in management – the focus is on growing the support workforce. Upskilling staff for online training and shifting to online management a challenge under COVID-19.
 Allied Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mixed awareness of the existence of Allied Health Assistants (AHAs). Those familiar with the AHAs see them as a great way to reduce workload and support clients with more basic tasks. A potential opportunity for direct support workers to progress or shift roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The NDIS structure lacks funding for allied health workers to provide on-the job training to AHAs. Some worry that AHAs shouldn't be viewed as replacing specialised allied health supports, particularly for clients with complex needs.

Workforce retention

In 2020, the vast majority of longitudinal² participants were still working in the disability sector and an increasing number see themselves working in the disability sector in the future.

In 2020, close to 74% of longitudinal participants were working in the same job as last year within the sector, while 18% had moved to a new job in the disability sector. A minority of surveyed workers had left the sector; they had either moved to a new job in another sector (2%) or left the workforce altogether (5%).

The proportion of those who were unsure about working in the disability sector in five years' time has steadily decreased over time. In 2020, those who were unsure about working in the disability sector in five years' time were significantly more likely to say that this was motivated by a reduction or change in work hours (20%), which was likely to be attributable at least in part to the COVID-19 pandemic where workers were limited to working at only one site.

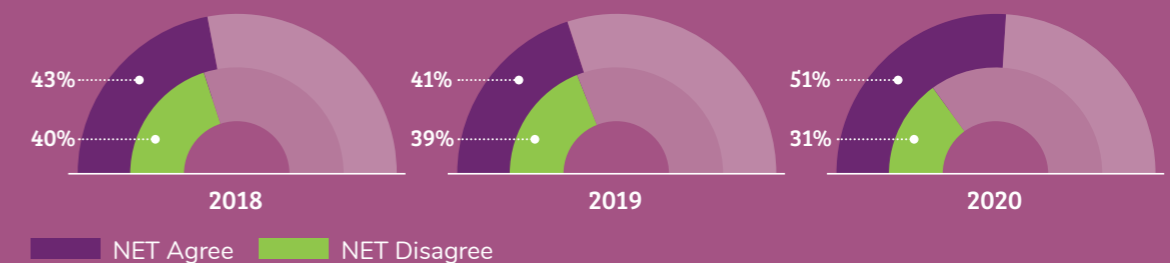


Do you see yourself working in the disability sector in five years' time?

Conversely, a growing proportion of workers reported that they will continue working in the disability sector in the future – this was particularly true amongst younger participants aged 18 to 44 years (60% vs 48% of those aged 45 years and over).

Improving perceptions of pay fairness

An increasing proportion of workers believed that they were paid fairly for the things they do in their job in 2020 compared with previous years (51% in 2020 compared to 41% in 2019 and 43% in 2018). Perceptions around fair pay differed across settings. For instance, those who identified as working in direct support roles (49%) were less likely to believe that they were paid fairly compared to those working in allied health and support coordination roles (74% and 67% respectively).



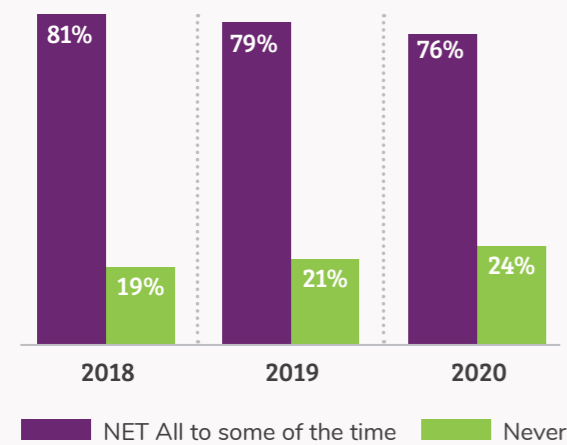
I get paid fairly for the things I do in my job by wave (NET AGREE/NET DISAGREE)

² Participants who completed the survey in any set of multiple years have been considered 'longitudinal' in this analysis.

Spotlight – Health, safety and wellbeing under the NDIS

In 2020, focus groups and in-depth interviews explored the workforce’s experience of health, safety, and wellbeing under the NDIS, as well as the workforce’s understanding of current health and safety protections both at a workplace and legislative level.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which was reaching its peak in Victoria when the research was conducted, also meant that health, safety, and wellbeing were front of mind for workers in 2020. Considering the potential impacts of COVID-19 on the disability workforce, it is noteworthy that there was an increase in the proportion of survey participants who said that their job “never” put their health and safety at risk between 2018 and 2020 (24% in 2020 vs 21% in 2019 and 19% in 2018).

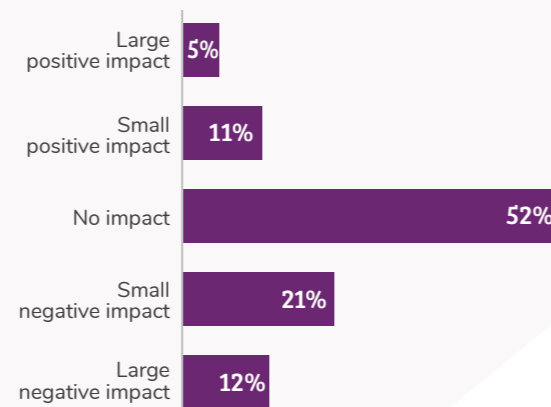


My job puts my health and safety at risk

Mental health was top of mind

Mental health was overwhelmingly the first thing that came to mind when workers were asked about health, safety, and wellbeing. In the qualitative research, most workers reported experiencing health and safety risks as part of their job, of particular concern were mental health and stress. The pressures of workload (clients and administration), risky work conditions, often combined with unsupportive management systems and cultures of workplace bullying were

immensely stressful. Feelings of being isolated and that their roles were increasingly devalued also contributed to worker’s psychological burden, particularly in direct support contexts. Stress was also commonly attributed to isolation, a high workload due to increasing administrative requirements coupled with limited time for this additional work.



To what extent did the NDIS impact on your decision to leave the disability workforce?

Most workers felt that an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) was insufficient in meeting their mental health needs, and many wanted to see greater emotional support provided from within their organisation, delivered by people who understood the nature of their work.



Mental health: There’s a lot of stress, have been with psychologist four times, I have been on work cover, stress leave. It’s management that makes it stressful, when they don’t listen, you feel frustrated.

I probably got more out of being able to debrief with colleagues and team managers, that they know what I’m talking about, I don’t have to explain the whole situation before getting to the debriefing part.

Experience of occupational violence was common

Research findings suggest that experiences of occupational violence were common. Many workers felt that this wasn’t taken seriously enough in the industry. The qualitative research participants report that there are not adequate processes in place to reduce the risk of violence (such as risk assessments or provision of security equipment for home visits); and when incident reports were lodged, follow up was lacking. This was often attributed to a culture that puts the safety of clients well ahead of the rights of staff.

Exclusion of the direct support workforce from information about clients (including their NDIS plans) often put workers at risk, particularly when working in a casual capacity with unfamiliar clients. In 2020 18% of survey participants indicated that they work in a casual capacity, which is a significant increase compared to 2018 findings (13%).

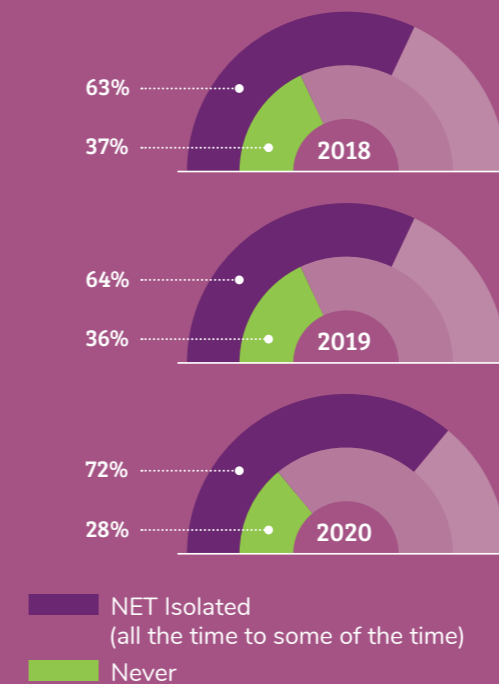
These themes continued into 2020. Many workers reflected it is the ability to debrief with colleagues and team management who understand the nuances of issues faced was most beneficial for stress management and overall wellbeing. An increased sense of isolation under the NDIS was leaving workers feeling bereft of this opportunity and feeling more isolated than ever. Isolation also presented barriers to the exchange of ideas and experiences, such as behavioural de-escalation strategies, which were not as easily shared as in the past.

COVID-19 may have amplified existing feelings of isolation. While isolation was a common experience across the workforce, the manifestation of this differed for those remaining on-site, (such as residential support workers) compared to those who transitioned to working from home (often those in management positions, support coordinators or allied health professionals).

Many direct support workers who continued to work on-site or in clients’ homes felt abandoned by management in a potentially highly risky situation. It was often observed that there was a lack of recognition of the risks and challenges of work for those working face-to-face with clients. This coupled with the challenges of managing client’s frustrations about living under lockdown conditions, and often taking on additional management responsibilities, escalated feelings of isolation.

Isolation is a growing issue

The theme of isolation has been identified in this research as a prevalent issue in the disability sector. This has been largely attributed to the introduction of the NDIS, which has meant an increase in casualised, one-on-one work, and a billable-hours structure which limited the ability for NDIS providers to hold team meetings and provide group training and networking.



I feel isolated in my job (NET Isolated vs Never)



This year (during COVID) has been the most mental draining for me... management that were here, pretty much walked out and worked from home, but the centre was still open for high behaviours, so I was in position of managing the centre and the staff plus clients.

The disability workforce has a lack of knowledge of health and safety rights

There was a lack of awareness of the protections in place for workers. Research participants commonly cited OH&S representatives and their unions as their key avenues to raise safety concerns. Reporting was often felt to be a “tick box” exercise with no feedback or action ever received.

Signifying a lack of standardised information about health and safety across the sector, qualitative findings suggest that workers across the study had very little understanding of what health, safety or wellbeing protections are in place legislatively for those who work in the disability sector. None mentioned the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 and there was also very low awareness of their rights. Generally, workers agreed that there was a lack of genuine focus on health and safety across the sector.

This was attributed to a culture that didn't adequately prioritise safety, a lack of training, and lack of time to do adequate risk assessments before issues occur. Instead, workers described a highly reactive system. It was also commonly observed that even when proper processes were followed and incidents reported, there was rarely any response to the issue.

Workers articulated the need for an organisational culture that is committed to safety, is responsive, open to feedback, transparent about processes and prioritises the safety of staff alongside clients.



To be honest I'm severely disappointed in the recognition of staff. We had a client who was an NDIS client who was extremely abusive towards staff. I wasn't fully aware of the full extent of it... it was happening prior to my arrival. There is a culture in disability that you just suck it up. I don't just suck it up, I went to WorkSafe and it has been elevated up the organisation.

*A safety culture is responsive. If someone raises an issue, physical, psychological [or] other, is there a response?
(Residential support worker)*

When asked to imagine a workplace in the disability sector that is truly committed to the health, safety, and wellbeing of staff, some of the most commonly raised characteristics of the workplace were:

- Staff feel comfortable reporting health, safety and wellbeing issues and ideas for process improvement without fear of blame or other negative repercussions
- Incidents and issues are taken seriously, and the organisation's response visible
- Management recognise and acknowledge the challenges of disability work, listen to, and provide support and advice to staff
- Training on safety procedures is regularly provided for new and existing staff, including promotion of the NDIS quality and safeguards orientation training
- Correct equipment is provided, and infrastructure is safe and regularly tested



Recommendations

As broadly similar themes have presented throughout the three years of the study, it is advised that the 2018 and 2019 recommendations are retained with some additions (please see Understanding the workforce experience of the NDIS – Longitudinal Research Project: Year one and Year two reports).

The following recommendations are based on the research findings presented here, and input from the project's Expert Advisory Panel

1. Create and disseminate standardised health, safety, and wellbeing information

There is need for standardised information to be made available to the sector about workforce health and safety protections specific to the disability sector with a unified approach to dissemination. This will provide the workforce with a clear path to the resolution of OH&S issues and demonstrate to the workforce and organisations that worker safety is a priority. Key to the development of this information is consultation with and input from key stakeholders such as WorkSafe and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) as well as NDIS providers. The development of standardised information should also be accompanied by a sector-wide communication and training program. Specifically:

- A coordinated approach to provision of training about the information developed should be undertaken. WorkSafe and NDIA should also be a part of the health and safety training story to help empower staff, particularly direct support workers.
- Training should be encouraged and implemented at a service level as workforce perception is that employers are ultimately responsible for employee welfare.
- While there is a need for available written information about policies and procedures, it was also noted that there should be training that includes role plays and taking workers through a variety of scenarios that could occur,

as workers are often too short of time to read lengthy documents. This also could be conducted in an online environment.

- To promote a healthy and safe workforce, information, and support services available to the workforce should be tailored to the specific needs and experiences of disability workers.
- Provide information to NDIS providers about building a safety culture. For workers a safe workplace is responsive, open to feedback and prioritises the safety of staff alongside clients.
- Disseminate information through existing Communities of Practice, which provide an opportunity for workers to exchange ideas and reflect on organisational practice.

2. Share positive examples of career progression

This research identified many examples of members of the workforce finding new, specialised, and motivating roles within the NDIS. There is an opportunity to share these stories to showcase the possibilities of working in the sector. Additionally; support, education and flexibility are needed to encourage the existing workforce to carve out fulfilling careers in the sector and ensure their retention.

3. Explore opportunities for more diverse training and qualification pathways

Many members of the workforce – particularly those in direct support or support coordinator roles – are keen to obtain qualifications and move into allied health roles as they can see a clear demand for these skills. However, the current pathways to qualifications are seen as limited, overly academic, and difficult for those already in the workforce to access, particularly if living in regional areas. There was strong demand for the opportunity to conduct traineeships or other forms of study that can be combined with existing work in the sector. Further research and consultation with the education sector is required to explore opportunities to diversify qualification pathways.

In addition, there is growing interest in working as a sole trader within the NDIS as a potentially more lucrative and flexible pathway for the workforce. However, further education and support is needed; such as services that match clients with workers, social networking opportunities and training in policy, procedures, and financial management.

This research study has continually identified that funding for training is a severe limitation of the NDIS. The workforce has typically been reluctant to migrate to online training, as it lacks the opportunities for incidental peer learning and social interaction. However, with the widespread move to using online tools such as Teams and Zoom to collaborate in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, there may be the opportunity to capitalise on increased technical competency to develop innovative and collaborative training models. A co-design approach should be used with the workforce to ensure that any digital training meets their needs.

4. Advocate for a systems-thinking approach to reviewing the NDIS nationally

While the Expert Advisory Panel recognised there is a need for solutions such as those outlined above to address the issues raised by the research, it was also agreed that there are significant structural barriers to improving health, safety and wellbeing and providing adequate training and career progression opportunities for a growing workforce. A systems-thinking approach would involve reviewing some of the structural issues that exist under the NDIS. This three-year research project suggests any review should aim to ensure employment conditions that include time for training, supervision, collaboration and ultimately, worker wellbeing. A systems-thinking approach would also mean identifying strategies for the NDIA, WorkSafe, NDIS providers and the Department of Social Services to better collaborate in meeting the needs of the workforce.



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