From Entitlement to Experiment:

The new governance of welfare to work

Australian Report back to Industry Partners

October 2016

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Welcome

This report details the results of the 2016 Australian survey of frontline employment services professionals. It is the first major output from the project, *From entitlement to experiment: the new governance of welfare to work* which commenced in early 2016 and is funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and our industry partners: the National Employment Services Association (NESA), Jobs Australia (JA) and Westgate Community Initiatives Group (WCIG). The project is a continuation of the team's long-standing research program on welfare reform and the frontline of employment services delivery, which dates back to the first survey of the Australian employment services sector workforce in the late 1990s.

This is the fourth time we have surveyed frontline employment services staff in Australia, building upon previous surveys in 1998, 2008 and 2012. The longitudinal nature of this research affords us a unique insight into Australia's evolving, contracted employment system. It also allows us to understand how policy decisions made in Canberra translate into on-the-ground service delivery.

The findings presented in this report reflect frontline practice within the *jobactive* iteration of the Australian employment services system, which commenced on 1 July 2015. Employment services professionals were surveyed in the third quarter of 2016, at which point *jobactive* had been operational for a year. The report describes how frontline staff decide to work with clients, when to issue sanctions, and how they perceive the job seekers they work with. It also describes who frontline staff are and their perceptions of the employment services system and the agencies they work in.

We hope you enjoy this first report and we look forward to sharing the findings from our UK survey in coming months.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere thanks to all the Australian employment service providers, and their staff, for participating in this research. We are especially grateful to all frontline employment services staff who took time out of their busy days to complete the survey.

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Introduction

Employment services policy and delivery is constantly in flux, with the sector persistently subject to design, redesign, regulation and reregulation. The latest redesign of the Australian employment services system, *jobactive*, commenced in July 2015 linking a greater proportion of provider funding to the delivery of employment outcomes. Other changes include a stronger job seeker compliance framework, an increased emphasis on Work-for-the-Dole, and changes to how job seekers are streamed into different service categories.

The 2016 survey of the Australian employment services sector workforce provides an opportunity to assess the characteristics of the current Australian system and the experience of recent changes at the frontline of employment service provision. It was undertaken as part of ongoing three-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council *From entitlement to experiment: the new governance of welfare to work*. The aim of this project is to model and explain two organisational dynamics underlying major changes to contemporary welfare systems: the shift towards governance driven by performance and the problematic way changes 'from above' seek to stimulate real service delivery change. As part of this project, a related survey of the UK employment services sector is also being carried out. We will also examine how policy instruments and design experiments can be used to improve service delivery to those who are most in need and 'hardest-to-help.' Case studies will be undertaken with a small number of 'high-performing' providers to understand how they have improved their performance over time in relation to assisting those who are most disadvantaged and furthest from the labour market.

From entitlement to experiment builds on the work undertaken in previous projects with our industry partners: *Increasing Innovation and Flexibility in Social Service Delivery* and *Activating States*. Information about these prior projects, including research outcomes, is available at: http://arts.unimelb.edu.au/ssps/research/projects/employment-services.

This Australian report back to industry represents the first major outcome of the new project. In the coming months, we will also produce an industry report for the UK and a third report comparing the findings between Australia and the UK.

The Method Section of the report describes how the 2016 questionnaire was adapted from a survey of frontline employment services staff first conducted in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands from 1996 to 1999 and repeated in 2008 and 2012. The adaptation process involved a mix of site visits to employment services providers, discussions with industry professionals, and extensive consultation with project partners.

The Findings section of the report is broken into discrete subsections which describe different aspects of the Australian employment services sector. It commences with an overview of the distribution of jobs performed by the Australian employment services sector workforce. This is complemented by a review of the survey findings on the demographics of frontline staff, including: the age of staff, their gender, education levels, and experience within the sector. A discussion of the geographical spread of the industry and the nature of the training provided to frontline employment services staff follows in the subsection *Employment Sector Agencies*.

In the section entitled *Working with Job Seekers*, we consider what the survey findings tell us about the type of job seekers that employment services professionals work with. For example, the proportion of frontline workers' clients who are perceived as being close to employment compared with those who are seen as more difficult to place into employment. We also explore frontline staff's perceptions of how willing job seekers are to get off benefits and the extent to which job seekers are seen as complying with their obligations.

This is followed by a more detailed section on *Working as an Employment Services Professional*, which examines several aspects related to the work demands that employment services professionals are under and how they prioritise their work. A particularly important issue is the caseload size that frontline employment services staff have, which influences how many job seekers they see in an average day. The section also explores the tools that employment services professionals rely on when deciding how to work with job seekers, as well as other factors such as local labour market demand and job seekers' preferences that influence which activities they recommend for their clients. Other important aspects of working as an employment services professional that are considered in this section include the duration of time that frontline staff spend on various tasks and the extent to which they collaborate with government, welfare agencies, training organisations and employers in supporting job seekers. The section concludes with a discussion of the main factors that determine the work priorities of employment services staff and their organisations, and the degree to which frontline staff feel able to influence their work environment.

The next section of the report, *Sanctioning Powers*, explores how frontline staff exercise their powers to report job seekers for compliance action. It describes recent changes to the job seeker compliance framework, the frequency with which employment services professionals issue compliance reports, and the circumstances in which they are likely to report job seekers for sanctioning.

The final sections of the report, *Factors Influencing Employment Services Agencies and how Staff do their Job* and *Perceptions of the Employment System*, consider employment services professionals' views on a range of issues. These include their perceptions of the level of discretion and flexibility they have in their jobs, their attitudes towards the IT system that they use, and their views about the broader effectiveness of the Australian employment services system. These sections also explore frontline staff's views about prioritising rapid job placements versus raising education and skill levels as well as the degree to which they are influenced by numerical targets and the need to generate payable outcomes for their organisations. The report concludes with an analysis of employment services professionals' views about how the current system could be improved and a comparison with the 2012 survey results.

Method

Survey Adaptation

The survey instrument used in this study was adapted from a questionnaire designed by Mark Considine in 1998 and incorporated a number of standard measures used in other studies. The findings from the 1998 survey are published in Mark Considine's book *Enterprising States: the public management of welfare-to-work* (2001). The survey was repeated in 2008 and 2012. In 2008 the survey was conducted online for the first time. A copy of the industry report for 2008 and 2012 is freely available online at: http://arts.unimelb.edu.au/ssps/research/projects/employment-services. The findings from the 1998, 2008 and 2012 surveys are also the basis for the book, *Getting Welfare to Work: street-level governance in Australia, the UK, and the Netherlands*, which was published in 2015.

The 2016 survey instrument closely resembles the 2008 and 2012 questionnaires. In developing the 2016 version of the survey, consistency was a principal concern. To develop the 2016 survey, extensive field research was again conducted. This included consultations with our industry partners, visits to a range of employment services offices, and meetings with agency senior management. Where changes were made to the survey they were primarily done in response to changes in industry practice or language use; for example, in relation to changes to the job seeker compliance framework and the introduction of Non-Attendance Reports (NARs) and Provider Activity Reports (PARs) since the last survey.

The Survey Instrument

The survey comprised around 100 questions. Not all questions appeared for all respondents, although most respondents were asked most questions. The questions were predominantly closed, while a small number of questions invited respondents to provide expanded answers.

The survey was conducted online, which was estimated to take between 20 and 30 minutes for respondents to complete. It was programmed by members of the research team using the *Limesurvey* platform and hosted on University of Melbourne servers to ensure the integrity of the data. The online survey was designed so that respondents had to read and acknowledge a plain English statement describing the research, and read and respond to an initial screening question (designed to screen out service staff who do not work directly with job seekers) before they could enter the body of the survey. After that, respondents were able to progress through the survey even if they did not answer all the questions. However, respondents were advised at the start of the survey that only those who answered all the questions were eligible to enter the prize draw.

Eligible frontline staff were sent instructions on how to enter the survey, via an email sent directly from their manager. Each participating agency was provided with a unique pathway into the survey in the form of a custom URL. The survey was filled out between 4 July and 26 August 2016, with some agencies commencing earlier than others. However, all agencies had four weeks to complete the survey.

Participation Parameters

The survey was designed to be completed by frontline employment services staff working under a *jobactive* contract. Frontline staff were defined as employment services providers working directly with job seekers to find employment. These included client-facing staff assisting job seekers to find work, staff helping clients to become job-ready, and other staff involved in delivering post-placement support to job seekers to help them retain employment. Questions at the beginning of the survey were designed to screen out ineligible participants, such as employment services staff who did not work directly with job seekers or who did so solely as part of another contract (for example, as a *Disability Employment Services* provider).

All *jobactive* providers were approached to participate in the survey, with staff from 32 agencies completing the survey. Fourteen of these agencies participated in the survey for the first time in 2016. The remaining 18 agencies had participated in previous surveys.

Participant Profile

Once the file cleaning was complete, 1233 usable survey responses remained. That represents a 35% response rate out of 3507 potential respondents. Approximately two-thirds of respondents (65%) were from not-for-profit agencies, with just under a third (31.7%) coming from for-profit providers. This was higher than in previous surveys and reflects an increase in the share of services delivered by for-profit providers under the *jobactive* contract. An overview of the sample is shown in Table I.

Table I Sample Overview

	Number	Percentage
Not-for-profit participating agencies	20	62.5
For profit participating agencies	11	34.4
Other participating agencies	1	3.1
Total participating agencies	32	
Potential not-for-profit respondents	2088	59.5
Potential for-profits respondents	1247	35.6
Potential Other respondents	172	4.9
Total potential respondents[1]	3507	
Actual not-for-profit participants	799	65.0
Actual for-profits participants	393	31.7
Actual Other participants	40	3.2
Actual "agency type unknown" participants	1	0.1
Total actual participants	1233	34.9

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[1] One agency was unable to provide us with a potential sample size. We have therefore excluded that agency when calculating the response rate.

Findings

The Employment Sector Workforce

Survey participants were asked to indicate the job that they performed as an employment services professional. As shown in Figure I, nearly 60 per cent of frontline staff work as employment consultants (58.5%). The other positions held by survey participants, in descending order, are: managers (14.8%); business development officer/employment brokers (6.4%); receptionists (6.2%); trainers (1.9%); and compliance and quality reporting officers (1.5%). One hundred and thirty two respondents (10.9%) reported their role was not included as an option in the questionnaire.

Figure I Job Description
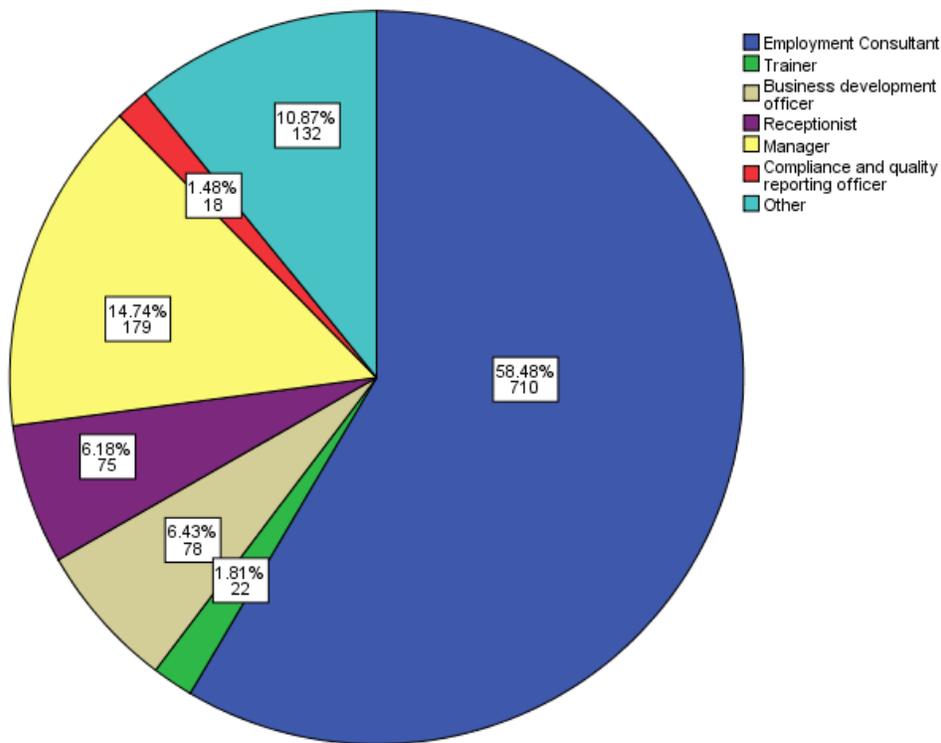
Consistent with previous surveys, the employment sector is dominated by female frontline staff (76.0%) and almost all work on a full-time basis (91.8%) (see Table II). Very few frontline staff (just 3%) are members of a union.

The survey results indicate that there has been considerable movement of staff within the employment services sector over the past year. Nearly 3 in 10 respondents (29.0%) reported working for their current employer for less than a year. The *jobactive* contract saw several new providers enter the sector while other agencies that had previously delivered employment services lost contracts. Although the proportion of frontline employment services staff who have commenced jobs within the past year is relatively high, the proportion who have entered the *sector* in the past year is much lower (16.5%). This suggests that many of those who have recently commenced jobs have previous

experience of working in the sector and in other employment services agencies. Further evidence of the extent of employment mobility within the sector is provided by a comparison between the proportion of respondents who have worked for their current *employer* for more than 5 years (18.5%) and the proportion who have worked in the *sector* for more than 5 years (47.8%).

The results reported in Table II show that the employment services sector continues to make strong use of information technology. However computers are not used universally, with seven per cent of frontline staff reporting that they are either never logged onto, or only sometimes logged on to computers when interviewing job seekers. Still, nearly 80 per cent of employment services professionals indicate that they are always logged on to computers while interviewing job seekers.

Table II Employee Profile

	Number	Percentage
Full-time/part-time work		
Work full-time	1098	91.8
Work part-time	98	8.2
Gender		
Female	567	76.0
Male	177	23.7
Transgender	2	0.3
Years worked in the employment sector		
Less than 1 year	123	16.5
1 – 5 years	267	35.7
More than 5 years	357	47.8
Years worked for current employer		
Less than 1 year	217	29.0
1 – 5 years	392	52.5
More than 5 years	138	18.5
Employees who are members of a union		
Yes	22	3.0
No	722	97.0
Computer use		
Always logged on and accessing a computer while interviewing job seekers	696	79.3
Most of the time logged on and accessing a computer while interviewing job seekers	117	13.3
Sometimes logged on and accessing a computer while interviewing job seekers	53	6.0
Never logged on and accessing a computer while interviewing job seekers	12	1.4

As shown in Figure II, the majority of survey respondents are aged between 25 and 34 years (33.4%) closely followed by employees aged 35-44 years (25%) and 45-54 years (23.9%). The smallest proportion of Australian employment professionals are either under 25 years of age (6.7%) or over 55 years (11.1%).

Figure II Age groups

Legend:
- Up to 24 years
- 25 to 34 years
- 35 to 44 years
- 45-54 years
- 55 years and over

6.68%
33.38%
24.97%
23.90%
11.08%
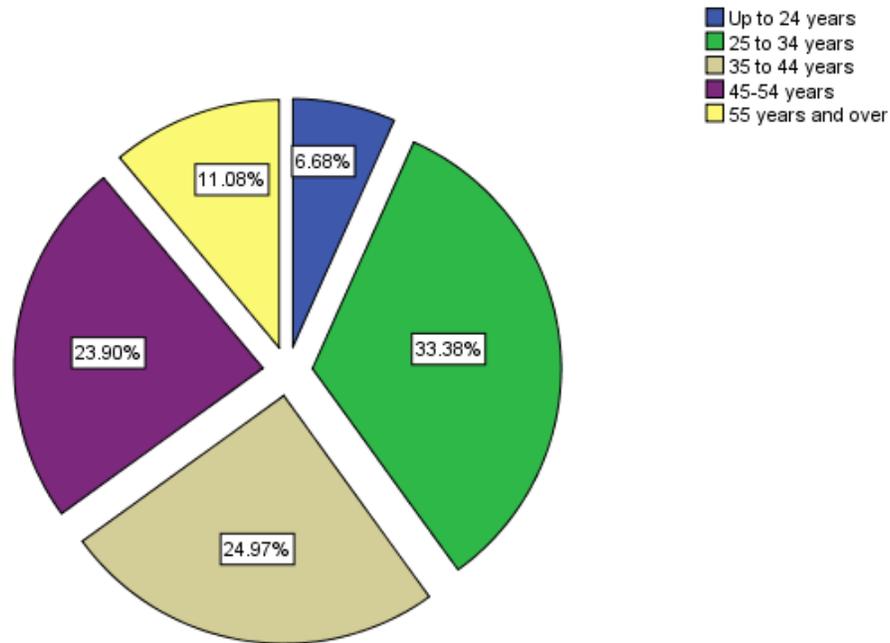
The survey also asked frontline employment services staff to indicate their highest level of education. The largest proportion of frontline staff have a TAFE qualification or vocational certificate (36.6%) while almost a quarter have no post-secondary qualification. A similar proportion of frontline staff have a university degree, with 19.9 per cent of respondents indicating that they have a bachelor or undergraduate degree and a further 5.7 per cent reporting that they have a postgraduate degree.

Figure III Highest education level

Values: 36.58%, 19.86%, 14.52%, 14.11%, 9.178%, 5.753%

Categories: A TAFE or vocational certificate, A bachelor or undergraduate degree, An undergraduate diploma, Year 12, Year 11 or below, A postgraduate degree
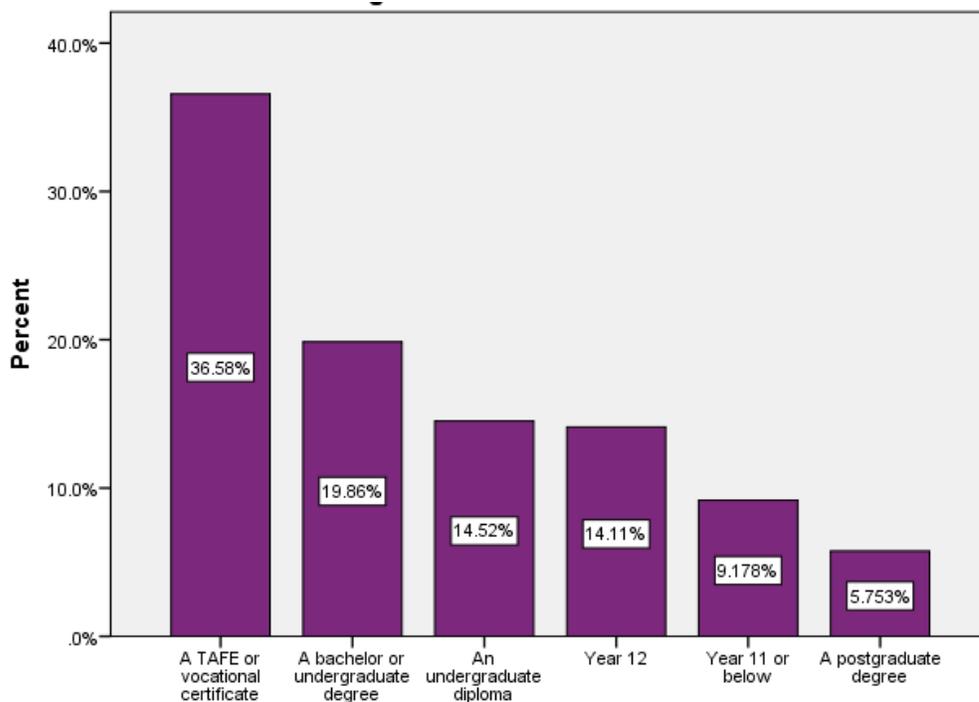
Employment Sector Agencies

Most respondents work in an office in Victoria (40.3%), followed by QLD (20.9%), NSW (18.9%) and then, in descending order: Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania, the ACT and the Northern Territory (see Figure IV).

Figure IV Agency location
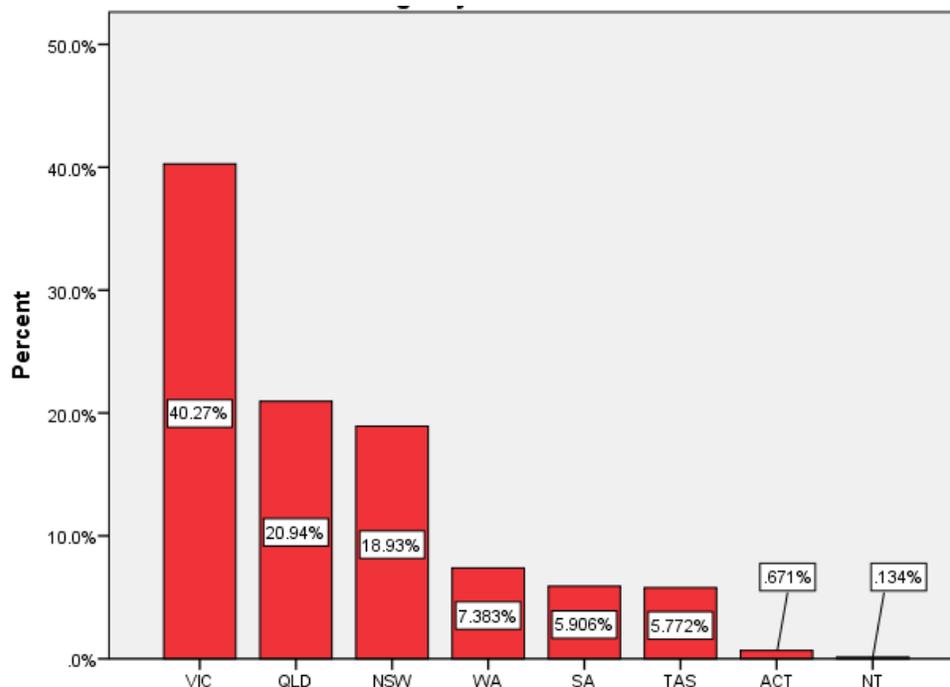
There was not a great deal of difference between the proportion of respondents that work in metropolitan areas (47.1%) and those that work in regional centres (49.1%). However, very few of those surveyed indicated that they work in a remote location.

In terms of the training received to do their jobs, the majority of frontline staff in this survey reported that they received formal in-house training (56.1%). A similar proportion (46.5%) indicated that they had received informal training from colleagues, while 14 per cent received training run by an external organisation or outside trainer. Approximately 1 in 10 (12.1%) frontline staff reported that they did not receive any training to do their jobs.

Table III Agency Profile

	Number	Percentage
Location type		
City/metropolitan area	351	47.1
Regional centre	366	49.1
Remote location	28	3.8
Training prior to commencing work		
Formal training run in-house	674	56.1
Formal training run by an outside trainer	168	14.0
Informal training by colleagues	559	46.5
No training	146	12.1
Other	102	8.19

Working with Job seekers

Under *jobactive*, job seekers are classified into one of three streams that determine the level of support that is available and the range and intensity of any activity requirements (for example, Work-for-the-Dole) that job seekers may have. Previously, job seekers were classified into one of four streams based upon an assessment of the employment barriers they experienced. Job seekers are now assessed and classified into one of three service streams: from Stream A (those who are most job ready) to Stream C (those who have a combination of work capacity and personal issues).

In earlier surveys, respondents reported an almost even distribution with respect to the different service streams their clients were in. By contrast, in the 2016 survey, frontline staff estimated that almost 40 per cent of their caseload was comprised of job seekers in Stream A (see Table IV). This was compared to nearly 30 per cent of their clients who were estimated to be in Stream B and 23.3 per cent who were estimated to be in Stream C. However, the high standard deviations indicate considerable variance in the average (mean) proportion of clients within each stream. In particular, the standard deviation of 29.06 for the proportion of clients estimated to be in Stream A indicates that a number of frontline staff (68 respondents) have caseloads entirely comprised of Stream A clients.

The survey also included an additional measure of the degree to which respondents' clients are job-ready or some distance from employment. Using a scale of 1 to 4, frontline staff were asked to estimate the proportion of their clients who they considered 'easier to place' (1) versus those they considered 'more difficult to place' (4). As shown in Table IV, frontline staff's responses to this departed noticeably from the answers they gave about the streaming of their clients. Whereas employment services professionals indicated that, on average, just under a quarter of their clients were in Stream C, they estimated that over 41 per cent of their clients could be considered 'more difficult to place.' Conversely, respondents estimated that 23 per cent of their clients are 'easier to place' despite previously reporting that just under 40 per cent of the job seekers they work with are in Stream A. As such, the combined estimate of job seekers that are 'difficult to place' is 60.4 per cent compared to the combined estimate of 39.6 per cent of job seekers that are considered easier to place.

The responses that employment services professionals gave about the proportion of their clients with a mental health problem further suggests that a high proportion of job seekers have complex issues affecting their participation in employment. Employment services professionals perceived that, on average, 43 per cent of their clients have a mental health problem. Again, the standard deviation of 24.6 indicates a considerable variance in the proportion of job seekers that are estimated to have a mental health problem.

In order to gauge the monitoring of job seekers by frontline staff, survey participants were asked to indicate the proportion of clients that they follow either closely, somewhat, a little or not at all. The largest proportion of clients are followed closely (55.5%) while 22.9 per cent are followed somewhat. The smallest groups were the clients who are followed a little (13.5%) and those who are not followed at all (8.19%). Information was also gathered about the extent to which the frontline staffs' clients are looking for employment or participating in other activities such as training, work-

experience, or non-vocational programs. The largest proportion of clients are looking for employment only (34.9%) followed by participating in an activity (28.8%). Just under 19 per cent of job seekers are estimated to be neither participating in an activity nor looking for work.

Although employment services professionals report that well over 60 per cent of their clients are either actively looking for work or participating in another activity, the survey results suggest that a high proportion of job seekers are perceived as non-compliant or not fully committed to looking for work. For example, frontline staff reported that, on average, just less than 39 per cent of those who apply for benefits or an allowance would rather be on benefits than work to support themselves and their families. An almost identical proportion of job seekers (39%) were perceived as not complying with their obligations.

Table IV Job Seeker Profile

	Mean	Standard deviation
Proportion of clients that are estimated to be in (n=1062)		
Stream A	39.3	29.6
Stream B	29.7	19.2
Stream C	23.3	19.1
Don't know	7.7	26.6
Proportion of clients perceived to have a mental health problem (n=1068)		
Percentage	43.1	24.6
Percentage of job seekers not complying with their obligations (n=868)		
Percentage	39.0	20.7
Percentage of job seekers that are followed (n=750)		
Closely	55.5	31.2
Somewhat	22.9	19.7
A little	13.5	17.4
Not at all	8.1	19.0
Approximately what percentage of people who apply for benefits or an allowance do you think would rather be on benefits than work to support themselves and their families? (n=805)		
Percentage	38.8	21.6
Proportion of job seekers that are easier to place versus more difficult to place (n=805)		
1 (easier to place)	23.1	16.9
2	16.4	10.0
3	18.7	11.7
4 (more difficult to place)	41.7	22.3
Estimated number of job seekers that are (n=692)		
Participating in an activity	28.8	20.1
Looking for employment but not participating in an activity	34.9	20.6
Receiving support after being placed in a job or program	17.6	15.7
Not participating in an activity and not looking for work	18.7	16.2

Working as an Employment Services Professional

The survey results indicate that caseloads within the *jobactive* system are relatively high, and that employment services professionals work with job seekers via a mix of individual and group activities. The average (mean) caseload reported by survey respondents is 147.8 clients. The standard deviation of 58 clients also indicates that some staff have considerably larger caseloads than this while others have much smaller caseloads.

As shown in Table V, frontline staff were asked to estimate the number of job seekers seen on an average day: firstly, in individual appointments, and secondly, in other group activities. Employment services staff reported seeing an average of 9 clients per day as individual appointments, and a similar number of additional clients in group activities. Again, the standard deviation of 16 clients indicates that some frontline staff see considerably more than 9 clients per day in group activities. Combining the responses for individual appointments and group activities, the findings suggest that frontline staff see an average of nearly 19 clients per day either as individual appointments or group activities.

The survey asked frontline service staff about the number and proportion of clients they had placed in work in the previous month and in the last year. Respondents reported placing, on average, 11.2 people into work in the previous month while the average number of job seekers placed into employment in the previous year was just under 79 people. Respondents estimated that this (79 people) represented 31 per cent of their annual caseload, although the large standard deviations for these figures point to considerable variation in both the number and proportion of clients placed in work in the last year.

Various data was also captured about the tools and approaches that employment services staff use when deciding how to work with job seekers. As reported in Table V, more than 6 in 10 frontline staff (61.8%) indicate that they use a client classification tool when deciding how to work with job seekers. At the same time, over a third (38.2%) of employment services professionals report that they do not use such a tool.

Table V Working with Job seekers

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Current caseload (n=614)	147.6	57.8
Number of job seekers seen on an average day as individual appointments (n=1084)	9.1	6.8
Number of job seekers seen on an average day in group activities (n=1062)	9.4	16.4
Estimated number of people placed in work in the last month		
People placed in work (n=766)	11.2	10.0
Percentage of caseload (n=322)	10.4	13.2
Estimated number of people placed in work in the last year		
People placed in work (n=494)	78.8	51.5
Percentage of caseload (n=207)	31.0	24.7
Use of a client classification tool	**Number**	**Percentage**
Used when deciding how to work with clients	608	61.8
Not used	376	38.2

The factors influencing employment services staff's decisions about activities for their clients were further explored in the range of questions reported in Table VI. Frontline staff were asked to evaluate the extent to which various factors such as labour market demand, their own judgement, and job seekers' preferences (among others) influenced their decision making about which activities to recommend. The survey findings show that many frontline staff use their own judgement when working with clients, with over a quarter (25.8%) reporting that their own judgement is 'very influential' in determining what activities are recommend for each job seeker. A further 49.9 per cent reported that it is 'quite influential.' Less than half of frontline staff reported that the answers to a standard set of assessment questions or other assessment results are either 'quite influential' or 'very influential' in determining what activities they recommend for each job seeker. These factors proved to be the least influential factors influencing the decisions that frontline staff make about activities for their clients.

The government's mutual obligation policy emerges as the biggest influence on the decisions that frontline staff make about activities for their clients. Nearly half (45.8%) report that it is 'very influential' in determining what activities are recommended while a further third (34.9%) report that it is 'quite influential.' The next largest influence on the decisions made by frontline staff is labour market demand, followed by the availability of labour market program vacancies. Less than 1 in 5 employment services professionals report that job seekers' preferences for activities are 'very influential' in determining what activities they recommend, although half (49.9%) reported that they are 'quite influential.' A combined proportion of 45.3 per cent of frontline staff report that the need to get an outcome quickly is either 'quite influential' or 'very influential' in informing the decisions they make about what activities are recommended for each job seekers.

Table VI Influences when determining what activities are recommended for each job seeker

	Percentage			
	Not at all influential	Somewhat influential	Quite influential	Very influential
Answers to a standard set of assessment questions (n=921)	11.7	46.5	28.8	13.0
Other assessment results (n=907)	11.6	44.8	33.1	10.6
My own judgment (n=938)	3.4	22.9	47.9	25.8
Job seeker's preference for activities (n=936)	2.1	29.0	49.9	19.0
Labour market demand (n=936)	1.8	16.2	46.6	35.4
Availability of labour market program vacancies (n=932)	2.4	17.9	46.9	32.8
Access to funds for special assistance (n=938)	6.4	34.3	37.4	21.9
Need to substantiate a case for sanctioning someone (n=924)	15.8	37.2	32.7	14.3
Need to get an outcome quickly (n=936)	16.6	38.1	32.5	12.8
The government's mutual obligation policy (including activity requirements) (n=936)	2.7	16.6	34.9	45.8

Table VII shows regularity of contact between employment services frontline staff and various service providers, excluding contact associated with assisting a job seeker obtain a job interview. The results indicate that frontline staff are in regular contact with employers, with 35.1 per cent reporting that they speak to employers on a daily basis. The lines of communication are also strong between different offices in the one organisation, with just under half (49.9%) reporting that they are in contact with another office in their organisation on a daily basis. Conversely, the results show a sizeable proportion of frontline staff 'never' contact local media (70.2%), local government (45.7%) or local service clubs (35.7%). Some respondents did indicate regular, weekly contact with training providers (44.0%), welfare agencies (30.6%), and other employment agencies (27.5%). However, only 1 in 20 respondents reported that they are in daily contact with welfare agencies while more than 10 per cent never contact welfare agencies.

Table VII Regularity of contact outside the office (excluding contact associated with assisting a job seeker obtain a job interview)

Percentage						
	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Quarterly	Less than quarterly	Never
Another office in this organisation (n=890)	49.6	29.8	9.9	3.3	4.7	2.8
Officials from a government department (n=876)	3.4	23.1	25.3	13.2	18.0	16.9
Local government (n=875)	0.5	5.8	13.9	13.7	20.3	45.7
Welfare agencies (n=873)	5.2	30.6	30.0	11.1	12.0	11.1
Employers (n=886)	35.1	31.4	16.6	3.8	5.8	7.3
Training providers (n=887)	14.3	44.0	25.1	5.4	5.4	5.7
Another employment agency (n=884)	5.4	27.5	29.6	10.0	13.1	14.4
Local service clubs (n=875)	2.4	8.9	18.3	13.4	21.4	35.7
Schools and universities (n=877)	1.7	16.9	24.6	14.4	19.0	23.4
Local media (n=878)	1.8	2.1	4.7	7.2	14.1	70.2

Frontline employment services staff were also surveyed about how they distribute their each week between various tasks. As shown in Table VIII, frontline staff overwhelmingly spend the largest proportion of their time each week in direct contact with job seekers (43.7%)—more than double the amount of time they spend on any other task or activity. The large standard deviation of 25.2, however, indicates that some staff spend considerably more time in direct contact with job seekers whereas others spend a relatively small proportion of their time working directly with job seekers.

While working with job seekers accounts for a very large proportion of the time that employment services professionals spend at work each week, the survey results also highlight the considerable administrative workload that frontline staff have. On average, employment services staff spend a combined 34.6 per cent of their time each week on either contract compliance activities or other forms of administration. Nearly a fifth (17.8%) of their time each week is spent on contract compliance activities alone.

The remainder of employment services professionals' time is divided between working with employers (10.3%), working on other tasks (6.7%), and working with other service providers (4.7%).

Given the considerable amount of time that employment services staff spend on contract compliance to meet government reporting requirements, survey participants were asked their opinion on the amount of evidence required by the Department of Employment. The responses they gave were almost evenly split between those who feel that the amount of evidence required for each client is 'fair enough' (47.6%) and those who feel that it is 'excessive' (46.2%). Only 11 frontline staff indicated that they feel not enough evidence is required by the Department.

As indicated previously (Table II), employment services professionals frequently use computers when doing their jobs. Accordingly, the survey gathered information about their perceptions of the IT system and whether they perceived that it provides them with the information they need to do their jobs. The vast majority of those surveyed (69.8%) reported that the IT system provides them with accurate information, although 29 per cent felt that not enough accurate information is available via the IT system.

Table VIII The employment services workplace

	Mean	Standard deviation
Proportion of time per week spent (n=721)		
In direct contact with job seekers	43.7	25.2
Working with other service providers	4.7	6.4
Working with employers	10.3	14.6
On contract compliance to meet government reporting/administration requirements	17.8	17.2
On other administration	16.8	15.8
On other tasks	6.7	11.6
Regularly of feedback to your manager(s) in the past six months	**Number**	**Percentage**
Often	540	61.2
Several times	160	18.1
A few times	157	17.8
Never	25	2.8
The amount of evidence required for each client is		
Excessive	348	46.2
Fair enough	359	47.6
Inadequate	11	1.5
Not relevant to my job	25	3.3
Don't know	11	1.5
Is enough accurate information available via the IT system?		
Yes	525	69.8
No	218	29.0
I don't use the IT system	9	1.2

The survey asked frontline staff to reflect upon the factors that determine work priorities in their office as well as their own personal work priorities. Respondents were given a closed choice between one of four statements: meeting targets set by management, knowing the rules and official procedures, competing successfully with other service providers, and having the best possible set of contacts outside the organisations. As Figure V shows, the vast majority of frontline staff (57.4%) perceive that 'meeting targets set by management' is the thing that best reflects work priorities in their office, followed by 'knowing the rules and official procedures' (30.9%). Only a small proportion perceive that either 'competing successfully with other service providers' or 'having the best possible set of contacts' reflects the priorities of their office - although a slightly higher proportion of employment services professionals indicate that these factors best reflect their own personal work priorities.

The survey results indicate that 'meeting targets set by management' (43.5%) also best reflects the personal work priorities of frontline staff, although this is very closely followed by 'knowing the rules and official procedures' (42.8%). This would suggest frontline staff are divided between focussing on 'meeting targets set by management' and 'know the rules and official procedures' but the former is more clearly a priority for their office.

Figure V Office vs. personal priorities
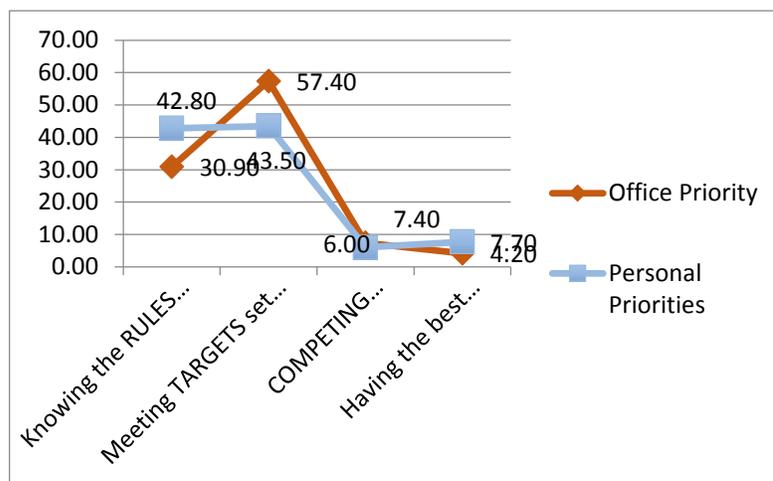
Employment services professionals were also asked about the degree of say they have in relation to various aspects of their job, including how the job is done and how clients are engaged with. As shown in Table IX, employment services professionals have either a good or a very great deal of say on almost all factors and especially in relation to the how clients are engaged with. Over 60 per cent (62.3%) of respondents reported having either a good deal of say or a very great deal of say over this aspect of their jobs. A similar proportion of frontline staff perceived that they had either a good or a great deal

of say in relation to the order in which tasks are performed (59.4%) and the speed at which work is performed (56.5%). When it comes to making changes to how the job is done, however, frontline staff report having less of a say with 10.9% perceiving that they have no say at all and a further 17.3% reporting that they have some say.

Table IX Employee influence and work related decisions

	No say at all	Some say	Moderate say	A good deal of say	A very great deal of say
How the job is done (n=747)	5.5	16.6	27.2	40.0	10.7
The order in which tasks are performed (n=744)	4.8	14.0	21.8	41.9	17.5
Speed at which work is performed (n=743)	6.2	13.6	23.7	39.3	17.2
Changes to how the job is done (n=744)	10.9	17.3	27.4	32.3	12.1
How clients are engaged with (n=744)	3.5	13.0	20.7	39.8	23.0

Table X provides information on how well informed employment services professionals believe they are about a range of factors related to their jobs. The results indicate that staff believe they are very well informed with respect to what is to be done (48.53%), the priority of work to be done (47.7%) and policies and procedures (45.8%). Overall, staff believe they are quite well informed on all factors including technical knowledge (36.9%) and how they are supposed to do their job (33.7%). The money value of their interactions with each job seeker is the aspect of their job that frontline staff feel least well informed about, although more than half (54%) still feel either very well informed or quite well informed about it.

Table X How well informed frontline staff are about various aspects of their job

	Very well informed	Quite well informed	Fairly well informed	Somewhat informed	Hardly at all informed
What is to be done (n=746)	48.5	31.5	13.3	4.6	2.1
Policies and procedures (n=744)	45.8	35.2	11.3	5.5	2.2
Priority of work to be done (n=747)	47.7	31.6	14.3	4.4	2.3
How well the job is done (n=745)	38.9	29.9	16.2	8.3	6.6
Technical knowledge (n=745)	30.5	36.9	19.2	10.3	3.1
How you are supposed to do the job (n=747)	35.6	33.7	18.9	8.2	3.6
Money value of your interactions with each job seeker (n=745)	26.2	27.8	23.6	13.4	9.0

Sanctioning Powers

The *Job Seeker Compliance Framework* has changed in recent years, including the introduction of Non-Attendance Reports from 1 July 2014, the implementation of a 'Suspend til attend' policy from January 2015, and the ability for providers to recommend a financial penalty be applied through the submission of a Provider Appointment Report from 1 July 2015.[2]

The survey asked respondents about the number of job seekers they had reported for non-compliance – filed a Non-Attendance Report (NAR), Provider Appointment Report (PAR) or Participation Report (PR) - within the previous two weeks. The results show that, on average, 15 clients were reported for non-compliance in the last two weeks, although the high standard deviation indicates that some employment services professional reported a considerably greater number of clients while others reported relatively few, if any.

Table XI Number of clients sanctioned in the last two weeks

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Number of clients (n=781)	15.06	21.03

Table XII shows the circumstances under which frontline staff typically issue compliance reports (NARs, PARs, or PRs). The most common reason given for issuing a compliance report is that that a job seeker had behaved inappropriately on two occasions (94.0%). This is very closely followed by the failure of a job seeker to commence an employment program, training course, or activity such as Work-for-the-Dole (93.5%). Failing to attend a job interview and refusing a suitable job offer are also seen as serious offences with over 91 per cent of respondents stating that they would file a compliance report under either circumstance. Close to 80 per cent of employment services professionals reported that they would file a compliance report if a job seeker fails or refuses to sign their job plan (80.3%), refuses a suitable job offer (79.9%), fails to contact their office (79.7%), or voluntarily leaves a job (79.4%). Leaving a training course is the circumstance least likely to trigger a compliance report from frontline staff, although two thirds of respondents still issue a compliance report if a job seeker does so.

Table XII NARs, PARs, and PRs (sanctions) are Normally Filed under the Following Circumstances

	Percentage
A job seeker is dismissed from a job or a training program (n=827)	77.6
A job seeker refuses to apply for a suitable job (n=836)	79.9
A job seeker refuses a suitable job offer (n=839)	91.1
A job seeker fails to commence an employment program, activity or training course (including WfD) (n=846)	93.5
A job seeker leaves a training course (n=812)	66.1
A job seeker fails to contact our office (n=833)	79.7
A job seeker fails to attend a job interview (n=840)	91.2
A job seeker voluntarily leaves a job (n=832)	79.4
A job seeker fails to keep an appointment with my office (n=837)	89.8
A job seeker does any of these for a second time (n=833)	94.0
When a job seeker fails/refuses to sign their job plan (n=817)	80.3

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[2] Department of Employment (2016) *The Job Seeker Compliance Framework – Explanatory Notes*. Available from https://docs.employment.gov.au/documents/job-seeker-compliance-framework.

Employment services professionals were also asked about the reasons why they might decide not to issue a compliance report. As shown in Table XIII, respondents indicated a range of considerations that would lead them to decide not to file a NAR, PAR or PR. Their responses suggest that the principal reason is that 'the job seeker is normally a good client and it is more effective to issue a verbal warning only' (66.2%). The next most popular reason is that 'the case can't be substantiated' (55.5%) followed by 'the job seeker agreement was not specific enough' (42.7%). The survey results also show that a small proportion of frontline staff (15.3%) decide not to issue compliance reports because they believe 'sanctioning is not an incentive to compliance' while 17.1 per cent report that they decide not to file NARs, PARs, or PRs out of 'fear for personal safety.'

The issue of personal safety was explored in an additional survey question, which asked frontline staff about whether they had personally experienced any threats of physical violence in their office in the past two months. While the majority of employment services professionals did not personally experience any threats of physical violence, 363 respondents reported that they had.

Table XIII Compliance Reports (sanctions) Continued

NARs, PARs, or PRs NOT filed for the following reasons	Number	Percentage
The case can't be substantiated	478	55.5
The job seeker agreement was not specific enough	368	42.7
Fear for personal safety	147	17.1
Sanctions are often overturned	186	21.6
Sanctioning is not an incentive to compliance	132	15.3
Avoiding a reputation for being too tough	9	1.0
The office does not encourage Sanctioning	6	0.7
The penalties are too harsh on the job seeker	41	4.8
The job seeker is normally a good client and it is more effective to issue a verbal warning only	571	66.2
Experience of threats of physical violence in the last two months		
Yes	363	44.9
No	445	55.1

Factors Influencing Employment Services Agencies and how Staff do their Job

The survey included several questions designed to elicit frontline staff's views about the effectiveness of the Australian employment services system and the extent to which they feel their job is routine. The results in Table XIV reveal that employment services professionals generally believe that the employment services system is effective. Over half of those surveyed (55.8%) indicated that they viewed the effectiveness of the system in helping job seekers find employment positively, including 8.4 per cent who saw it as 'very effective' in this regard. Frontline staff similarly have favourable views of the effectiveness of the system in getting job seekers off benefits, with a combined 42.8 per cent reporting positive views in this regard. Nonetheless, one in three employment services professionals (32.9%) broadly disagree that the current system is effective in getting job seekers off benefits whereas only one in five frontline staff (20.3%) perceive the system as less than effective in getting job seekers into work. In other words, the perception among frontline staff is that the employment services system is largely effective in helping job seekers find a job but they are less sure about how effective it is in getting people off benefits.

Table XIV also highlights the level of job satisfaction amongst frontline staff as well as the extent to which they perceive that their job is routine and dictated by the IT system. The results with respect to job satisfaction indicate that employment services professionals are happier than not with their present work conditions such as pay, working hours, and opportunities for promotion. Although only 13.1 per cent feel 'very satisfied' with their work conditions, a further 21.6 and 17.5 per cent of frontline staff report positive responses about the extent to which they are satisfied with their present work conditions. Conversely, only a third (34.8%) indicate that they are less than satisfied with their present conditions of work, including 12.8 per cent who say they are 'not very satisfied' at all.

While employment services professionals are reasonably satisfied with their working conditions, the survey findings reveal that their jobs are nevertheless quite routinized. For instance, one in five (19.9%) frontline staff perceive that the activities that make up their job are 'very routine'. Overall, the responses reported in Table XIV suggest that over three quarters of frontline staff (75.9%) feel that their job is routinized to an extent compared with just 12 per cent who feel that the activities that make up their job are not that routinized. A similar pattern is reflected in the responses that employment services professionals give about the extent to which they feel the IT system dictates how they do their job. Only 2.3 per cent state that their IT system dictates how they do their job 'to a small extent' whereas 25.1 per cent feel that it dictates how they do their job 'to a large extent.' A combined proportion of 64 per cent of employment services professionals perceive that the IT system they use dictates how they do their job.

The results reported in Table XIV also demonstrate that the decisions that employment services staff make about their clients are heavily determined by standard program rules and regulations. Indeed, over 30 per cent of frontline staff say that the decisions that they make about job seekers are determined 'to a great deal' by standard program rules and regulations compared with only one half of a per cent of respondents who feel that standard program rules and regulations have 'very little' influence on the decisions they make. Combining the responses of those who indicate that their decisions are

determined to some extent by standard program rules and regulations, the survey findings suggest that 85 per cent of employment services professionals feel that program rules and regulations determine the decisions they make about job seekers.

There is a strong tendency among frontline staff towards feeling that their decisions are determined by standard program rules and regulations. Yet, at the same time, the findings reported in Table XIV indicate that employment services staff generally feel that they have leeway in deciding which programs or activities to recommend for their clients. Only a small proportion (5.4%) indicate that they have 'very little leeway' in this regard, although one in five (21.5%) frontline staff feel neutral about whether or not they have leeway concerning which programs or activities clients should be assigned to. Nevertheless, over half (53.9%) of those surveyed indicated that they had some degree of leeway in deciding which programs or activities to recommend for their clients.

Table XIV Views on the Employment System

Percentage							
	1 Not effective	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7 Very effective**
How effective is the whole employment services system in helping job seekers find a job? (n=837)	3.1	5.4	11.8	24.0	28.6	18.8	8.4
How effective is the current employment services system in getting job seekers off benefits? (n=836)	5.5	9.6	17.7	24.4	24.0	13.9	4.9
	1 Very satisfied	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7 Not very satisfied**
To what extent are you satisfied with your present conditions of work (pay, hours, promotion etc.)? (n=750)	13.1	21.6	17.5	13.1	10.9	11.1	12.8
	1 Very routine	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7 Little or no routine**
To what extent are the activities that make up your job routine? (n=748)	19.9	32.5	23.5	12.0	8.0	1.9	2.1
	1 To a small extent	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7 To a large extent**
To what extent do you feel the IT system you use dictates how you do your job? (n=750)	2.3	7.1	13.3	13.3	18.0	20.9	25.1
	1 Very little	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7 A great deal**
To what extent are the decisions you make about your job seekers determined by standard program rules and regulations? (n=799)	0.5	0.4	2.3	12.0	22.7	31.4	30.8
	1 Very little leeway	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7 A great deal of leeway**
How much leeway do you have in deciding which program or activity your job seekers should be assigned to? (n=789)	5.4	6.8	12.3	21.5	27.8	18.1	8.0

In addition to canvassing respondents views about the effectiveness of the employment services system and the extent to which they feel their jobs are routinized or standardised, employment services professionals were also asked to reflect upon the practices of their agencies: whether they focus resources on particular clients and the degree to which they emphasise getting job seekers into work quickly over developing clients' skills.

The findings detailed in Table XV show that most frontline staff disagreed that their agency focuses services on the most capable job seekers, with 29.5 per cent of those surveyed strongly disagreeing that their agency prioritises the most capable job seekers. When asked about the extent to which their agency focuses on quickly moving people from welfare-to-work, the perception among the majority of employment services staff (51.6%) is that the priority of their agency is to help job seekers find employment quickly. Less than 6 per cent of frontline staff surveyed felt that their agency would prioritise raising skill levels over getting clients into jobs quickly.

This perceived 'work-first' orientation is reinforced by the subsequent question in Table XV concerning whether management in their agency would advise job seekers to take a low-paying job in order to leave welfare rather than wait for a better employment opportunity to present. The vast majority of frontline staff (68.8%) felt very strongly that management in their agency would advise clients to take the low-skill, low-paying job with just 0.1 per cent stating that they felt management would be more likely to advise the client to stay on benefits.

Respondents also tended towards the view that their office encourages staff not to be lenient in the use of Participation Reports, with 16.8 per cent reporting that they are encouraged not to be lenient compared with just over one per cent who identified that they are encouraged to be lenient in the exercise of sanctioning powers.

Table XV Views on how Agencies Carry out their Business

Percentage							
	1 Strong agree	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7 Strongly disagree**
The practice in my agency is to pick out the most capable job seekers and give them the best service (n=830)	6.6	6.1	8.4	16.0	15.9	17.3	29.5
	1 To get a job quickly	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7 To raise skill levels**
What would you say is the more important goal of your agency: to help job seekers get jobs as quickly as possible OR to raise education or skill levels of clients so that they can get the job they want, in the future (n=834)	22.9	15.0	13.7	25.1	12.2	5.4	5.8
	1 Take the job and leave the benefits	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7Stay on benefits and wait for better opportunities**
After a short time attending your service, an average job seeker is offered a low-skill, low paying job that would make him or her better off financially. Assume he or she has two choices: either to take the job and leave welfare OR to stay on benefits and wait for a better opportunity. What advice would management in your agency give to a client/job seeker of that type? (n=814)	68.8	17.0	6.1	5.4	2.3	0.2	0.1
	1 None	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7 A great deal**
How much does your agency emphasise giving job seekers more choice about the services they receive? (n=803)	4.0	5.6	10.6	23.2	24.3	19.1	13.3
	1 Not to be lenient	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7To be lenient**
Does your office encourage staff not to be lenient or to be lenient in the use of Participation Reports (n=796)	16.8	24.5	22.1	23.2	9.4	2.8	1.1

Following from the questions addressing frontline staff's perceptions of their agency's practices and priorities, the survey explored the degree to which respondent's own views reflected the priorities of management within their agency. The results shown in Table XVI indicate that the advice frontline staff would give job seekers about whether to take a low-paying job or wait for a better opportunity is not dissimilar from how management would counsel clients. Only 0.5 per cent of employment services professionals say they would advise clients to stay on benefits and wait for a better opportunity rather than take a low paying job. More broadly, the findings shown in Table XVI suggest that frontline staff are very committed to the organisations they work for, with nearly half (45.6%) saying they are 'very willing' to exert considerable extra effort on behalf of their agency.

The largest proportion of survey participants assumed a neutral position (37.0%) when asked 'which is more often to blame if a person is on benefits: lack of effort on their part or circumstances beyond their control'. Of those that did take a strong position, 8.9 per cent stated that a lack of effort on the part of the job seeker is a considerable factor while 2.6 per cent believe job seekers are on benefits because of circumstances beyond their control.

Table XVI Personal Views of Employment Services Staff

Percentage							
	1 Take the job and leave benefits	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7 Stay on benefits and wait for better opportunity**
After a short time attending your service, an average job seeker is offered a low-skill, low-paying job that would make him or her better off financially. Assume he or she has two choices: either to take the job and leave welfare OR to stay on benefits and wait for a better opportunity. If you were asked, what would your personal advice to this client be? (n=817)	62.2	18.4	7.6	8.0	2.6	0.9	0.5
	1 Effort on their part	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7 Circumstance beyond their control**
Which is more often to blame if a person is on benefits: lack of effort on their part, or circumstances beyond their control? (n=820)	8.9	10.7	20.1	37.0	14.4	6.3	2.6
	1Very willing	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7Not very willing**
To what extent would you be willing to exert considerable extra effort on behalf of your organisation? (n=750)	45.6	29.2	11.5	6.8	2.7	2.1	2.1

Perceptions of the Employment System

Table XVII shows the results from questions that asked frontline staff about how they do their job, what they think about the Australian employment system, and how they work with job seekers. The survey findings on these questions again point to a tension between the perception that employment services staff have considerable leeway in making decisions and the feeling that much of their job involves routine activities or processes. For example, the results for question ix show that just under half of employment services professionals (49.6%) either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that they are free to decide for themselves what to do with each job seeker on a daily basis. Similarly, as indicated by the responses to question xvii, nearly two thirds (64.5%) feel that they use a lot of personal judgement to decide what is best for each job seeker. On the other hand, over 40 per cent of employment services professionals 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that their job can be done by following a few basic rules while nearly half (48.3%) report that their computer system tells them what steps to take with job seekers and when to take them.

Frontline staff were also asked about the extent to which their supervisor knows about the work that they do and the degree to which they consult with their supervisor on matters not covered by procedural guidelines. The results for questions ix and xv suggest that there is a close working relationship between frontline staff and their supervisors, with nearly half (48%) agreeing that their supervisor knows a lot about the work they do day-to-day and a further 29.9 per cent strongly agreeing with this statement. A third of employment services professionals (33.6%) also strongly agreed with the statement 'when I come across something not covered by the procedural guide, I refer it to my supervisor' compared with just over 5 per cent of respondents who either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Generally, as responses to question vi show, there was a very clear perception among frontline staff that the lines of authority are clearly demarcated in their work, with just 8.6 per cent agreeing and 3.2 per cent strongly agreeing that the lines of authority are not clear in their work.

As illustrated by the responses to question xii, numerical targets are another important influence on how frontline staff do their job. Only 11.5 per cent of employment services professionals report that that they are not influenced by numerical targets (including star ratings) compared with three quarters (75.1%) who either 'disagree' (43.4%) or 'strongly disagree' (31.7%) with the statement 'in my job, I am NOT influenced by numerical targets (including star rating)'. These results are further strengthened by the answers to question xiv, with nearly 79 per cent of frontline staff agreeing (48.7%) or strongly agreeing (30.2%) that their organisation has targets for certain types of job seekers.

When asked about the goal of their work, the vast majority of frontline staff indicated that it involves finding a middle ground between the needs of job seekers, employers, and the social security system (see question xvi). Gaining the trust of job seekers was seen as very important by employment services professionals, with 15.3 per cent strongly agreeing and 41.2 per cent agreeing with the statement 'the main thing I have to do in this job is gain the trust of the job seeker.' The survey findings also demonstrated a strong emphasis among employment services staff on shifting the maximum number of job seekers off benefits. A third (33.2%) of respondents strongly agreed that this is the

objective in their job, with a further 52.1 per cent reporting that they agreed with the statement 'I think the objective in this job is to shift the maximum number of job seekers off benefits'. Maximising their organisation's financial outcomes was also considered important by frontline staff. More than half of respondents either agreed (34.8%) or strongly agreed (19.8) that 'more and more the objective in this job is to maximise the organisation's financial outcomes'. These results are reinforced by the answers to question xxix, with 47.4 per cent of frontline staff agreeing that they are aware their organisation pays attention to the income they generate by placing jobseekers and a further 30.2 per cent strongly agreeing that they are aware of this. Similarly, a combined 65.2 per cent of frontline staff either agreed (50.7%) or strongly agreed (14.5%) that they take note of those actions with job seekers that will generate a payable outcome for their office. This was compared to just 9.1 per cent of frontline staff who disagreed, and 1.1 per cent who strongly disagreed, that they take note of actions that will generate a payable outcome.

Table XVII Perceptions of the employment system

	Strongly agree	Percentage agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
i) Many of our job seekers will never find open or regular employment (n=801)	10.9	28.6	21.1	30.6	8.9
ii) I consider myself to be an advocate for the client/job seekers' rights (n=794)	14.2	41.1	36.3	5.7	2.8
iii) Public servants have special responsibilities which are different from other service delivery staff (n=798)	18.2	39.7	27.4	10.5	4.1
iv) Governments should do more to help job seekers (n=798)	18.2	31.5	33.1	14.5	2.8
v) I find that issuing Participation Reports (sanctions) can really damage your reputation with job seekers and others in the employment field (n=759)	1.4	13.3	22.8	43.3	19.1
vi) The lines of authority are not clear in my work (n=756)	3.2	8.6	12.8	45.5	29.9
vii) I do not like my competition (internal or external) to know how I go about getting my results (n=752)	2.8	12.0	34.7	33.9	16.6
viii) My job can be done by following a few basic rules (n=755)	9.0	32.8	16.0	28.3	13.8
ix) When it comes to day-to-day work I am free to decide for myself what I will do with each job seeker (n=754)	9.8	39.8	24.0	21.9	4.5
x) My supervisor knows a lot about the work I do day-to-day (n=758)	29.9	48.0	10.7	7.3	4.1
xi) The really important rules in this job are the ones to do with obtaining assistance from other organisations (n=750)	2.0	12.3	42.8	33.2	9.7
xii) In my job, I am NOT influenced by numerical targets (including star rating) (n=756)	3.4	8.1	13.4	43.4	31.7
xiii) The main thing I have to do in this job is gain the trust of the job seeker (n=757)	15.3	41.2	27.3	13.7	2.4

	Strongly agree	Percentage agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
xiv) Our organisation has targets for certain types of job seekers (n=749)	30.2	48.7	12.1	6.3	2.7
xv) When I come across something not covered by the procedural guide, I refer it to my supervisor (n=755)	33.6	52.6	8.5	3.6	1.7
xvi) The goal in this work is to find a middle ground between the needs of job seekers, employers, and the social security system (n=756)	20.2	47.5	19.4	9.7	3.2
xvii) I use a lot of personal judgement to decide what is best for each job seeker (n=758)	14.9	49.6	22.2	9.6	3.7
xviii) Before reporting a job seeker for non-compliance, I would always consider which classification group they belonged to (n=738)	7.5	41.5	20.3	24.4	6.4
xix) I like to keep my own records and files on job seekers and programs (n=739)	8.1	32.7	22.5	24.5	12.2
xx) Our computer system tells me what steps to take with job seekers and when to take them (n=736)	6.7	41.6	28.8	19.8	3.1
xxi) When you get a good result with job seekers it's usually a team effort by yourself, trainer, other staff in your office, and the employer (n=738)	24.7	55.0	10.0	8.1	2.2
xxii) To get job seekers to pay attention I often remind them that enforcing compliance is part of my job (n=736)	14.5	53.5	15.4	14.3	2.3
xxiii) My job is determined by goals set elsewhere (n=737)	10.9	37.4	32.0	16.3	3.4
xxiv) More and more the objective in this job is to maximise the organisation's financial outcomes (n=736)	19.8	34.8	27.7	15.2	2.4
xxv) I think the objective in this job is to shift the maximum number of job seekers off benefits (n=735)	33.2	52.1	11.0	3.0	0.7
xxvi) I use our information technology system to track priority job seekers (n=737)	14.8	49.4	24.6	10.2	1.1
xxvii) I do tend to take note of those actions with job seekers that will generate a payable outcome for the office (n=737)	14.5	50.7	23.9	9.1	1.8
xxvii) All my job seekers receive a similar service (n=739)	25.2	50.7	11.9	10.3	1.9
xxviii) I am often asked to suggest ways to improve things (n=737)	14.8	48.2	21.8	10.4	4.7
xxix) I am aware that my organisation pays attention to the income I generate by placing job seekers (n=738)	30.2	47.4	16.7	4.2	1.5
xxx) If an official from another employment organisation asked for help in using the IT system, I would help them (n=738)	19.4	42.8	23.8	7.6	6.4
xxxi) In my job, job seekers are organised into formal and informal priority groups (n=738)	7.6	28.3	39.3	18.0	6.8

The survey asked employment services professionals to identify one measure that could be implemented to improve *jobactive*. Respondents were given a list of options and asked to select the option they believed could improve the employment services system the most. Figure VI shows that frontline staff were divided between identifying 'more flexibility to provide what jobseekers need to help them into work' (17.4%), 'better links to employers' (17.3%), and 'more staff on the frontline' (16.5%). Reducing red tape and having less of a focus on annual activity requirements (such as Work-for-Dole) were other commonly identified measures to improve *jobactive*, with 11.8 per cent of respondents selecting each of these options. Improving access to training for jobseekers (6.2%) and having better IT systems (8.6%) were the measures selected by the smallest proportions of employment services professionals in relation to improving *jobactive*.

Figure VI Measures to improve jobactive
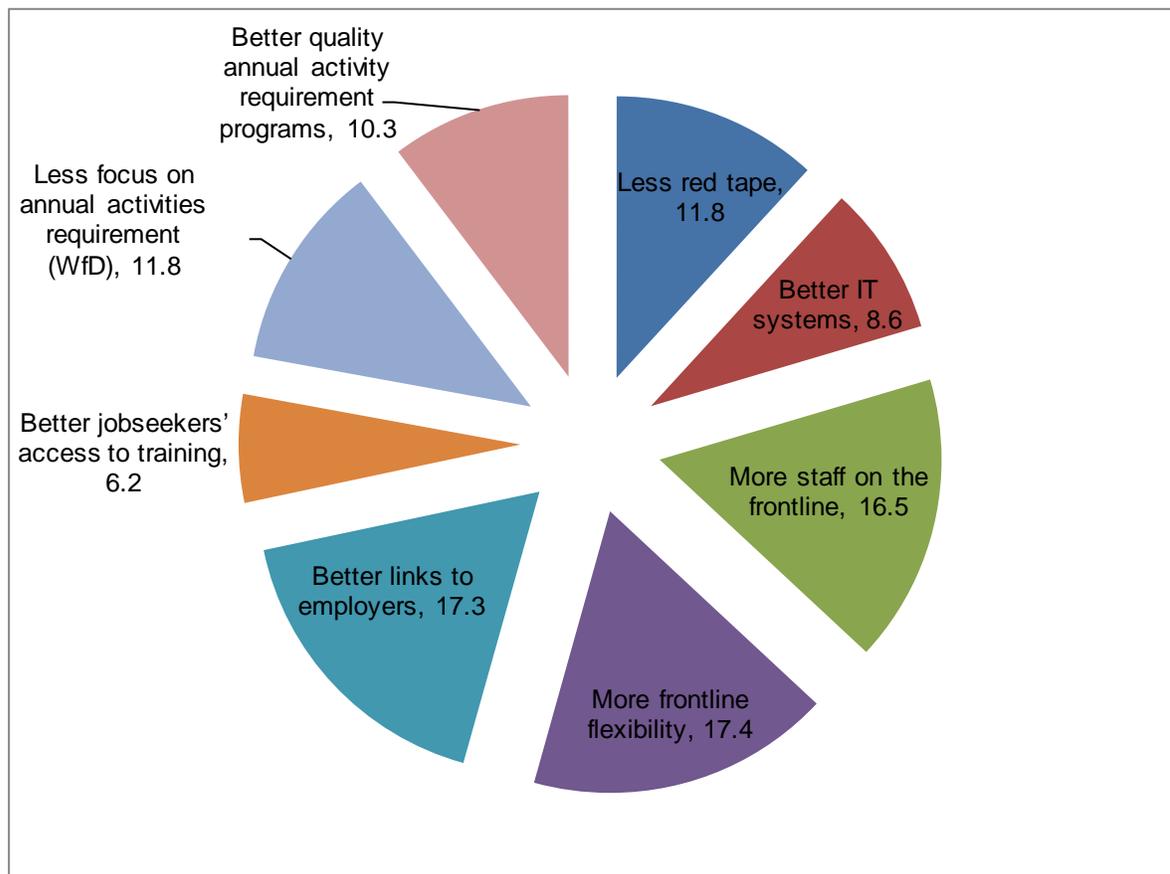
Differences between the 2012 and 2016 survey results

Comparing the 2016 and 2012 survey results (see Table XVIII), we observed a number of differences in how frontline employment services staff responded to questions about the clients they work with, the factors that determine how they work with jobseekers, and the degree to which they exercise sanctioning powers as part of their job. One particularly notable difference was a sizeable increase in the average caseload reported by frontline staff compared with the 2012 survey, in addition to their caseload becoming more complex:

▪ In 2016, frontline staff reported a mean (average) caseload of 147.6 clients compared 114.2 clients in 2012 – an increase of 29.2 per cent.
▪ A higher proportion of the job seekers that frontline staff work with in 2016 are seen as 'more difficult' to place (41.7%) than in 2012 (35.6%).
▪ Just over 43 per cent of the job seekers that employment services staff work with are estimated to have a mental health problem compared with 39 per cent in 2012.
▪ The proportion of clients who are estimated to be not complying with their obligations has increased from 35.6 per cent in 2012 to 39 per cent in 2016.

These changes in caseload composition appear out of sync with the high percentage of clients (39.3%) who are estimated to be in Stream A, with frontline staff reporting that just 29.7 and 23.3 per cent of their clients are in Streams B and C respectively. In 2012, by contrast, the caseload of frontline staff was more evenly distributed, with the highest proportion of clients estimated to be in Stream 4 (28.6%).

The 2016 survey results also pointed to noticeable changes in how employment services professionals exercise their sanctioning powers:

▪ Frontline staff indicated that, in the previous two weeks, they had reported an average of 15.1 clients for non-compliance – more than double the average of 6.53 clients reported by survey respondents in 2012.
▪ With the exception of cases where job seekers leave a training course, there was an increased tendency among frontline staff to indicate that they would report job seekers for non-compliance under various circumstances, and particularly in cases where job seekers refused to apply for a suitable job, or refused a suitable job offer, or failed to commence an employment program, activity, or training course.

These changes in sanctioning behaviours reflect the strengthening of the *Job Seeker Compliance Framework* since the previous survey in 2012, and the recent introduction of Provider Appointment Reports (PARs) and Non-Attendance Reports (NARs). Nevertheless, the 2016 survey results also revealed that many employment services professionals hold reservations about reporting clients for non-compliance:

▪ The proportion of survey respondents who indicated that they do not report job seekers for sanctioning because they believe it is not an incentive to compliance nearly doubled from 8.1 per cent in 2012 to 15.3 per cent in 2016.
▪ The percentage of respondents who cited fears for personal safety as a reason for not reporting job seekers for sanctioning rose from 9.1 per cent in 2012 to 17.1 per cent in 2016.

The 2016 survey results also indicated subtle changes in the work priorities of employment services staff and the factors influencing the decisions they make about their clients. The response that they gave to several different survey questions indicated an increased trend towards getting clients into jobs quickly and focusing on outcome targets. This is despite a decline in the proportion of frontline staff who reported that 'more and more objective in this job is to maximize the organisation's financial outcomes':

- In 2016, the largest proportion of frontline staff (43.5%) reported that 'meeting the targets set by management' was the main factor determining their work priorities whereas, in 2012, nearly half (49.5%) ranked 'knowing the rules and official procedures' as their main priority, with 37.8 per cent reporting that 'meeting the targets set by management' was their main priority.
- A combined proportion of nearly 79 per cent of frontline staff agreed or strongly agreed that their organisation has targets for certain types of job seekers compared with 75.1 per cent in 2012.
- Three in four (75%) employment services professionals reported being influenced by numerical targets (including star ratings) compared with 69 per cent in 2012, with just 11.5 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing that they are NOT influenced by numerical targets (compared with 16% in 2012).
- More than half of frontline staff (51.6%) agreed that their agency prioritises getting clients into jobs quickly over raising education or skill levels compared with 38.1 per cent in 2012.
- Over 45 per cent of front staff reported that the 'need to get an outcome quickly' is quite or very influential in determining which activities they recommend for job seekers compared with under 39 per cent in 2012.

In addition to the changes in perceptions and behaviours reported above, the 2016 survey findings also suggested a deepening of trends observed in previous surveys towards greater standardisation and reduced leeway for decision-making in the work that employment services professionals do:

- Fewer than half (49.6%) of frontline staff agreed that they are free to decide for themselves what to do with each job seeker compared with over 60 per cent in 2012.
- Nearly 85 per cent of employment services staff reported that the decisions they make about job seekers are determined to a good or a great deal by standard program rules and regulations compared with 77.8 per cent in 2012.
- The proportion of frontline staff who reported having little or very little leeway in deciding which program or activity clients should be assigned to rose from 21.8 per cent in 2012 to 24.5 per cent in 2016.

Contract compliance and administration also continued to account for a sizeable proportion of frontline staff's time each week. Although the average proportion of time that frontline staff reported spending each week 'on contract compliance to meet government reporting requirements' declined from 23.4 per cent in 2012 to 17.8 per cent in 2016, this was more than offset by the considerable amount of time that frontline staff reported spending 'on other administration' (16.8%). Indeed, in 2016, frontline staff reported spending a combined proportion of 34.6 per cent of their each week on either contract compliance or other administrative tasks.

Surprisingly, the 2016 survey results indicated that frontline staff held more positive attitudes towards the amount of evidence required for each job seeker, with nearly half (47.6%) reporting that the amount of evidence required was 'fair enough' compared with just over a third (34.4%) in 2012. Levels of satisfaction with pay and other working conditions were also higher in 2016, at 52.2 per cent, than in 2012, at 42.2 per cent. This is a somewhat surprising finding given the apparent trend towards increased routinisation and standardisation of frontline employment services work.

Table XVIII Comparison between 22012 and 2016 Survey Results

Caseload size and composition	2016	2012
Average (mean) number of job seekers in caseload	147.8	114
Proportion (%) of job seekers that are perceived as 'more difficult' to place	41.7	35.6
Proportion (%) of job seekers that have a mental health problem	43.1	39.0
Proportion (%) of job seekers that are not complying with their obligations	39.0	35.6
Sanctioning Powers	**2016**	**2012**
Number of clients sanctioned in the last two weeks	15.06	6.53
Proportion (%)who would report a client for sanctioning if:		
- A job seeker refuses to apply for a suitable job	79.9	71.3
- A job seeker refuses a suitable job offer	91.1	85.4
- A job seeker fails to commence an employment program or activity	93.5	84.6
- A job seeker fails to attend a job interview	91.2	87.2
- A job seeker leaves a training course	66.1	71.2
Proportion (%) who would NOT report a client for sanctioning due to:		
- The case can't be substantiated	55.5	61.9
- Fear for personal safety	17.1	9.1
- Sanctioning is not an incentive to compliance	15.3	8.1
Outcomes and getting clients into jobs quickly	**2016**	**2012**
The factor which best describes my work priorities (%):		
- 'Meeting targets set by management'	43.5	37.8
- 'Knowing the rules and official procedures'	42.8	49.5
Our organisation has targets for certain types of job seekers:		
- Agree or strongly agree	78.9	75.1
- Neither	12.1	13.6
- Disagree or Strongly Disagree	9.0	11.4
In my job, I am NOT influenced by numerical targets:		
- Agree or strongly agree	11.5	16.0
- Neither	13.4	15.1
- Disagree or strongly disagree	75.1	69.0
In my job, job seekers are organised into formal and informal priority groups:		
- Agree or strongly agree	35.9	33.7
- Neither	39.3	34.6
- Disagree or strongly disagree	24.8	31.6
How influential is the 'need to get an outcome quickly' in determining what activities are recommended for each job seeker:		
- Quite or very influential	45.3	38.8
- Not at all or somewhat influential	54.7	60.2

What would you say is the more important goal of your agency:		
- To get clients into jobs quickly	51.6	38.1
- Neutral	25.1	33.7
- To raise skill levels	23.4	28.3
More and more the objective is to maximise the organisation's financial outcomes:		
- Agree or strongly agree	54.6	65.3
- Neither	27.7	21.1
- Disagree or strongly disagree	16.6	13.6
Routinisation, standardisation and job satisfaction	**2016**	**2012**
When it comes to day-to-day work I am free to decide for myself what I will do with each jobseeker:		
- Agree or strongly agree	49.6	60.2
- Neither	24.0	18.9
- Disagree or strongly disagree	26.4	20.9
I use a lot of personal judgement to decide what is best for each job seeker:		
- Agree or strongly agree	64.5	68.2
- Neither	22.2	22.5
- Disagree or strongly disagree	13.3	9.4
To what extent are the decisions you make about job seekers determined by standard program rules and regulations:		
- A good or great deal	84.9	77.8
- Neutral	12.0	17.9
- Little or very little	3.2	4.2
How much leeway do you have in deciding which program or activity your job seekers should be assigned to?		
- A good or great deal	53.9	52.9
- Neutral	21.5	25.4
- Little or very little	24.5	21.8
To what extent are the activities that make up your job routine:		
- Quite or very routine	75.9	72.0
- Neutral	12.0	17.8
- Not much or no routine	12.0	10.1
To what extent are you satisfied with your present conditions of work:		
- Quite or very satisfied	52.2	44.2
- Neutral	13.1	16.5
- Not much or not very satisfied	34.8	39.2
The amount of evidence required for each client is:		
- Excessive	46.2	62.2
- Fair enough	47.6	34.4
- Inadequate	1.5	0.7
Proportion (%) of time spent per week:		
- In direct contact with job seekers	43.7	42.6
- Working with other service providers	4.7	5.4
- Working with employers	10.3	12.4
- On contract compliance to meet government reporting requirements	17.8	23.4
- On other administration	16.8	N/A
- On internal staff meetings	N/A	6.4
- On other tasks	6.7	9.9

Conclusion

The findings presented in this report offer an important perspective on the characteristics of the Australian employment services system following the first year of *jobactive*. They provide an overview of the frontline of service provision and what the work of employment services professionals entails: from how staff work with jobseekers, to the composition of their caseloads, to their reliance on IT systems, to how they exercise sanctioning powers. The report also offers an insight into how frontline staff view the purpose and effectiveness of the overall employment services system, as well as the practices and priorities of their own agencies.

In coming months we will report back on our survey of UK frontline employment services staff. That will be followed by a third report which will demonstrate how the experience of frontline staff differs between Australia and the UK.

This project will also generate a number of academic publications, including journal articles and conference papers. These can be followed on the project's website: http://arts.unimelb.edu.au/ssps/research/projects/employment-services.