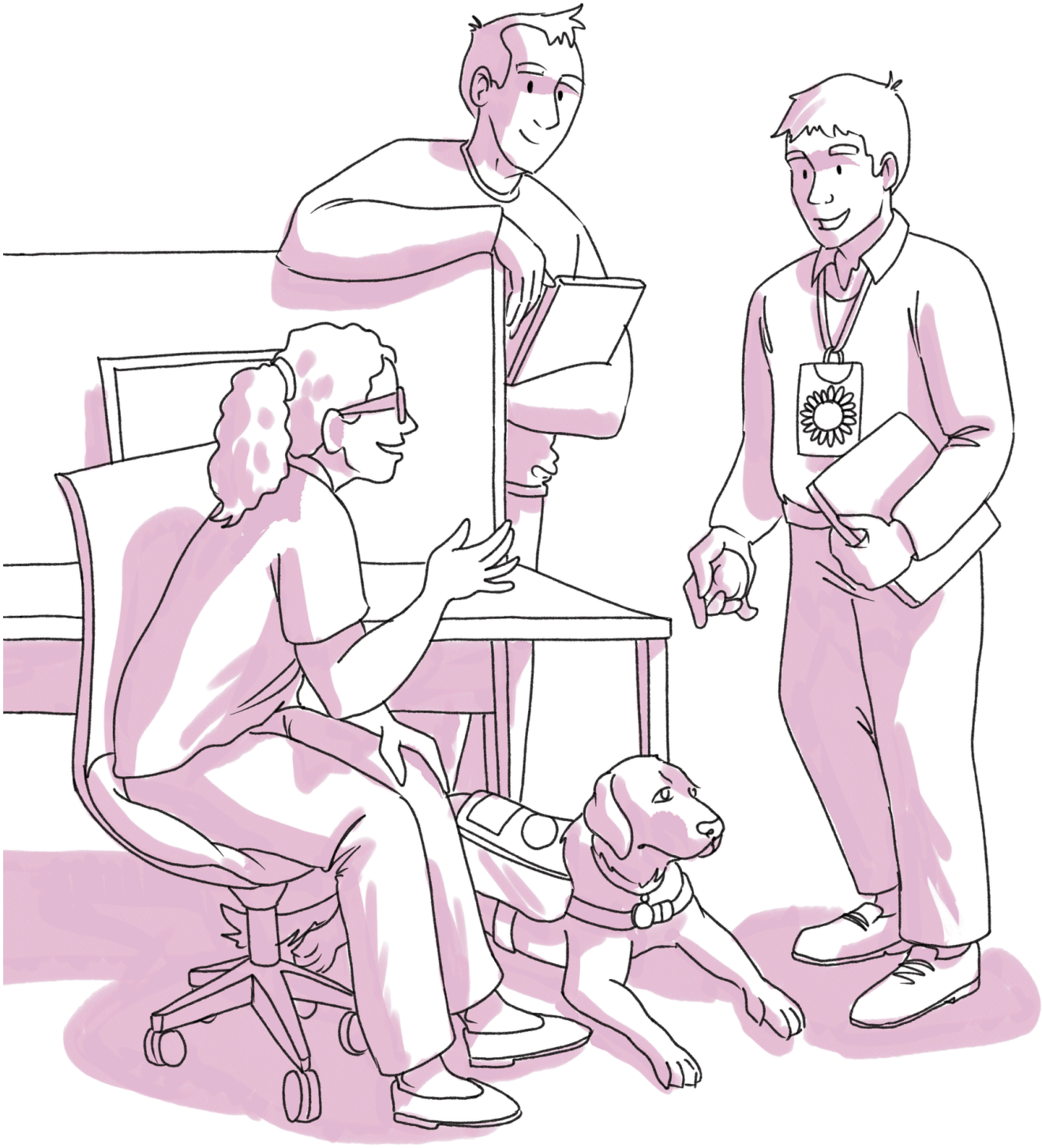
ThinkPlace WāhiWhakaaro

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Disability Employment Support Products Redesign

Engagement Insights Report

April 2026



This report was developed by ThinkPlace New Zealand | WāhiWhakaaro and Dovetail Consulting, as part of the Disability Employment Support Products Redesign (DESPR) project.

Primary purpose and audience

This report was developed to inform the service redesign undertaken by ThinkPlace | WāhiWhakaaro and MSD. The insights can support MSD more broadly to better understand stakeholder perspectives related to employment support for disabled people. While other audiences may also find this report useful, the insights as they are written may not be suitable or applicable to other contexts or uses.

Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere gratitude to all the disabled people, employers, service providers, and system leaders who generously shared their time, experiences, and expertise with us. We recognise how important this issue is to everyone who participated, and that their voluntary involvement was driven by a strong commitment to improving disability employment support services.

Disclaimer and limitations

The engagements informing this report were conducted specifically to support the service redesign project, rather than as an independent research project. This was the primary phase of engagement. The insights gathered will inform the ongoing service design, with further engagements planned to test and validate the design direction. These later engagements will not be included in this report.

Efforts were made to reflect a diverse range of perspectives in this redesign engagement; however, many experiences were not heard. The perspectives shared are the free and frank views of participants and do not represent the experiences of all disabled people or the official positions of any organisations, regardless of their organisations or employers.

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Executive summary

Purpose

The Disability Employment Support Products Redesign (DESPR) engagement, conducted by ThinkPlace | WāhiWhakaaro, explored the experiences of disabled people and whānau, employers, service providers, and system experts to inform the redesign of MSD's disability employment support services. This Insights Report summarises and frames up what we heard in ways that clearly inform the service redesign process.

Methods

The insights in this report are drawn from the project's primary engagement phase, which contained the majority, but not the entirety, of the project's engagements, as some were reserved for testing emerging service designs later on in the project. In this primary phase, we engaged with 54 participants through six group sessions and 29 interviews, including disabled people and whānau, employers, service providers, and system experts. Dedicated engagement streams were also undertaken with tāngata whaikaha Māori, tagata sa'ilimalo (Pacific disabled people), and people with learning disabilities to ensure their experiences and aspirations were represented in the redesign process.

Key insights

Disabled people want to work, but face access barriers.

Unemployment is driven primarily by structural, environmental, and workplace-based barriers, rather than a lack of motivation or capability.

Current services are often deficit-focused rather than strengths-based.

Many participants felt the current services focus heavily on the limitations of disabled people rather than recognising disabled people's skills, strengths, and potential contributions to workplaces.

Employment outcomes are shaped by broader life circumstances.

Participants emphasised that employment services need to account for intersecting inequities in disabled people's lives, even though it's not their job to fix them.

Cultural identity and community matter.

For tāngata whaikaha Māori, employment support is most effective when it upholds mana, recognises cultural identity, supports whānau decision-making, and enables participation in both te ao Māori and employment. For tagata sa'ilimalo, participants highlighted the importance of culturally safe services, Pacific-led and family-inclusive support approaches, and support that allows people to participate as their whole selves.

People with learning disabilities are often left behind.

People with learning disabilities often experience exclusion from paid employment opportunities to a greater degree than other disabled people do.

Disabled young people are currently insufficiently supported.

Participants stressed the importance of beginning employment support early in secondary school and giving particular attention to the transition from school into tertiary education or employment, because lack of early support significantly compounds problems later in adulthood.

Services are difficult to find and navigate

Participants called for clearer pathways, better communication, and a "no wrong door" approach to accessing support.

Funding and contracting settings create unintended barriers.

The funding model can unintentionally discourage providers from working with people who face greater or more complex barriers to employment, creating inequitable outcomes for those who need assistance the most.

Personalisation is critical.

The most positively-viewed service experiences were highly personalised, relationship-based, and driven by the individual's own goals and aspirations.

The current system doesn't adequately recognise the crucial role of employers.

Stakeholders described how a lack of support for employer capability and confidence significantly reduces the impact of the support given to disabled people. They stressed the importance of the redesign incorporating strong partnership with employers to ensure the services are effective.

Conclusion

Overall, these engagement insights advocate for a redesigned employment support service suite that is highly personalised, relationship-based, enables disability-confident employers and inclusive workplaces, and is driven towards enabling long-term employment success for disabled people.

Report Overview

Project context

This Engagement Insights Report is one deliverable as part of the **Disability Employment Support Products Redesign** project. The project involves the review and redesign of four disability employment services, as well as potential transition pathways out of Disability Enterprises (DE's). The focus is to ensure that these services have the best possible impact on all stages of disabled people's employment journeys, that they function effectively and sustainably, and that they form a coherent package of services.

The project has three interconnected streams of work: community and stakeholder engagement, service design, and broader engagement between MSD and other government agencies. This report shares key insights from the community and stakeholder engagement stream. The purpose of this stream is to ensure that every stage of the design process is informed, tested, and shaped by people with lived and practice-based expertise, creating a design that is culturally grounded, practical, and responsive to real-world delivery conditions.

Purpose of this report

This Insights Report summarises what we have heard from disabled service users and family members, employers, service providers, and people with system-level or professional expertise. The insights shared have been intentionally selected and framed in ways that clearly inform the redesign process. The lived experiences and aspirations of disabled people are at the centre, and we draw connections to implications for the planning, commissioning, management, and delivery of employment support services.

Within this report, we conceptualise employment support, and the current state of employment support services, as something produced through the interaction of multiple actors — including disabled people, whānau, employers, employment service providers and MSD — rather than as the responsibility of any single person or organisation.

How to read this report

The structure of the report is as follows:

> **Part 1. Important context:** Broader insights that form a foundation for understanding disabled people's experiences of employment support services.
>
> **Part 2. Insights from our engagements with three disabled communities:** Māori disabled people (tāngata whaikaha Māori); tagata sa'ilimalo (Pacific disabled people); and people with learning and developmental disabilities. As agreed with MSD, we dedicated particular consideration to these groups in recognition of their cultural backgrounds, engagement style preferences, and the tendency for their voices and needs to be underrepresented in disability-related data, design, and policy.
>
> **Part 3. Insights across the employment support service journey:** Insights gathered across engagements relating to four key dimensions of a disabled jobseeker's employment support journey.

At the end of each Part, we consider the potential design implications of these insights, outlining some attributes of effective employment support services based on our engagements.

For easy reference, the Index contains a collated view of all insights and their corresponding attributes of effective disability employment services.

Rather than presenting the insights by stakeholder type as discrete perspectives (e.g. service user insights being separate from provider insights, etc.), we have considered these perspectives together as a whole to identify where experiences align, where tensions exist, and where system settings may be helping or hindering good outcomes. Considering different voices' experiences within a particular topic reflects the importance of the relationships between all stakeholders in contributing to a disabled person's employment outcomes, and helps surface design opportunities that may not be visible through any single viewpoint alone.

Our terminology

Disability employment services / employment support services:
We interchangeably use these two terms when referring to the particular services in scope for this redesign. It is worth noting that these particular services are distinct from the wider package of Disability Support Services (DSS) and mainstream employment support services provided by MSD.

Service providers:
We use 'service providers' to refer to the current and former providers of the services in scope, as well as providers of other disability employment services that are commissioned under a different MSD contract or by a different agency. We have chosen not to differentiate between the three provider types to enhance readability and protect the identities of participants.

Tagata sa'ilimalo:
As explained by Tōfā Mamao Collective, "Tagata Sa'ilimalo (tagata = people or person, sa'ilimalo = pursuit of success) is a new vision of Pacific disability in Aotearoa New Zealand and also a term of identity to replace 'Pacific disabled people, their families, and carers/supporters.'"[1] In recognition of this term's increasing use and celebration throughout the disability sector in Aotearoa, we have chosen to reference it in this report.

Learning disabilities
We use the term 'learning disabilities' to describe a group of disability experiences that are often referred to as 'intellectual disabilities' and 'developmental disabilities'. While 'intellectual disability' is the clinically-recognised term, we have learnt that 'learning disability' is the preferred term for a large proportion of the Aotearoa community.

System experts
We use 'system experts' to describe participants who brought a system-level perspective to the conversation. This includes, for example: sector leaders and thought leaders; people with professional experience working in disability employment support in Aotearoa; and people with academic knowledge of the subject matter. Many of these people were also disabled themselves.

Tāngata whaikaha Māori
We use 'tāngata whaikaha Māori' to describe Māori disabled people. While there are several terms used in Te Ao Māori to describe this community, 'tāngata whaikaha Māori' is one of the most commonly-used terms, and is understood to mean "people who are determined to do well."[2]

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[1] https://www.tofamamao.com/

[2] The term was coined by Kaumatua Maaka Tibble MNZM. https://www.whaikaha.govt.nz/news/news/on-the-passing-of-kaumatua-maaka-tibble-mnzm

Engagement Summary

This section provides a summary of our primary engagement phase and the process we took to develop the insights shared in this report. Our engagement methodology is detailed in the previously supplied *Service Redesign Plan*[3].

Engagements

We are taking a 'braided rivers' approach to this work (see visual below), inspired by He Awa Whiria[4]; a practical way to bring different knowledge streams together into the service redesign. As such, our engagement consists of a number of independent yet interconnected streams.

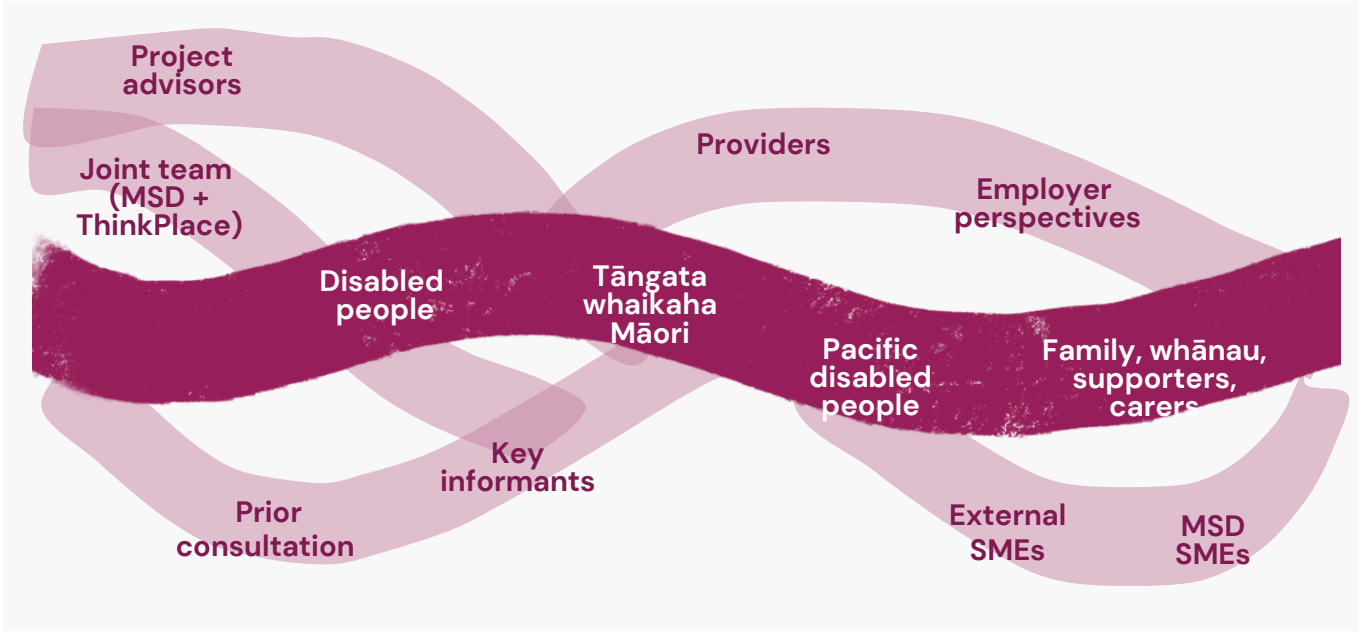
Overall, we have engaged with 54 participants through 6 group sessions and 29 interviews. Among these participants, 32 (60%) identified as disabled - encompassing a variety of conditions affecting mobility, communication, hearing, vision, as well as physical and mental wellbeing. We engaged with disabled service users and family members (27), employers (10), service providers (6) and people with system-level or professional expertise (15).

Analysis and synthesis

We used iterative and collaborative thematic analysis methods to make sense of what we learned, turning raw insights into clear implications for the service design.

We analysed the findings in two phases. First, findings from our engagements with three specific disabled communities (Māori, Pacific and learning disability) were analysed in their own right to preserve the context and specificity of those voices (reported in Part 2). We then analysed findings from our engagements with all participants, including the three specific communities, to surface common patterns, important differences, and priorities for redesign (reported in Part 3).

The names of participants have been pseudonymised in this report.



[3] This includes our approach, rationale, values, ethics, and ways of engaging.

[4] *He Awa Whiria: a braided rivers approach* (Macfarlane, Macfarlane & Gillon, 2015).

Part 1.
Important context

This section sets out the wider context for understanding disabled people's experiences of employment support. It highlights the broader system settings and social factors that influence whether support is accessible, effective, and equitable.

These insights are broader than those presented later in the report, which are more targeted to particular communities and to specific opportunities for redesign.

Broader insights
Context and positioning

Disabled people want to work. Problems with access, not motivation, drive unemployment.

Disabled people have a strong and enduring desire to be in employment, yet face disproportionately high rates of unemployment due to barriers of access, rather than a lack of motivation. In 2025, only 23.4% of disabled people were in paid work, compared with 69.3% of non-disabled people[5]. Despite this, the 2023 Household Disability Survey showed that of those disabled people without a job, almost three-quarters wanted to be employed[6].

Disabled people we engaged with consistently emphasised a strong desire for work. For some, this was about needing an income. For others, employment provided dignity, connection, and purpose, as expressed by Jacob:

> ***I'm really motivated to get a job. Keep trying despite it being really hard. It would give me a reason to get out of the house. I like having my regular routine where I need to leave the house and be somewhere and come home at a specific time. And a job makes me do the routine. It makes me more independent. Independence is really important to me.***
>
> - Jacob (disabled person)

The labour market misses out on the immense value of many disabled workers.

A common message from our participants was that disabled people bring significant skills, strengths, and economic value to workplaces, yet they don't always feel that employment support services are designed to recognise or leverage this. Disabled workers clearly expressed their job-relevant skills, many of which they linked to their disabilities, such as reliability, precision, and consistency.

> ***I don't think we've heard enough around 'what are the skills that you bring?' If an employer asked you, what are the things you bring to that workplace? And most people can articulate what they bring to the workplace.***
>
> - Amy (disabled person & system expert)

Employers reported that, when the right support is in place, hiring disabled people often led to strong workplace outcomes, including productivity gains and valuable diversity of experience and perspective. Beyond these individual benefits, NZIER modelling suggested that closing the employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people could have increased New Zealand's GDP by an estimated $578 million in 2025.[7]

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[5] Valuing Access to Work, NZIER, 2025
[6] 2023 Household Disability Survey
[7] Valuing Access to Work, NZIER, 2025

> ***Fundamental to valuing people with disability is having some expectations of what each person can achieve... We often hire someone who has been coached to not own the fact they are a disabled person. But in this organisation, it is a really positive thing, so we need to unpack that with them. Their disability is a real attribute and skill.***
>
> - Mark (employer)

However, disabled people described experiencing employment services as deficit-focused, with needs assessments, language (e.g. communications, websites, etc.), and eligibility processes focused on their limitations rather than their potential contributions to the workforce.

Designing services around disabled people's strengths, by explicitly positioning service users as capable contributors, is essential to enabling positive service experiences for disabled people.

Everyday inequities magnify the impact of employment support design.

Disabled people engaging with employment services are often already navigating intersecting inequities across health, transport, housing, finances, care arrangements, education, and social connection. Participants described how these everyday conditions strongly shape whether employment is realistic, accessible, or sustainable. Inflexible care schedules, limited transport, unaffordable accessible housing, rural isolation, and poor digital access could narrow work options before employment services were even engaged. For some - particularly people who acquired disabilities later in life - stabilising housing, health, transport, or support arrangements was a necessary step before work could be considered. Navigating multiple fragmented systems added further cognitive and emotional burden.

> ***The [issues] don't sit siloed, they're so entwined... housing, accessible housing, housing that's in transport routes, it's not affordable. Therefore, many people are forced to live in more affordable areas which tend to have less connected public transport or less connection to internet or access to libraries where it can be used - and that became a huge issue for people applying for jobs.***
>
> - Anna (disabled person & system expert)

Participants also linked prolonged unemployment, repeated rejection, and exclusion from meaningful work with declining mental wellbeing. Loss of routine, purpose, confidence, and social connection were described as significant consequences when people wanted to work but remained locked out of opportunities.

In this context, seemingly small service design issues (such as delays, repeated administration, or inflexible service hours) can become decisive barriers to participation. Support that recognises and helps mitigate compounding disadvantage is more likely to enable participation, confidence, and sustainable employment outcomes.

Attributes of effective employment support services

As indicated by participants in our engagements

Employment is accessible to and inclusive of disabled people.
Effective employment supports prioritise removing structural, environmental, and procedural barriers to work where possible, recognising that disabled people's unemployment is driven by access constraints rather than a lack of motivation or skill.

Disabled people are seen as valuable contributors to the workforce.
Effective employment supports actively identify, articulate, and leverage the skills, strengths, and value that disabled people bring, positioning them as valuable contributors to the workforce.

Employment supports account for compounding inequities.
Support is intentionally flexible and holistic, accounting for the intersecting impacts of housing, transport, health, trauma, and poverty on participation in employment.

Part 2.
Highlighting insights from three disabled communities

This Part comprises three sections focused on our prioritised engagement activities with tāngata whaikaha Māori, tagata sa'ilimalo, and people with learning disabilities.

We have given dedicated attention to these communities in recognition of their distinct cultural contexts, preferred engagement approaches, and the tendency for their voices, experiences, and needs to often be underrepresented in disability data, service design, and policy development.

Members of these communities also contributed through the wider stakeholder engagements, where they shared system-wide experiences and perspectives alongside other participants.

Key insights
Kaupapa Māori engagement

The purpose of this engagement stream was to understand the broader context for whānau and how they think about being and/or walking alongside tāngata whaikaha Māori, their views about the world of work, and how they think about support services. This Kaupapa Māori approach created space for Māori experiences, values, and ways of working to shape the insights in their own right.

Engagements were conducted by Kataraina Davis (Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Kahu) in Te Reo Māori, when preferred by whānau. Whanaungatanga was utilised to create safety for whānau, and engagements were undertaken in ways that intentionally upheld the mana of whānau.

This Kaupapa Māori engagement involved whānau who live in Tāmaki Makaurau and who have lived experience of disability. In some instances, several members of the same whānau are tāngata whaikaha Māori, with ages spanning from rangatahi to adulthood.

The engagements surfaced these key insights:

The moemoeā of tāngata whaikaha Māori and their whānau centres on access, participation and inclusion.

We heard that tāngata whaikaha Māori (and their whānau) dream of being able to participate in everyday activities that are accessible to non-disabled people - to be able to study, work, and live in their own homes. They have abilities emotionally, socially, mentally and physically and they do not want to be defined by their disability. Tamariki and rangatahi with disability are viewed by whānau as precious: he taonga.

> ***Hīkoi ngā ao e rua.***
> - Manaia (tangata whaikaha Māori)
>
> *[To walk confidently in both worlds.]*

Tuakiritanga (identity) is a key part of hauora for tāngata whaikaha Māori.

We heard that connection and social cohesion is important for tāngata whaikaha Māori and their whānau. Being able to participate in all aspects of te ao Māori - such as kapahaka, kura, Te Reo Māori, marae life - contributes to wellbeing. For whānau, having a disability means reassessing what wellbeing, enabling, and success look like.

Upholding mana through service and support provision is critical.

We heard that some aspects of living with disability can be mana diminishing for tāngata whaikaha Māori and their whānau. Services and supports that tāngata whaikaha Māori and their whānau utilise need to seek opportunities to maintain mana through all parts of the process.

This can include speaking in Te Reo Māori, taking strengths-based approaches, supporting whānau to make their own decisions, and acknowledging the role of whānau caregivers. We heard that upholding mana contributes to equity.

If services don't support tino rangatiratanga, whānau Māori may choose more enabling pathways.

We heard that systems of support for tāngata whaikaha Māori are well-intentioned and have some positive elements, such as navigation support. However, these systems often do not work for Māori. The challenges include repetitive administrative processes, the need to prove ongoing support requirements, the necessity for advocacy to obtain assistance, and restrictions on how services can be used by tāngata whaikaha Māori and their whānau.

Without tino rangatiratanga for whānau, many may choose to opt out of the system, either partially or entirely.

> ***It's great to have a system that intends to help whānau – that should come with a trust that the whānau know what they need to do with the funding.***
>
> – Anahera (whanaunga)

Attributes of effective employment support services

As indicated by participants in our engagements

Access, participation, and inclusion for tāngata whaikaha Māori is uplifted.
Supports align with the moemoeā of Māori disabled people and their whānau by enabling full participation in work and community life on an equal footing with non-disabled people.

Tuakiritanga is affirmed as central to hauora.
Employment support recognises identity, culture, and connection — including participation in te ao Māori — as foundational to the wellbeing and vocational success of tāngata whaikaha Māori.

Every touchpoint is mana-enhancing.
Interactions, communication, language, and decisions consistently uphold dignity and respect, avoid deficit-based and welfare-oriented framing, and reinforce capability and belonging for everyone involved.

Tino rangatiratanga and whānau decision-making is supported.
Supports always work to enable genuine choice and control for tāngata whaikaha Māori and their whānau, trusting them to determine the supports they need and the kinds of services that provide affirming experiences.

Key insights
Engagement with tagata sa'ilimalo / Pacific disabled people

Previous research and engagement have indicated that the service access inequities faced by Pacific people are compounded by the intersection of being both Pacific and disabled.

This engagement stream has specifically sought the unique perspectives of tagata sa'ilimalo / Pacific disabled people, their families, service providers, and system experts. We engaged our partners who specialise in community engagement with Pacific communities to arrange these engagements.

Intersecting identities: being Pacific and disabled.

Navigating both a Pacific identity and a disability identity in mainstream New Zealand society was described by tagata sa'ilimalo as a unique, complex, and sometimes challenging experience. It was common for tagata sa'ilimalo to feel excluded and disconnected from the Aotearoa disability community because of their Pacific heritage.

They felt that their cultural ways of being, communication styles, and leadership styles often did not match dominant disability norms and that they were expected to take on a new persona to fit in. For example, the cultural significance of family relationships, togetherness, and responsibilities sometimes seemed at odds with the disability community's strong focus on independence, self-advocacy and self-determination. One tagata mentioned that they experienced more genuine inclusion in non-disabled environments than in disability circles.

> ***When I was in primary [school], everyone kind of forced me to be in the cultural dancing groups with [my brother], and there were no ramps back then. And so people would just carry me on to the stage. And like not once did I have to look around and ask who's going to take me on stage. I just knew I was going to be on stage. And so I had that inclusion in cultural things from like throughout my whole school life.***
>
> - Leilani (tagata sa'ilimalo)

Those who were active and connected in Pacific disabled social circles described an immense sense of pride and belonging, although they noted that they had to work hard to 'earn' this. However, belonging to these groups was clearly a precious and highly-valued experience, with tagata sharing stories of cultural joy, strong mentoring relationships, and access to new opportunities.

Other tagata we spoke to felt disconnected on multiple fronts — from mainstream society, from the disability community, and from Pacific cultural roots. They described colonial attitudes being absorbed by Pacific communities and contributing to low expectations for disabled people within Pacific communities and families. Tagata who chose to separate themselves from these low expectations also experienced

separation from their cultural and spiritual roots, which often significantly impacted their mental health.

These experiences spoke to the importance of employment support services creating environments where disabled people belong as their whole selves — culturally, socially, and professionally. When services expand to meet Pacific ways of being, Pacific people do not need to mould themselves to fit in. This includes ensuring there are Pacific-led disability employment services available and running effectively.

Employment outcomes fail without reciprocal confidence, communication, and cultural safety.

Community leaders described a tendency for confidence and communication styles to be common barriers to employment for tagata sa'ilimalo. They stressed the importance of coaching and empowering job-seekers to use their voice, ask lots of questions, and develop their assertiveness, while still maintaining their cultural safety and boundaries (acknowledging cultural differences in communication, especially assertiveness). Even when employment support services found job-seekers a job placement, being unable to ask a manager a question, raise a concern, or navigate workplace relationships often led to dismissal. Family dynamics sometimes amplified this problem, as with good intentions, families may prioritise safety and togetherness, while avoiding difficult topics like independence, money, or relationships.

This spoke to the importance of employment support services prioritising culturally safe communication coaching, family-inclusive approaches, and a safe, low-pressure pace when working with tagata sa'ilimalo.

Attributes of effective employment support services

As indicated by participants in our engagements

The whole self is recognised and supported.
Effective employment support services create environments where tagata sa'ilimalo can participate as their whole selves - culturally, relationally, and professionally - without having to conform to dominant disability norms to belong.

Pacific leadership in the ecosystem is visible, resourced, and valued.
Pacific disability leaders are given the authority and resourcing required to shape and deliver support services for their people that make Pacific ways of being central to the service model.

Confidence and communication strategies are treated as core employment foundations.
Effective supports prioritise culturally safe coaching that builds confidence, self-advocacy, and communication as essential prerequisites to sustainable employment, not optional extras after placement.

Services work *with* families, not around them.
Strong employment support services are supported and resourced to engage Pacific families as partners, building shared understanding of independence, work, and wellbeing in ways that align with cultural values of care and collectivity.

Key insights
Engagement with people with learning disabilities

Early engagement consistently indicated that people with learning disabilities were being poorly served by aspects of the current services and were at risk of falling between existing support pathways.

Disabled people, whānau, and advocates told us that Community Participation services and Disability Enterprises were often more visible and easier to access. However, where people wanted to pursue open employment, they frequently struggled to find effective, personalised support to do so. Recent data from IHC New Zealand[8] shows that 41% of adults with learning disabilities are not in education, employment, or training, while only 21% are in paid work. These findings reinforced the importance of hearing directly from this community.

We partnered with a community organisation with expertise in supporting people with learning disabilities to co-design and facilitate targeted engagements. In this section, we share key insights from those conversations.

A system that consistently leaves people with learning disabilities behind.

People with learning disabilities described a common pattern — being overlooked, deprioritised, or quietly excluded by an employment system that wasn't designed with them in mind.

Sector leaders reflected that despite decades of advocacy, the core exclusions that people with learning disabilities face have not meaningfully shifted:

> ***Between when I started [working in this sector over 30 years ago] and now, nothing has changed in terms of the kōrero that people with learning disabilities have with me about the extreme employment exclusion they face.***
>
> - Rebecca (employer)

Service providers described difficulties in effectively supporting individuals with learning disabilities. They reported that funding and contract structures can discourage work with people who need more time, flexibility, and intensive support — requirements that are common among those with learning disabilities. This means that some people with learning disabilities can be turned away from disability employment services.

> ***We went to [provider] years ago, and they did the initial assessment, but then they told [my son] that they weren't the right service for him, and he'd be better off approaching the community participation services. But he didn't want to go and do crafts and 'life skills', he wanted a job!***
>
> - Caroline (family member)

[8] Shared with permission from a publication under preparation by IHC NZ.

Participants also described barriers for disabled people engaged in Disability Enterprises and Wage Exemption settings. In most cases, they are ineligible for the other disability employment services. This risks creating parallel pathways in which people remain in segregated or low-paid work environments without timely access to services that could assist movement into open employment. Rigid programme pathways may prevent people from realising their career aspirations.

Providers also indicate that current contract specifications and payment arrangements frequently restrict their ability to collaborate with families and broader support teams, to offer in-work coaching or on-site assistance, or to spend sufficient one-on-one time with clients to achieve positive outcomes.

> ***This is where support is lacking... someone going with you for the interview or helping you with the talk of interview, and when you need someone with you, they're not here for you. That's the problem. So when you need someone with you, [because] we haven't got resources on your own.***
>
> - Micah (disabled person)

> ***I wouldn't know who to go to, what to do, to find my son support with employment. I have very little faith in the Employment Services.***
>
> - Barbara (family member)

It was also evident through the engagement process that repeated experiences of exclusion had profoundly shaped how people with learning disabilities viewed their own potential and how they measured themselves against others.

> ***If people know you have disabilities, then they're not likely to hire you because they have to put you through a lot of the training. Therefore, they're spending money on someone where they could, you know, potentially save, save money and have someone working. Doing a more better job or working more effectively or faster or whatnot.***
>
> – Caitlin (disabled person)

Advocates and experts in the learning disability sector told us that the implication for redesign is structural and systemic. Without explicit requirements, incentives, and accountability for inclusion, people with learning disabilities will continue to fall through the gaps because the system lacks the necessary structure to support their success.

Low expectations start early and compound across a lifetime.

Many disabled people, including those with learning disabilities, are weighed down by others' low expectations right from birth. Low expectations of their skills and potential during their education result in many leaving school without qualifications, literacy skills, or meaningful exposure to work. This occurs because employment was never treated as a real or expected outcome, not because they lack capability.

> ***When people with intellectual disabilities leave school, 60% are without a qualification. So lack of expectation starts really young.***
> – Shanae (service provider/ system expert)

School students with learning disabilities are often excluded from the work experience opportunities that their peers get, despite consistent reports from participants that work experience opportunities are crucial enablers of employment for people with learning disabilities.

> ***The system needs to expect people to enter employment right from the teenage age, rather than just being expected to go to a day centre. Change the expectation from super early, and they probably wouldn't stay at school until they're 21 years old.***
> - Penny (system expert)

> ***The work-ready programmes that build literacy and other life skills should happen during transition and while at school, not delayed until later.***
> - Barbara (family member)

Participants highlighted the importance of viewing employment services as part of a broader life-course system: one that reinforces the expectation of work early, invests in school-to-work transitions, and treats employment not as a stretch goal, but as a normal and achievable future.

A learning disability doesn't justify an exemption from personalised job matching.

People with learning disabilities are often funnelled into a narrow band of low-paid, insecure jobs that bear little relationship to their interests, skills, or aspirations. These roles are frequently part-time, segregated from mainstream employment situations, or offer no pathway for progression. However, our participants' experiences endorsed that satisfying jobs, with fair wages, matched to a person's actual talents and goals, are not only possible but consistently achieved through customised employment approaches.

> ***When I say employment, I mean real jobs, real money. Not 'food, filth, and flowers'. Not business enterprises for $2 an hour.***
> – Penny (system expert)

Participants stressed that the issue lies not in the disabled person's capability, but in resourcing and design. Many providers noted that the current funding models, combined with an underskilled workforce, restrained their ability to deliver deep discovery, personalised job matching, and strong employer relationships. Redesign must shift the measure of success from just 'any' job placement to good jobs that match a person's interests, strengths, and aspirations. Participants argued that meaningful jobs with fair wages are achievable when providers have time to understand the person.

Leaders in the learning disability sector praised a customised employment approach called *Discovery* created by Milton Tyree[9], a recognised world leader in customised employment for people with learning disabilities. *Discovery* recognises that many people with learning disabilities may have limited experience in the world, making it challenging to identify their passions and how they can contribute in a workplace. The approach is now commonly recognised as useful for other disabled groups too, and involves spending time with the person in familiar and novel activities, interviewing people who know them well, and reviewing records to collaboratively uncover their aspirations and skills.

Enduring support is not a luxury — it is what makes work possible for some people.

For people with learning disabilities, sustaining employment often hinges on having support available over time, not just at the point of placement.

Providers shared how something as simple as a new supervisor or a change in team dynamics can destabilise a job overnight. Yet current service expectations assume someone is 'settled' after a year, with providers having to work hard to justify continued involvement beyond 12 months.

People with learning disabilities and their advocates emphasised the need for a backdrop of support — sometimes active, sometimes just a trusted person to call — that can step in when circumstances shift.

> ***They think after a year somebody's in work and see you later, you know, but when you've got a learning disability and you're neurodiverse and you've got all this other stuff going on for you, all you need is a change of supervisor or a new colleague coming in, and it just turns to custard.***
>
> – Sarah (service provider)

Jacob described leaving his job because he wasn't being supported to progress his skills. He describes his reasoning in the following quote:

> ***One time [my co-worker] showed me how to use the till so that I could do something different. But then the supervisor said 'who taught you to use the till!?' and then said I couldn't use it because I had to be trained... But they weren't willing to train me for some reason. So I left because I got bored."***
>
> – Jacob (disabled person)

Effective employment services for people with learning disabilities would feature time-unlimited, flexible support as its core infrastructure rather than an exception.

[9] Co-creating employment with Discovery, Milton Tyree, https://imaginemore.org.au/resources/employment-and-microenterprise/co-creating-employment-with-discovery/

Attributes of effective employment support services

As indicated by participants in our engagements

Disabled people are always viewed as capable and employable.
Support services help counter society's low expectations by reinforcing the belief that disabled people have value and are employable from early life through adulthood.

Job quality, fit, and aspiration are prioritised.
Effective supports are structured to facilitate job placements that align with a person's interests, talents, and long-term goals—not just readily available roles. Personalised strategy, job matching, and creative brokering are intentionally prioritised.

Support lasts long enough.
Post-placement support is available over a substantial period of time for those who need it, to help them respond to workplace change, instability, or new challenges. Warning signs of potential job loss are closely watched for, and interventions promptly launched when necessary.

Part 3.
Insights across the experience journey of employment support services

This Part explores insights across four dimensions of a disabled person's experience when using employment support services.

This section explores insights across four dimensions of a disabled person's employment support journey (see visual below) :

1. finding, accessing, and transitioning between, services;
2. experiencing effective employment services;
3. achieving meaningful employment outcomes;
4. maintaining those outcomes over time.

The insights tell a connected, experience-led story, and reflect what it is like to move through the system from a disabled person's perspective.

This journey-based approach aligns with the overarching service design methodology being used, which requires consideration of different stages and touchpoints across the end-to-end client experience.

Presenting engagement findings within a similar framework makes it easy to draw clear, practical connections between what we heard through engagement and the implications for service improvements and design decisions.



Dimension 1.
Finding, accessing, and transitioning between services
How people become aware of, qualify for, enter, and transition between services.

Dimension 2.
Experiencing effective employment services

The quality, relevance, flexibility, and dignity of disabled people's interactions with the services.

Dimension 3.
Achieving meaningful employment outcomes

How the services contribute to gaining work, building capability and confidence, and progressing toward employment goals.

Dimension 4.
Sustaining outcomes over time

How the services help people retain work, adapt to change, progress, and remain connected to support when needed.

Dimension 1. Finding, accessing, and moving between services

Employment support that starts early enough prevents a trajectory of compounding exclusion.

Stakeholders consistently described the years before leaving school as both the most critical and the most neglected window of employment support. Many disabled young people reach their final year of school having had little or no opportunity to explore what work could look like for them. When appropriate support does appear, it is often too late. It is very difficult to counter the cumulative effects of years of low expectations, missed learning opportunities, and exclusion from meaningful work experiences. Sector leaders expressed frustration over this issue still not being recognised by the disability support and education sectors, despite decades of advocacy.

> ***We're not starting early enough with our disabled kids at high school... [We need to be] building up towards that final year, because you just can't chuck them into an internship in the final year and think that it's going to work because it just doesn't work like that.***
> - Steven (disabled person & system expert)

Providers told us there is no funded, coordinated pathway bridging education and employment, and that they are left absorbing the cost of filling this gap. Existing work experience opportunities are often unsafe, poorly supported, or disconnected from real employment outcomes.

As Katherine noted, helping someone navigate workplace expectations for the first time in their 40s is far more difficult than building those foundations at 14 years old:

> ***And to be frank, I got sick of meeting 30, 40 year olds who had never worked in their life... to try and develop some of those skills and potential behaviours or things that are expected in workplaces are a hell of a lot harder to do when you're in your 40s.***
> - Katherine (service provider)

Another system expert described the value of investing in work experiences for disabled high school students:

> ***Work experiences aren't about getting the job, they're about gathering data about that human and what contexts work best for them, what timings work best for them, how many times do they need to be given an instruction, how many instructions can you give them at any one time. All those sort of fundamentals, right? And you gather all that up, you go, OK, this is what we've learned. Let's have another go and fine tune it. Then by the time they get ready to leave school, the data is available of how to customise the role for them.***
> *- Matthew (system expert)*

The “transition cliff”: Moving from education to work.

Transitions from education into employment were repeatedly described as one of the weakest points in the current disability employment system. Rather than a connected pathway, our participants described an abrupt drop in support as disabled people leave school, tertiary study, or training, to seek employment.

> ***It’s just a cliff, yeah. If you don’t catch [the disabled person], then, you know, yeah.***
>
> - Sarah (service provider)

Young people can shift suddenly from structured education environments into fragmented benefit and employment systems, with no clear handover, navigation, or continuity of relationships. Participants described a seeming lack of support that bridged the transition from school-based supports to post-school disability employment services. They reported that continuity felt absent and outcomes tended to depend on whether someone happens to be “caught” by the right provider, family support, educator, or employer at the right time, rather than a joined-up support system.

For those in tertiary education, participants described funding access criteria as preventing employment services from working flexibly with students while they study. Contract models built around fixed periods of intensive support do not fit the episodic reality of student life, where suport may be needed during holidays, internships, graduation, or job search periods. As a result, disabled students can complete qualifications, yet still face a labour market transition with little personalised assistance.

> ***Our 18 to 24s, when they're studying at University or Polytech, we are structurally prevented from taking them into the employment service, because once we take them in, we have to work with them for 12 months. And they don't want that. What they want is someone to work with them to provide them an opportunity for some summer placement, and then they want to be left alone to go and do their study. And, then they want to come back and see us again at the end of their study. And then they want help going into their first job. So, that is probably the biggest and most glaring case example of why we need flexibility in the employment service.***
>
> - Steven (disabled person & system expert)

Our participants also noted that many provider networks are oriented toward entry-level sectors rather than graduate or professional pathways. Some qualified disabled people need introductions, mentoring, adjustments, and access to employer networks more than long-term case management, yet these brokerage supports are underdeveloped.

Overall, participants described transition as needing to be designed as a multi-year journey spanning school, study, training, and early employment. Funding and services should move with people through these stages, rather than

requiring them to end one service and begin another at the very point continuity is most important.

> ***The biggest thing for me is it would be just marvellous if there was a system that started at the very beginning, had a sense of longevity, and went right through and stayed with the person. Didn't abandon the person halfway through, but actually stayed with them and walked alongside them and ensured that the person was looked after on all stations in their life.***
>
> - Kylie (disabled person & system expert)

Low awareness of disability employment services means people in the greatest need of assistance could be missing out.

The low visibility of the services was one of the most persistent messages across our engagements. Some participants told us they were not aware that help was available at all.

> ***We'd never heard of the Disability Employment Support Products. We didn't even know it was possible to get <u>any</u> support for employment!***
>
> - Jacob (disabled person)

Disabled people and their families described navigating employment as though they were entirely on their own. For whānau, this added deep personal burden. These gaps were felt most acutely at transition points, such as leaving school or re-entering work after job loss.

> ***I feel like it's all on me to find him a job... I feel responsible for [my son's] outcomes, especially when there's no other support that I know of.***
>
> - Rachel (family member)

This lack of awareness is not incidental. Information about the services is scattered, difficult to find without prior knowledge, and buried within standard Work and Income benefit information online — not somewhere you would logically think look for employment support.

> ***It would be great if effort was put into supporting disabled people to know what they're entitled to. Supporting employers and workplaces to adapt is really important, but it's also important that disabled people are empowered to know what services, supports, and funding they can access on their own.***
>
> - Katie (employer)

Our participants also described communication barriers including inaccessible information, lack of Easy Read materials, limited NZSL/interpreter access, and systems that assumed phone, written, or digital literacy. For some disabled people, services were effectively inaccessible before engagement even began.

Those who knew about the services said they had heard about them through word-of-mouth, or had stumbled across them by accident.

We also heard that many employers are highly motivated to hire disabled employees and support them to thrive in their roles, but they do not know what support is available, which costs might be covered, or where to begin finding out.

Only narrow forms of "employment" are supported in the current model.

Across our engagements, a consistent disconnect emerged between how Disability Employment Support Products define "employment" and how many disabled people actually participate in work. Current service contracts and eligibility criteria privilege traditional forms of permanent employment while excluding other forms of work that are increasingly common, and often essential, for disabled people.

Disabled people described being locked out of support when pursuing fixed-term contracts, part-time roles, contracting, self-employment, seasonal work, or project-based opportunities. As one former provider observed, "You've got to work 30 hours a week [to receive the wage subsidy]... but the way people are working is changing quite a lot" (Steven).

For many disabled people, flexible working arrangements are not a preference but a precondition for getting and staying employed, but if rigid rules make support inaccessible, they may not be able to do the flexible jobs either.

This exclusion is particularly stark for self-employment. Although self-employed people aren't formally ineligible for the services, Steven, a former service provider, reported that in practice it remains "completely "off the table" because there is insufficient funding to provide the necessary support, despite around 20% of clients expressing interest in it.

> ***If it's a fixed term contract for, you know, perhaps three months' worth of work, you know, that means that person doesn't qualify for that work and training support [JTSF], even though they may need interpreters or they may need support people or they may need mobility taxis or something like that to do that work.***
>
> - Sam (disabled person)

It is also worth acknowledging that, in the NZ Disability Strategy Refresh consultation[10], Māori and tāngata whaikaha Māori submitters went further, by challenging whether paid employment alone should define 'work' and calling for broader recognition of meaningful work within whānau and community contexts. When definitions of employment do not reflect real life, the system can unintentionally filter out capable, motivated people, reinforcing exclusion rather than enabling participation.

Settings designed to avoid 'cherry picking' inadvertently have the opposite effect.

Our engagements consistently showed that disabled people who need the most support are often excluded or underserved by current services, not because those services are unwilling to prioritise these groups, but because the system is designed in ways that make doing

[10] "Summary of submissions - tāngata whaikaha Māori and Māori feedback" by Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled People. Retrieved from 'New Zealand Disability Strategy Summary of Submissions'. https://www.whaikaha.govt.nz/about-us/our-work/new-zealand-disability-strategy-2026-2030/summary-of-submissions

so economically and administratively unviable.

Some providers cited outcomes-based contracts and short milestone windows as examples, explaining that these can reward speed and volume, rather than depth or persistence. Providers are paid only when placements are achieved within 6, 9, or 12 months — a timeframe that does not work for many disabled people, including many with learning disabilities, tāngata whaikaha Māori, and tagata sa'ilimalo. When funding is tight, providers may de-prioritise those facing the greatest number of barriers to employment in order to receive more regular payments.

> ***Because to find someone a job you've still got to do all the same stuff. It doesn't matter if they've got a mild intellectual disability versus, a wheelchair, to be really crass, because you've still got to do all the same activities.***
>
> - Mike (service provider)

Another example given was the Service Level Indicator (SLI) categories. Providers told us that the 'low-medium-high' categorisation of provider effort bears little relationship to the actual work required to support someone into employment, yet they determine funding levels. This means that clients whose circumstances do not align neatly with these categories — including tāngata whaikaha Māori, tagata sa'ilimalo, and those facing intersecting social barriers — are frequently deemed "too complex" for what the contract can absorb.

Finally, providers reported that the current contracts do not allow them to collaborate effectively with each other, with other professionals in a client's support team, or with specialists needed to achieve successful employment outcomes. They described many cases where best practice would have involved working with culturally-specific services, clinicians, disability specialists, or other Employment Service providers, but doing so was not financially viable. As a result, clients who critically needed this collaboration to receive effective employment support often came away from the Employment Service empty-handed.

> ***We used to do so much more holistic stuff... We had all these innovations in place, you know, and now it's all about getting people off your books and getting people on your books, you know, so the more people you enrol, the better the probability of being able to offer people more support and work***.
>
> - Sarah (service provider)

Many disabled people described feeling let down by the Employment Service in this way, and the impact this had on their confidence and hope for their employment prospects. This was especially common among participants with learning disabilities, who described being moved from provider to provider after being told it was too difficult to find them a job within the funding and timeframes given by MSD.

Equitable access is not an implementation issue but a design issue. Unless funding, timeframes, eligibility, and outcome measures are deliberately recalibrated to value long-term, relational, high-support work, the most underserved cohorts will continue to be left

behind. Importantly, participants did not frame this primarily as a provider motivation issue.

Many providers were seen as wanting to work well with higher-support clients, but operating within funding, timeframe, and performance settings that made this difficult to sustain.

Attributes of effective disability employment support services

As indicated by participants in our engagements

Employment support starts early to interrupt cycles of exclusion.
Supports for rangatahi begin early in secondary school, building confidence, providing work exposure, and laying foundations for employment.

The education-to-work transition is bridged systematically.
Supports provide continuity across schooling, study, training, and employment, helping prevent the "transition cliff," supported by long-term relationships between system participants.

Everybody can find the right information easily.
Information about the available supports is accessible, clearly communicated, and consistent across all platforms, so that disabled people and whānau, Work and Income staff, providers, and employers can easily find the information and support they need when they need it.

Diverse forms of work are recognised.
Flexible work arrangements that suit many disabled people, including part-time, ad hoc, contracting, fixed-term roles, and self-employment, are supported.

People facing greater barriers receive equitable access to support.
Providers are enabled by contract and system settings to support clients with a range of support needs, including those encountering more intersecting, compounding, or complex barriers.

Dimension 2. Experiencing effective employment services

Employment support works best when it's highly personalised and disabled people remain in control.

Our participants were clear that experiences across different providers varied considerably, and that effective support was both possible and already occurring in parts of the system. Good service experiences were described as relational, affirming of the disabled person's power and agency in the support pathway, and deeply invested in understanding the person's goals, strengths, and circumstances. Providers often noted the difficulty of providing personalised service under a highly prescriptive MSD contract.

Disabled people described feeling a strong sense of powerlessness when it felt as though the service was being done *to* them rather than *with* them. Services often took over decision-making, chose support pathways, shaped individualised plans, and negotiated with employers without the client present. This made them feel at the mercy of both MSD, the provider, and the prospective employer.

> ***What we often see is the employer talks only to the employment support. Would that happen in any other employment relationship? The answer is probably no.***
> - Amy (disabled person & system expert)

Disabled people also told us that employment support often feels standardised and procedural, as though they are being asked to fit into a pre-existing pathway, rather than having support shaped around their lives. For example, many Employment Service clients expressed frustration at having to sit through work readiness and pre-employment activities when that was not the support they needed. People also spoke about feeling categorised by employability or diagnosis rather than being supported to articulate what a good life, meaningful work, or success looks like for them.

> ***They said I had to go to job club before they found me a job but I just said, 'why can't you just give me what I'm asking for and help me find a job?' At job club we were writing CVs, but I'd already made my CV at [another disability support provider] so I didn't need to do that, but I had to go to job club every week anyway.***
> - Joshua (disabled person)

Providers and system experts described this loss of agency as being reinforced by system settings. For example, Employment Service contracts require a prescriptive service pathway for all clients, and funding structures incentivise 'quick and easy' job placement through the provider's existing employer agreements, rather than supported job searching and job carving for a role of the client's choice. Where people experienced genuine choice and control, the difference was stark. When services start with the person and offer flexible, personalised support, people feel seen and understood, and are enabled to lead their own employment journey.

> ***I used the disability support service at my university, it was fantastic. Very helpful. They gave me 1:1 mentoring and support and stuff... They worked within my career choice — law — and gave advice on what parts of the law sector might suit me and what parts might not.***
>
> - William (disabled person)

A consistent mentor or coach, who understands the individual's disability, context, and support needs and can advocate on their behalf, was repeatedly identified as critical to securing and sustaining employment. Without that support, people are often left to manage interviews, performance reviews, and workplace challenges alone. Many disabled people said they had to rely on external support workers to fill this gap, although these workers often lacked the expertise required.

> ***I was needing extra support from the [provider], but he wasn't there for me. And so I was having to go to my performance reviews all by myself. And it was real challenging.***
>
> - Caitlin (disabled person)

> ***What helps is the right people that understand and you know they're gonna support you.***
>
> - Violet (disabled person)

Participants' experiences clearly demonstrated that no contract, process, or placement target can compensate for the absence of a skilled, consistent human who understands both the person and the system. Effective consultants need skills in disability confidence, vocational coaching, employer support, accommodations, and navigating complex systems. Redesign needs to treat this role not as an optional add-on, but as core service infrastructure — ensuring every disabled person has someone in their corner, for as long as they need.

> ***It's always been true and it will always be true that it's the quality of the human being that's delivering the thing that makes a difference. It doesn't matter what the tool is.***
>
> - Matthew (service provider)

Additionally, we heard that client autonomy should be treated not just as a principle, but as a design requirement: embedding choice, shared decision-making, and control into how services are funded, delivered, and measured. Effective employment support is flexible, relational, and built around the person, not the programme. One disability employment service provider we spoke to, who doesn't currently hold an Employment Support contract, described his organisation's more personalised service model:

> ***It's very much about what does the individual need. And what's the capacity of a service to meet that. More than going, oh well, we've ascribed this level [support level indicator] to you and this amount of support.***
>
> - Mike (service provider)

Language and framing don't just describe the services - they shape who participates, how, and with what confidence.

Language, framing, and positioning emerged as deeply consequential forces, shaping how disabled people see themselves, how employers behave, and how the wider system functions. Participants were clear that deficit-based language embedded throughout communications and documentation causes real harm. Terms like 'fund of last resort' were described as confusing and stigmatising, making people feel like they were "losers who couldn't get support anywhere else" (Mitchell, disabled person and system expert), rather than people being enabled to succeed. People with invisible, fluctuating, or progressive disabilities described additional challenges navigating systems built around fixed categories of need. They often felt they had to work harder to 'prove' their need for support, which caused a great deal of stress.

Participants highlighted the common use of language that associates disability with low productivity, reinforcing narratives that disabled people are inherently less productive or capable.

> ***The problem I have is the association of the word [productivity] with disabled people because it gives the message that most disabled people actually aren't as productive... When actually, there's plenty of non-disabled people that would be leaving a course and going into a job and might not be as productive.***
>
> - Anna (disabled person & system expert)

How support is framed to employers matters just as much. Employers and sector leaders repeatedly cautioned against framing that emphasises "social good" or resembles charity. As Christopher (employer) explained, narratives that position hiring disabled people as a charitable gesture lead to "one placement and feeling good about it, and it stops there." In contrast, framing employment as mutually beneficial — strengthening sustainability, equity, and the existing workforce — was seen as far more likely to build capability and encourage repeat hiring among employers.

Our participants frequently raised concerns about the 'welfare positioning' underlying the disability employment services. Despite more recent intentions by MSD for these services to be completely independent from the benefit system, many disabled people still experience the services as primarily focused on moving them off a benefit, rather than supporting their long-term vocational success. This framing is evident in service contracts that prioritise beneficiaries, the lack of support for work arrangements that don't get people off benefits, and information being embedded within Work and Income's benefit-oriented webpages.

These subtle, often unintentional yet highly impactful messages accumulate over time. They become self-fulfilling, reducing confidence, narrowing aspirations, and discouraging disabled people from engaging with employment altogether. A shift toward strengths-based framing that emphasises the mutual benefits of employment for disabled people would re-anchor Disability Employment Support as participation infrastructure, helping to shape a system that invites people in rather than quietly teaching them they do not belong.

> ***[The Support Funds application form is] not mana-enhancing, I guess you'd say... it focuses on the impairment, it doesn't kind of consider so much what is the benefit you add to the role or what is the barrier, if we're thinking about the social model - what is the barrier in the workplace? What is the barrier in society that requires the support? Rather than focusing on the impairment aspect of it.***
>
> - Sam (disabled person)

Fragmentation and complexity shift the work of the system onto disabled people, and many are excluded as a result.

Disabled people consistently described disability employment services as fragmented, confusing, and difficult to navigate from the very first point of contact.

> ***The pathways are very confusing for people. People don't know where to go, what there is available and how to access the right information.***
>
> - Nicole (disabled person & system expert)

Participants described poor connection and coordination between education, health, MSD, and provider systems, requiring disabled people to repeat information, retell histories, and manually coordinate supports across agencies.

Instead of encountering a clear pathway into support, they spoke of not knowing where to begin, who to talk to, or what would happen next. For many, this uncertainty alone was enough to prevent them from engaging at all.

This confusion persists throughout a person's employment journey. From discovering that services exist, to onboarding, completing application forms, coordinating multiple supports, and sustaining assistance once in work, people described a system that required constant interpretation and effort. Support Fund applications were described as particularly burdensome, deficit-focused, and mana-diminishing, requiring extensive paperwork, repeated reassessments, and long delays — sometimes lasting months — while jobs hung in the balance. Inconsistent decisions and unclear reasons for decline created anxiety and unpredictability, making the effort feel disproportionate to the likelihood of success.

> ***Every time you do those authorisations, right, they give you forms to fill out, a lot of forms every time you go to any organizations you have to fill out these forms, and it's a lot harder trying to understand because it ain't in EasyRead.***
>
> - Warren (disabled person)
>
> ***I feel like I have to justify my existence [with JTSF needs assessments].***
>
> - Evelyn (disabled person)

Transition points expose these issues most clearly. Leaving school, completing training, acquiring a disability, or moving from

unemployment into work were repeatedly described not as moments of coordinated support, but as moments in which people fell through the gaps.

Because services are fragmented, coordination rarely happens behind the scenes. Instead, disabled people and their whānau are left to manage multiple support systems at once. As Daniel (disabled person and system expert) explained, this can involve "multiple different funding streams that go to one person [and those funding streams] don't necessarily talk to each other."

Disabled people described how exhausting it is to carry this cognitive load on top of the daily pressures of navigating a world designed for non-disabled people.

> ***It just becomes another thing that you're balancing, but then you don't realize at the end of the day that it's a lot of thinking and a lot of navigating through, and you're usually quite isolated when you're doing it.***
>
> - William (disabled person)

Contradictory information adds to the load. Service users, providers, and employers alike described their confusion when navigating what feels like mixed messages about eligibility, the relevance of benefit status, and the distinction between employer and MSD responsibility for reasonable accommodations. This means that disabled people and those supporting them must attempt to make sense of seemingly nonsensical information at moments of high stress and potential risk for the disabled person.

Instead, what is needed are "no wrong door" pathways, aligned information, accessible administrative processes, and coordinated service delivery. If the system absorbed the complexity itself, disabled people, providers, and employers could focus more of their energy on achieving the client's employment goals.

When employment support falls short, the burden shifts onto those least resourced to carry it.

When employment support services are ineffective, absent, or inconsistent, disabled people, their whānau, and employers are left to fill the gaps. Engagements revealed that families were frequently taking on the role of employment consultants: searching for opportunities, interpreting complex benefit rules, advocating with providers and employers, and carrying responsibility for outcomes that should be shared. This responsibility was described as a significant source of stress and anxiety, layered on top of already demanding caring roles.

One family member described the impact on parents when they cannot access adequate employment support for their disabled adult children:

> ***Far too many people with intellectual disabilities end up doing nothing, sitting at home, year on year... That means that mothers, usually, end up losing their careers, they end up staying home.***
>
> - Penny (family member)

Disabled people often bear the heaviest burden themselves. When support is fragmented or unavailable, they are left to coordinate across MSD, health services, funders, and workplaces, carrying the cognitive, emotional, and financial costs of system failure. Employers, too, step in when support breaks down, building in-house capability or self-funding accommodations after being turned away or let down by services.

> ***We've chosen not to have our employees on some form of supported employment, but we did in the past. We felt like it was a tick-boxing exercise, support wasn't great, we didn't feel it was very genuine. Most of our staff identify as disabled. We just do the employment support ourselves. It would be nice if we had some good support though.***
>
> - Rebecca (employer)

When services fail to provide consistent, proactive, and relational support, risk and labour are shifted onto people who are already under-resourced. The redesign offers an opportunity to consider how the suite of disability employment services might be structured to carry that weight, rather than redistribute it.

Attributes of effective disability employment support services

As indicated by participants in our engagements

Support is personalised and flexible.
Providers are enabled to easily adapt support strategies and pathways to each client's unique context without unnecessary rules or pre-prescribed processes getting in the way.

There is no wrong door.
Support services have clear pathways, aligned information, and intentional coordination between agencies and providers, with the aim of absorbing as much system complexity as possible to reduce pressure on disabled people.

Burden is distributed equitably.
Services are structured to take proportionate responsibility for fixing problems in the system without shifting undue risk onto disabled people.

Dimension 3. Achieving meaningful outcomes

Re-thinking "work readiness": who isn't ready, and for what?

"Work readiness" surfaced repeatedly in engagements, but it was also consistently contested. Participants often distinguished between work preparation and work readiness. Preparation meant raising expectations of employment, exploring vocational aspirations, building confidence, and gaining familiarity with workplace norms, especially for people excluded from these experiences early in life. Readiness referred more specifically to practical supports linked to obtaining and starting paid employment, including job-specific capability building. Others challenged the premise altogether: are disabled people not ready for work, or are our systems simply not ready to recognise and respond to their potential?

> ***Our principle very much is place then train. Our focus is get someone a job, and through that journey [teach them the skills].***
>
> - Mike (service provider)
>
> ***Sometimes, after 6 months, we realize actually they weren't ["high needs"], they just needed a job. And the right job.***
>
> - Sarah (service provider)

Disabled people and system experts described how low expectations — set early in schooling and compounded over time — often shape who is deemed "not ready." Many leave school without qualifications or exposure to real work, then cycle through readiness programmes that delay employment rather than enable it, because these programmes often do not do enough to expose them to the world of work. Leaders in the sector advocate starting from the assumption that everyone is employable if we are willing to understand the person — their skills, interests, and conditions for success — and shape work around them. Of course, this approach is dependent on an employment environment that accommodates this, which is why it's so important for service providers to be building strong working relationships with employers.

These leaders frequently referred to overseas experts on supported employment for people with learning disabilities, including Milton Tyree, who developed *Discovery,*[11] an equivalent of the Individualised Plan. *Discovery* prioritises understanding the whole person — their interests, conditions for success, and potential contributions — before any job planning begins. Rather than testing people or simply asking "What do you want to do?", *Discovery* involves spending time with the person in familiar and novel activities, interviewing people who know them well, and reviewing records discerningly. As Tyree explains, "*Discovery* is never a test. It never involves people proving readiness. Our assumption is that everybody is ready for employment if we are ready to know and understand the person."

The implication for redesign is not to abandon the work readiness function, but to redefine it: as practical, individualised, and connected to real jobs — not as an indefinite holding pattern that keeps people waiting to begin.

[11] Co-creating employment with Discovery, Milton Tyree, https://imaginemore.org.au/resources/employment-and-microenterprise/co-creating-employment-with-discovery/

People are too frequently placed into "any job", not the right job.

Service users consistently described employment support that prioritised speed of placement over fit or personal aspiration. Many reported being offered only a single job option, often unrelated to their skills, background, or goals, with little opportunity to explore alternatives. In some cases, disabled people said they were not asked what kind of work they wanted at all, and were instead funnelled into readily available roles. A consistent pattern also emerged in the types of positions disabled participants were placed into (i.e., low-wage, unskilled, low-expectation roles) even when they held tertiary qualifications. This left people feeling unheard, underestimated, and discouraged about their career prospects.

> ***[My son] was offered a New World job [through an ES provider] and he said I don't want this, I want to be a priest! No one in the system was ever going to listen to him (about what job he wanted), so I found him a job with the clergy and he's been working in the Parish office ever since. He loves it. He's been there for years.***
>
> - Penny (family member)

It was acknowledged that nobody can expect every job to be their ideal role, especially in difficult labour market conditions or early in their career. However, most service users described a lack of willingness or consideration to even try to align job placements with their aspirations.

Others said they were told that a low-skill job placement, volunteer role, or internship was merely a 'stepping stone' towards their long-term goals, only to remain in that role for five, ten, or more years, with no support from the provider to take the next step.

> ***I've been at [workplace] for 5 years and I hate it so I asked [provider] to help me find another job. But they keep saying 'job market's low Josh, job market's low. Look online see what you can find.' But it's your job to help me! That's not good enough! Why am I at [provider] if you just tell me to do it myself!***
>
> - Joshua (disabled person)

System experts commonly attributed this pattern to the tendency of some Employment Service providers to offer only direct job placement services through a small pool of employers with whom they had pre-existing relationships. Providers attributed this to the MSD contracts not allowing enough time or funding to provide personalised job placement, as well as some of their staff lacking the required skills.

While facilitated job placement is a valuable option for some disabled people, many others described approaching providers for support with the job search process. They wanted a coach who could mentor them through the 'mainstream' employment system. More often than not, this request was not granted, with employment consultants appearing underconfident and suggesting that clients

search for jobs on their own, without support.

Many people with tertiary qualifications also described being turned away by Employment Service providers, even though they still faced significant barriers to gaining employment.

> ***[Provider] stared at [my partner and I] in wonderment momentarily, only to then admit they hadn't heard of anyone in the disabled world as qualified as us, and they didn't know what to do with us. Once, I got a very simple job with them, and on another occasion I went to them with an idea for a particular industry I wanted to work in- their brilliant suggestion was to find someone I know who worked in that industry, and ask them if there were any jobs going. Well, gee, I never thought of that.***
>
> - Mary (disabled person)

Providers often linked this pattern to contract settings. Although Individualised Plans include clients' aspirations and strengths, funding and performance measures reward rapid placement and benefit exits over discovery, job matching, and creative brokering. Many providers wanted contracts to better support deep, personalised engagement with employers and prospective employees through job carving.

Two providers that don't currently hold Employment Service contracts described how they do this in their own practice:

> ***So instead of trying to juice up good employers to consider hiring disabled people, we would follow the direction of the job seeker and that would lead us into the pathway of hopefully creating an employment opportunity. And in my mind, it worked fabulously… Otherwise, you end up with a handful [of employers] who seem to be your buddy employers, but a lot of job seekers are ending up in jobs that perhaps they don't wish to do.***
>
> - Jason (service provider)
>
> ***One of our KPIs is that each week every employment consultant should meet 6 employers face to face… You should have time to go out and meet with employers because ultimately, as an employment service, what you need, the critical difference you need is an employer.***
>
> - Mike (service provider)

This points to the need for employment support that starts with the person, invests in discovery, and treats finding the right job as essential - not optional. In addition, there is a need for stronger professional development and specialist practice capability across the workforce.

Attributes of effective disability employment support services

As indicated by participants in our engagements

Employability is always assumed.
Support approaches assume all clients are employable by default and focus on building readiness skills through supported, graded exposure to real work experiences that begin as early as possible in the service journey.

Supports are grounded in a three-way relationship between employer, provider, and jobseeker.
This relationship is not merely an element of the service experience; rather, it is the catalyst that drives the employment support journey, with all three partners co-designing the support approach together.

Dimension 4. Sustaining outcomes over time

Job sustainability is where employment support often falls short.

Disabled people told us that job loss was a common and deeply destabilising experience. All too often, the reason for job loss was not that they could not do the work, but that the support around them had fallen away. Many spoke of being restructured out, losing accommodations after changes in management or systems, or feeling forced to resign because conditions were unsuitable. In these moments, employment services were often absent, despite the 'continuous employment support' specifications in provider contracts. People described feeling abandoned and left to rely on family and friends to cope, along with the distress of having to start the process all over again. For some people we spoke to, this meant restarting the process several times a year.

> ***When I worked in one of the [workplaces], I didn't have enough support. Not long after, I lost job. It was disappoint and upset, they used my employment funding but they didn't help, no help from employment service, but I had support from my family and friends.***
>
> - Charlotte (disabled person)

The engagements clearly showed that this is a systemic issue, not an individual one. When providers do not proactively check in with clients and employers after job placement, they are less able to identify potential issues and intervene before they become major problems. One disabled person described how they imagined it would feel if an employment support service checked in with them regularly:

> ***That somebody is actually, would be on your side, pushing the system to work for you, pushing the system get as much as possible for the person, as opposed to working for the system.***
>
> - Nicole (disabled person & system expert)

Participants also attributed this to poor initial job matching:

> ***I lost my job, just been told to go, don't come back tomorrow, no explanation why. I went to my bedroom and cried and felt hurt.... Need to match the job with disabled people's ability and skills.***
>
> - Thomas (disabled person)

> ***[At] the service I was running in Auckland, we had a 93% 6-month retention rate and 85% 12-month. And then, you know, that was just through doing what we do. We had a really good job-to-people matching.***
>
> - Katherine (system expert)

Participants all pointed to job sustainability being treated as a core outcome. They called for employment support that acts as a long-term partner and advocate - supporting workplace adjustments, navigating change, preventing avoidable job loss, and standing alongside people when roles end - because staying in work matters as much as getting it.

Participants also noted that long-term sustainability is strengthened when newly employed disabled people are supported to build their own workplace confidence, self-advocacy, and problem-solving capability. Where this occurs, provider involvement can gradually fade out appropriately rather than ending abruptly or remaining indefinitely necessary.

Employment outcomes break down when employers are left without support.

A recurring message across the engagements was that the employer's crucial role in a disabled person's employment journey is not adequately recognised in the current service design. Employers were consistently described as willing but under-equipped to employ and retain disabled people. Across engagements, employers frequently indicated they were open to employing disabled people and, in many cases, eager to do so. What was often missing was a trusted support partner who could reduce uncertainty and help make inclusion workable in practice.

Many employers want to do the right thing, yet lack confidence, practical knowledge, and a trusted source of guidance. Fear of "getting it wrong," uncertainty about reasonable accommodations, and concerns about perceived risk often lead employers to disengage or avoid hiring altogether — especially when economic pressure is high.

> ***At a Supported Employment course I did in the US, we went out and asked employers whether they'd employ a disabled person. Overwhelming response was YES absolutely! We just need a bit of help!***
>
> - David (system expert)
>
> ***You talk to employers and they say, we just want to do the right thing. But we don't know what to do. So help us out.***
>
> - Steven (disabled person & provider)
>
> ***It's scary. Nobody knows how it's going to play out. If it's a failure, it could reflect really badly on me, and stunt my career. And so I'm less likely to take risks. And unfortunately, there is that perception that employing somebody who is disabled, is a risk because we don't know how to do it, we lack that confidence.***
>
> - Christopher (employer)

Participants frequently told us that the current services underinvest in employer-facing work. Support tends to focus on placement rather than building employer capability, and often disappears once a role begins. Employers reported receiving poorly matched employee referrals, limited preparation, and little follow-up from providers, leaving them to navigate accessibility, performance conversations, or workplace changes on their own.

> *I haven't found the Employment Service providers very helpful. There was no follow up, nobody jumped at that opportunity when I approached them for referrals [to jobseekers]. I feel sad about that because people [jobseekers] might be missing out on opportunities.*
>
> - Robert (employer)

Disabled employees described how, without structured support, it felt nearly impossible to self-advocate in environments that were not designed to support them, increasing the risk of job loss.

> *I've been restructured out of a role before. It was obvious that the restructure was intentionally to get rid of me. They told me it was because I wouldn't be able to use the MYOB software. I have no idea if there's anything [legally] I can do to stop that. Maybe I should've gotten legal advice. I know so many people who have had the same thing happen to them; restructured out of roles because of inaccessible tech.*
>
> - Evelyn (disabled person)

Employers and disabled employees also expressed confusion about reasonable accommodations. Employers are often unclear about what "reasonable accommodation" means and what they are responsible for providing, as opposed to what should be covered by the Job and Training Support Funds.

> *Reasonable accommodations are such a broad term as well, and what does that mean? Well, actually it means so much for so many different people. It might mean, you know, take out the LED bulb above someone's desk and put in a lamp, or it could be a whole ramp that's going to cost $14,000 type thing.*
>
> - Lisa (disabled person & system expert)

Participants made it clear that employers are not passive actors in employment outcomes. Sustainable inclusion depends on relationships, coaching, and ongoing problem-solving. Employment support must recognise employers as active partners, not merely endpoints — by providing consistent, practical, and relational support that enables them to hire, retain, and rehire disabled people with confidence.

> *I put it in the commercial way, I put the post-placement support in the category of 'this is sales', because if I support the employer well, we're going to get more opportunity.*
>
> - Jason (service provider)

Support for role and career progression is lacking.

Many disabled employees described performing the same tasks for years with little opportunity to grow, upskill, or move into roles that better reflect their strengths and aspirations. They

noted that this lack of progression limits access to leadership pathways, meaningful training, and career transitions as roles, industries, and technologies evolve. People spoke of wanting to try new tasks or take the "next step," but found no clear pathway for who would fund the support needed to make that possible. This caused immense frustration and contributed to a sense of low expectations about disabled people's potential.

For example, Joshua described his frustration about being stuck in his table-clearing role at his workplace for 5 years, and the lack of support from his Employment Service provider:

> ***When I first started [in my job] they let me do fries for like half an hour but then never again. They never told me why! I've been there for five years I need more opportunities! They said I can't because I need to be trained and they don't have time or something. But there are so many people who started the job after me and they get to do the fries and drinks!***
>
> ***[The ES provider] came in and talked to the managers about it, but nothing's happened. [The managers] said 'oh yeah yeah we will' but then I went back to work and nothing changed.***
>
> - Joshua (disabled person)

Several participants also noted that the Training Support Fund is allocated on a lifetime rather than annual basis, which means disabled people cannot access retraining support if they need to change careers.

> ***The training support is over a lifetime. So if you are in a, you just say you are in design, right? And you access the training support to enable you to be in that profession, but AI comes in and disrupts it and suddenly you need a career change and you have to go into a completely different sector. You might not have any training supports across your lifetime remaining anymore because it was already used in your previous profession.***
>
> ***I think that a big part that needs to be considered in all of this, is that it's not just about ticking that box of having a job, it's how far on that journey to employment that person is able to go.***
>
> - Anna (disabled person & system expert)

For redesign, this insight highlights the need to reframe employment support around long-term careers - with flexible, ongoing support that enables learning, progression, and change throughout a person's working life, not just at their first placement.

Attributes of effective disability employment support services

As indicated by participants in our engagements

Job sustainability is treated as a core outcome.
Support takes a key focus on building employer and workplace confidence and capability so that disabled people can work in environments that support their role retention.

Employers are partners at all stages of the service journey.
Employers are recognised as crucial contributors to clients' employment experiences and trajectories, with intentional investment of time and resources in building relationships and providing accessible advice and problem-solving support.

Disabled people's career development and progression is in view.
Disabled people's career development is in view right at the beginning of the employment support journey, through goal setting, personalised future planning, comprehensive employer support, and long-term funding to remove barriers where needed.

Index.
Summary of insights & attributes

This table in this section gives a collated view of the insights and corresponding attributes of effective disability employment services, as also covered in Parts 1, 2 and 3.

Collated insights & attributes

Insights	Attributes of effective disability employment support services
Part 1. Important context (p. 7-10)	
Disabled people want to work. Problems with access, not motivation, drive unemployment. Disabled people we engaged with consistently emphasised a strong desire for work. **Designing employment support around disabled people's strengths and value.** Disabled people bring significant skills, strengths, and economic value to workplaces, yet they don't always feel that employment support services are designed to recognise or leverage this. **Everyday inequities magnify the impact of employment support design.** Disabled people engaging with employment services are often already navigating intersecting inequities across health, transport, housing, finances, care arrangements, education, and social connection.	**Employment is accessible to and inclusive of disabled people.** Effective employment services prioritise removing tangible barriers to work where possible. **Disabled people are seen as valued contributors.** Effective employment services actively leverage the strengths that disabled people bring to the workforce. **Services account for compounding inequities.** Support takes a holistic, intersectional approach.
Part 2. Insights from three disabled communities (p. 11-20)	
Tangata whaikaha Māori **The moemoeā of tāngata whaikaha Māori and their whānau centre on access, participation and inclusion.** Whānau dream of being able to participate in everyday activities that are accessible to non-disabled people. **Tuakiritanga (identity) is a key part of hauora for tāngata whaikaha Māori.** Being able to participate in all aspects of te ao Māori - such as kapahaka, kura, Te Reo Māori, marae life - contributes to wellbeing. **Upholding mana through service and support provision is critical.** Services and supports that tāngata whaikaha Māori and their whānau utilise need to seek opportunities to maintain mana through all parts of the process. **If services don't support tino rangatiratanga, whānau Māori may choose more enabling pathways.** Without tino rangatiratanga for whānau, many may choose to opt out of the support system, either partially or entirely.	**Access, participation, and inclusion for tāngata whaikaha Māori is uplifted.** Supports enable full participation in community life and work. **Tuakiritanga is affirmed as central to hauora.** Services recognise identity, culture, and connection as foundational to the success of tāngata whaikaha Māori. **Every touchpoint is mana-enhancing.** Interactions, communication, language, and decisions consistently uphold dignity and respect. **Tino rangatiratanga and whānau decision-making is supported.** Supports always work to enable genuine choice and control for tāngata whaikaha Māori and their whānau.

Insights	Attributes of effective disability employment supports
Tagata sa'ilimalo **Intersecting identities: being Pacific and disabled.** Navigating both a Pacific identity and a disability identity in New Zealand society was described by tagata sa'ilimalo as a unique, complex, and sometimes challenging experience. **Employment outcomes fail without confidence, communication, and cultural safety.** Confidence and cultural differences in communication styles can be common barriers to employment experienced by tagata sa'ilimalo.	**The whole self is recognised and supported.** Tagata sa'ilimalo can participate in support services as their whole selves, including cultural and community-based aspects of their identity. **Pacific leadership in the ecosystem is visible, resourced, and valued.** Pacific disability leaders are resourced to shape and deliver support services for their people. **Confidence and communication strategies are treated as core employment foundations.** Effective supports prioritise culturally safe coaching that builds confidence to self-advocate. **Services work *with* families, not around them.** Strong employment support services are supported and resourced to engage Pacific families as partners.
People with learning disabilities **A system that consistently leaves people with learning disabilities behind.** People with learning disabilities described a common pattern - being overlooked, deprioritised, or quietly excluded by an employment system that wasn't designed with them in mind. **Low expectations start early and compound across a lifetime.** For many people with learning disabilities, employment was never treated as a real or expected outcome by people and systems around them. **A learning disability doesn't justify an exemption from personalised job matching.** People with learning disabilities are often funnelled into a narrow band of low-paid, insecure jobs that bear little relationship to their interests, skills, or aspirations, even when they are experienced workers. **Ongoing support is not a luxury - it is what makes work possible for some people.** For people with learning disabilities, sustaining employment often hinges on having support available over time, not just at the point of placement.	**Disabled people are always viewed as capable and employable.** Support services help counter society's low expectations. **Job quality, fit, and aspiration are prioritised.** Effective supports are structured to facilitate job placements that align with a person's interests, talents, and long-term goals. **Support lasts long enough.** In-work support is available over a substantial period of time for those who need it.

Insights	Attributes of effective disability employment supports
Part 3. Journey-based insights (p. 24-46)	
Dimension 1 – Finding, accessing, and transitioning between services **Employment support that starts early enough prevents a trajectory of compounding exclusion.** The years before leaving school are both the most critical and the most neglected window of employment support. **'The transition cliff': Moving from education to work.** Transitions from education into employment were repeatedly described as one of the weakest points in the current disability employment support system. **Low awareness of disability employment services means people in the greatest need of assistance could be missing out.** The low visibility of the services was one of the most persistent messages across our engagements. **Only narrow forms of "employment" are supported in the current model.** Current service contracts and eligibility criteria privilege traditional forms of permanent employment while excluding other forms of work that are increasingly common, and often essential, for disabled people. **Settings designed to avoid 'cherry picking' inadvertently have the opposite effect.** Disabled people who need the most support are often excluded or underserved by current services, not because those services are unwilling to prioritise these groups, but because the system is designed in ways that make doing so economically and administratively unviable.	**Employment support starts early to interrupt cycles of exclusion.** Supports for rangatahi begin early in secondary school. **The education-to-work transition is bridged systematically.** Support services provide continuity across schooling, study, training, and employment. **Everybody can find the right information easily.** Disabled people and whānau, MSD staff, and employers can easily find the information and support they need when they need it. **Diverse forms of work are recognised.** Flexible work arrangements that better suit many disabled people are supported. **People facing greater barriers receive equitable access to support.** Contract and system settings enable providers to equitably support clients with a range of circumstances, including those facing greater barriers to employment.
Dimension 2 – Experiencing effective employment services **Employment support works best when it's highly personalised and disabled people remain in control.** Current contract settings can constrain providers' ability to deliver the flexible, intensive, and long-term support they believe works best.	**Employment support is personalised and flexible.** Providers are enabled to easily adapt support strategies and pathways to each jobseeker's unique context.

Insights	Attributes of effective disability employment supports
Language and framing don't just describe the services - they shape who participates, how, and with what confidence. Language, framing, and positioning emerged as deeply consequential forces, shaping how disabled people see themselves, how employers behave, and how the wider system functions. **Fragmentation and complexity shift the work of the system onto disabled people, and many are filtered out as a result.** Disabled people consistently described disability employment supports as fragmented, confusing, and difficult to navigate from the first point of contact onwards. **When employment support falls short, the burden shifts onto those least resourced to carry it.** When employment support services are ineffective, absent, or inconsistent, disabled people, their whānau, and employers are left to fill the gaps.	**There is no wrong door.** Support services have clear pathways, aligned information, and intentional coordination between providers. **Burden is distributed equitably.** Services are structured to take proportionate responsibility for fixing problems.
Dimension 3 - Achieving meaningful employment outcomes **Re-thinking "work readiness": who isn't ready, and for what?** "Work readiness" surfaced repeatedly in engagements, but it was also consistently contested. **People are too frequently placed into "any job", not the right job.** Disabled people consistently described employment support that prioritised speed of placement over fit or personal aspiration.	**Employability is always assumed.** Support approaches assume all disabled people are employable by default. **Services are grounded in a three-way relationship between employer, provider, and jobseeker.** This relationship is the catalyst that drives the employment support journey.
Dimension 4 - Sustaining outcomes over time **Job sustainability is where employment support often falls short.** Disabled people told us that job loss was a common and deeply destabilising experience. **Employment outcomes break down when employers are left without support.** The employer's crucial role in a disabled person's employment journey is not adequately recognised in the current service design. **Support for role and career progression is lacking.** People spoke of wanting to try new tasks or take the "next step," but found no clear pathway for who would fund the support needed to make that possible.	**Job sustainability is treated as a core outcome.** Support takes a key focus on helping ensure disabled people can work in environments that support their role retention. **Employers are partners at all stages of the service journey.** Employers are recognised as crucial contributors to clients' employment experiences and trajectories. **Disabled people's career development and progression are in view.** Disabled people's career development is in view right at the beginning of the employment support journey.