

National Capacity, Local Expertise — Building the Job Futures Network

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Abstract

Job Futures is an Australian national network of non-profit, community-based organisations specialising in the delivery of employment services. Its unique membership structure harnesses the local capacity of community organisations under the leadership of a large national organisation.

Job Futures was established in 1997 by a small group of not-for-profit employment and training organisations determined to build a national capacity in order to compete in the newly privatised employment services market.

Since then Job Futures' membership has grown significantly, with strategic additions to membership creating coverage in every state and territory of Australia. By building its expertise and determinedly pursuing new opportunities Job Futures is now one of the country's largest providers of employment, training and support services.

The Job Futures model is a simple one, combining national capacity with local expertise. Member organisations retain their strong local identity and are distinguished by their links with their communities and a proud history of delivering services to those local communities. The diversity of the membership, which features a number of specialist organisations, reflects Job Futures' focus on helping those most disadvantaged in the community, including Indigenous Australians, people with disabilities, young people and ex-offenders.

The Job Futures model allows the member organisations to gain a greater access to resources, business opportunities and ideas. This allows them to improve their effectiveness in providing programs and services in their own communities and therefore develop greater sustainability.

Keywords

Employment, business, community, specialist, Indigenous

Introduction

This paper provides a brief history of Job Futures, a unique Australian national network of community organisations specialising in the delivery of employment and training services, primarily targeted at unemployed people.

Job Futures was formed in 1997 when the newly-elected conservative federal government decided to privatise the Commonwealth Employment Service by contracting out the provision of unemployment services to the not-for-profit and private sectors. Small community-based organisations were clearly at a disadvantage in tendering for contracts under such a model, so 23 not-for-profit community employment and training organisations from four states and territories — organisations with extensive experience in assisting unemployed people — decided to work together as Job Futures. These founding organisations were determined to build a national capacity to continue delivering services to their local communities in this rapidly changing service delivery environment.

Fundamental to the development of this model was the underpinning philosophy of maintaining community participation and engagement in service and program delivery. These founding organisations were motivated by their desire to maintain their ability to do business ethically and successfully without losing their connection to the communities in which they operated.

Out of this philosophy the unique membership structure of Job Futures developed — a structure that utilises the local capacity of community organisations under the leadership of a large national organisation — providing national, regional and local solutions. By building its expertise and determinedly pursuing new opportunities, Job Futures is now one of Australia's largest providers of employment, training and support services.

The business model involves subcontracting the delivery of services to locally-based Job Futures' member organisations and partner agencies, backed up by centralised contract management and support provided by national and state offices. The structure of Job Futures ensures that the members are actively engaged through participation in regular regional meetings, national conferences and in the various working groups and board subcommittees that contribute to the organisation's development. This high level of member participation has the dual purpose of ensuring that staff employed directly by Job Futures maintain an ongoing knowledge of and connectedness with the communities in which we operate.

There is an inherent recognition within the Job Futures model that local members have the expertise and knowledge along with a proven record of working within their own communities. However, there is also the recognition that members benefit from a considerable amount of support and expertise with a variety of business and governance issues in order to ensure they remain prosperous and sustainable. These are the type of services that Job Futures' management team is well placed to provide to the membership. Job Futures' staff have considerable expertise in contract and performance management, staff training and development, business development, research and policy development and development of

best practice service models. Regular support and assistance is also provided through ongoing site visits and via phone and email. This allows member organisations to focus on what they do best, that is, deliver quality and innovative services to their local communities.

The objectives and values of Job Futures' and its members include a commitment to an agenda of strengthening local communities through employment generation, economic and community development. This particular objective is highlighted through one of Job Futures' core values — the return of operating surpluses or profits to provide community benefit. Examples of this value in action are the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) holder program and the establishment of a national centre of expertise in youth mentoring.

Job Futures is in a unique position to respond to and influence policy decisions at a national level, policy decisions that have the potential to affect the clients and communities with which we work. The community-based agencies that form our membership have neither the individual capacity nor the profile to achieve this. Job Futures is able to harness the knowledge and expertise of the membership and present that knowledge and expertise in a way that makes a meaningful contribution to the public policy debate. This ensures that some of the most powerless and marginalised voices in our society are heard and actively engaged. Through this process Job Futures has been instrumental in bringing about important changes in policy, in relation to Indigenous Australians, people on the Disability Support Pension and young people, to name a few. Therefore, the model to a large extent enables the active engagement of the citizen, community and the community-based organisation in social policy.

The Job Futures model has been extremely successful in the provision of specialist services to unemployed people. We are the largest provider of specialist employment services within the job network, holding approximately one-third of all specialist contracts nationally. The diversity of the membership, which features a number of specialist organisations, reflects Job Futures' focus on helping some of the most marginalised people in society. The capacity of these members to implement specific strategies based on locally-based resources and networks is particularly important in the delivery of specialist contracts.

Areas of specialist expertise include the provision of employment services to Indigenous people where we deliver approximately 80 per cent of the total job network services. Job Futures has several Indigenous members that are an integral part of the communities where they operate, making a significant contribution to those communities through the provision of employment related services, training programs and through the employment of local Indigenous people. We also hold contracts for the delivery of specialist contracts for young people and people with disabilities. Additionally, all Job Futures' members have extensive experience in working with people who face multiple non-vocational barriers to employment.

Alongside the benefits and successes of this model, there are of course some significant challenges. The challenges that are involved in bringing together 70 diverse and independent community based organisations operating in 160 locations across Australia are significant. The members of Job Futures all retain strong identities in their own right and have their own values, goals and vision for their future. In addition they have a commitment to the values, goals and vision of Job Futures. While generally these are congruent, there are times when some member organisations may find their core welfare values at odds with the demands of the contract management regime.

One of the challenges for Job Futures is managing the inherent tensions between its business imperatives and its governance framework. This issue is played out in the context of performance management. Because of the way government contracts are structured, poor performance by one member has the potential to affect the chances of other members keeping and winning business. When this occurs, the organisation must choose between supporting an individual member and taking action which supports the membership as a whole.

However, while the model has inherent tensions it also has inherent strengths as we are also in a unique position to develop strategies that work in partnership with local communities. We can then utilise such innovations and the experiences of our high performing members to replicate across the network some of the key features that have led to their success.

Despite the challenges, the Job Futures model has proven to be highly successful, currently delivering services valued at more than \$65 million and placing more than 20,000 clients in employment annually. Job Futures has demonstrated the benefits of retaining local identity and community expertise under a national umbrella organisation. The Job Futures experience provides an example of a successful business model that is widely applicable to a range of not for profit organisations, particularly where sustainability is threatened by current social, political and economic pressures, without the expertise, support and knowledge that is gained through a partnership model based on 'National Capacity and Local Expertise'.

The following examples of some of our key services further demonstrate the effectiveness of the Job Futures business model.

Correctional Services Employment Pilot Program (CSEPP)

The Correctional Services Employment Pilot Program provides an excellent example of Job Futures' ability to bring together a diverse group of specialist organisations to create an effective multi-stakeholder partnership. It commenced in July 2002 and is fully funded by the Victorian Government.

The program provides prisoners and offenders on Community Service Orders with assistance to obtain sustainable employment. Job Futures is the lead organisation in a consortium of nine not for profit community service and job network agencies. Employment consultants work with our clients both pre- and post-release and in the community at 15 prisons and community corrections offices throughout the state.

Since the commencement of the program over 11,120 prisoners and offenders have had some contact with Job Futures CSEP program. Of those, only 1021 re-offended, demonstrating that the CSEP program is performing well in meeting the aim of reducing recidivism.

Green Corps — a case study

The Green Corps program is funded by the Australian Government and gives young people the opportunity to participate in projects designed to preserve and restore Australia's natural environment and heritage. Participants gain improved career and employment prospects through accredited training, structured work activities and work experience. They receive assistance in preparation for employment, personal development opportunities and also provide an opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing of the community.

Job Futures delivers Green Corps in partnership with Greening Australia, a national environmental organisation. This brings together Job Futures' expertise in training and youth development and the natural resource management expertise of Greening Australia.

Green Corps activities are encompassed in six-month projects which are subcontracted to Job Futures and Greening Australia members. Each project has ten young participants who receive a training allowance while they are participating.

Each Green Corps project is initiated and supported by a locally-based partner organisation including landcare groups, Indigenous and youth organisations, local councils, state and federal government agencies, educational institutions and private companies. Every year 1700 young people (17-20 years old) participate in Green Corps projects across the country.

Green Corps projects make a significant contribution to rural and regional areas, with approximately 85 per cent of projects based in those areas. It provides an opportunity for many young people (60 per cent of participants are early school leavers) to engage in an educational and training program that will provide them with new skills and a qualification. The high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (11 per cent) participants demonstrates the program's ability to be adaptive of the particular needs of different participant groups.

Since 2002, Green Corps projects have made a significant contribution to the environment and planted more than 11 million trees, erected more than 4700 km of fencing, removed over 39,000 hectares of weeds, collected more than 7700 kg of seeds and built or maintained more than 5000 km of walking tracks or boardwalks.

The following information clearly demonstrates the positive impact Green Corps has had on the lives of the many young Australians who have completed the program.

Improving self-esteem and the ability to find work are key goals of Green Corps:

- 87 per cent of participants thought their self esteem had improved.
- 81 per cent of participants indicated that their chances of getting a job had improved as a direct result of participating in Green Corps.
- 86 per cent of participants thought their desire to find a job had improved as a direct result of participating in Green Corps.

The Green Corps program encompasses the key fundamentals of a community development approach to program implementation and service delivery including community participation and community building, consultation, active citizenship and environmental sustainability. Not only has the program achieved a service delivery model based on the inclusive principles and practices of community development, but has also delivered significant improvements to numerous communities in a number of cultural, social, economic and environmental areas. Significantly, the program has also made a positive impact on the lives of the many young people who have been program participants — leading many to outcomes of employment, education and training. This community development approach is highlighted through the following example.

The Mia Mia Revegetation Project — JobCo, Templestowe, Victoria

The Mia Mia Aboriginal Art Gallery, situated in Westerfold's Park in Templestowe, is on Wurundjeri land. It promotes Aboriginal artists as well as educating the community about the historical importance of the park and the customs of the Traditional Owners of the land.

The Mia Mia Gallery and surrounding parklands constitute a significant spatial element within the urban landscape. The entire area contains valuable historical, cultural and botanical information about the history of the Indigenous communities that once inhabited the lands. The local community identified a need to improve, beautify and restore the Westerfold Park and surrounding areas.

The director of the gallery initiated the project by approaching JobCo to discuss the possibility of developing and implementing a revegetation project. The project has now received two

rounds of Green Corps funding, with 20 young people working on the first stages and a further stage still to be completed.

The Green Corps Project Team consulted with and engaged the community throughout the entire planning, development and implementation of the project.

Initially the project participants were informed of the environmental, cultural, historical, Indigenous and sociological significance of the gallery and the park. This induction process was delivered by local Indigenous speakers, the director of the Mia Mia Gallery and experts from Parks Victoria. Throughout the project there was a focus on increasing the participants' employability skills and prospects through encouraging the development of self-esteem, confidence and motivation. There was also a significant focus on improving the verbal and written communication skills of participants through the use of group problem-solving activities, conflict resolution training and interpersonal relationship skills development.

In addition, the project achieved a number of environmental, social and cultural outcomes. Indigenous plants, shrubs and trees were planted and all non-indigenous plants were removed. A disability access walkway was designed and constructed in the theme of a 'serpent dreaming'. This walkway will eventually encircle the land around the gallery encouraging and allowing for all community members to enter. Additional outcomes of the project included the design and construction of signs to promote the cultural and sociological significance of the areas to visitors and community members. A large deck was also designed and constructed with the purpose of viewing cultural performances.

This project provides an excellent example of what is achievable when a genuine community development approach is utilised — an approach that ensures that the project provides positive and measurable outcomes for the young people participating as well as for the community as a whole.

isaSKILLS Job Futures — a case study

Finally, I would like to give an example of a project occurring in one of our local communities, which is, of course, where much of our good work takes place.

At the recent Job Futures national conference, Job Futures' member isaSKILLS was the winner of the inaugural Job Futures Values Award for the 'Little Night In' project, a crime prevention program addressing high levels of youth crime and substance misuse, particularly amongst Indigenous young people aged 12 to 24 years.

The project is run by isaSKILLS in the far west Queensland communities of Mt Isa, Longreach, Cloncurry and surrounds. Operating out of the multipurpose youth centre, the

'Little Night In' program adopted a whole-of-community approach by involving local police, youth workers, family service officers, teachers, drug and alcohol workers and sexual health workers.

The 'Little Night In' program conducts educational and recreational activities each Thursday and Friday night. These activities include basketball, football, futsal, volleyball, videos, computer games, board games, art therapy activities, information and education sessions and discos. The activities conducted aim to promote good communication and team work skills, but more importantly the program allows the youth service to develop a relationship with these young people, enabling them to refer them to the range of other youth-specific programs run by isaSKILLS.

The pilot program has been extremely popular amongst young people in the area, including youth from a variety of different cultures, including a high percentage of Indigenous participants. The pilot program addressed the cultural diversity of participants by providing a range of activities, as well as using workers from different cultural backgrounds, including Indigenous Police Liaison Officers, night patrol officers and representatives from a range of community service providers.

The project has had several positive outcomes. There has been evidence of reduced youth crime while the night activities were conducted, reduction in substance misuse, improved health of young people, increase in self-esteem and confidence by young people and an awareness of services (and workers) available in the community, leading to an increase in the amount of young people accessing these services.

There was also a reported increase in the retention rate of young people in school and other education and training programs. Young people reported that they were feeling better about themselves and more willing to participate in school, training, youth and recreational activities. Importantly, the project has increased the awareness of young people's needs in the community and built the capacity for the community to work together to address these needs.

The project is now attempting to attract permanent funding from the Queensland Government as an educational and recreational resource for the Mt Isa community. This will be progressed through consultation with a variety of youth, community and government stakeholders. There will also be an increased focus on the promotion of the excellent outcomes and community benefits of the program to date.

As can be seen from the previous examples, the Job Futures business model clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of utilising locally based members to deliver programs and services backed by the knowledge, support and expertise of a national network. It is important

to note that these members not only have knowledge of the communities in which they operate, they are part of that community, a factor that is crucial to their success. Additionally, these examples highlight the values of Job Futures, clearly demonstrating its commitment to engaging with and strengthening communities. These two case studies also provide practical examples of how the Job Futures model is achieving positive and measurable social, economic, cultural and environmental outcomes.