

Intro: Choice and Control, a podcast celebrating people with disability. In this season we're talking about access, inclusion, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme. This podcast series is brought to you by Carers Queensland, NDIS Local Area Coordination Partner in the Community.

00:23 Jodie van de Wetering: G'day, I'm Jodie van de Wetering. Today we're talking to Des Ryan, recently elected Chair of Queenslanders with Disability Network and a powerful advocate for employment for people with disability. He organises the Rockhampton region's Accessible Pub Crawl, which we're going to find out about a little later, and he's working on Community Solutions' Regional Advantage Project, building employment options for people with disability by working on the employers and shining a light on the economic benefits of an inclusive workforce.

00:53 Des Ryan: The one stark thing that stood out over time was the statistics of people with disabilities taking up employment, not so much taking up employment but being able to gain employment, is flat-lining. It hasn't changed radically, if anything is not quite as good as it was way back. And I realised it's no good going back to the same old hole, it doesn't work. People with disability have still got the same inclination to work as they always did. So the problem isn't with people with disabilities wanting to get involved with work, the problem was the other parts of it. The employer is equally important and also you've got to have the funding. So the NDIS is going to be there, so you've got two parts of the cog, haven't you?

You've got people with disabilities, they're still the same, they're not any different. Matter of fact, they must be a lot better motivated in a way, because these days with all the social changes that have happened, kids with disabilities are going to school for a lot longer, and they're going mainstream. They've got expectations.

01:57 Jodie: And like you said, the motivation is one thing but there also has to actually be a job there, and an employer willing to give you that job.

02:03 Des: Yeah. And we don't celebrate employers who do that. And I thought a group of high level employers, or people with a level of high respect in the business community, who are out there and trying to motivate people could have some good effect. But they'd have to be people that people would listen to them.

As part of the other research I did, I looked at the myths. There have been plenty of inquiries into this problem, and there's a group of myths. That people with disabilities are more prone to sickness, so that they don't turn up for work. They're unreliable, that they don't stay in the job for long because of ill health. They can't achieve at work, and that the cost of business modifications. Now, when we looked at that, all those were either reversed or the same as the ordinary employee without a disability.

The main thing that stood out, the really key improvement you get with people with disabilities, is that they don't roll over into other jobs frequently. They don't change jobs, when they've got a job that frequently stay there. Well, I've been working at Community Solutions for 22 years. I'm the perfect example. Once you find a good niche, you know, it fits your lifestyle, you stay there and you feel valued and you enjoy the role.

A lot of things have got to happen to make that really successful more often than not. That is, the employer's got to get involved. He's got to possibly tailor a work role, set up the environment, the immediate environment around the employees. Through that first part, which is the hardest part, it's not just for people with disabilities, it's for all people. We've had some keen interest from employers, but they've got to be switched on.

We're also working with other employer groups. We're working with the big hitters, like the university, the Rockhampton Regional Council, and trying to change their HR policies. And time will tell whether it has an effect. But once you get an employer, he can frequently come back to us. You know, looking for employees who have certain tasks that are regulated, that routine, there's a cohort of people in a general sense that will fit the bill. They'll turn up for work, do a routine job, and they'll keep turning up and keep doing the job that most people would find maybe mundane and too boring and then not turn up for work. Now they're all keen for the job, they need that, that money is more vital in their life. So this is happening, you know, that's starting to happen.

04:46 Jodie: As well as working with local employers to get more people with disability into the workforce, there's also an element of finding out where people are already hitting goals and celebrating their successes.

04:57 Des: I'd run into one of them at the nursing home when I was visiting my mother. I went in one day and this lady was there in the kitchen and not only was she great with them, with the clients, who've all got dementia, she had them all standing around the outside of the closed off area where she was washing it up. They were wiping up for her, this group of ladies, and it was like a social activity. I just felt so great because mum was out there and enjoying herself and having a social activity about something that people do every day in their normal life - wash and wipe up. Normally the staff there aren't like that, they don't involve the clients, so what was just a mundane job was a really social activity for the people and they're all either standing around or chatting in some way.

She said, 'I just got a letter from Mercy Care today to say I'll be made permanent'. I thought, 'this is fabulous' at the time. The next day I was so pleased I thought 'I'll ring up the CEO and tell him how great of an employee that got and it's great that he's picked up someone

who's so good at what she does'. So I did, you know, because I believe that passing on recommendations about good performance is really important in life. Everyone needs a pat on the back.

There was a young girl in Yeppoon working at a childcare centre and she was just a star in that place, you know, with kids. And most people would think someone with an intellectual disability couldn't work with kids, but she had a certificate, she'd done all that, and the kids just loved her. And she was rolling up to work everyday with a smile on her face. She had a job and she loved her job. So we were blown away by some of the people that are already on the ground doing it.

06:48 Jodie: And you mentioned when you were first setting this up, you looked at the myths about what would be the challenges employing a person with disability. Do you think making that one-on-one connection with the employers and explaining some of the truths there is starting to break down those misconceptions?

07:03 Des: Well, we hope so. We've managed to get some funding, so we created these videos of successful employers, equally focused on the employee but also the employer. And I mean, unless we make a star of the employer, it's going to be hard to make inroads with the other employers. We want to motivate the other employees saying, 'well, look around'.

It's not just about making them feel good. It's about them realising they can employ someone with a disability and make a dollar at the same time. And that's when David French said at one of his presentations - it was very interesting that he said it - 'we're not a charity'. Even though he's motivated, himself, he had to make a dollar at some point. So this employee has got to be successful. And she is very successful for him, more successful than what he initially thought. He said he would make her permanent full-time, but she's very busy doing other things, you know, with Horseriding for the

Disabled and doing this and that. But the minute she's available, he'll have her full time, and full salary, full award wage.

That's what Kangabins are doing, they're offering full award wages for employees. Because they moved something like a million product lines a week out of there. They've got nine sites, collecting all these bottles and that [through Containers for Change]. That's growing into a massive business, and they need people that turn up all the time and do a routine task to count these [bottles]. And they're willing to pay award wages.

08:56 Jodie: You mentioned you've been working with Community Solutions for 20 years and change. What's your own employment history like, Des?

09:01 Des: Well, I started there as their IT person, and I did that for nearly 18 years. But then we amalgamated with Community Solutions - we were CQ personal services – so we were a larger organisation with eight sites and they would all log into our NT servers at work. And I was doing it part-time, because I had really good relationships with our providers, our suppliers, and I organised the work. So I could just monitor it, and basically most of the work I did really was getting people to reboot their computer, reset the passwords.

09:46 Jodie: Have you turned it off and on again?

09:46 Des: Yes, and not only that I stayed away from programs and with business applications that would crash the system. You know, the trouble is people expect it all to work. And with our NBN, I mean, that is probably the greater disaster, the NBN, because a really good NBN would have made a lot of these software applications work better.

So then I moved, I was doing complaints for Endeavour and Community Solutions. I loved working for Endeavour with their complaint system because they went, they were at a very

regimented level, which I respected and I learned a lot. And then there was another refocus of the business so I stepped back to doing the complaints for Community Solutions.

And then this Regional Advantage came up. For about a year and a half, I did a lot of desktop audits on service providers, Australia wide, looking at what the implications of the NDIS was on the original sites, where they implemented the NDIS in Melbourne first. Then I went back and re-did the same thing again after a year, all those [service providers in] New South Wales, Queensland, and wrote up the businesses providing services. You could see what was happening with the NDIS, businesses were coming and going, some businesses were completely moving away from the service they were providing before. Some businesses just amalgamated, like in Tasmania Uniting Care amalgamated with United Care Victoria and in one fell swoop, they created a massive business. Imagine if they did that up the east coast of Australia?

The options were, things were very fluid, and if you didn't get your financials in order, you could quickly go out of business and lose a lot of money. So this was really key to making this work for our business too. To be honest, it wasn't a great cost to us because I was only working 12 hours a week, and I enjoyed it. Who wouldn't? Going to a lot of meetings and lunches and dinners, it was a feel good job.

12:08 Jodie: Getting into that IT role in the first place, was that challenging?

12:13 Des: Well, it was, but I mean, I come from a level where I wasn't working, so it was so interesting. I started studying first, because I used to play chess at the TAFE College, I realised it wasn't accessible. There was no wheelchair accessible cabs originally so that was out until they became available.

I was Secretary of Capricorn Respite Care and needed to automate mail outs, so I wanted to learn some more about Microsoft Office or

something. So I started doing some programs. I was in the chess club with these guys, we were vying, we were CQ champions, about three of us all had the role one time or other when we were successful. One day I borrowed a book and one of my mates said to me, I handed it back to him in a few weeks, and he said 'Oh, that is six months of our course.'

That encouraged me to just do it. So I enrolled at TAFE and then within three years, I think, or four years, doing a Diploma of Computing Business, I would get work. Comp Assist computer solutions, rang me out of the blue and I don't know who or how, but they heard that I was interested in doing programming with Microsoft Access. They had an application that had someone working on a project, but he was out of his depth. So my first two jobs were for Dobinson's Spring Works as a consultant, they were paid, and I was getting good money, incredibly good money. I just couldn't believe it.

One day I was sitting on the floor over there at Dobinson's and it was about 40 degrees in the shade and this furnace was going. But what was most interesting to me was we weren't talking about disability, we were talking about the layout of these springs. They sell springs all around the world, Dobinson's, it's a massive business. And it was a massive moment for me to think, 'wow, here I am, not talking about disability, it's work.' You know, that's really important.

And then I got a contract, not a contract, they tapped me on the shoulder, an Aboriginal legal service in Rockhampton. So I did a database for them and they graciously let me keep the copyright. I sort of stipulated that but you know, you can only push that so far. And so I kept the copyright. So I finished up selling that to 23 legal services around Queensland, and I had fabulous life. One day I went to work and my boss, we had had a bit of a turndown and he sat down and said, 'we going to have a meeting and we're asking everyone to take a cut in their hours.'

Oh, I was so glad because I'd just signed up this big [contract] with five sites. He was so relieved I was taking the news so easily, but it was so good – I was earning more from my private job than my day job.

15:41 Jodie: Outside of the day job Des also organises the Accessible Pub Crawl. It's what it sounds like: once a year, COVID permitting, a group of people get together to suss out Central Queensland's night life. It includes people with disability, people working in the disability and health sector, and local community leaders - to get a better feel for just how accessibility is working on the ground in practice.

16:05 Des: I've done it so many times, and every time I think 'that's the last one'. But then people ring me, 'when are we doing the pub crawl?' Because it's such a good night.

So now I get everyone to put in \$10, and we choose up to four hotels. If I get enough people, there's enough money to have nibbles at all those hotels lined up, prepaid for, and you mix with a group of business people, you mix with the group of nurses or doctors. What we do is we pick the people, and we say, 'you're blind, you've got to go up to the bar and order a drink. Here's a scarf.' Or, 'you're in a wheelchair. You've got to try and go to the toilet, report back'. So when we get outside, we have these lists of tasks, some of the questions are things like 'what are the staff like?' Because if the staff are really good, it's nearly as important as accessibility. They will make it work, the staff, as much as they can.

17:03 Jodie: That attitude makes such a difference, of thinking 'how can we make this work?' rather than, 'it's too hard, it can't be done.'

17:09 Des: Yeah. We've had some great experiences, and in doing that you mix. I might meet people with disabilities at times that I might not have mixed with before. And sometimes it's highly entertaining. I remember we had the Federal member come along,

and she stayed the whole night. One of our persons with disability got talking to her and he could talk the leg off a wooden horse, you know, and he was with her and I'm sure she was like, 'wow.' But after talking to him for about five minutes, you could see she really enjoyed herself and was taking part and he was such a gregarious, entertaining character. So it forces people to mix, and I give Michelle Landry good credit because she stayed the whole night and took part.

And, it gets people out of their normal mode of operating socially, they get a bit of an idea of what we're trying to achieve, you know?

18:10 Jodie: How good that you have a nice, fun social outing, no one feels threatened, but at the same time all these business people and politicians and decision-makers get to witness firsthand some of the challenges when a venue isn't accessible.

18:24 Des: They might be in a wheelchair, we might put them in a wheelchair and say 'you do this and you do that', and we review it outside. So at the end of the night, we've got a table of scores.

So then I'm going back to the venue to say, 'look, you scored high on this, you scored on that, or your toilets were bad.' It's not just that, it's also about the noise level. What we found when we did our first pub crawl, we had a blind person with us and we thought it was accessible. He wasn't happy at all, he said, 'it was like I was sitting at home because I couldn't hear anyone.' He couldn't see anyone and might as well have been at home, talking to himself. He couldn't hear anyone. That's a really key thing, you know? So you realise people have got to blend all those things together.

19:10 Jodie: Because it's not just about the people who use wheelchairs, there's also visual impairment, sensory processing problems. There's such a wide scope of things that disability can be.

But how do you go with the venues? Do the venues see you coming in and being like, 'oh no,' or are they up for it?

19:27 Des: Oh, they love it - 40 people come along buying drinks, and they all buy their own drinks of course. One of the first pub crawls we did, we had this blind guy come along and he had to go up and order a drink at the bar. So he had a white cane, and went up to the bar, and we're sitting watching him. And of course, when he was there at the bar, someone jumped in in front of him not realising he was blind. Jim thought it was someone from our group having a bit of a dig at him. So he got his white cane and he socked this guy across the legs half a dozen times. We absolutely lost it. He didn't do it in a bad way, you know, and the guy's looked at him like 'this guy's out of his tree!' It was so hysterical a night.

They realise, because there's people wearing scarves around their eyes, you know, it was obvious that they weren't always as disabled as they were making out.

20:24 Jodie: Has the pub crawl itself and the feedback to the venues seen any changes?

20:28 Des: I'm not sure, but they're all keen to hear if we've got issues. They're in the business of making money and the best way to make money is attract the widest group of clients that you can.

20:40 Jodie: That's true. Nobody deliberately wants to exclude people with disability. It's just, maybe they don't know how to, or they think it's going to mean really expensive building mods and they just don't know how to get started.

20:50 Des: One hotel we went to, they had an accessible toilet, a beautiful accessible toilet, unfortunately they had it stacked it up full of toiletries. You couldn't use it. The next year we went back went there and the toilet was shut because someone blocked the toilet. So they just weren't opening it until they got their guy to come on a

maintenance contract to fix it, which would have been another month.

21:17 Jodie: A month to get a loo fixed?

21:21 Des: You think, 'are you joking? Leave the toilet closed for a month?' Some people, you can't get through to them.

21:25 Jodie: While most venues are interested to see what feedback they get from the Accessible Pub Crawl, Des says sometimes, some places take a bit more work. When that's the case, it's not just a matter of picking your battles, but picking your strategy as well.

21:39 Des: We noticed one particular hotel, then it was the worst. They didn't have an accessible toilet on the ground floor. You'd have to catch a lift upstairs. And the rooms weren't that really accessible, a bit of a step. And they're always going to put in a wheelchair accessible toilet, but they never ever did it. You could see that there was no, there was no management push for it.

You know, 75% of most [liquor] licenses are owned by either Woolworths or Coles. So I dug around and found the email of the chairman of Wesfarmers, who was the overarching body [for that venue], and wrote to him to say, 'as a person with disability, I find it terrible to see that this business that's associated with your company is providing possibly the worst accessibility in town when it comes to the patrons. It's not good you're associated with it. Because the best accessibility that we found in a pub in Rockhampton was Allenstown Hotel, which is associated with your competitor.'

So that morning of the pub crawl, I got an email from the chairman of Wesfarmers to say, 'it will be done, it might take six months, but it will be done - provided you hold off on the publicity'. I said, 'absolutely, that's not our preferred option anyway.'

22:58 Jodie: That's interesting, that's strategy, that rather than having a picket out the front or an angry letter in the paper, you go

to where the money is or where the big decision makers are and work strategically about the change you want to see.

23:13 Des: People respect their brand name and they don't want to lose that respect. There are other ways to skin a cat, you know. There's a need for the Anti-Discrimination Commission, but softly-softly I find is a good way to go first.

23:27 Outro: Thanks for joining us at Choice and Control, a Carers Queensland podcast. For more information about Carers Queensland, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, or the Local Area Coordination Program, please contact us online at www.carersqld.com.au.

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This podcast is a place for people with disability to share experiences, stories, and achievements. If you have a story you think we should know about, please contact us through the Carers Queensland inquiries line on 1300 999 636, or email cq.enquiries@ndis.gov.au.

Until next time, thanks for listening.