Employment Officers’ Views on the Operation of Job Network in a Non Metropolitan Area

by Manohar Pawar

Abstract

Under the influence of neo-liberal ideology and through the Liberal-National coalition government policies, Job Network - the development of a contestable market for publicly funded employment placement services - has been implemented in Australia for the last seven years. Several studies have been conducted to examine its successes, failures and limitations, so that it may be further improved to deliver better outcomes for employment seekers.

As rural areas generally experience several social, economic, political and geographic disadvantages, more so in regard to unemployment issues and labour market conditions and opportunities, this paper looks at some experiences and views of employment officers in regard to the operation of Job Network in a large country town in the Riverina region. Drawing on interviews, a focus group and secondary data, the paper analyses employment officers’ perceptions of the impact of Job Network on, and problems experienced by, other employment agencies. It identifies several roles performed by employment officers and explores approaches followed by them to help job seekers under the intensive assistance program. The analysis suggests some gaps and barriers in assisting job seekers with difficult circumstances. Job Network may need to try alternative innovative and flexible approaches to address some of the gaps and barriers so that the most disadvantaged unemployed people can be enabled to participate in the job market. However, such trials may not be adequate unless we address people’s values and attitudes and the social, economic and political structural issues that are changing the nature of work and unemployment.

Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to discuss views and experiences of employment officers in regard to the operation of Job Network, particularly with reference to unemployed people with multiple barriers and difficult circumstances, in a large country town in the Riverina region. Towards this, it presents a brief background on Job Network at the national level. Drawing insights from both primary and secondary data analysis it points out gaps in assisting unemployed people through the intensive assistance program, and argues that human services and social workers need to play crucial roles in addressing some of the gaps both at individual and structural levels.

Job Network is essentially a product of liberalisation, free markets, privatisation and managerialism, belief in small
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governments and economic rationalism - a range of mechanisms rooted in the conservative liberal ideology. It is a new framework for the delivery of labour market assistance. The rationale for the framework includes need based and flexible forms of assistance, performance based incentives, separation of purchaser from provider and a competitive market for employment services, activity based income support and high quality services. It also emphasises one-to-one case managed services, and focuses on the right outcomes, appropriate targeting and early intervention and more attention to the needs of employers (see Vansstone 1996). It is a national network of about 200 private, community and government organisations, which operate in a competitive market-like situation to deliver employment services to unemployed people with the aim of finding them remunerative jobs. Internationally, it is considered a radical experiment replacing as it did the publicly funded Commonwealth Employment Services. Instead of directly providing employment services, the government became a purchaser and regulator of services that were competitively offered by Job Network organisations which were selected through a competitive tender process.

Having first started in May 1998, Job Network is in its eighth year of operation with the following objectives, which clearly reflect the neo-liberal agenda - cutting costs, reducing services, emphasising outcomes at the cost of processes and promoting individualism at the cost of collectivism.

- Deliver a better quality of assistance to unemployed people, leading to better and more sustainable outcomes.
- Target assistance on the basis of need and capacity to benefit.

- Address structural weaknesses and inefficiencies inherent in previous arrangements for labour market assistance, and to put into effect the lessons learnt from international and Australian experiences of labour market assistance.
- Achieve better value for money especially in a tight budgetary environment (DEWR 2002, p. 12).

To achieve these objectives, the government introduced several changes to assist the unemployed. The main changes include:

- the establishment of Centrelink in 1997 as the service delivery agency that offers self-service access to job search facilities, conducts assessments of labour market disadvantage using an enhanced profiling system (the Job Seeker Classification Instrument) and refers job seekers to Job Network members.

- contestability in the delivery of employment services through establishing a national tender process for the delivery of labour market services. Successful tenderers included government, private and community organisations.

- replacement of labour market programs and case management services with five key employment services: (1) Job Matching; (2) Job Search Training; (3) Intensive Assistance; (4) the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) and (5) project contracting. (New Apprenticeships Centres were included only in the first contract for Job Network.) (DEWR 2002, pp. 13-16).

The five key employment services are intended to meet the needs of five
different types of job seekers as follows.

1. **Job Matching** employment services are available for those job seekers who are least disadvantaged in the labour market. Job Network members providing this service canvass employers for jobs and match and refer suitable job seekers to vacancies. In metropolitan areas job seekers can enrol with up to 30 Job Matching sites, where as in rural areas there are generally at least two local providers (DEWR 2002, p. 173), though distance, transport and opportunities are real issues.

2. **The Job Search Training** services are meant for those job seekers who are ready for work, but are less likely to find it on their own. They are offered counselling, facilities to assist with job searches and training in interview skills and presentation techniques, resume writing and job search skills. Altogether the service provides 15 consecutive days of training in these areas. Both the job seeker and the provider identify the job seeker's specific needs and develop and implement a course of action to meet those needs.

3. **Intensive Assistance** services are designed for those job seekers who are seriously disadvantaged in the labour market or are long term unemployed. Although all job seekers may participate in Job Matching, the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) is employed to determine job seekers' eligibility for Job Search Training and Intensive Assistance. The JSCI measures job seekers' relative difficulties in securing a job based on the factors such as age, educational attainment, recency of work experience, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, geographic location, disability/medical condition, and language and literacy. By assigning a numerical weight to each factor the extent of the job seeker's disadvantage is calculated. The higher the JSCI score the more the disadvantage likely to be experienced by job seekers in the labour market. Depending upon the JSCI score, job seekers are referred to Job Network members who under a competitive environment provide assistance to them to secure sustainable employment. The assistance may include counselling, vocational training, work experience, training in language, literacy or numeracy, wage subsidies, work place modifications or help in job search techniques and support after they have found a job (DEWR 2002, p. 174). Services are provided for up to 12 months for job seekers with funding level A and up to 15 months for funding level B job seekers with a provision to extend for a further six months.

4. **New Enterprise Incentive Scheme** aims help interested unemployed people to establish and run small businesses through small business training, mentoring and business viability assessments.

5. **Project Contracting** is designed to offer seasonal help in regions that need workers from out-of-area - for example, the supply of adequate numbers of job seekers to vegetable and fruit growers during the harvest season.

By mid-2001 the five services were offered by 200 Job Network members located at 2133 sites where more than 700,000 job seekers were processed (see DEWR 2002, p.16). The first Job Network contracts, for $1.7 billion of services, ran from May 1998 to February 2000 (In 1999-2000, Job Network accounted for 26 percent of expenditure in Australia on active labour market assistance.); second contracts, for about $3 billion ran from February 2000 to June 2003 (DEWR 2002, p.13); and third contracts run from July 2003 to 1 July 2006. The recent figures show that at the present there are 109 organisations providing Job...
Network services in over 1100 offices nation-wide. The budget for 2004-05 is $1,377 million. The government has already announced employment services purchasing arrangement for June 2006 to July 2009 (The Australian Workplace 2005).

**Participation: Review of Studies**

Market oriented interventions in the public sector and the introduction of competition policy in case-management may be traced to initiatives of the Labor government in the early 90s, as in the White Paper Working Nation (Reating 1994) (see Carney & Ramia 2002; Wearing 2005; Wearing & Smyth 1998). However, the Job Network experiment in Australia is the most comprehensive example of the market approach to providing employment services to job seekers on income support and it is the only country to do so among OECD countries. Thus it appears to be radical, popular and controversial (see ACOSS 2000; Considine & Finn 2004; DEWR 2002; Dockery 1999; Eardley, Abello & MacDonald 2001; OECD 2001) and to weaken the situation of the unemployed as their rights are not protected (Carney & Ramia 1999). It also appears to be dynamic enough to refine its approaches so as to achieve its objectives. Towards this, evaluation strategies are inbuilt into the program to make sure that it is an efficient and effective system and also that the public is convinced that it is so both in terms of its politics and economics. A review of literature shows that there are four sources of research studies on Job Network. First, the functioning of Job Network has been evaluated by the government itself, through the Evaluation and Program Performance Branch of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR). Second, several academic scholars based in university research centres (some in collaboration with non-government organisations) have looked at specific aspects of Job Network. Third, it has been independently reviewed by the Productivity Commission. Finally, it also has been reviewed by a well known international body, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The DEWR has published three Job Network evaluation reports. The first report (stage 1) looks at the implementation of and market development for Job Network (DEWRSB 2000); the second is a report on progress and covers the operation of Job Network over the whole of the first contract period (May 1998 to end – February 2000) and the early months of the second contract period (September 2000) (DEWRSB 2001); and the third report discusses the effectiveness of Job Network against key evaluation criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, equity of access to assistance, quality of service and market development) (see DEWR 2002). Against these criteria, all three evaluation reports show the overall performance of Job Network to be positive and encouraging (see DEWRSB 2000; DEWRSB 2001; DEWR 2002). However, the analysis of the extent of job seekers disadvantage suggests that job seekers' living in rural and remote (regional) areas experience higher levels of labour market disadvantage than their metropolitan counterparts (DEWRSB 2001, p.71). Other independent reviews by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2001) and the Productivity Commission (2002) generally appreciated and supported the Job Network framework as it focuses on efficiency, outcomes, competition and choice.

As stated above, several studies have reported how well Job Network is performing, but when it comes to Job
Network's intensive assistance services or helping job seekers with personal barriers and difficult circumstances. The Job Network framework has not worked as well as it should have (see ACOSS 2000; Considine & Finn 2004; DEWRSB 2000; Dockery 1999; Eardley, Abello & Macdonald 2001; Pawar 2001; Eardley 2002; OECD 2001), though it accounts for about 70 percent of the funds the government allocates to Job Network's employment services (DEWR 2002). A significant proportion of job seekers (35 to 40 percent) referred to intensive assistance services do not commence (see DEWR 2002; DEWRSB 2003; DEWRSB 2000). Thus the huge question remains: what happens to those job seekers who do not participate in the intensive assistance program and remain unemployed? Although official reports suggest that the net impact of intensive assistance has increased (referral: 2.2 in 2002 to 4 in 2002; Commencement: 6 in 2001 to 6.2 in 2002), these findings cannot be relied upon due to methodological problems of measuring them (see DEWR 2003; Eardley 2002).

These evaluations focus on job seekers' individual attributes (age, education ethnicity, etc), attitudes, confidence levels and motivation levels, and segment and brand them as dependents, drifters, disempowered, withdrawn etc (see DEWR 2002). However, they need to equally focus on societal, structural and access factors that are beyond the control of an individual job seeker. As the language and focus of these studies are managerial and political in nature, the studies squarely concentrate on outcomes, cost and efficiency, effectiveness, competition, comparison with the previous labour government outcomes (see Stage 1 to 3 evaluation reports), diminishing the significance of process and quality in assisting job seekers. Particularly, these studies have failed to capture experiences and perceptions of employment officers, who play pivotal roles in helping job seekers find jobs, and the interaction process between employment officers and job seekers. How do they work together? What exactly happens between them?

The concentration on outcomes and competition has resulted in Job Network members helping those job seekers who can easily find jobs, leaving behind those job seekers who have genuine employment barriers. This phenomenon is depicted in the literature in terms of 'parking' (a reluctance to put effort or expense into harder-to-place clients and 'deadweight' (the high proportion of positive outcomes likely to have happened even without assistance (DEWR 2002; Eardley 2002). These research studies also show that accurate targeting is the real issue and needs to be improved (see DEWR 2002). Another limitation of Job Network evaluations is that they are official versions and original data are not available to the public for independent analysis (Eardley 2002; Webster & Harding 2000; Productivity Commission 2002). As such the number of research studies on Job Network is very few. Many studies indicate that it is too early to suggest anything conclusively on the quality and quantity of outcomes, and that ongoing research is needed to identify critical issues and refine Job Network strategies as this radical experiment progresses.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to address one of the research gaps or issues identified in the above review. As employment officers are key personnel in Job Network organisations, the author explores their perceptions and experiences of working in Job Network contexts. Drawing on the results of a research project, the discussion...
will focus on the process employment officers follow to assist job seekers under the intensive assistance category. Particularly, it will look at the range of roles performed by employment officers, and gaps and barriers they experience in performing those roles. Based on this analysis, the author will raise critical questions for reflection and further action so as to deliver high quality services to those job seekers who need it most.

**Qualitative Research Method**

This paper is based on the results of a research project using qualitative research methods - interviews and a focus group - and secondary sources to collect relevant data pertaining to Job Network and employment services in a large country town in the Riverina region. Altogether fourteen unstructured interviews were conducted at four Job Network and eleven non-Job Network organisations. A focus group discussion was held with eleven employment officers. Although the data captures views of the respondents and issues in the field, its main limitation is that it is not based on a representative sample and common limitations of any qualitative study apply. But these data are valid as they confirmed some of the findings of evaluation studies completed by the DEWR. The main sources of secondary data were the three evaluation reports published by the DEWR. These data are analysed by using the qualitative content analysis method. Expected ethical requirements - voluntary participation, informed consent form and related provisions - were followed in conducting the study.

**Findings**

**Views on the Operation of Job Network**

Employment officers expressed both positive and negative views about the operation of Job Network. They thought that under the Job Network framework each job seeker is given much more individual time and attention. It allows flexibility in meeting individual needs and helps to provide highest quality of service to both job seekers and employers. On the other hand, they were of the view that the introduction of Job Network has generally affected non-Job Network employment organisations. Due to Job Network, the private market of employment agencies has been seriously damaged and in many instances has resulted in closures. This is especially the case in a non-metropolitan area selected for the study. As there are too many employment agencies, competition among them is not fair. Some non-Job Network organisations showed dissatisfaction with second round Job Network contract decisions and allocation of funds. In their view, there appears to be little informal interaction among Job Network agencies. Due to the competitive environment, employment agencies experience claims and counter claims of placements. The New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) is not suited to being offered in a competitive environment such as Job Network because there is a saturation point where a town just cannot take any more new businesses. The accuracy of figures compiled by the government and the quality of training offered under the apprentices scheme are not clear for them. Non-Job Network organisations do not have access to the information (the national database) that only Job Network agencies have. But Job Network agencies do not serve people who are ineligible for Job Network services. Employment officers have also observed some deviations in organising employment...
for job seekers. When it comes to the quality of service provided by Job Network and non-Job Network agencies, their opinions were at best divided.

Problems Experienced by Employment Agencies

The analysis suggests seven main problems experienced by employment agencies. First, many agencies face the problem of lack/shortage of funds to carry out their activities. This is best captured from one of the group participant's responses:

*It comes down to funds. If you want to provide a quality service in an area like this and the regions that we cover, then it costs a lot of money. We are not like Sydney, we are an area that is huge and it is time they threw money at us so that we can all give quality positions.*

We should all be receiving the same amount of funding. We probably do more to support a client in a job, yet we receive usually less per dollar to do that. It is just ludicrous. We should all get a fair bite of the cherry.

Second, Job Network tenders and contract decisions seem to have confused some employment agencies with regard to criteria used to take decisions, as those who appear to be apparently doing well did not get it. Third, due to sudden changes in employment services there appears to be a lot of confusion among people (particularly so during the first contract period) about who is providing what and to whom.

*You see people come in, they wipe their sweat off their brow and sit down and go, *You are the sixth person I have seen today, can you help me?*"

As services are disjointed and spread apart, it is a real problem for job seekers to get from one service-providing agency to another.

*If you do not have a car, a phone, a mobile phone, and a computer connected to Internet, you have not got a hope of getting a job today because you are up against people who do, and how can you afford all of that if you know your income base is zero and it has to be to get unemployment benefits.*

Fourth, many agencies were preoccupied with meeting bureaucratic requirements in their day to day work. One respondent put it in this way:

*In the first twelve months or so the paper work changed about six times and they are still to this point changing guidelines and just, I can see their point of view, they are streamlining the process because it was a massive change from the old CES days to this, to this new regime. But it was incredibly difficult and it still is to work within that environment. When you are out there talking to employers and telling them you can get this and you can get that, and then you receive a memo or something from DETYA that basically says well they cannot any more.*

It appears that administrative work and preparing reports consumed a lot of time and drew employment officers away from the job at hand some times.

Fifth, employment officers experienced high work pressure and stressful environment in offices a respondent stated:

*When I was formerly a case manager, I know, the pressure was enormous on me. I had to*
maintain something like, I think. at one stage I had one hundred and thirty clients. How can you give specialist support and mentoring to 130 clients? Because the way it was set up was the way the organisation made money that we had to churn these people through.

Sixth. perhaps as a consequence of such stressful work conditions. little/inadequate attention was given to job seekers' personal Issues. This problem will be elaborated later in the paper.

Roles of Employment Officers

Table 1 shows employment officers' roles as stated by them. The list gives only a broad idea about what they do. The analysis of the focus group data showed different perceptions of their roles and several roles performed by them. depending upon their positions (placement consultant; intensive assistance case manager). It appears that some employment officers perform two types of broad roles. First. professional roles. as part of the job description. which are expected of them. Second. social and moral roles. which are not part of the job description.

Table 1: Roles of Employment Officers as Indicated in the Focus Group Discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working with clients</th>
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<tr>
<td>Resumes and career guidance</td>
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<td>Talking to parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Face to face interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparing for work and dealing with behavioural issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support to trainees and parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attending to phone calls (clients and employers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talking to employers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job canvassing</td>
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<td>On the job training support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job matching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching and training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessing trainees who are going into work places</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Searching data bases</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exploring future funding arrangement</td>
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<td>Travelling</td>
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In terms of time allocation to various roles, about 30% of employment officers' time is used for directly working with the unemployed, another 30 percent for attending to phone calls (clients and employers) and the remaining 40 percent is used for various types of administrative work including travelling.

The figures suggest that a significant proportion of employment officers’ time goes into administrative work and travel. The following response shows how an employment officer was progressively occupied with administrative work.

*My role as a Placement Consultant, part of my job when I joined the organisation, was going to be a fifty/fifty split; fifty percent having a look at or trying to interview job seekers, put them on a database and then fifty percent was out on the road talking to employers. In the last three months I have probably been out talking to employers for no more than six hours. You just tend to get bogged down in the office with the day-to-day registration, they keep flying at you, you keep adding them on and I guess that is the reality of it. The database keeps growing bigger and bigger and certainly for us the jobs do not keep pace with it.*

Another important finding was that although some employment officers have a professional background, some are trained in psychology or short counselling courses, but generally, most of them learn while doing the job.

**Employment Officers’ Approaches to Work with Job Seekers under Intensive Assistance**

As pointed out in the review of studies, the Job Network framework is lacking in assisting job seekers classified under the intensive assistance category, though recent evaluation reports present the case of increasing effectiveness (DEWR 2002; DEWR 2003). Characteristics of the intensive assistance population certainly suggest that they are disadvantaged. DEWR (2002) evaluation data shows that nearly one third of them are female, more than 45 years of age, received income support for more than 36 months, completed less than Year ten educational level, and about two-fifths of them belong to equity groups (disabled, indigenous, and non-English speaking background). Despite intensive assistance, about 40 percent of them remain unemployed. Thus it is important to explore the process employment officers follow to assist these job seekers. The focus group data suggests that a typical employment officer follows the following steps, though one should not generalise from the process presented as there are so many and they are from all ages and all backgrounds.
Table 2: Steps Followed to Assist Intensive Category Job Seekers

<table>
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<th>Step</th>
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<tr>
<td>Referral</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explaining and clarifying</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preliminary Preparation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drawing an agreement ensuring participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparing further plan and implementing it</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identifying hidden problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stimulating participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Testing motivation - mentoring and monitoring</td>
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</table>

An employment officer narrated the process:

Depending upon the Job seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) score (24 to 32 score are referred to as level A and score 33 or more are referred to as level B participants), first Centrelink refers Intensive assistance job seekers. Job seekers have a choice of where they want to go or, if not, they hang up there and they just get automatically referred anyhow. For introduction, we first bring them into our office totally confidentially, sit down with them and ask them questions like “How are you?” That is when you become the Counsellor straight away, because often you are the first person that has actually sat down with them in a confidential arrangement. Because you have an appointment with them, they are sent out a letter by the Centrelink process and they know that that time is their’s, they feel you are really interested in and you do want to hear just about them. The first time you spend about an hour and a half sometimes. You plan on three quarters of an hour, I do, but sometimes it goes into an hour and a half and I will do that if I do not have anyone else waiting, because there is a lot to get through, there is a mountain to get through.

Next they try to develop an understanding between them, explain and clarify requirements and begin preliminary preparation.

They come in and some of them have been through the system before, some of them have got a chip on their shoulder, quite resentful of ‘what am I doing here?’ sort of thing. Others are “Yeh. Help me, I do not know what I am doing, I do not know where I am going”, quite lost souls. But, you spend time getting to know them first, you have got to build up trust and I say that works both ways and then I suppose you just work with them.

You need to explain what this whole process is and they need to understand it. Because, you are getting them to sign an agreement which is a legal and binding...
document. If they sign it, then they say they did not understand it, then nothing holds. So you not only explain it but you ask them to explain it back. Ask a few questions such as: Do you understand? Do you have any questions? What would you do if this happened? And explain their responsibility for signing the agreement.

So I run through why they are here, how the job network works, the different levels. If they are waiting in the waiting room for any length of time, I ask that they be given a booklet to read to start off with. So they have got a little bit of an idea, sometimes they have more of an idea than you think.

If they get through that, talk about resumes. If they have got a resume or not, organise one. So it is all those preliminary things: Where are you up to now? What have you been doing? Where do you want to go?

What do you see as the barriers? How do you think we can get there?

What do you need? Have you got your Drivers Licence? Have you got a First Aid Certificate? Things like these are really important. A lot of them say, "No, I have not got a licence because I have got unpaid fines". On finding out the amount of fine and on the production of the fine notification, part or full payment arrangement is made. They are helped to organise a licence, a phone and a First Aid Certificate. Explain to them that some of these are very basic things that they do need to start off with. However, one Job Network member stated that "Job Network agencies do not automatically or always help with unpaid fines and put individuals into First Aid courses. It all depends on what they have stated in their contract".

Further, they develop an agreement and implementation plan. The process continues:

So you sit down with them and you draw up the agreement. There are a number of activities such as looking through the paper and doing the touch screen that they have to agree to. And this is where you emphasise with them too that "I am not going to be out there physically looking for a job for you and I cannot create the perfect job. You have to look for the job. So I will be there to support and encourage you, and guide you, but the physical work has to be done by you." And so when they are in agreement with that, you get them to sign the agreement. And then you hope they come back. Then you go on and make a plan of how you are going to assist them and help them. Depending on what has come up in the first interview as to how huge the plan might be. So that is when you are looking at 'all these factors' before they are job-ready. We assist them probably socially I suppose. We refer if necessary for different things. Assist them financially just depending on what it might be. That is where you have got to be careful because the word gets out that you will assist financially and some people come in and expect you to pay two thousand dollars to your clients.

Employment officers need to identify hidden problems as some job seekers not only have barriers, but also discomfort in revealing them. For example, some job seekers may hide their literacy problem. Employment officers try to identify these issues by looking at their signatures or at figures written by job seekers. Alternatively, while job seekers wait for interviews, they are asked to fill out a
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job registration form, though with an instruction that if they have difficulty in filling it out they will be assisted so that they are not under any pressure to complete it. If they cannot read and write, their scrawls on the form speak louder than their words about it. It seems some job seekers say, “I have got a problem, but do not want to do anything about it”. This would be an issue straight up for employment officers.

To ensure job seekers' participation, employment officers clearly explain to them that they are not there to do everything for them. They try to make job seekers responsible for themselves. Employment officers clearly tell job seekers that they are not going to chase them. Job seekers must meet employment officers half way and employment officers will meet job seekers half way. Depending upon each individual circumstance, job seekers are asked to go out and do little things. Undoubtedly, the participatory approach appears appropriate. However, is it going to work with those job seekers who have been experiencing personal problems/barriers and have remained unemployed for a long time?

The data shows that, to test and engage job seekers' motivation, employment officers give them small tasks such as completing a resume form at home and returning it to the officer as soon as possible so that it will be ready as soon as they submit it. If the job seeker brings back the completed form in a few days, employment officers think that the person wants to work. If the person leaves it till their next interview appointment (two to three weeks away), then the employment officers understand that the job seeker is not in a real hurry. Then the issue comes up, whether they want to work or not. In such circumstances, employment officers are often caught in a dilemma. Generally they do not recommend for a breach of the contract, but Centrelink does enforce it when it finds that job seekers are not meeting their responsibilities. This also results in contract managers raising the procedural and policy issues with employment officers. It appears that employment officers find it hard to perform the conflicting roles of mentoring and monitoring. They say:

It is no balance. It is one or the other and you are just rolling with the client really, are not you?

The discussion also revealed that employment officers carefully look at requests made by job seekers, verify with employers and sometimes confront job seekers, often with unexpected outcomes.

And some of them are out to really scam you. They come up with great stories - I need money for petrol, food, accommodation, I am going here, there, here and there. You collect names of the employers and necessary details to verify it. You tell them, “come back this afternoon and I will see what I can do”. While they have gone, you have been ringing the employer and there is no job. When they come back, you have to say to them, “Well sorry there is no job, so there will be no money. I do not appreciate what you just tried to do”. And the next thing you know they have requested another Case Manager.

On the whole, the above process suggests that employment officers try to understand job seekers, establish rapport and trust so as to complete the required agreement and monitor it.

We basically hold hands, give support and help them along the way and I suppose show them if they do not already know in which direction to go to find work.
Gaps/Barriers in Assisting Intensive Category Job Seekers

The analysis suggested that many employment officers find work with intensive category job seekers daunting and with little outcome. They do not think the plan they develop to secure a job is just and accurate and it is entirely different from the job matching role. It is not merely putting someone in a job. there is also a lot of underground work and bureaucratic work. In these cases they have to resolve social aspects, financial aspects, moral issues and leave their own judgement out of it.

I just find a lot of them have given up, they are quite depressed or they just have had so many knock-backs or so many people that have not replied to their efforts. They get to the point where they do not really want to try.

Thus some employment officers stated that despite addressing the issues "some people are never going to change", though this statement cannot be explicitly made. In addition, in the given time span, they cannot see getting through all those issues and getting someone employed.

Due to competition and pressure on producing outcomes, employment officers seemed to have focused on good cases that produce quick outcomes.

It is dollar driven. you have got to get outcomes, you have got to get the dollars coming back in, or else we will not get a contract next time.

Most of the money and resources were expended on easy cases at the cost of those unemployed people who really needed it most, though this situation might have slightly changed in the second and third Job Network contracts. Some case managers found this phenomenon really frustrating.

Another significant gap occurs when job seekers have serious welfare/personal issues and dysfunctional families, when employment officers' assistance is not adequate and they do not have the time to address these issues. There is a pool of job seekers they could not place mainly because other issues served as a major barrier. It appears that, as an organisation some are simply not equipped to deal with such issues as relationship problems, court proceedings, issues of aggression and illiteracy. They do not ignore such issues, but "they do not have time to spend uncovering, peeling off the layers."

These people are often referred to the Community/Personal Support Program. Then it is logical that some other helping professionals together with employment officers need to work with job seekers to address other than employment issues which have significant bearing on their potential employment.

Well I think that the welfare issue is huge. I mean I have got a family at the moment. The father is my client. I have been on the phone half the morning trying to keep in focus what is happening in the household that is causing his problems. I have been on to Community Mental Health and all sorts of things like that and sort of think. here there and everywhere. And then basically a person said. "Oh, well if he rings the xyz number twenty-four hours a day, they will assess him over the phone. and then they can refer him to us and then you can do this, and this and that". So basically, I have really gone round the world for nothing. But he is not in the situation where he will ring them. I spoke to him and he said "Oh, yes I will". But he is not really functional. the whole family is not functional. And I think that is what
I was thinking, I thought may be we could benefit by having an arm of a social worker or someone there somewhere attached. I mean because everyone will in my experience or practically everyone that I see comes with problems. Once you are there, even if they say they do not have problems, you can open them up. I have had them crying and doing all sorts of things. But they are just talking to somebody who is a complete stranger and they have all got problems. But some way they are just putting up a front or hiding them or they are doing it tough.

One Job Network member succinctly articulated the issue as follows:

The most difficult aspect of Intensive Employment Assistance is the process of mutually identifying barriers to employment and then devising strategies to address these barriers. Many clients present with multiple problems, many of which directly affect the client’s employability but which are outside the expertise of Job Network members (and funding capacity) to readily address.

JSCI assessment was another significant issue, though efforts to improve it are continuing. Employment officers have often observed inappropriate and inaccurate assessment. They were of the view that Centrelink staff have not been properly trained to apply the assessment tool and they do not probe enough. In addition, the questions in the instrument are not adequate. The staff need to be trained in how to ask the questions to ascertain accurate and appropriate responses.

We work on the assumption that it takes three to four meetings with a person and seeing them in an actual work setting before you can actually make an assessment on what their abilities are. Now if they are doing it in half an hour, and sending the client to us and pretty much you can see them walk through the door and you know they have done the rounds, you are the last one on the list.

These problems, and the problems associated with the administration of the JSCI, for example, several items within JSCI and its measurement, are well pointed out in the stage 3 evaluation document (see DEWR 2002, pp. 105-108). In case of misclassification of job seekers, it is possible to arrange for reclassification, subject to providers bearing the cost (DEWRSB, 1999, p. 127, cited in DEWRSB, 2000). Although there is no charge for reclassification from level A to B, a Supplementary Assessment to determine eligibility for Community Support Program costs $536 (DEWR 2002). Although 70 percent of reviews are successful, about 40 percent of providers did not seek review as they thought it was too much trouble or too expensive to do so and may put them at disadvantage in future contract rounds (see DEWR 2002, p. 107).

For some job seekers lack of transport and enhanced skill requirements were genuine issues. At least in the first couple of months transport is needed for those who start work. Those job seekers who have literacy/numeracy problems are facing a real challenge of finding a job. An old saying, "If you do not do any good at school you will end up at the abattoirs", is no longer valid. The focus group members said, "People have now got to be able to read job instructions, they have got to be able to record temperatures and those sort of things. So, the person who cannot read and write does not have the luxury of being an abattoir worker any more. And God knows where they go!"
Further, employment officers expressed their concern regarding changing occupational structures and loss of manufacturing industries in the town. They pointed to the closure of Lamlnex, Dunlop, the shoe factory and a flourmill. More manufacturing industries and more jobs are needed. The Council needs to employ effective measures to attract industries to the city as new industries do not appear to be coming here. They are also of the view that the town cannot merely rely on service industries. Some core manufacturing industries are needed. Respondents also wondered about the role of the Riverina Regional Development Corporation and how it can contribute towards increasing work opportunities for the most vulnerable groups. On the other hand, employment officers noted the shortage of skilled trades workers as they have found it hard to find a welder, a refrigeration mechanic and a carpenter.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although the paper is about the operation of Job Network in a nonmetropolitan area, due to the nature of the issue, the discussion extends beyond the local level. As depicted by employment officers, issues of job seekers under intensive assistance are not effectively addressed and their potential to participate in paid employment to the fullest extent is yet to be realised. This in no way reflects on employment officers' abilities and skills, but certainly the new radical or controversial Job Network framework that has created a quasi-market and competitive climate has led to these outcomes. Despite such poor outcomes, market devotees still believe that the current Job Network arrangement is the best way to go, though incrementally on a trial and error basis, at avoidable cost to people, it can be improved.

However, there are signs that the market may not be the way ahead in this field. For example, the Productivity Commission has recommended that, instead of tendering Job Network providers, licensing them is a better option and the government has agreed to implement this suggestion (DEWR 2002a). Does it mean a regulatory regime? In a way contradictions in the Productivity Commission report (2002) (eg. on the one hand it states that Job Network's purchaser-provider model, with its focus on outcomes, competition and choice, is a suitable policy framework for the delivery of active labour market programs, on the other hand, it recommends (11.1) to replace competitive tendering by a licensing system) and its recommendations suggest that market framework appears to be failing in many ways, particularly with regard to disadvantaged job seekers. Considine and Finn's (2004) conclusion is hardly surprising that 'the current arrangements are not producing strong outcomes for the most disadvantaged and are creating a costly confusion for everyone involved'. Structural and systemic responsibilities need to be first addressed, rather than focusing on individual responsibilities. Individuals cannot be held responsible for global and national factors such as adoption of new technology, closure of industries, outsourcing and changing occupational structures, and their consequences. When these and similar factors cause unemployment, we cannot blame individuals, but respect them. The concept of work also needs to be restructured. Millions work at home, particularly women, without financial reward, and such work needs to be structured as employment. Thus our perception of the 'unemployed' must alter. There are people of all ages with genuine issues and we have responsibility to care for them. The market does not and cannot.
A simpler, transparent, less bureaucratic and non-punitive system is very much needed. Not only outcomes but also processes need to be equally valued and incorporated into the framework. A less stressful work environment and adequate time to provide intensive assistance are also needed. It is important to watch to what extent a Quality Assurance Program introduced by the DEWR and Centrelink will address several complex issues related to JSCE. Emphasis on JSCE scores, agreements, monitoring and breaches appear to be counter productive. Despite such evidence and right advice to invest in people’s education and skills, new rules for the unemployed are proposing more punitive measures (suspension of welfare payments or doubling of work-for-the-dole hours) and additional policing roles for Job Network providers, who are resenting such a proposal and are already pressed for time (ABC 2005; ACOSS 2005, 2005a). Such punitive proposals must be rejected as they have potential to take more time for administering punishments rather than preparing people for work.

This analysis clearly suggests that employment officers do not have adequate time for job seekers needing intensive assistance. In the available time, they appear to focus on completing minimum requirements such as work agreements and monitoring. Thus they rightly suggest a critical role for human services and social workers to work with these job seekers to enable them to get ready for paid employment. Undoubtedly, it is a great challenge and opportunity for human services, welfare and social workers. They can significantly contribute to reducing some of the gaps and barriers presented in the above section. For their effective practice, I would like to raise the following questions for reflection and action.

- Do privatisation principles operate fairly and equitably in the employment market?
- Is Job Network an appropriate and effective strategy to deal with the unemployment problem?
- Who should be responsible for the unemployment problem?
- What is the role of changing political and economic ideology?
- Who is responsible for changing technological adaptation and occupational structures, and their consequences?
- Who should address the structural causes and obligations?
- If job seekers are only a small part of the major problem, do we need to approach them with a new perspective?

References


ACOSS 2005a, ‘400,000 could be punished without increasing job chances’, ACOSS Media Release, viewed email 4 May 2005, from <http://acoss_news@acoss.org.au>


Employment Officers' Views on the Operation of Job Network in Non-Metropolitan Area – Pawar


Dr. Manohar Pawar is a senior lecturer in social work and human services at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, and an associate director and principal researcher of the Centre for Rural Social Research/Institute of Land and Water and Society, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga campus, New South Wales, Australia. (mpawar@csu.edu.au).

Much is known about the economic and environmental impacts of drought but little of the social impacts for the people most affected - the farm families, small business owners and rural communities - and the resulting welfare implications. This project addresses that gap assessing the impacts of the drought of 2002-3, one of the most extensive and prolonged on record affecting individuals and communities across most of eastern Australia, and its welfare implications.

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