

# The WISE system builders series:

## Lessons from the quiet architects of more inclusive employment in Australia

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Jigsaw

### Case study

How Jigsaw is transforming disability employment through sharing best practice social enterprise models

Social enterprise Jigsaw Australia is best known for its innovative work to support young people with disability gain on-the-job training and a pathway to open award-wage employment via its digitisation and information management business.

Less well known is the work Jigsaw is doing to transform the disability employment system to scale mainstream employment opportunities for young people with disability, through advocacy and

partnering with traditional disability service providers, business and government.

This case study highlights the impacts and challenges of Jigsaw's systems transformation initiatives, and why philanthropy, impact investors and governments who share the goal of building more inclusive employment practices should take notice of this often-invisible area of work among social enterprises.



# The backstory: A multi-year research program

**This case study is part of a multi-year research project to unpack the role of cross-sector collaboration in enabling Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) to scale innovative employment models that support Australians experiencing disadvantage.**

The research aims to fill a gap in empirical knowledge about WISEs, which are enterprises that operate like most other small-to-medium sized businesses but have a distinct social mission to create meaningful jobs for Australians who face the most complex barriers to employment.

New evidence has emerged which compares the effectiveness of WISEs in creating sustained employment opportunities compared to traditional employment services<sup>1</sup> for those most distant from the labour market. These findings are compelling, particularly in terms of value to government, as WISEs are typically found to absorb public costs and create greater public value than existing employment services.



**I see a much quicker path to impact and ultimate influence, which is what we always wanted, through partners, rather than doing the bricks and mortar ourselves.”**

*Paul Brown, Jigsaw CEO and co-founder*



**In times of increasing uncertainty the only way to predict the future is to design it.”**

*R. Buckminster Fuller, architect, systems theorist, philosopher and futurist*

A number of well-established WISEs, with aspirations to scale their inclusive work models to benefit more Australians, have been looking beyond their own operational backyards and stepping up to lead innovative cross-sector trials and initiatives.

In many cases, this cross-sectoral collaboration has been necessary to achieve scale, given that, despite the compelling value WISEs deliver to governments, they are not recognised or supported in governments' employment services systems, thereby hampering their growth.

For the WISEs leading these ecosystem growth strategies (on top of managing their own enterprises), it's hard work to sustain and resource. This is often due to the "invisible" and under-valued nature of the work despite the role it plays in driving social innovation to address the complex social problems experienced by marginalised jobseekers.

To evaluate the effectiveness of these emerging cross-sector collaborations, the research project focuses on the work of three Australian WISEs – STREAT, White Box Enterprises and Jigsaw – each of which is leading transformational projects to indirectly address social problems on a large scale by growing a supportive social enterprise ecosystem.

This case study – one of a series of three – aims to share a summary of the research findings and build awareness of the ways in which potential partners – such as philanthropy, governments and business who share the goal of building more inclusive employment practices – can help the WISE sector to scale.

The research is being undertaken by PhD Candidate Sally McGeoch, through the Centre for Social Impact Swinburne, under the supervision Professor Jo Barraket AM and Dr Krzysztof Dembek. It draws on data collected between December 2021 and May 2024.

<sup>1</sup> Jigsaw (n.d) Employing people with disability through Jigsaw Connect. [www.jigsawaustralia.com.au/jigsawbusiness](http://www.jigsawaustralia.com.au/jigsawbusiness); Taylor Fry (2023). Costs and benefits comparison of social enterprise employment and Disability Employment Services. [www.whiteboxenterprises.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/WBE\\_PBO3-Costs-and-benefits-analysis-final.pdf](http://www.whiteboxenterprises.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/WBE_PBO3-Costs-and-benefits-analysis-final.pdf)

# Jigsaw: a strong track record of success

**Jigsaw has a broad vision for an Australia in which people with disability are fully included in the workforce.**

Different from a traditional Disability Employment Service, Jigsaw's holistic approach starts from the very basics of work-readiness training all the way through to supported transition to mainstream award wage employment.

Jigsaw believes that people prepare best for work through work and operate a document and data management social enterprise in five cities servicing more than 70 corporate and government clients across Australia.

Through its Connect program, Jigsaw also supports mainstream employers to access and engage job seekers with disability to help them build a more inclusive workforce. Partners include Allianz, City of Sydney and Sydney Opera House.

Since 2014, Jigsaw has supported more than 1,200 people with disability on their pathway to mainstream award wage employment, earning award wages, and 91% of people employed or placed into jobs by Jigsaw have retained their employment.

## Jigsaw's vision for system transformation

**Australia has one of the highest unemployment rates for people living with disabilities within the OECD and this has not changed for decades.**

Statistics show that the nation's traditional employment services are not working. Among job placements made through the government's Disability Employment Services (DES), 70 percent of placements do not surpass three months in role<sup>ii</sup>, because candidates are placed before they are truly job-ready and do not receive adequate support.

Not only does Jigsaw's holistic approach achieve significantly better employment outcomes than DES providers but it is more cost effective. Placing a candidate into mainstream employment costs Jigsaw approximately \$12,500 (per placement) compared to the DES model where placements can cost up to \$40,000 (per placement)<sup>iii</sup>.

The Australian Government is undertaking major reform of the \$1 billion DES sector, with a view to developing a new specialist model to replace the current DES program by mid-2025. Among initiatives to stimulate transformation, the Department of Social Services (DSS) has established a "Structural Adjustment Fund" for NDIS providers to demonstrate and scale innovative disability employment models that deliver positive outcomes.

As keen advocates for change, the leadership team at Jigsaw saw this as an opportunity to take action and test its successful training and employment model with traditional NDIS providers, initially with the support of philanthropic partners.

Jigsaw have partnered with two large disability service providers – Macarthur Disability Services in Western Sydney, and Kirinari in Albury – to pilot its approach and set up their own replica social enterprise.



**Our focus will be on helping others take on the model, and sharing that success with government to see if some policy change can be driven."**

*Paul Brown, Jigsaw CEO and co-founder*

### About Jigsaw

- Established: 2014
- FY23 Revenue: \$14.2M
- Industry: Technology and diversity recruitment
- Hubs: Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Adelaide & Canberra
- Target: Young people with disability

### Jigsaw's Impact

- **1200+** people with disability supported on their pathway to mainstream award wage jobs.
- **91%** of people employed or placed into jobs by Jigsaw have retained their employment.

<sup>ii</sup> Disability Employment Services - Outcome Rates by Disability Type, 2023. Available at: [Disability Employment Services Outcome Rates by Disability](#).

<sup>iii</sup> Department of Social Services (2022). Disability Employment Services Grant Agreement. [www.des-grant-agreement.pdf \(dss.gov.au\)](#).

# Collaborating to share best practice

**It would be unusual for a traditional business with a successful product or service to simply give their IP to other businesses to attract and benefit new customers in the way that Jigsaw has.**

However, as a social enterprise, Jigsaw is primarily motivated by the positive impact it can make on the lives of young people with disability and the opportunity to help other disability providers adopt its proven employment model.

After setting up five hubs of its own, Jigsaw sees the sense in partnering to share and scale the model rather than taking on the added cost and risk of expanding further, particularly in an environment where NDIS funding is not keeping up with the costs of delivering services and increasing compliance.

Jigsaw has a dedicated team that works directly with the two providers in an advisory role to help them replicate all aspects of the Jigsaw model. The Jigsaw team shares policies, processes, and business plans, and also offers hands-on support to help train staff and embed the model.

Partners pay a monthly license fee to cover Jigsaw's staffing costs for up to two years and then can either



**We realised that our goals were quite nicely aligned and that is, putting people with a disability in the centre of what we do and looking for real genuine outcomes for people not just getting people to a point where we can get paid."**

*Macarther Disability Services representative*

remain in a partnership arrangement or go their own way with the goal to stay connected in tracking their collective impact through a measurement framework developed by Flinders University.

Macarthur Disability Services, an established disability services not-for-profit based in South Western Sydney, has been the first to trial the Jigsaw model with their new hub called *Livelihood*. The roll out has more than exceeded expectations with the hub already attracting 23 trainees in the first five months, and with plans to expand to 80 trainees by 2025.

Jigsaw's goal is to create up to two partnerships with disability service providers per year. Based on a single hub being capable of creating employment pathways for up to 150 young people a year, they have the potential to amplify their impact from their five hubs, which at capacity will support 750 people each year, to 15 hubs supporting 2250 people per year when at capacity.

## Partnership Stakeholders



## Jigsaw Collaborative Impact

### Jigsaw & Disability Service Provider Partnerships

- **Macarthur Disability Services**
- **Kirinari**

### Macarthur Disability Services Impact:

- **23 Trainees since October 23**
- **80 Trainees by 2025**

**Jigsaw with 15 hubs (owned and partnered) at capacity by 2028**

- **2250 Trainees per year**

# Insights from Jigsaw's cross-sector leadership

**Cross-sector collaborations led by WISEs not only have the potential to lead to greater employment outcomes but also a range of other positive outcomes...**

Social enterprise collaborations like the partnership between Jigsaw and Macarthur Disability Services not only support the development of the individual partners but also showcase innovation and have the potential to transform the disability sector as a whole.

- **Strengthen impact and networks:** Rather than see each other as competitors for funding, Jigsaw and Macarthur Disability Services have aligned on their shared goal of creating better outcomes for young people with a disability seeking meaningful jobs in the open labour market. By also tracking their impact together and building a network of other providers and a community of practice, they will be able to scale and deepen their impact over time through model improvements and shared learning.
- **More sustainable sector:** Traditional disability service providers often lack the resources and skills to develop more sustainable business and impact models, particularly in the challenging NDIS funding environment. A proven model de-risks the process for partners and means they don't have to start from scratch. The partnership approach also enables social enterprises like Jigsaw to avoid the added financial risk of creating more bricks and mortar Hubs as they can achieve their mission by working with others.
- **Better policy delivery:** Jigsaw already advocates to government the benefits of their employment model but testing the model through partnering demonstrates how it can be replicated and scaled through others. By working together across the social enterprise and traditional disability service provider sectors, the model has much greater potential to shift policy to encourage greater innovation and more suitable funding to stimulate effective disability employment pathways.

**... but collaborations are complex, slow and emergent and require significant management and stewardship.**

Even if partners agree with overall shared goals, the leadership to support and empower partners in a collaboration requires strong facilitation skills, time investment and significant energy.

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**They know that they can't just exist within the ecosystem and deliver a service. After their 10 years of experience they recognize what their strengths are and how they've responded to the gaps in the NDIS. And now they're feeling that responsibility to share their learnings and advocate for change on behalf of the sector."**

*Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation representative*

- **Often invisible work:** Mature, systems-minded WISE like Jigsaw have forged ahead to drive greater collaboration to achieve scale drawing on their strong networks, facilitation skills, and spirit of collectivism. Yet leading collaborations requires significant "heavy lifting" on behalf of the sector and much of this work is invisible and undervalued.
- **Relationships take time:** Building trust through working on projects together takes time – more complex higher stakes and riskier collaborations can take longer if partners have not worked together before. The Jigsaw and Macarthur Disability Services "courting" period took 18 months where both organisations explored their values alignment and built trust through site visits and meetings with members of both boards before they were ready to move forward to the pilot stage.
- **Under-resourcing and capacity:** Partnering with others is challenging due to the under-resourced nature of the social sector. In the case of Jigsaw, it was able to draw on government and philanthropic funding to help cover costs in the partnership development stage. Macarthur Disability Services was aware of the costs and risks involved in setting up a new social enterprise and in its case the partnership approach made sense despite the upfront investment of time and energy.

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*Paul Brown, Jigsaw CEO and co-founder*

# Key takeaways for WISE supporters

A vital role can be played in supporting emerging cross-collaboration in the social enterprise sector by philanthropy, investors and governments who share the goal of building more inclusive employment practices:

- **Consider backing cross-collaborations to drive impact:** Fund mature WISEs to innovate and experiment with models to scale through cross-collaboration. Share risk and allow for flexibility and significant time investment to enable these collaborations to develop.
- **Pay attention to enabling factors when developing collaborations:** Focus on opportunities that build the business engines of WISEs and are aligned with their inclusive employment practices. Resourcing is required for leadership, learning and long-term engagement. Invest in processes that build a sense of reciprocity among collaborators through sharing power and building trust, to support relationships that grow beyond transactional to transformational.
- **Incentivise and encourage ecosystem investment from WISE and cross-sector partners:** Build systems awareness and shift culture among WISEs and their boards towards the important role they can play in ecosystem development. Strengthen sector networks and intermediaries to help convene, amplify connectivity, and stimulate collaborative initiatives. Support capacity building investments that encourage WISEs and others in the social sector to work together to build trust and opportunities for innovation.

## Glossary

**Award wage employment:** employment at or above the "Award Wage" as defined by the Fair Work Commission, it does not include the "supported employment services award".

**Cross-sector collaboration:** the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organisations in two or more sectors (e.g. business, government, not-for-profit) to jointly achieve an outcome that could not be achieved by organisations in one sector alone<sup>iv</sup>.

<sup>iv</sup> Bryson, J. M., Crosby, B. C., & Stone, M. M. (2015). Designing and Implementing Cross-Sector Collaborations: Needed and Challenging. *Public Administration Review*, 75(5), 647-663.

## Thank you

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**Jigsaw:** [www.jigsawaustralia.com.au](http://www.jigsawaustralia.com.au)

**Macarthur Disability Services:** [www.mdservices.com.au](http://www.mdservices.com.au)

**Livelihoods:** [www.mdslivelihood.com.au](http://www.mdslivelihood.com.au)

Image credit: Jigsaw Australia