The New Digital Governance of Welfare-to-Work

Industry Report on Survey of Workforce Australia Frontline Staff

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Acknowledgements

Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

1. Introduction

This report details the results of the 2023 survey of Workforce Australia frontline employment services staff, which was conducted between mid-May and late July - almost one year after the new employment services model was introduced in July 2022. The survey was conducted as part of *The new digital governance of welfare-to-work* project, funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage program in collaboration with our industry partners WCIG and the National Employment Services Association (NESA).

Background

The project is a continuation of the *Getting Welfare-to-Work* research team's long-standing program of research on welfare-to-work reform and the frontline delivery of employment services, dating back to the first survey of the Australian employment sector workforce in 1998 (Considine, 2001) and also including comparative international studies of the frontline delivery of welfare-to-work programs in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Ireland (Considine et al., 2011, 2015, 2020; Considine & Lewis, 2003, 2010; McGann, 2023). This is the fifth time that the research team has surveyed frontline employment services staff in Australia, building upon prior surveys in 1998, 2008, 2012, and 2016. For further information about the team's previous research on the frontline delivery of employment services, including research reports and other publications, visit arts.unimelb.edu.au/employment-services.

The long-term nature of this research affords unique insights into Australia's evolving, contracted employment services system; a system that has been in constant flux since its inception due to employment services being persistently subject to redesign, reform, regulation, and re-regulation. Indeed, Workforce Australia is the fifth major iteration of Australia's main welfare-to-work program following on from the previous Jobactive system (2015-2022) introduced by the Abott Coalition government, the Job Services Australia model (2008-2015) introduced under the Rudd-Gillard Labor Government, Job Network (1998-2008) introduced by the Howard Coalition government, and the Working Nation (1994) reforms of the Keating Labor Government.

In between each of these major system overhauls, there have also been periodic adjustments to the Australian Government's commissioning approach such as the provider payment models, the criteria for measuring providers' performance, the market share allocation and re-allocation to each service provider in this quasi-market, and the mutual obligations required of jobseekers (or participants). For instance, the Job Network era comprised three discrete contracting periods while the era of Job Services Australia involved two separate procurement rounds (for a history of these reforms, see O'Sullivan et al., 2021, Chapter 1).

Workforce Australia

Workforce Australia is the main welfare-to-work (or employment services) program for recipients of the Jobseeker payment, and for working-age recipients of related activity-tested payments (e.g., Parenting Payment and Youth Allowance). It came into effect on 1 July 2022, following several years of trialling a new employment services model in Adelaide South and the mid-north coast of New South Wales.

Workforce Australia has been described by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), among others, as 'the biggest change to publicly-financed employment services in Australia since they were fully contracted-out in 1998' (OECD 2023, p. 1). This stems from the two-tiered system of support that the new model embedded, which now comprises of a fully online and heavily automated service stream known as Workforce Australia Online and an enhanced service stream delivered by contract providers known as Workforce Australia Services. The former is a digital platform operated by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), where participants who 'are digitally competent and the most job-ready' (DEWR 2023a, p. 6) can self-manage their job search and reporting of mutual obligation activities. The latter includes more intensive, face-to-face employment services that are delivered under contract across 51 employment regions by a network of for-profit and not-for-profit employment services providers (Select Committee 2022).

The rationale behind the introduction of Workforce Australia was to streamline how face-to-face services are delivered, so that they can be more effectively targeted at those who need assistance the most. For example, whereas in the region of 750,000 participants were eligible at any point for face-to-face employment services under the former Jobactive system, fewer than 450,000 participants were registered for Workforce Australia Services in August 2023. Consequently, compared with the previous Jobactive system when the ratio of jobseekers to employment

advisors or consultants was estimated to be 148:1 (Lewis et al., 2016), it is hoped that the new employment services model will result in lower caseloads - freeing providers 'to invest time in job seekers who need the most support' (DJSB 2018, p. 4) and to deliver 'more individualised and targeted support' (DEWR 2023a, p. 6).

Besides the differentiation between online and enhanced services, another important aspect of the Workforce Australia reforms was the move to a Points-Based Activation System (PBAS) and wider implementation of the Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF). Under PBAS, participants can now meet their mutual obligation requirements through a wider variety of activities (e.g., training, work or study) rather than the 20 job searches per month that had previously been the standard component of job plans during the Jobactive era (DEWR 2023a, p. 63). Participants now accumulate points for different types of activities that can be pooled together to meet their monthly participation requirements. The number of points that can be earned for completing different types of approve activities depends upon the intensity of those activities, although the intention is to give jobseekers greater 'flexibility and choice to determine the way that they meet their mutual obligation requirements' (DEWR 2023a, p. 6). Moreover, whereas previously breaches of mutual obligation requirements could result in immediate payment suspensions and financial penalties, now participants receive demerit points.

Under the TCF, participants incur payment penalties if they accumulate a specified number of demerit points (currently six) within a six-month period (DSS 2023). However, participants can still have their payments suspended if they miss appointments or activities arranged by their provider and do not have a valid reason for doing so. Participants' payments are generally restored in full once they reconnect with services. Notably, during the second quarter of 2023, a total of 198,435 Workforce Australia Services participants had their payments suspended at some point (DEWR 2023b).

The 2023 survey of the Workforce Australian Services frontline staff provides an opportunity to understand the characteristics of the current system and the impact of these recent changes at the frontline of employment service delivery. Specifically, the report focuses on how frontline staff work with participants, when to issue sanctions, how they perceive the participants they work with, and the impact of increasing digitalisation on their decision-making. It also describes who frontline staff are and their perceptions of the employment services system and the agencies they work in.

Structure of Report

Following this initial introductory section, Section 2 of the report details the Methodology employed in conducting this research. This includes how the 2023 questionnaire was adapted from the previous survey of frontline employment services staff, which involved a mix of site visits to employment services providers, discussions with industry professionals, and consultation with project partners.

The remaining sections of the report detail key findings from the survey, structured around several key themes.

Section 3 on *The Employment Sector Workforce* details the composition of the frontline workforce that participated in this survey. This includes an overview of their demographic characteristics (including gender, age, and education levels) as well as the professional backgrounds and the level and type of experience that frontline staff bring to employment services.

Section 4 on *Frontline Workers' Views of Participants* examines survey findings on how respondents perceive the jobseekers that they are working with. This includes the extent to which they view their clients as being close to employment and their understandings of the reasons why people are unemployed and on benefits.

The fifth section, *Working in Employment Services*, examines several aspects related to the work demands that employment services staff face and how they prioritise their work. In particular, this section addresses how staff work with participants, how services are tailored, the factors that influence their decision-making, how their work time is spent, and the degree to which frontline workers' are reliant on IT systems to do their job.

Section 6, on *Sanctioning Powers*, explores survey findings on the role that frontline employment services staff play in monitoring jobseekers' compliance with their mutual obligation requirements. It examines the frequency with which employment service staff report participants on their caseloads for breaching mutual obligations; the principal circumstances under which they do so; and also the reasons why frontline staff might decide against reporting jobseekers for possible compliance breaches.

The next section of the report, *Agency Practices and System Effectiveness*, considers the views of employment service staff on a range of issues concerning the overall orientation and effectiveness of the employment services system. This includes the degree to which respondents perceive that their agency emphasises a so-called 'work-first' approach

to activation or whether the agencies that they work for place a higher priority on supporting participants to develop their skills through education and training. This section of the report also considers employment service staff views on whether the employment services system is effective at supporting participants to find a job and to move off welfare, and what additional changes could be made to further improve Workforce Australia Services. Finally, the report concludes with a summary of some trends and developments since 2016, when the employment services workforce was last surveyed about their practices and approaches to delivering welfare-to-work programs.

2. Methodology

This section details the methods of data collection and analysis employed in the project, including:

- How the 2023 questionnaire was adapted from previous iterations of the survey;
- The parameters for participating in the survey; and
- A profile of the survey sample.

Survey Adaptation

The survey instrument employed in this study was derived from the original questionnaire developed by Mark Considine in 1998, and subsequently adapted and used in 2008, 2012, and 2016 for studying how Australia's employment services workforce had evolved during the Job Network, Job Services Australia, and Jobactive eras. While maintaining consistency and comparability of the data across time is essential for a longitudinal study like this, adapting the survey instrument for each iteration to reflect new developments is also critical and has long been an integral part of our research approach. For the purpose of updating the survey instrument for the 2023 iteration specifically, the research team conducted consultations with industry partners, on-site visitation to a range of employment services offices, and meetings with agency senior management. The resulting alterations made to the survey instrument include (1) updating the survey's standard measures with new practices and terminology, and (2) a new set of questions on the impact of digitalisation, corresponding to the enhanced emphasis on digital services under Workforce Australia.

Survey Instrument

The survey comprised roughly 100 questions, and though not all questions appeared for every respondent, most participants were asked most of the questions. The questions predominantly used closed responses, with a small number inviting respondents to provide written answers.

The survey was programmed by members of the research team using the *Qualtrics* platform hosted on University of Melbourne servers. It was conducted online, in line with procedures approved by the University of Melbourne's Research Ethics Committee. The survey also included an initial screening question to filter out volunteers who did not meet the target parameters (e.g. service staff who do not engage directly with jobseekers). After that, respondents were able to progress through the survey, though they were not required to answer all questions. It

took participants approximately 25 minutes to complete the survey.

The survey was conducted between 8 May and 24 July 2023.

Participation Parameters

The survey was designed to be completed by frontline employment services staff operating under a contract as part of Workforce Australia. Frontline staff are defined as employment services providers who work directly with participants. These include client-facing staff assisting participants to find work and/or become job-ready, as well as staff involved in providing post-placement support to assist with employment retention. All Workforce Australia Services providers were invited to participate. Out of 24 agencies participating, 13 had also participated in the 2016 survey while the remaining 11 were undertaking the survey for the first time.

Participant Profile

Following initial review, the 1,304 useable responses were uploaded out of 3,440 potential respondents employed by the participating agencies. That constitutes a 38 per cent response rate for the survey. Two-thirds of respondents were from not-for-profit providers, with the remaining third employed by for-profit organizations. An overview of the sample is shown in Table I.

Table 1: Sample Overview

	N	%
Potential not-for-profit respondents	2410	70.1
Potential for-profit respondents	1030	29.9
Total potential respondents	3440	
Actual not-for-profit participants	864	66.3
Actual for-profit participants	440	33.7
Total actual participants	1304	

With the implementation of specialist licenses, survey respondents were also asked which Workforce Australia contracts they delivered in their office. As employment services providers and their employees can operate multiple contracts from the same location, percentage figures cannot be provided. However, the majority of respondents (1,129) reported that they delivered a 'generalist' service. Of those delivering specialist services, 338 reported that they delivered specialist Indigenous services, 297 worked with ex-offenders, 286 worked with

CALD communities, and 151 reported they delivered specialist services to refugees.

As shown in Figure l, most survey respondents were from agencies operating in Victoria (25 per cent), followed closely by New South Wales (24 per cent) and Queensland (21 per cent). The rest are distributed across South Australia (14 per cent), Western Australia (just below 10 per cent), Tasmania (5 per cent), and the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory (both less than 1 per cent).

Table 2: License Type Held by Agencies

License type	N
Generalist services	1129
Indigenous	338
Ex-Offender	297
CALD	286
Refugee	151

Figure 1: Agency location
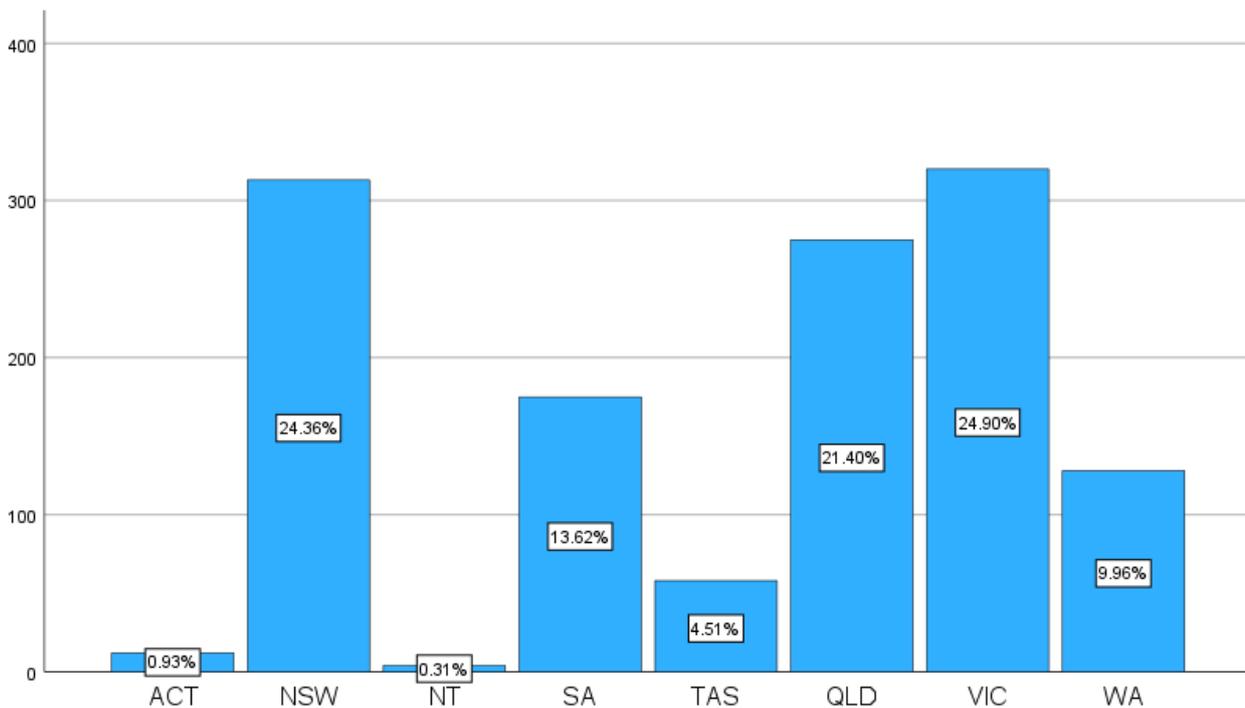
3. The Employment Sector Workforce

This section addresses the employment sector workforce, including the demographic characteristics, job roles, and experience of participants.

Survey respondents were asked to identify the occupation that they held as an employment services professional. As per Figure 2, just over two-thirds (67 per cent) of frontline staff work as employment consultants, personal advisors, and/or case managers. The remaining sample, in descending order, consists of managers, who also directly work with jobseekers at times (16 per cent); business development consultants, employer brokers, and/or reverse marketers (5 per cent); receptionists (3 per cent); and trainers (1 per cent). A further 6 per cent of respondents reported that their role did not align with these occupational categories.

As shown in Figure 3, the largest share of the employment services workforce is aged between 25 and 34 (32 per cent) and 35 to 44 (26 per cent) years of age, with a further 19 per cent between 45 and 54. The smallest proportion of employment services providers are either under the age of 25 (9 per cent) or over 55 years old (14 per cent). The age distribution is largely consistent with the 2016 findings, with only modest reductions in the 25-34 and 45-54 age ranges and slight increases within the other brackets.

Figure 2: Age group of respondents
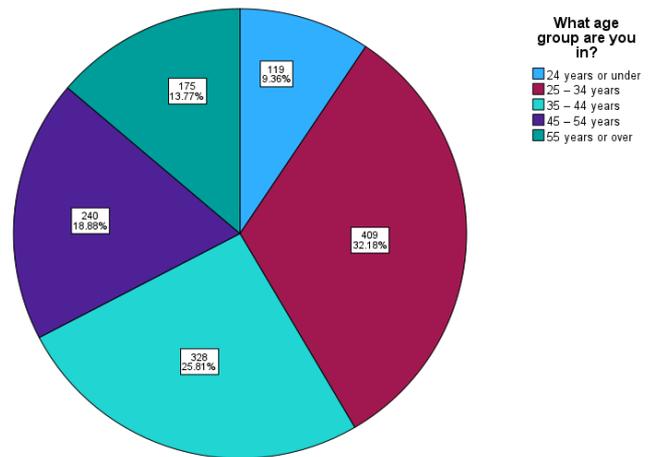
In terms of educational levels, Figure 4 shows that:

- Approximately a third (33 per cent) of frontline employment services workers report a TAFE or vocational certificate as their highest level of qualification;
- Less than a third reported holding no post-secondary qualifications, including 8 per cent of frontline workers who reported completing high school and a further 12 per cent who reported leaving school before Year 12;
- 12 per cent have received an undergraduate diploma, 16 per cent have completed an undergraduate or bachelor's degree, just under 7 per cent holding a postgraduate degree.

Figure 3: Job description of respondents

Table 3: Training received prior to working in employment services

Training prior to commencing work	N	%
Formal training run in-house	777	61.6
Formal training run by an outside trainer	208	16.5
Informal training by colleagues	623	49.4
No training	178	14.1
Other	39	3.1

As shown in Table 3, most frontline staff reported that they had received formal in-house training prior to commencing their position (62 per cent), which was further supplemented by additional and informal training by their colleagues (49 per cent). It was less common for staff to receive formal training administered by an external organisation or outside trainer, with only 17 per cent of frontline staff having reported doing so prior to commencing in the role. The remaining 14 per cent reported that they had received no training at all, with a further 3 per cent indicating that they had received some other form of training outside of these categories.

Consistent with prior surveys, the responses of those surveyed in 2023 suggest the vast majority of employment services workers are:

- Female (78 per cent);
- Employed on a full-time basis (91 per cent); and
- Non-unionised (97 per cent).

The results shown in Table 4 also indicated a high degree of labour mobility within the sector, with 41 per cent of respondents having worked for their current employer for less than a year, and a further 42 per cent having served a tenure between one and five years with their current employer. However, only 24 per cent have worked within the sector as-a-whole for less than one year and 40 per cent have only served in the profession for a period of between one and five years.

This indicates a significant degree of labour movement within the employment services profession, with staff commencing new roles within one agency bringing with them prior experience working in another in the same sector. This is further evidenced by 37 per cent of survey participants having worked for more than five years within the sector, compared to only 17 per cent who had worked for more than five years under their current employer. This finding is consistent with prior surveys, with contributing factors including new providers entering the sector while other agencies that previously offered employment services as part of Jobactive lost their contracts.

Figure 4: Highest level of education
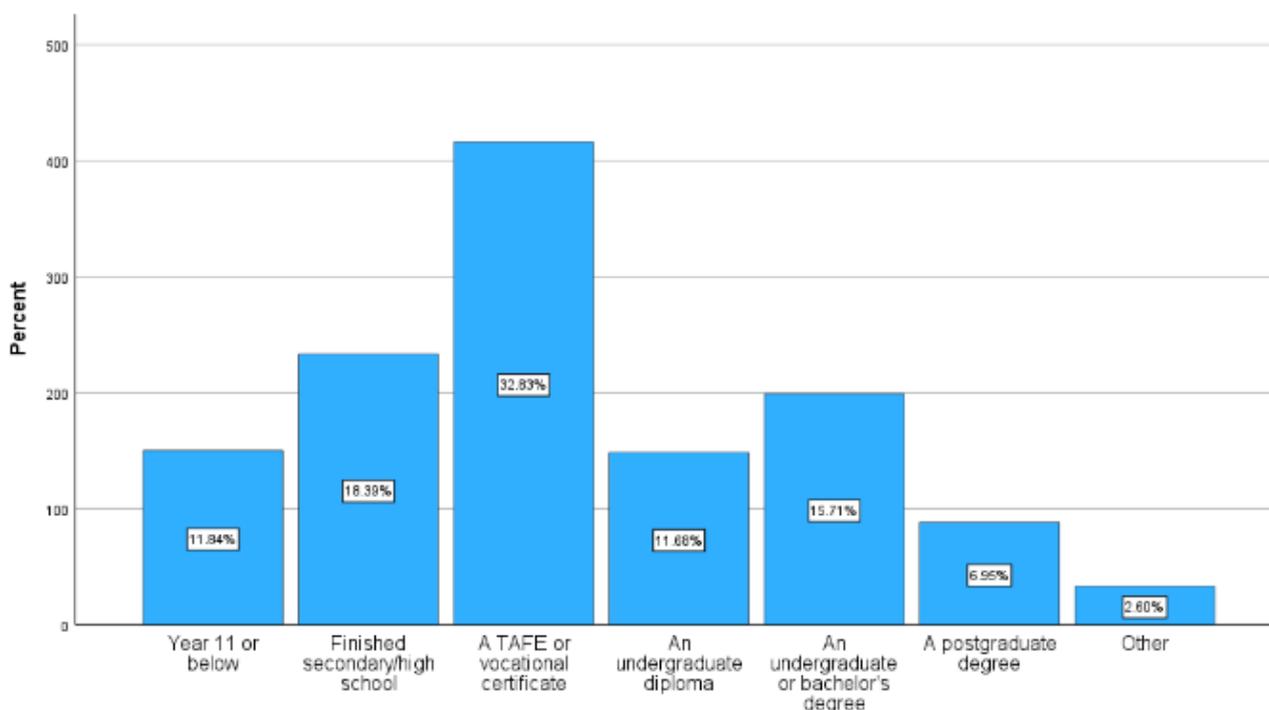
Table 5: Profile of employment services workers by gender, occupational background, and experience

Industry worked in previously	N	%
First industry	27	2.1
Retail and wholesale trade	285	22.5
Hospitality, Tourism and Travel	186	14.7
Personal services	19	1.5
Business services	171	13.5
Financial services	63	5.0
Government	95	7.5
Community services	128	10.1
Health-related services	67	5.3
Other	226	17.8
Full-time/part-time work	N	%
Work full-time	1187	91.0
Work part-time	89	6.8
Gender	N	%
Female	998	78.3
Male	264	20.7
Transgender	5	0.4
Prefer not to say	8	0.6
Years worked in employment sector	N	%
Less than 1 year	305	24.0
1 – 5 years	494	38.9
More than 5 years	470	37.0
Years worked for current employer	N	%
Less than 1 year	521	41.1
1 – 5 years	527	41.6
More than 5 years	220	17.4
Member of a trade union	N	%
Yes	41	3.2
No	1224	96.8

In addition to questions about their occupational backgrounds, qualification levels, and training, survey respondents were also asked about the extent to which they were satisfied with their present working conditions and pay, as well as their level of commitment to their employer.

As presented in Table 5, just under half of frontline staff (48 per cent) reported being satisfied to some extent on a one-to-seven scale with their present working conditions, while 35 per cent expressed some degree of dissatisfaction. This indicates that employment service staff are generally happier than not with working conditions, including such factors as pay, hours, and opportunities for career advancement. However, these topline figures are broadly distributed across the one-to-seven scale, as evidenced by only 12 per cent claiming to be 'very satisfied' and 10 per cent being 'not very satisfied.' Moreover, the findings in Table 5 indicate that employment service staff tend to be highly dedicated to the organisation that they work for, with a combined 81 per cent indicating that they would be willing to exert considerable extra effort on behalf of their employer; over one-third (39 per cent) indicated that they would be 'very willing' to do so.

Table 4: Job satisfaction and commitment to their employer

	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=942)	12.4%	15.8%	19.9%	17.4%	14.9%	9.3%	10.3%
	1 Very willing	2	3	4	5	6	7 Not very willing
To what extent would you be willing to exert considerable extra effort on behalf of your organisation? (n=942)	38.6%	22.8%	19.5%	12.0%	3.3%	1.9%	1.8%

4. Frontline Workers' Views of Participants

The rollout of Workforce Australia represented a substantial refocusing of frontline employment services resources on participants who are longer-term unemployed and experiencing complex employment challenges, such as housing insecurity, relationship breakdown, and/or mental health issues.

Whereas under the previous Jobactive system, contracted providers delivered face to face employment support to all participants receiving activity-tested payments, this is no longer the case. As of August 2023, approximately a quarter of all Workforce Australia participants were accessing job-search support services through the Australia Government's online employment service stream rather than receiving face-to-face support from a contracted provider.[1]

This section of the report details how frontline employment services staff perceive the jobseekers that they work with. Notably, previous studies suggest that how frontline workers perceive jobseekers on these dimensions of 'job-readiness' and 'willingness to work' can be important to shaping how they work with participants (McGann et al., 2022).

To provide a measure of the degree to which participants were perceived as 'job-ready', frontline staff were asked to estimate the proportion of their clients who were 'easier to place' compared with those they perceived as being 'more difficult to place'.

As summarised in Table 6, staff indicated that 42 per cent of their clients were, on average, perceived as being 'more difficult to place,' with an additional 28 per cent perceived

Table 6: Frontline staff's perceptions of jobseekers

	Mean (%)	Standard deviation
Proportion of clients perceived to have a mental health problem (n=1143)	61.5	24.37
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=846)	42.3	23.03
Percentage of job seekers not complying with their obligations (n=950)	39.9	22.83
	Mean (%)	Standard deviation
Percentage of job seekers that are followed (n=915)		
▪ Closely	58.6	28.67
▪ Somewhat	20.8	16.75
▪ A little	12.8	14.14
▪ Not at all	7.8	14.89
	Mean (%)	Standard deviation
Proportion of job seekers that are easier to place versus more difficult to place (n=929)		
▪ 1 (easier to place)	12.6	11.51
▪ 2	16.3	9.32
▪ 3	28.8	15.08
▪ 4 (more difficult to place)	42.2	21.19
	Mean (%)	Standard deviation
Estimated number of job seekers that are (n=892)		
▪ Participating in an activity	25.3	17.80
▪ Looking for employment but not participating in an activity	26.7	16.77
▪ Receiving support after being placed in a job or program	22.3	15.04
▪ Not participating in an activity and not looking for work	25.8	18.12

[1] In August 2023, the number of jobseekers participating in Workforce Australia Online services was 154,850 out of a total of 628,598 participants (DEWR 2023c).

as being somewhat difficult to place. Only 13 per cent of participants were considered 'easier to place,' with the remaining 16 per cent rated as 'somewhat easy.'

A potential contributing factor to this variation is the mental health of clients, which can result in a range of complex issues impacting their ability to seek, attain, and retain employment. Employment service staff estimated that roughly 62 per cent of their clients may have a mental health problem, with a standard deviation of 24.4 indicating that this problem may be more pronounced among certain providers or more clearly recognised by some than others. This is an increase from 43 per cent in 2016, with a similar standard deviation of 24.6, indicating that the experience of staff on the higher end of this scale has now become the new normal. This, in turn, may reflect the refocusing of face-to-face services on those participants experiencing more complex employment challenges under the new Workforce Australia model.

In addition to this increase in clients perceived as experiencing mental health issues, 40 per cent of clients are perceived as not complying with their obligations (compared to 39 per cent in 2016) and 42 per cent were perceived as preferring to remain on benefits as opposed to attaining work (compared to 39 per cent in 2016).

By contrast, as the data in Table V show, when asked whether they thought most people were claiming welfare payments due to a lack of effort on their part or circumstances beyond their control, frontline staff were more likely to cite circumstances beyond a person's control rather than a lack of effort as being behind their claiming benefits. For instance, just over 38 per cent of respondents believe that circumstances beyond an individual's control are, to a certain extent, more often the cause of a person being on benefits, compared to 30 per cent who believe that a lack of effort on the individual's part is more often the cause.

However, the largest proportion of respondents on a one-to-seven scale adopted a neutral position (32 per cent), with responses on either side concentrated towards the middle of the spectrum. Only 8 per cent and 9 per cent of respondents consider a lack of effort or circumstances beyond an individual's control to be a considerable factor, respectively.

Employment service staff were asked to estimate both the proportions of participants they follow and the activities they are engaged in. Regarding the former, 59 per cent are followed closely and a further 21 per cent are followed

somewhat. Just 13 per cent are followed a little and 8 per cent are not followed at all.

Participants are spread roughly evenly, with 25 per cent engaged in an activity, 27 per cent seeking employment but not engaged in an activity, 22 per cent receiving ongoing support after being placed in employment, and the remaining 26 per cent neither receiving support nor engaged in an activity.

5. Working in Employment Services

This section of the report considers the experience of frontline staff in their work in employment services. Due to the range of topics addressed, this section has been further organised into subsections focusing on different aspects of the employment services workforce, including:

- Working with participants and tailoring services;
- Working with employers and other organisations;
- How frontline staff spend their time at work; and
- Use of IT systems by frontline staff.

Working with Participants and Tailoring Services

Table 7 indicates that employment service staff have an average caseload of 89.2 clients, though the high standard deviation of 32.1 indicates that some staff have substantially larger caseloads while others have much smaller caseloads. On average, staff reported that they had helped to place 7.6 clients into work within the month prior to taking the survey, which they estimated to be roughly 12 per cent of their entire caseload. In terms of the tools and approaches used by frontline staff, 82 per cent of respondents reported that they utilised a client classification tool when deciding how to work with their clients. Only 18 per cent made no use of any classification tool.

Given the increasing emphasis on service personalisation and tailoring under the new Workforce Australia system, the 2023 survey included new questions about the factors that frontline workers took into account when tailoring services to jobseekers. As Figure V shows, frontline staff reported that their own personal experience in dealing with participants remains the primary influence, with 57 per cent of respondents saying that they very frequently and 34 per cent saying that they quite frequently draw

Table 7: Working with participants

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Current caseload (n=873)	89.2	32.14
Number of job seekers seen on an average day as individual appointments (n=1131)	9.1	5.45
Estimated number of people placed in work in the last month		
People placed in work (n=803)	7.6	6.52
Percentage of caseload (n=429)	11.9	16.23
Use of a client classification tool	N	%
Used when deciding how to work with clients	908	81.6
Not used	205	18.4

upon information obtained from interviews, conversations, and observations. The next most influential factor is a participant's JSCI score, Job Seeker Snapshot, ESAT, or equivalent, with 49 per cent drawing on this very frequently and 33 per cent drawing on it quite frequently.

Information obtain about participants from work colleagues also appears to be frequently relied on by frontline staff when tailoring services. For instance, 40 per cent indicated that they use information obtained from other staff within the office (such as a business relationship manager) very or quite frequently, when tailoring services, with a further 39 per cent drawing upon it sometimes. Information obtained from external sources (e.g., other social services providers or participants' previous employment service provider) was far less frequently called upon by frontline staff when tailoring services. For instance, 45 per cent of those surveyed reported that they never or

Figure 5: How often are the following used when tailoring services to participants

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Quite frequently	Very frequently
Information about the participant obtained from the internet (ABN lookup, social media) (n=973)	49	22.9	16.4	6.9	4.7
Information about the participant obtained from other welfare or social services providers (health, housing etc) (n=1018)	17.8	27.9	34	13.3	7.1
Information about the participant obtained from other/previous employment service providers (n=992)	35.6	27.5	20.8	9.9	6.3
The participant's JSCI score, Job Seeker Snapshot, ESAT, or equivalent (n=1078)	3		14	32.7	48.9
Information about the participant obtained from other staff within my office (e.g. business relationship manager) (n=1074)	4.5	16.9	38.6	24.8	15.2
Background about the participant that you have obtained from interviews, conversations and observation (n=1083)			7.8	34.2	56.9

only rarely used information from other welfare or social services providers to tailor services (compared to 20 per cent who relied on it very or quite frequently). Likewise, close to two thirds (63 per fent) of frontline staff surveyed indicated that they 'never' or would only 'rarely' use information obtained from other/previous employment service providers. Information obtained from the Internet, including ABN lookups and social media searches, was the least influential of all sources, with 49 per cent never using it and a further 23 per cent doing so only rarely.

The survey also asked respondents about the extent to which a range of factors are influential in determining the activities recommended to jobseekers. As the data in Figure VI shows, the most influential factor identified by respondents was jobseeker's preference for activities, which just under 87 per cent of frontline staff reported as being 'very influential' or 'quite influential in determining the activities they recommended to participants. This was followed by the government's mutual obligation policies and activity requirements (79 per cent); the availability of labour market program vacancies (78 per cent); labour market demand (76 per cent); access to funds for special assistance (66 per cent); personal judgement (63 per cent); other assessment results (62 per cent); and answers to a standard set of assessment questions (57 per cent). The least influential factors were the need to substantiate a case to sanction someone (66 per cent of respondents rated it

as not at all or only somewhat influential); the outputs of computer programs of software (67 per cent); and the need to achieve a quick outcome (71 per cent).

More broadly, frontline staff were asked to assess the extent to which they feel they have influence over various work-related decisions, using a five-point scale ranging from 'no say at all' to 'a very great deal of say.' As shown in Table 8, respondents felt that they had the highest level of influence over how clients are engaged with, with 35 per cent claiming to have a very great deal of say and a further 36 per cent having a good deal of say.

Employment services staff also self-reported having influence over the order in which tasks are performed (24 per cent claim to have a great say and 37 per cent a good say), the speed at which work is performed (23 per cent claim to have a great say and 37 per cent a good say), how the job is done (17 per cent claim to have a great say and 37 per cent a good say), and changes to how the job is done (15 per cent claim to have a great say and 32 per cent a good say). Less than a quarter of staff claimed to only have some or no say at all in any of these categories.

The regularity of feedback from managers across a six-month period was high, with 45 per cent of respondents claiming to have received it often and a further 25 per cent having received feedback several times. An additional 24

Figure 6: Influences when determining what activities are recommended for each participant
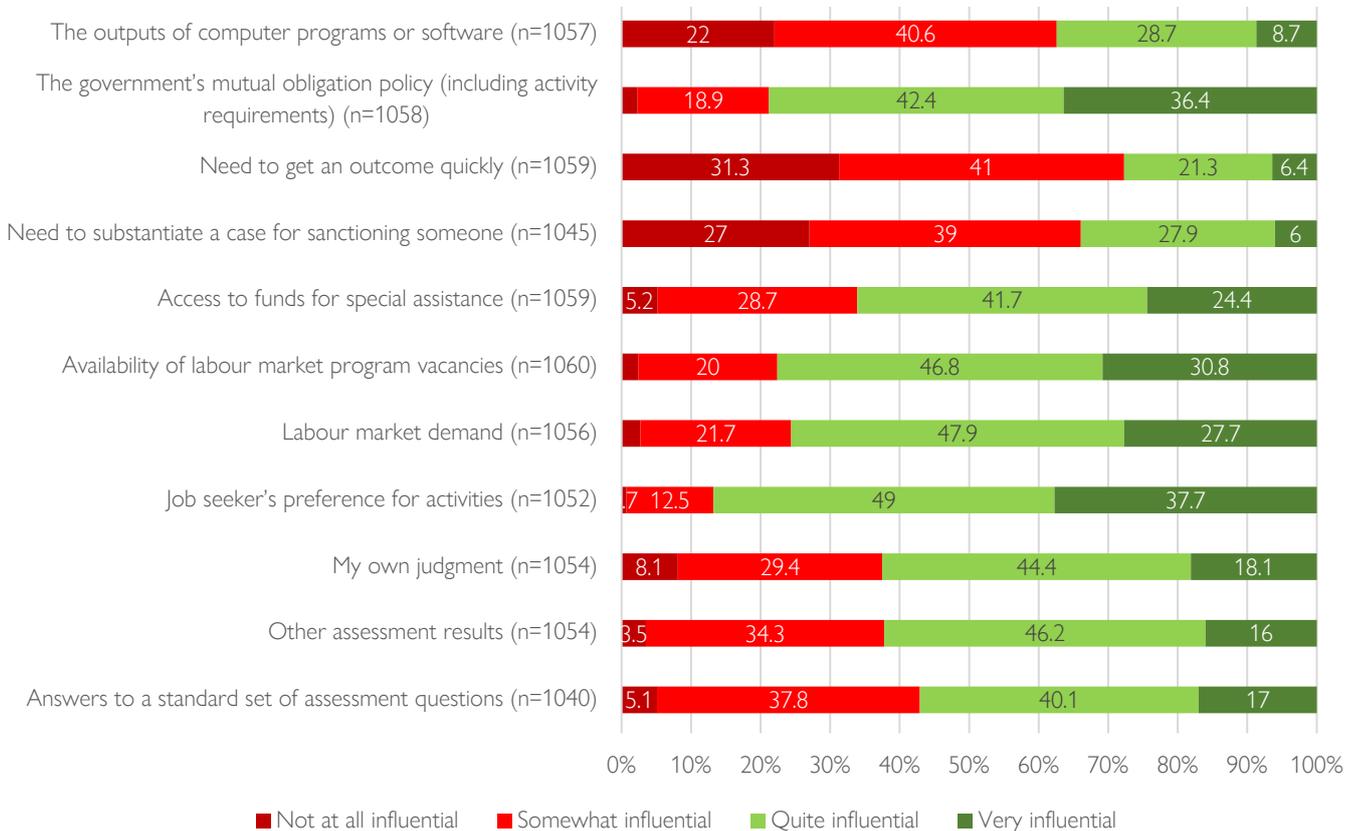
Table 8: Employee influence and work-related decisions

	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=920)	3.8%	13.3%	29.2%	37.2%	16.5%
The order in which tasks are performed (n=918)	2.9%	11.1%	22.5%	39.7%	23.7%
Speed at which work is performed (n=918)	5.3%	11.5%	23.3%	37.0%	22.8%
Changes to how the job is done (n=919)	7.5%	17.3%	27.6%	32.3%	15.2%
How clients are engaged with (n=916)	2.7%	8.2%	17.8%	36.4%	34.9%
Regularly of feedback to your manager(s) in the past six months				N	%
Often				408	44.5
Several times				231	25.2
A few times				216	23.6
Never				62	6.8

per cent claimed to have received feedback from their managers a few times over the past six months, with only 7 per cent never receiving feedback at all.

Employment services were also asked to reflect upon the factors that determine work priorities in their office as well as their own personal work priorities. As shown in Figure 7, 'knowing the rules and official procedures' was identified as the highest priority for both employers and employees, with 51 per cent citing it as a personal priority and 47 per cent citing it as a priority for their office. This was closely followed by 'meeting the targets set by management,' with 46 per cent citing this as a high office priority and 39 per cent as a high personal priority. 'Competing successfully with other organisations' was a low priority at both the personal (4 per cent) and office (5 per cent) levels, as was 'having the best possible set of contacts outside the organisation (8 per cent personally versus 3 per cent at the office level).

Figure 7: Office vs. Personal Priorities
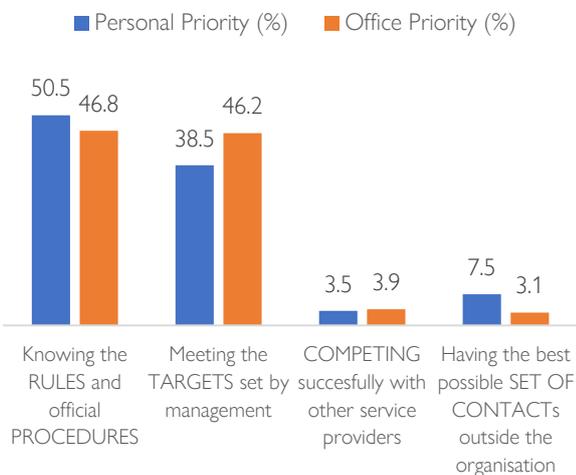
Figure 7 demonstrates the extent to which personal and office priorities have come to largely align with one another compared to previous years, despite a small range of divergence.

Working with employers and other organisations

Respondents were further asked about the regularity of contact with organisations outside the office, excluding contacts associated with helping a participant to obtain a job interview. As shown in Figure 8, the most frequent contact was made between offices within the same organisation, with 42 per cent of staff doing so daily and a further 30 per cent doing so weekly. Frequent contact was maintained with employers (28 per cent did so on a daily basis, with a further 37 per cent weekly) and training providers (19 per cent daily and 47 per cent monthly).

There was a wide distribution of contact between officials from a government department and welfare agencies along the spectrum from daily to never, indicating that the level of contact varies between roles within the organisation. More than half of respondents either had less-than-quarterly or no contact at all with local governments, other employment agencies, local service clubs, or schools and universities. The least contacted group was local media, with 71 per cent of staff never making contact.

Figure 8: Regularity of contact outside the office

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Quarterly	Less than quarterly	Never
Local media (n=998)		2.8	4.2	6.1	13.9	71
Schools and universities (n=1003)		10.9	20.2	13.5	19.8	34.2
Local service clubs (n=1000)		5.4	13	13.8	24.1	42.3
Another employment agency (n=998)		11.3	19.7	13.9	25.2	27.4
Training providers (n=1000)	19.4	47	20.8	5.7	3.8	3.3
Employers (n=1001)	28.2	37	16.2	5.9	6.4	6.4
Welfare agencies (n=1001)	2.8	18.6	27	16.4	20	15.3
Local government (n=998)		3.1	12.8	14.3	25.9	43.3
Officials from a government department (n=999)		11.6	21.9	16.4	26.3	22.2
Another office in this organisation (n=1001)	41.5	29.7	11.7	4.3	9.1	3.8

How frontline staff spend their time and use technology

Table 9 details participants' answers to a series of questions asking frontline staff about how their time is spent on various work-related tasks. When asked to estimate the proportion of time during the week spent on various work-related activities, respondents reported spending an average of 46 per cent of their time in direct contact with jobseekers. The remaining time in the week is spent on contract compliance to meet government reporting and/or administrative requirements (16 per cent), other administration (16 per cent), working with employers (10 per cent). The least amount of time was spent on other tasks and working with other service providers (both approximately 6 per cent).

This indicates that the average frontline staff member spends nearly half their time dealing directly with jobseekers and one-third engaged in some form of administration. This is broadly consistent with the proportion of time that frontline staff reported spending on administrative work in 2016 (34.6 per cent), however frontline staff reported much higher caseloads in 2016 than in 2023. This would therefore seem to suggest that the level of administration associated with each participant has increased - given that frontline staff report spending a similar overall proportion of their time on administrative work but a substantially lower caseload. Moreover, the survey data on the level of administrative burden associated with frontline work does not include tasks that may be undertaken by back-office staff in non-client facing roles.

Given the amount of time these frontline staff spend on contract compliance activities and administrative reporting, the survey sought to elicit frontline staffs' views about the level of evidence they were required to document about their clients and whether they were provided with sufficient evidence via their IT system to do their job effectively. Despite the size of the administrative workload, 54 per cent of respondents indicated that the amount of evidence required by the Department for each client is reasonable. However, 29 per cent consider it to be excessive, with only 7 per cent labelling it inadequate, 6 per cent claiming it was not relevant to their job, and 4 per cent claiming not to know.

As the data in Table 9 also shows, the employment services sector continues to make strong and increasing use of information-technology in the delivery of services. Over 90 per cent of frontline staff responding to the survey reported that they are either always logged on to a computer (74 per cent) or logged on most of the time (18 per cent) while interviewing jobseekers. Just under 7 per cent reported being logged on sometimes and 1 per cent reported never being never logged on at all.

Given the prevalence of IT systems, frontline staff were asked whether their computer system provided them with the information they need to do their jobs. Although a sizeable proportion of frontline staff (41 per cent) indicated that their IT system did *not* provide them with enough accurate information, the majority (58 per cent) felt that

Table 9: Time and computer use by frontline employment services staff

	Mean (%)	Standard deviation
Proportion of time per week spent (n=855)		
▪ In direct contact with job seekers	45.8	24.58
▪ Working with other service providers	5.8	6.39
▪ Working with employers	10.0	13.46
▪ On contract compliance to meet government reporting/administration requirements	16.2	15.95
▪ On other administration	15.9	14.37
▪ On other tasks	6.3	10.59
	N	%
The amount of evidence required for each client is		
▪ Excessive	269	28.8
▪ Fair enough	507	54.2
▪ Inadequate	61	6.5
▪ Not relevant to my job	58	6.2
▪ Don't know	40	4.3
	N	%
Computer use 'while interviewing participants'		
▪ *Always* logged on and accessing a computer	829	74.1
▪ *Most of the time* logged on and accessing a computer	204	18.2
▪ *Sometimes* logged on and accessing a computer	75	6.7
▪ *Never* logged on and accessing a computer	11	1.0
Is enough accurate information available via the IT system?		
▪ Yes	541	57.5
▪ No	386	41.0
▪ I don't use the IT system	14	1.5

they were provided with enough accurate information via the IT system they use.

Additionally, frontline staff were also asked about their negative experiences of using computer software or data and the frequency with which certain problems arose, with results presented in Figure 9. The biggest issues were automatic classifications such as JSS or JSCI scores not being appropriate (44 per cent quite or very often compared to 24 per cent never or not very often); data on participants

being inaccurate, out-of-date, or missing (37 per cent quite or very often compared to 22 per cent not or very often); inadequate ability to adjust for individual circumstances (37 per cent quite or very often compared to 25 per cent never or not very often); and options provided for action being inadequate (32 per cent quite or very often compared to 26 per cent never or not very often).

The least cited issues were data on vacancies being inaccurate, out-of-date, or missing (15 per cent quite or

Figure 9: Problems encountered when using computer software or data

	Never	Not very often	Sometimes	Quite often	Very often
Ability to adjust for individual circumstances not adequate (n=938)	4.1	20.6	38.4	21.9	15.1
Automatic classifications (i.e. JSS, JSCI) not being appropriate (n=937)	4.9	18.8	32.2	25	19.1
Options provided for action not being adequate (n=930)	4.1	21.7	42.5	20.9	10.9
Data on vacancies not being accurate (e.g., out of date, incorrect, missing) (n=932)	6.9	36.5	42	10.4	4.3
Data on participants not being accurate (e.g., out of date, incorrect, missing) (n=939)	4.2	17.7	41.2	25.7	11.3
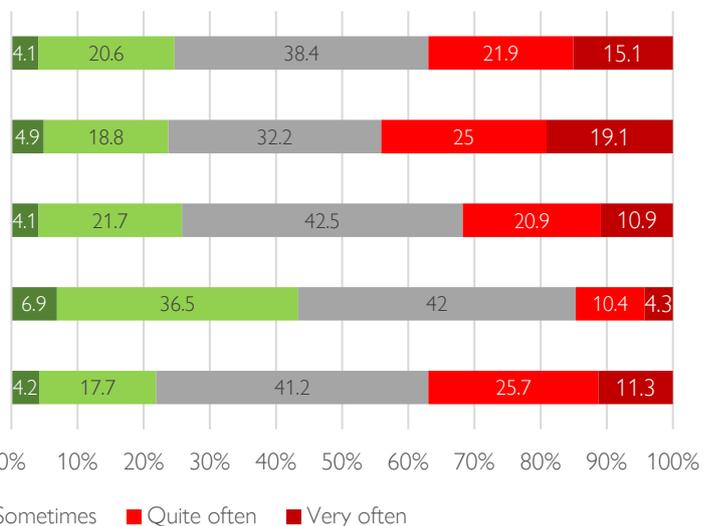
Table 10: Degree to which frontline workers perceive their job as standardised or routine

Percentage							
	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=948)	19.4	23.5	31.2	20.8	3.4	0.6	1.1
	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=947)	3.0	4.8	11.1	21.3	20.6	17.4	21.9
	1 Very little	2	3	4	5	6	7 A great deal
The extent to which decisions about your clients/ participants are determined by computer programs or software (n=941)							
	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=949)	0.4	0.6	2.1	15.0	27.6	24.3	29.9
	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=936)	2.2	2.7	7.5	21.8	32.2	19.4	14.2

very often compared to 43 per cent never or not very often). Across all five variables, more than one-in-three to over one-in-four staff indicated that these problems occurred sometimes.

The survey questions also asked participants to reflect on the degree to which they felt that their jobs were routine and that their decision-making was determined by standard program rules and/or computerised protocols. As shown in Table 10, the survey findings indicate that employment services staff feel that their work is highly routinised and their decisions are largely determined by IT systems, standard program rules, and regulations.

Across a one-to-seven scale, nearly three-quarters of respondents (74 per cent) indicate that their job is to some extent routine compared to only 5 per cent that believe it is not overly routine. These sentiments are reinforced by 82 per cent of respondents indicating that the decisions they make about participants are determined by standard program rules and regulations (compared to only 3 per cent who believe otherwise) and a further 52 per cent believing that the IT system dictates how they do their job

to some extent (compared to only 19 per cent who believe that it does not).

Staff were also asked to rate the extent to which computer programs and software determine the decisions they make about participants, employing a one-to-seven scale. A combined total of 43 per cent indicated that software had some degree of influence while 32 per cent indicated that its influential was limited to some extent. In both instances, the largest proportion of staff responded towards the middle, with only 10 per cent indicating that software has a great deal of influence and 8 per cent saying that it has very little influence. The remaining 25 per cent of respondents remained neutral.

Despite the perception that their decisions are highly influenced by rules and IT systems, the data in Table 10 suggests that employment services staff generally feel that they have *some degree* of leeway when it comes to determining the programs or activities that their clients are assigned to. Nearly two-thirds of staff believe that they

Figure 10: Degree to which frontline staff feel informed about various aspects of their job

Aspect	Very well informed	Quite well informed	Fairly well informed	Somewhat informed	Hardly at all informed
Money value of your interactions with each job seeker (n=913)	22.3	25	27.3	16.4	9
How you are supposed to do the job (n=916)	36	33.2	19.2	6.9	4.7
Technical knowledge (n=916)	33.4	33.1	20.5	9.2	3.8
How well the job is done (n=917)	38.9	29.7	17.7	8.8	4.9
Priority of work to be done (n=916)	46.4	30.7	13.8	5.2	3.9
Policies and procedures (n=917)	46.3	30.1	13.7	6.5	3.3
What is to be done (n=918)	43.9	30.3	14.4	8.6	2.8

■ Very well informed ■ Quite well informed ■ Fairly well informed ■ Somewhat informed ■ Hardly at all informed

have some degree of leeway in the decision-making process, compared to only 12 per cent who believe otherwise. However, across a one-to-seven scale, views were concentrated in the centre on both ends of the spectrum, with only 14 per cent of staff believing they have 'a great deal of leeway' and 2 per cent saying they have 'very little leeway.' These findings are indicative of a general view among employment services staff that they have some degree of leeway within the parameters established by standard program rules and IT systems.

Staff were also asked to self-report how well-informed they believed themselves to be regarding various aspects of their job, using a scale ranging from 'very well informed' to 'hardly at all informed,' as outlined in Figure 10. Respondents felt that they were very well informed about the priority of work to be done and policies and procedures (both 46 per cent), as well as what is to be done (44 per cent). Though slightly lower numbers were reported for how well the job is done (39 per cent), how they are supposed to do the job (36 per cent), and technical knowledge (33 per cent), over two-thirds of all respondents assessed themselves as knowledgeable in those areas when incorporating those who identified as quite well informed. Staff felt they had the least amount of knowledge regarding the monetary value of their interactions with clients, although almost half (47 per cent) still felt either very well or well-informed on the subject.

6. Sanctioning Powers

This section of the report reviews the survey findings on the enforcement of mutual obligations by employment services staff and their application of the jobseeker compliance framework. As discussed in the Introduction, Workforce Australia has introduced several reforms to the jobseeker compliance and mutual obligations framework. The most notable of these include the move to a Points-based Activation System (PBAS), and the associated Targeted Compliance Framework where participants now accrue demerit points for mutual obligation breaches rather than attracting immediate financial penalties.

Respondents were asked about the number of participants that they had reported for non-compliance within the two-weeks prior to the survey. This includes Participation Reports (PRs), Did Not Attend-Invalids (DNAI), 'creating compliance' or other equivalent sanctions.

As shown in Table 11, on average, participants claimed to have reported just over 17 of their clients for breaching their mutual obligations within the previous two weeks. However, the high standard deviation of 17.8 demonstrates that this figure sits within a broad range, with some frontline staff reporting a significantly greater number of clients while others reported far fewer, if any.

Respondents were asked to indicate the circumstances under which compliance reports (PRs, DNAIs, create compliances, etc.) would be filed against a participant and when they would not, with the findings for each presented in Tables 12 and 13 respectively.

The most cited reason for issuing a sanction is that a participant has behaved inappropriately on at least two occasions (92 per cent). Frontline staff will also regularly file sanctions if a participant refuses a suitable job offer or fails to attend a job interview (both 90 per cent); fails to keep

Table 11: Clients reported for non-compliance within previous two weeks

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Number of clients (n=729)	17.34	17.80

an appointment with their office (89 per cent); voluntarily leaves a job (86 per cent); fails to commence an employment program, activity, or training course or fails to contact their employment services office (both 83 per cent); refuses to apply for a suitable job (77 per cent); is dismissed from a job or training program (72 per cent); or fails or refuses to sign their Job Plan (71 per cent). The least likely circumstance to result in a compliance report being generated is the participant leaving a training course, although more than half (56 per cent) of respondents would file one in this situation.

Frontline staff were also asked about the reasons why they might decide not to report jobseekers for breaching mutual obligations. As shown in Table 13, the most common reason for not filing a non-compliance report was the staff member perceiving the participant as being normally a good client, with a verbal warning only deemed more effective or appropriate (78 per cent). All other circumstances fell below the 50 per cent threshold, with the next most common reasons being that:

- The case cannot be substantiated (48 per cent);
- Sanctions often being overturned (32 per cent);
- The jobseeker agreement not being specific enough (29 per cent);
- Fear for personal safety (25 per cent);
- The belief that sanctioning is not an incentive to compliance (22 per cent); and
- The perception that penalties are too harsh on the jobseeker (16 per cent).

Table 12: Non-compliance reports are normally filed under the following circumstances

PRs, DNAIs, and create compliances (sanctions) are normally filed under the following circumstances	%
A job seeker is dismissed from a job or a training program (n=901)	72.1
A job seeker refuses to apply for a suitable job (n=904)	77.1
A job seeker refuses a suitable job offer (n=910)	90.1
A job seeker fails to commence an employment program, activity or training course (including WfD) (n=910)	83.3
A job seeker leaves a training course (n=901)	56.3
A job seeker fails to contact our office (n=905)	83.2
A job seeker fails to attend a job interview (n=910)	89.6
A job seeker voluntarily leaves a job (n=907)	85.7
A job seeker fails to keep an appointment with my office (n=806)	88.7
A job seeker does any of these for a second time (n=902)	91.8
When a job seeker fails/refuses to sign their job plan (n=902)	71.2

Table 13: Reasons for NOT reporting participants for breaching mutual obligations

PRs, DNAIs, create compliances NOT filed for the following reasons	N	%
The case can't be substantiated (n=731)	350	47.9
The job seeker agreement was not specific enough (n=731)	209	28.6
Fear for personal safety (n=731)	186	25.4
Sanctions are often overturned (n=731)	236	32.3
Sanctioning is not an incentive to compliance (n=731)	157	21.5
Avoiding a reputation for being too tough (n=731)	24	3.3
The office does not encourage Sanctioning (n=731)	49	6.7
The penalties are too harsh on the job seeker (n=731)	113	15.5
The job seeker is normally a good client and it is more effective to issue a verbal warning only (n=731)	569	77.8

The least commonly cited reasons were the culture and policies of the office not encouraging sanctioning (7 per cent) or frontline workers wanting to avoid a reputation for being too tough (3 per cent).

Table 13: Reasons for NOT reporting participants for breaching mutual obligations

7 Agency Practices and System Effectiveness

The survey included several questions intended to elicit the views of frontline staff regarding the effectiveness of the Australian employment services system, their understanding of the key values and priorities of the agencies they work for, and what they perceived as the motivations for the increasing use of digitalisation in employment services delivery.

Employment services staff generally agree that the current system is effective in helping participants attain work. However, while a combined 61 per cent agree that it is effective to some extent on a one-to-seven scale, only 13 per cent rate it as 'very effective'. A further 41 per cent believe that the current employment services system is effective in getting participants off benefits, but over one-third of frontline staff (35 per cent) believe that it is ineffective to some degree with the remaining 24 per cent adopting a neutral position. This indicates that frontline staff broadly believe that the current system is effective at helping participants find work but is somewhat less effective at supporting them to move off welfare.

Considering the recent series of reforms and introduction of Workforce Australia digital services, respondents were asked to rate the perceived importance to the government of various potential drivers of digitalisation reforms, on scale of 1 (Extremely Important to) 7 (Not at all important). Across all seven variables, more than half of employment service staff perceived each digitalisation driver to be moderately-to-extremely important to the government.

As shown in Figure 12, the most important driver was ensuring participants take greater responsibility for their own activation (76 per cent). Other important drivers were better matching of jobseekers and vacancies (67 per cent), reducing errors at the frontline and reducing the influence of bias on decision-making (both 64 per cent), and allowing staff more time to work with more disadvantaged participants (61 per cent). The least important digitalisation drivers were improving efficiency by cutting red tape (52 per cent) and saving money by employing fewer administrative staff (51 per cent).

Figure 11: Views on the effectiveness of the employment services system
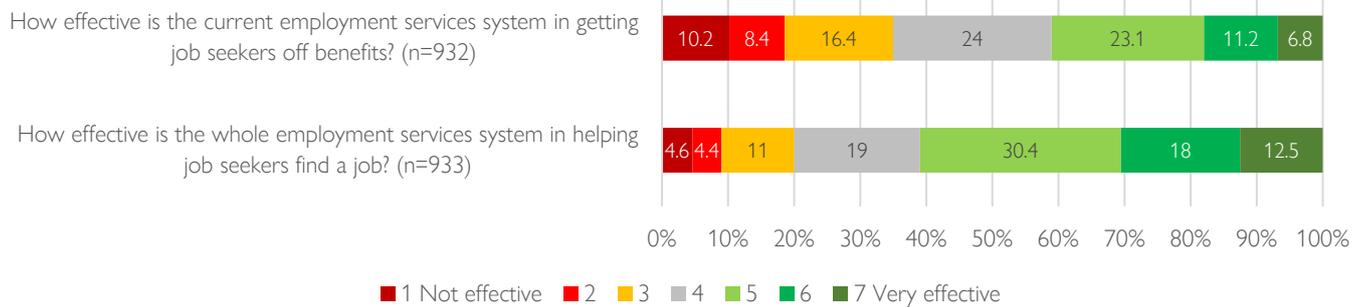

Figure 12: Perceptions of the drivers of digitalisation reforms
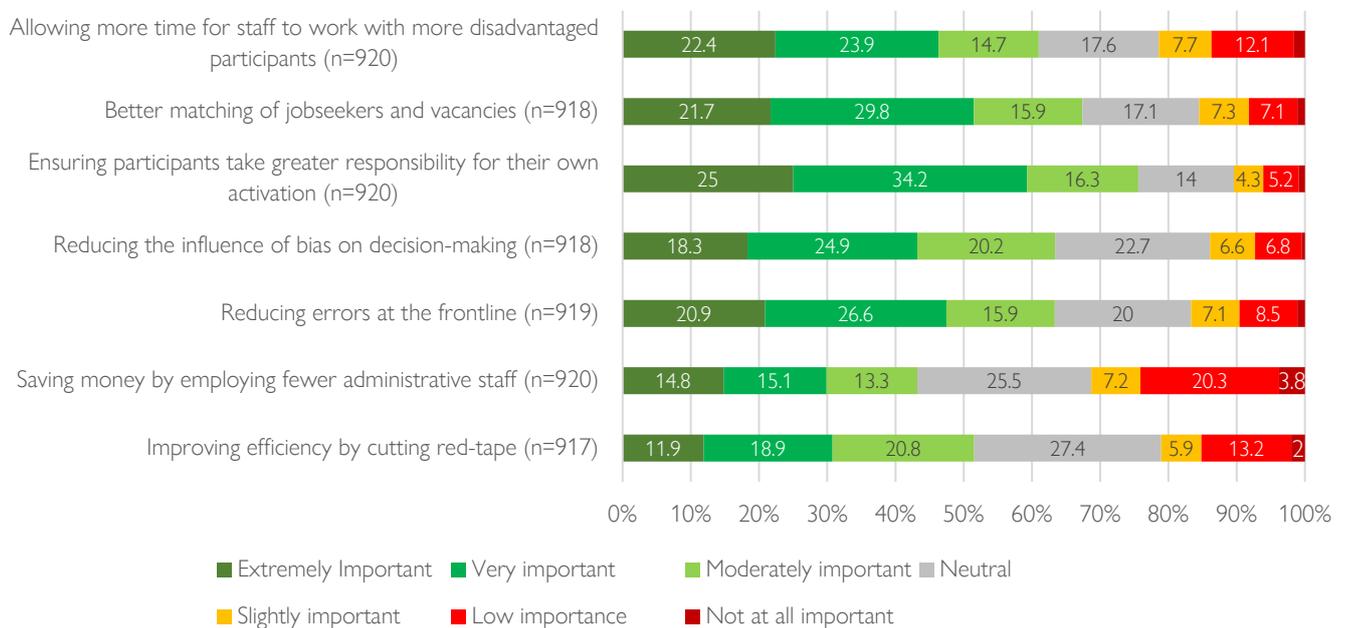
Along with soliciting input on the effectiveness of the employment services system as a whole, frontline staff were prompted to reflect upon the practices and priorities of the particular agency that they work for – including how they tailor their services to particular clients and whether they emphasise getting participants into work quickly or developing their skills over a longer period.

As detailed in Table 14, almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of frontline staff disagree to some extent that it is the practice of their agency to pick out the most capable jobseekers and provide them with the best service. Over a third (40 per cent) strongly disagreed with that premise, compared to a combined 21 per cent that agreed that was the priority of their agency to some extent (with 11 per cent strongly agreeing). This is reinforced by a combined 26 per cent of staff believing that it is to some extent a higher priority of their agency to help participants get a job as quickly as possible compared to 40 per cent believing that the higher priority is to raise the education or skill levels of a participant to help them get the job that they want over the long-term.

Despite these priorities, in a hypothetical situation in which an average jobseeker was offered a low-skill, low-paying job that would make them better off financially, over half of respondents (51 per cent) believe that their management would strongly advise them to encourage the client to take the position and get off benefits. An additional 30 per cent believe that the advice that they receive from management would be weighted in the direction of encouraging the client to accept the job. Just under 5 per cent believe that management would advise them to encourage the participant to remain on benefits until a better opportunity became available.

Table 14: 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=973)	10.7	3.6	6.4	15.1	12.0	12.7	39.5
	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=968)	11.8	4.5	9.3	34.3	16.8	6.5	16.7
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.	1 Take the job and leave the benefits	2	3	4	5	6	7 Stay on benefits and wait for better opportunities
▪ What advice would management in your agency give to a client/job seeker of that type? (n=960)	51.2	19.3	10.4	13.6	2.7	.07	2.0
▪ If you were asked, what would your personal advice to this client be? (n=962)	42.1	20.6	13.7	15.5	4.1	1.4	2.7
	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=973)	1.0	1.7	3.8	11.0	20.0	21.5	40.9
	1 Not to be lenient	2	3	4	5	6	7 To be lenient
Does your office encourage staff not to be lenient or to be lenient in reporting clients/participants (n=995)	3.6	8.3	15.5	32.2	20.9	10.5	9.0

However, employment services staff generally agree that their agency emphasises giving participants more choice about the services that they receive. A combined 81 per cent believe that their agency emphasises participant choice to some degree, with 41 per cent claiming that it matters 'a great deal' to their organisation.

In terms of reporting participants for sanctioning, a combined 40 per cent of respondents believe that their organisation encourages leniency in the use of sanctions compared to 27 per cent who believe their office discourages leniency. However, on a one-to-five scale, responses were generally concentrated towards the middle on both sides of the spectrum, with only 9 per cent and 4 per cent believing that leniency was strongly encouraged or discouraged, respectively.

Following on from the questions detailed in Table 14, respondents were asked about the extent to which their own personal views aligned with those of their employer. In the same hypothetical situation detailed previously, in which an average jobseeker was offered a low-skill, low-paying job that would leave them financially better off, over three-quarters of respondents (76 per cent) would encourage the client to take the job and leave benefits, with 42 per cent indicating that they would so in the strongest possible terms. Conversely, only 3 per cent of respondents would advise in the strongest possible times that the client remain on benefits until a better opportunity arises.

Table 15 details the results of a series of questions asking frontline staff whether they agree or disagree on topics pertaining to how they do their job, what they believe about the Australian employment services sector, and the way they work with participants. The findings once again highlight the contrast between staff perceptions of having considerable leeway in their decision-making and the feeling that their work involves routine processes.

- On the one hand, 51 per cent of staff either agree or strongly agree that they are free to decide what they will do with each jobseeker and a further 48 per cent believe that they use a lot of personal judgement in deciding what is best for each jobseeker.

- On the other, nearly a third of staff (32 per cent) agree or strongly agree that their job can be done by following a few basic rules and 38 per cent believe that their computer system tells them what steps to take with jobseekers and when to take them.

The results also demonstrate a strong working relationship between frontline staff and their supervisors, with 47 per cent of the former strongly agreeing that the latter knows a lot about their day-to-day work; a further 30 per cent also agree with this statement.

Employment service staff also indicated that they were highly likely to refer matters to their supervisor upon encountering something not covered by the standard procedures; 56 per cent strongly agreed that they would do so, with a further 28 per cent agreeing. This close working relationship was further emphasised by only 12 per cent of staff agreeing that the lines of authority are not clear in their organisation, compared to 44 per cent who strongly disagree with that statement and a further 26 per cent who disagree.

The data also indicate that numerical targets exert an influence over the manner in which staff do their job, though the needs of jobseekers are also influential:

- Less than 20 per cent of respondents agree to some extent that they are **not** influenced by numerical targets (including star ratings) compared to 53 per cent who disagree to some extent with that premise.

- Nearly four-in-ten staff strongly agree and a further 30 per cent agree that they are aware that their organisation pays attention to the income that they generate by placing jobseekers, with 17 per cent strongly agreeing and 35 per cent agreeing that they tend to take note of actions with jobseekers that will generate a payable outcome for the office.

- An additional 18 per cent strongly agree and 24 per cent agree that, more and more, the objective of their job is to maximise the organisation's financial outcome.

- Finally, 42 per cent strongly agree and 31 per cent agree that their organisation has targets for certain types of jobseekers.

Employment services staff largely believe that they are advocates for the rights of their clients/jobseekers, with 35 per cent strongly agreeing and 25 per cent agreeing with this premise. It is also a widespread perception that their goal is to find a middle ground between the needs of jobseekers, employers, and the social security system, with 32 per cent strongly agreeing and 35 per cent agreeing. Finally, 31 per cent strongly agree and 38 per cent agree that the main thing that they have to do in their job is to gain the trust of the jobseeker.

Table 15: Perceptions of the employment system

|	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Many of our job seekers will never find open or regular employment (n=957)	6.1	15.8	32.7	27.4	18.1
I consider myself to be an advocate for the client/job seekers' rights (n=955)	35.4	25.1	24.4	9.8	5.2
Public servants have special responsibilities which are different from other service delivery staff (n=952)	28.8	27.9	25.7	10.1	7.5
Governments should do more to help job seekers (n=956)	22.5	19.0	34.8	16.4	7.2
I find that issuing non-compliance reports (e.g. filling a DNAI, PR, or creating compliance) can really damage your reputation with job seekers and others in the employment field (n=917)	9.7	15.0	30.1	23.7	21.5
The lines of authority are not clear in my work (n=919)	4.1	8.1	17.5	26.4	43.9
I do not like my competition (internal or external) to know how I go about getting my results (n=915)	4.4	6.6	27.2	25.6	36.3
My job can be done by following a few basic rules (n=915)	10.8	21.4	26.7	17.8	23.3
When it comes to day-to-day work I am free to decide for myself what I will do with each job seeker (n=917)	15.2	35.9	27.3	13.4	8.3
My supervisor knows a lot about the work I do day-to-day (n=920)	47.0	29.7	13.2	5.4	4.8
The really important rules in this job are the ones to do with obtaining assistance from other organisations (n=910)	4.6	16.0	42.4	22.1	14.8
In my job, I am NOT influenced by numerical targets (including star rating) (n=918)	7.0	12.5	27.9	26.4	26.3
The main thing I have to do in this job is gain the trust of the job seeker (n=919)	31.3	37.6	21.7	6.9	2.5
Our organisation has targets for certain types of job seekers (n=918)	42.3	30.9	16.6	6.1	4.1
When I come across something not covered by the procedural guide, I refer it to my supervisor (n=917)	55.6	27.9	10.5	4.3	1.7
The goal in this work is to find a middle ground between the needs of job seekers, employers, and the social security system (n=916)	31.8	34.5	23.7	7.3	2.7
I use a lot of personal judgement to decide what is best for each job seeker (n=914)	16.7	31.6	32.3	12.4	7.0
Before reporting a job seeker for non-compliance, I would always consider which classification group they belonged to (n=915)	16.5	27.0	28.2	14.6	13.7
I like to keep my own records and files on job seekers and programs (n=914)	8.3	17.5	23.1	18.7	32.4
Our computer system tells me what steps to take with job seekers and when to take them (n=911)	11.0	26.9	34.0	18.0	10.1
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=909)	33.7	35.2	21.1	7.2	2.9
To get job seekers to pay attention I often remind them that enforcing compliance is part of my job (n=909)	13.9	27.7	30.9	17.9	9.6
My job is determined by goals set elsewhere (n=912)	28.4	39.9	23.5	6.5	1.8

Table 15: Perceptions of the employment system

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
More and more the objective in this job is to maximise the organisation's financial outcomes (n=907)	17.5	23.7	36.7	14.2	7.8
I think the objective in this job is to shift the maximum number of job seekers off benefits (n=911)	31.5	37.1	23.4	6.0	2.0
I use our information technology system to track priority job seekers (n=908)	15.7	31.1	35.7	11.8	5.7
I do tend to take note of those actions with job seekers that will generate a payable outcome for the office (n=901)	17.3	34.5	32.6	9.8	5.8
All my job seekers receive a similar service (n=911)	38.1	28.6	18.0	10.6	4.6
I am often asked to suggest ways to improve things (n=911)	24.0	31.1	25.9	12.1	6.9
I am aware that my organisation pays attention to the income I generate by placing job seekers (n=906)	39.6	29.5	19.3	8.3	3.3
If an official from another employment organisation asked for help in using the IT system, I would help them (n=907)	20.6	15.8	23.0	13.8	26.8
In my job, job seekers are organised into formal and informal priority groups (n=904)	8.8	15.0	32.2	20.8	23.1
Having access to digital information is crucial for tailoring my response to clients/jobseekers (n=915)	39.3	34.8	19.2	4.4	2.3

Finally, frontline staff were asked to identify one measure that could be implemented to improve Workforce Australia, limited to a single choice from a list of options. As demonstrated by Figure XIII, frontline staff did not indicate the existence of a single 'silver bullet' solution but were rather divided between identifying 'closer engagement between Services Australia and providers' (24 per cent), 'better IT systems' and 'less red tape' (17 per cent each), and 'more staff on the frontline' (11 per cent).

Smaller proportions of staff identified 'more frontline flexibility' (9 per cent), 'less focus on annual activity requirements' (7 per cent), 'better Departmental communication with providers' (6 per cent), 'better links to employers' (4 per cent), 'better jobseekers' access to training' (3 per cent), and 'better quality annual activity requirement programs' (2 per cent) as means of improving Workforce Australia.

Figure 13: Measures to improve Workforce Australia
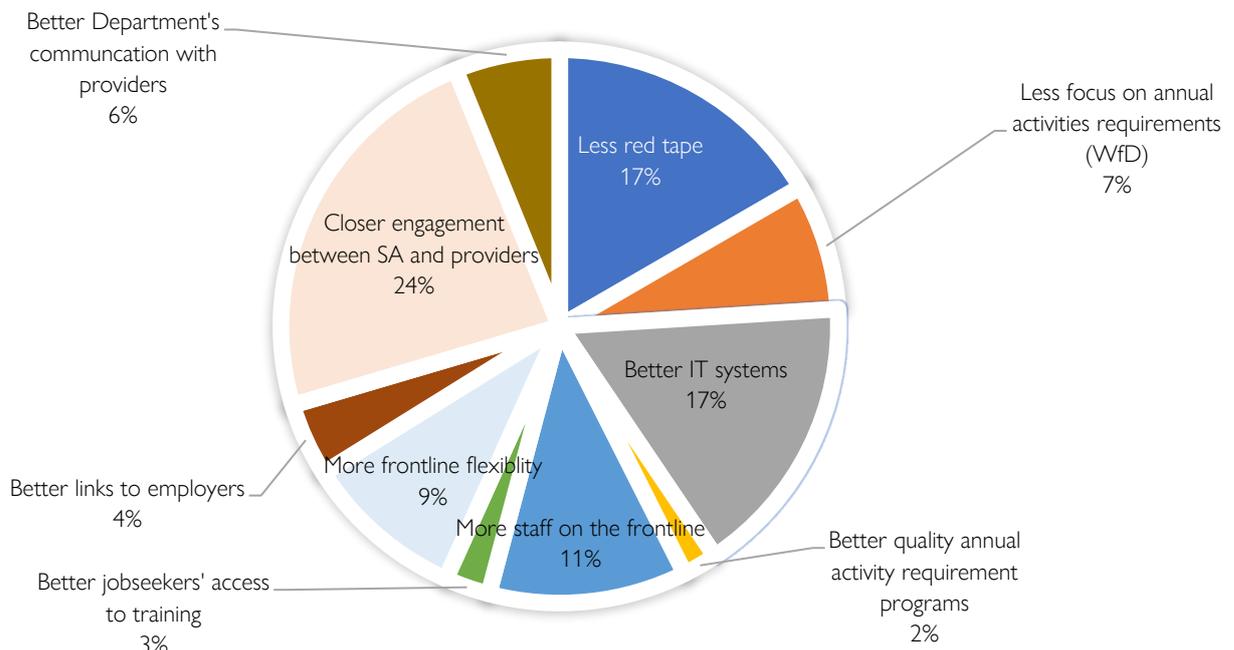
8 Key trends since 2016 survey

This section addresses the most substantial differences between the results of the 2023 survey and the previous survey conducted in 2016, during the Jobactive era. Significant policy reforms have been enacted across the employment services sector since 2016 and this is reflected in multiple observable differences in how frontline staff responded to questions in the 2016 and 2023 surveys, as detailed in Table XIV.

One particularly noteworthy difference is that caseloads have fallen for the first time since 2008, but these reduced caseloads are increasingly complex:

- In 2023, frontline staff reported an average caseload of 89.19, compared to 147.55 in 2016 – a reduction of just under 40 per cent.
- However, over 6 in 10 jobseekers (62 per cent) were perceived as having a mental health problem compared to 43 per cent in 2016.

Despite the increase in identified mental health issues, the proportion of jobseekers perceived as more difficult to place (just over 42 per cent in 2023 compared to slightly under 42 per cent in 2016) and not complying with their obligations (40 per cent in 2023 compared to 39 per cent in 2016) have remained relatively stable.

The 2023 survey results also indicate changing attitudes towards the application of sanctions and the circumstances under which they are applied (or not). Though the findings hint at a potential gradual cultural shift away from a work-first ideological focus, there are also identifiable contradictions:

- The number of clients sanctioned in the preceding two-week period experienced a slight increase from 15.06 in 2016 to 17.34 in 2023.
- The proportion of frontline staff who would report a client for sanctioning if they were dismissed from a job or training program, fail to commence an employment program or activity, leave a training course, or refuse to sign their Job Plan or Jobseeker Agreement all decreased since 2016. Employment services staff were only significantly more likely to sanction a client in 2023 for voluntarily leaving a job.
- The proportion of frontline staff who would not file sanctions against a client in 2023 increased in the event of fear for personal safety, penalties often being overturned, sanctioning not being perceived as an incentive to compliance, staff not wanting a reputation for being too tough, the office not encouraging sanctioning, the penalties being seen as too harsh, and

the jobseeker being perceived as normally being a good client.

These subtle emerging differences were also reflected in staff attitudes towards outcomes and the extent to which getting clients into work quickly is perceived as a priority:

- The proportion of staff who felt that meeting the targets set by management was their highest priority fell from 44 per cent in 2016 to 39 per cent in 2023.
- However, the proportion who felt that their highest priority was knowing the rules and official procedures rose from 43 per cent in 2016 to 51 per cent in 2023.

There were substantial declines in the proportion of employment services staff who agreed that:

- Their organisation has targets for certain types of jobseekers;
- They are influenced by numerical targets;
- Jobseekers are organised into formal and informal priority groups;
- The 'need to get an outcome quickly' is influential in determining which activities are recommended for each jobseeker; and
- More and more, the objective is to maximise their organisation's financial outcomes.

The proportion of staff who believed that it was a more important goal of their agency to get clients into jobs quickly fell by over half from 52 per cent in 2016 to 26 per cent in 2023. This was accompanied by a near corresponding increase in staff who believed it was a higher priority of their agency to raise the skill levels of jobseekers from 23 per cent in 2016 to 40 per cent in 2023.

Despite the 2023 survey indicating the reversal of certain trends within the employment services sector, the degree to which staff feel that their occupation has become standardised and routinised has deepened or remained entrenched:

- The proportion of staff that believe that they are free to decide for themselves what to do with each jobseeker on a day-to-day basis remains predominantly stable between 2016 and 2023, as has the extent to which decisions about jobseekers are determined by standard rules and regulations.
- Despite declining proportions of staff who believe that they use a lot of personal judgement to decide what is best for each jobseeker, the activities that make up

their job are quite or very routine, they are satisfied with their present working conditions, and the amount of evidence required for each client is excessive, the largest corresponding increases have occurred among staff who take a neutral position on these topics.

The proportion of staff that believe that they have a good or great deal of leeway in the decisions they make about which programs or activities jobseekers should be assigned to has risen from 54 per cent in 2016 to 66 per cent in 2023. The proportion who claimed that they have very little or no leeway has fallen from 25 per cent in 2016 to 12 per cent in 2023.

The proportion of time spent working with employers, on other administration, and on other tasks has remained relatively stable between survey periods. For instance, there has been a modest reduction in the proportion of their time that frontline staff report spending each week on contract compliance to meet government reporting requirements (from 17.8 per cent in 2016 to 16.6 per cent in 2023) and on performing other administration (from 16.8 in 2016 to 15.9 per cent in 2023). However, given the very sizeable reduction in caseload sizes reported by frontline staff, the data points towards an increase in the volume of administrative work relating to each client or participant.

Table 16: Statistically significant differences between 2016 and 2023 survey results

Caseload size and composition	2023	2016
Average (mean) number of job seekers in caseload	89.19	147.55
Proportion (%) of jobseekers that are perceived as 'more difficult' to place	42.22	41.68
Proportion (%) of jobseekers perceived to have a mental health problem	61.51	43.13
Proportion (%) of jobseekers perceived as not complying with their obligations	39.87	38.96
Sanctioning Powers	2023	2016
Number of clients sanctioned in the last two weeks	17.34	15.06
Proportion (%) who would report a client for sanctioning if:		
▪ A jobseeker is dismissed from a job or a training programme	72.1	77.6
▪ A job seeker fails to commence an employment program or activity	83.3	93.5
▪ A job seeker leaves a training course	56.3	66.1
▪ A Jobseeker voluntarily leaves a job	85.7	79.4
▪ When a jobseeker refuses to sign their Job Plan or Jobseeker Agreement	71.2	80.3
Proportion (%) who would NOT report a client for sanctioning due to:		
▪ The case can't be substantiated	49.7	55.5
▪ Jobplan not specific enough	28.6	42.7
▪ Fear for personal safety	25.4	17.1
▪ Sanctions/Penalties are often overturned	32.3	21.6
▪ Sanctioning is not an incentive to compliance	21.5	15.3
▪ I don't want a reputation for being too tough	3.3	1.0
▪ This office does not encourage sanctioning	6.7	0.7
▪ The penalties are too harsh on the jobseeker/client	15.5	4.8
▪ The jobseeker is normally a good client/jobseeker	77.8	66.2
Outcomes and getting clients into jobs quickly	2023	2016
In my job, job seekers are organised into formal and informal priority groups		
▪ Agree or strongly agree	23.9	35.9
▪ Neither	32.2	39.3
▪ Disagree or strongly disagree	43.9	24.8
Our organisation has targets for certain types of job seekers		
▪ Agree or strongly agree	73.2	78.9
▪ Neither	16.6	12.1
▪ Disagree or Strongly Disagree	10.2	8.9
In my job, I am NOT influenced by numerical targets		
▪ Agree or strongly agree	19.5	11.5
▪ Neither	27.9	13.4
▪ Disagree or strongly disagree	52.6	75.1

Outcomes and getting clients into jobs quickly	2023	2016
The factor which best describes my work priorities (%):		
▪ 'Meeting targets set by management'	38.5	43.5
▪ 'Knowing the rules and official procedures'	50.5	42.8
Whether 'need to get an outcome quickly' is influential in determining what activities are recommended		
▪ Quite or very influential	27.8	45.3
▪ Not at all or somewhat influential	72.2	54.7
What would you say is the more important goal of your agency:		
▪ To get clients into jobs quickly	25.6	51.6
▪ Neutral	34.3	25.1
▪ To raise skill levels	40.1	23.4
More and more the objective is to maximise the organisation's financial outcomes		
▪ Agree or strongly agree	41.2	54.6
▪ Neither	36.7	27.7
▪ Disagree or strongly disagree	22.1	17.7
Routinisation, standardisation and job satisfaction	2023	2016
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	51.0	49.6
▪ Neither	27.3	24.0
▪ Disagree or strongly disagree	21.7	26.4
I use a lot of personal judgement to decide what is best for each job seeker		
▪ Agree or strongly agree	48.4	64.5
▪ Neither	32.3	22.2
▪ Disagree or strongly disagree	19.4	13.3
To what extent are the decisions you make about job seekers determined by standard program rules		
▪ A good or great deal	81.9	84.9
▪ Neutral	15.0	12.0
▪ Little or very little	3.2	3.1
How much leeway do you have in deciding which program or activity job seekers should be assigned to?		
▪ A good or great deal	65.8	53.9
▪ Neutral	21.8	21.5
▪ Little or very little	12.4	24.6
To what extent are the activities that make up your job routine		
▪ Quite or very routine	74.2	75.9
▪ Neutral	20.8	12.0
▪ Not much or no routine	5.1	12.0
To what extent are you satisfied with your present conditions of work (pay, hours, promotion)		
▪ Quite or very satisfied	48.1	52.1
▪ Neutral	17.4	13.1
▪ Not much or not very satisfied	34.5	34.8
The amount of evidence required for each client is excessive		
▪ Excessive	28.8	46.2
▪ Fair enough	54.2	47.6
▪ Inadequate	6.5	1.5
Proportion (%) of time spent per week		
▪ In direct contact with job seekers	45.8	43.7
▪ Working with other service providers	5.8	4.7
▪ Working with employers	10.0	10.34
▪ On contract compliance to meet government reporting requirements	16.6	17.8
▪ On other administration	15.9	16.8
▪ On other tasks	6.3	6.6

9 Conclusion

The findings presented within this report offer a valuable perspective on the contemporary state of the Australian employment services system, its characteristics, drivers, opportunities, and challenges. Data collection occurred approximately one year into the new Workforce Australia system, whereas the 2016 survey followed the first year of *jobactive,* providing comparability into roughly equivalent periods of each system. The data provides an overview of the frontline of service provision and what the work of employment staff entails; the composition and complexity of caseloads; and the manner in which sanctioning powers are applied and understood. The report also offers insights into the increasing impacts of digitalisation on the employment services sector, its primary drivers, and some of the opportunities and challenges inherent in its adoption.

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: [Getting Welfare to Work: Research on Employment Services (unimelb.edu.au).](#)

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