Evaluation Report:
Employer Innovation Lab - Young People with Disability

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Executive Summary

This report outlines the findings of an evaluation commissioned by Social Ventures Australia to examine the effectiveness of their 'Employer Innovation Lab - Young People with Disability' (Lab) funded by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and conducted in conjunction with Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA). The Lab focused on enabling and supporting employers to enhance inclusion and economic mobility for young people with disability from non-university backgrounds in the Greater Melbourne area. Based on non-participant observation, content analysis of relevant Lab documentation and interviews with the participating organisations, our evaluation strongly endorses the structure, process and content of the Lab. Participating organisations particularly valued the coaching component of the Lab and the opportunity to hear from young people with disability about their lived experiences of employment and searching for work. The report also recommends delivery of the Lab format in other locations and with other cohorts. The report provides interim outcomes from organisations' Pilot projects and provides a series of recommendations for future iterations of the Lab.

1. Introduction

Since 2022, Social Ventures Australia (SVA) has facilitated Employer Innovation Labs[1] - an evidence-based program helping employers improve their recruitment and retention by removing employment barriers that non-university educated young people face. The Lab was adapted for the Australian context based on an innovative model designed and successfully delivered by Talent Rewire[2] in the United States. The initial adaptation and first two Labs Pilot were principally funded by Citi Foundation and a further three-years' funding was received from Paul Ramsay Foundation and Macquarie Group Foundation. To date, SVA has delivered six Employer Innovation Labs supported by philanthropic funding (not including this Lab).

SVA together with Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) were awarded additional Federal government funding through the Local Jobs National Priority Fund from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) to facilitate a specific 'Employer Innovation Lab' that focused on fostering career opportunities for non-university educated young people with disability (YPWD) in the Greater Melbourne area. This report presents findings from the evaluation of the YPWD Lab. Interim evaluations of other Labs conducted by SVA have been published elsewhere.[3]

This report is structured as follows. Section Two summarises the employment challenges experienced by YPWD and employers. Section Three sets out the aims of the YPWD Lab and outlines the Lab process. In Section Four the research methods used to conduct the evaluation are presented. Section Five summarises the key outcomes of the Lab. Section Six details employers' experiences of the Lab, overall. Section Seven presents employers' specific experiences associated with SVA and CYDA, the youth consultants, the key benefits of the Lab process, and the main challenges. Section Eight presents evidence regarding changes to employers' capability, organisational practice, and job (re-)design. Section Nine examines the suitability of the Lab for adoption/adaptation in other contexts. Section 10 presents reflections from the research team. Finally, Section 11 provides recommendations.

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[1] https://www.socialventures.org.au/about/programs/employer-innovation-lab/
[2] https://www.talentrewire.org
[3] https://www.socialventures.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Rebuilding-the-Career-Ladder-Initial-Evaluation-Report-January-2023.pdf

2. Context

2.1 The labour market exclusion of young people with disability

Young people are increasingly facing deep-rooted inequality and disadvantage due to limited job opportunities and broken career ladders. Youth unemployment remains a global challenge. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)[4], Australia's overall unemployment rate was 4% in December 2024, while the youth unemployment rate was 9%. By contrast, the youth unemployment rate reported by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) stood at 11.3% in October 2024.[5]

Young people with disability are more likely to be discriminated against and blocked out of the labour market due to inaccessible and inflexible recruitment and retention processes and practices, resulting in higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. Yet, 88% of those employed do not require additional support/accommodations from their employers to work.[6] The ABS identified approximately 5.5 million Australians with disability, representing 21.4% of the total population. [7] This is an increase from 4.4 million (17.7% of the population) in 2018. The labour force participation rate for people with disability aged 15-64 rose to 60.5% in 2022, up from 53.4% in 2018. However, these numbers still lag those for people without disability (84.9% compared with 82.3%). Similarly, while the unemployment rate for people with disability has improved, at 7.3%, (down from 10.3% in 2018) it remains high – more than double the rate for people without disability (3.1%).

The challenges that young people with disability experience hinder their social mobility within society and result in wasted talent for individuals, businesses and society. In response to these persistent problems, SVA and CYDA together adapted, co-created, launched and delivered a specific Employer Innovation Lab focused on young people with disability.

2.2 The business challenges

Prior to participating in the Lab, organisations were asked to complete a diagnostic survey, providing organisational information, current employment practices, and key workforce challenges. Employers participating in the Lab reported a range of workforce challenges, including: *delivering on diversity targets* (7), *filling roles that*

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[4] https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/latest-release
[5] https://www.oecd.org/en/data/insights/statistical-releases/2024/12/unemployment-rates-updated-december-2024.html
[6] https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment
[7] https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment

require specialist skills or knowledge (7), *lack of diversity in the workplace* (4), *attracting enough applicants* (4), *retention* (3), *increase in number of employees with mental health challenges* (1), *low level of employee engagement* (1), *outdated workforce skills/need to increase skills of workforce* (1), *aging workforce* (1), and *expected/actual loss of skilled employees* (1).

3. The Employer Innovation Lab Process

The specific objectives of the YPWD Lab were to:

   i.   Build the capabilities of participating employers to employ young people with disability and support them to achieve their potential in the workplace.

   ii. Support employers to identify and implement changes in job (re-)design that promote employment and progression of young people with disability in their workplaces.

   iii. Provide actionable insights for employers by including the voices of young people with disability and establishing an approach that can be replicated in other locations.

   iv. Promote wider action by employers through promotion of good practices, including through participation in CYDA's employer network and future Employer Innovation Labs.

The Employer Innovation Lab was designed and delivered by SVA and CYDA. Overall, the Lab encompassed: an initial two-day Workshop for employers; ongoing coaching sessions; and two Reconnect sessions spanning a seven-month period from August 2024 to March 2025. Under its funding agreement with the Commonwealth, SVA committed to securing commitments from participating employers so that, between them, they would create at least 7 quality employment opportunities for young people with disability within 12 months of them joining the Lab. Individual employers were asked to commit to hiring at least one young person with disability. Coaching sessions are planned to continue beyond the end of the funding agreement in June 2025 to optimise participants' outcomes.

*Figure 1. The Employer Innovation Lab process*
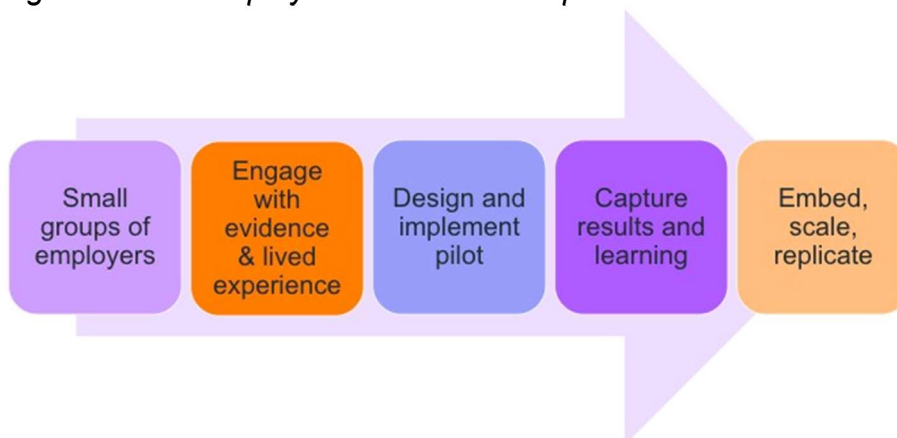
The Lab was provided at no cost to participating organisations. However, participating organisations were expected to attend all Lab sessions. In particular, employers were expected to:

i. Allocate appropriate staff to participate in the Lab
ii. Attend the Lab and develop a Pilot program to address identified challenges by providing employment opportunities for young people with disability
iii. Implement their Pilot program to affect change within their organisation and track progress
iv. Employ at least one young person with disability within 12 months of starting in the Lab (i.e. by August 2025)

The Lab Workshops were designed to provide an interactive applied learning experience for participants to facilitate the employment of young people with disability in their workplaces. The Lab Workshops provided employers with the opportunity to learn more about the challenges faced by young people with disability and develop the knowledge, skills and abilities to build a more inclusive workplace capable of facilitating the employment of young people with disability. A key aspect of the Lab Workshops was the inclusion of young people with disability as 'youth consultants', to provide participants with their insights and lived experiences. Participating employers had multiple opportunities to work with the youth consultants to receive feedback on their ideas and improve their Pilot programs. Additionally, SVA partnered with CYDA to undertake research with young people with disability in the local area of Melbourne, where the employers were based to ensure lived experience and local issues were embedded into the Lab. Subsequently, the *Voices on Work Report* and supplementary video were shared at the Lab workshops.

The initial Lab Workshop was delivered in-person over two full-day sessions one week apart in August 2024. The first day involved information and statistics on the processes that drive inequality for young people and people with disability, lived experiences of young people with disability, along with a theory of systems change.

Figure 2. Systems and change model from Lab Day One[8]
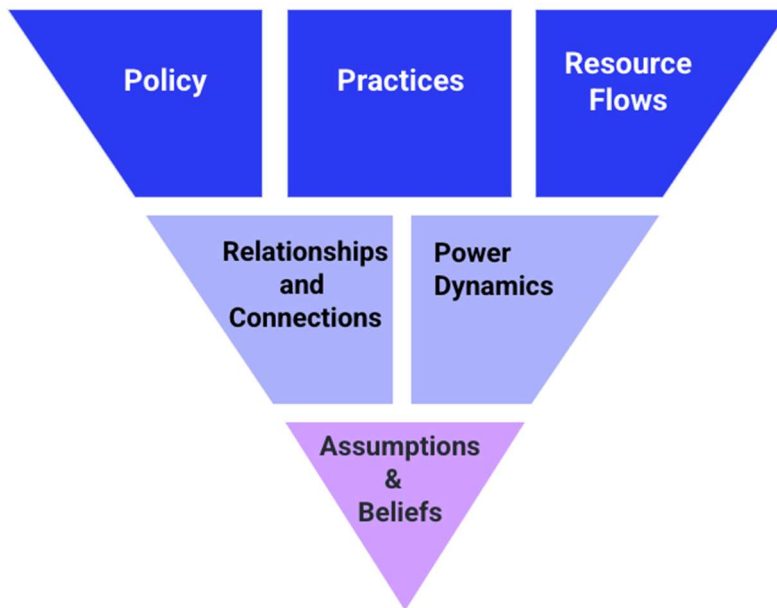
This theory suggests that there are six conditions of systems change that employers need to be aware of and address to assist them in making broader systemic change in their organisations. This particular theory of systems changes gives participants a sense that practice change is comprised of a number of dimensions and multiple stakeholders. Firstly, organisational change which prompts participants to consider (i) policies, (ii) practices and (iii) resource flows. Secondly, the relationships between people within the system in terms of the (iv) connections and (v) power dynamics in the workplace. Finally, (vi) assumptions and beliefs which are less visible and can be more difficult to address.

On day one of the initial Workshop an employer panel provided insights on their experiences employing people with disability. The next session presented employers with ideas around how to hire young people with disabilities, with a focus on job quality. Job (re-)design, workplace adjustments, and customising employment were discussed. Participants then began designing a Pilot program for their own organisation by considering: i) their purpose and vision; ii) the barriers preventing them from achieving their purpose and vision; iii) the potential interventions that could help them overcome the barriers identified; iv) potential Pilot components.

The second day of the initial Workshop focused on progressing the participants' Pilot programs. Participants continued working on their Pilot concept and received feedback from youth consultants as well as their peers. Employers were given the opportunity to ask questions and test their assumptions with three different youth consultants. Subsequently, employers revised their Pilot concepts before sharing them with the wider group of participants, which provided additional feedback.

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[8] https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/

Following the Workshop, the coaching sessions commenced. Coaching focused on providing individualised support on the design, and implementation of employers' Pilot programs and their measures of success. Employers also received one session of CYDA's workplace disability awareness and inclusion training, delivered to 12 - 15 of their employees. This two-hour training session was delivered onsite or online, having been developed and tested by YPWD. The Lab participants were brought back together for two Reconnect sessions on 14th November 2024 and 20th March 2025. The Reconnect sessions enabled them to share their progress, discuss key learnings and challenges experienced, and celebrate their successes.

4. Evaluation Methods

To evaluate the Lab process (workshops, pilots, coaching), the research team deployed mixed methods, including semi-structured interviews with participants, content analysis of relevant Lab documentation, and non-participant observation of the Lab process by members of the research team. Interviews were conducted with all eight Lab participants on two occasions. The first interviews occurred following the initial Workshops, and the final interviews were conducted after the Reconnect Workshop. The interview questions focused on the participants' views and experiences about the Lab and their pilot projects. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and the content was recorded and transcribed in full. The interviews lasted between 28 to 45 minutes. A summary of the participating employers is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of participating employer characteristics

Employer ID	Sector	Size
Organisation A	Private	Large
Organisation B	Public	Medium
Organisation C	Private	Large
Organisation D	Public	Large
Organisation E	Private	Large
Organisation F	Private	Medium
Organisation G	Public	Large
Organisation H	Private	Large

Note: Medium-sized organisations employ between 20-199 individuals and large organisations employ 200 or more individuals.

5. Summary of intended and achieved outcomes

The intended outcomes of the Lab involved:

    i.   engaging a minimum of six and a maximum of 10 medium to large employers in Australia to participate in the Lab

    ii.   building the capacity of participating employers to understand the steps required to improve people with disabilities' access to jobs within their organisation, including understanding the role of job (re-)design and workplace flexibility.

    iii.   supporting at least five participating employers to start implementing changes with a view to increase recruitment, retention and/or advancement of young people with disabilities.

All of the intended outcomes of the Lab were achieved. Notably, the data provided below are based on the participating employers' progress at the time of the interviews:

    i.   **A total of eight** medium and large employers participated in the initial Lab Workshop.

    ii.   **All eight of the employers** reported an increased understanding of the labour market challenges that YPWD face as a result of the Lab. Specifically, all employers gained a better understanding of how they could build "an inclusive employment pathway" (Organisation D) to better attract and/or retain YPWD. Additionally, employers engaged in creating or re-designing specific job roles to suit YPWD, adjusting/modifying their recruitment, selection and onboarding processes, and supporting and developing the YPWD(s) who join their organisation.

    iv.   At the time of the second interview, **six employers had made changes** to their recruitment and selection process, workplace adjustments, and/or provided training to existing employees to be able to support YPWD more effectively. Three of the eight participating employers had hired at least one YPWD as part of their individual Pilots and another three employers are in varying stages of implementing their Pilot projects (ranging from setting up the specifics of the program to waiting for approval to be able to execute the program). The remaining two organisations have not been able to facilitate much change in the workplace aside from some mindset changes within their work group because of limitations imposed on them (one because of organisational size and the need for consistency in policy and practice and the other because of an organisational

restructure). However, these employers had considered how they will address the implementation of their pilots and the barriers for YPWD but are awaiting the appropriate opportunity within the organisation to be able to proceed. **The intended outcome of supporting at least five participating employers to start implementing changes with a view to increase recruitment, retention and/or advancement of young people with disabilities was achieved.**

6. Employers' experiences of the Lab

When asked why they chose to participate in the YPWD Lab, several employers explained that they thought that the Lab would provide them with an **opportunity to learn** more about disability employment to support future candidates and their employees:

> *... what we wanted to do is get better at walking the talk... we have a high turnover in our employees and so we didn't want to be bringing someone in to fail without setting them up with the right structures around them.* - Organisation A

> *I think the lab is very much in alignment with one of our alliance objectives to become a disability confident alliance... we don't see ourselves as experts in all aspects of inclusive employment, and we really felt it was an opportunity to be able to learn around how we can do things better, especially in the disability employment space.* - Organisation E

Overall, the employers interviews spoke very highly of the Lab process, emphasising the impact of the Workshops, coaching provided by SVA and CYDA and interactions with youth consultants on bringing about change in their organisations. Notably, all of the employers mentioned that they would recommend the Lab to other organisations. When reflecting on their Lab experience, the employers brought up the workshops, coaching, and youth consultants as the most powerful aspects of the Lab process.

6.1 Specific experiences associated with the expertise provided by SVA and CYDA

The Workshops and coaching facilitated by SVA and CYDA were said to be central to the development and implementation of the employers' Pilots and helped **initiate conversations about change** within their organisations. An employer (Organisation A) explained that it was evident that both SVA and CYDA were highly experienced and supported them effectively:

It's clear that both orgs know what they're doing and that they've got a lot to offer. That's really clear. But I also think that the staff that they actually employ are really suited to that project-type work. They've got the skill set for the project; they've got the skill set in the knowledge of how to actually assist. It's not just words; they actually do know what they're doing.

The **Workshops** enabled employers to develop a fuller understanding of the challenges that YPWD face in the labour market as well as the systemic barriers that YPWD confront in their career pathways. Participants spoke positively about the design of the Workshops, which provided an effective balance between content, interaction between the employers and guests, and working time for the participants to develop their Pilots. This was made possible by the SVA and CYDA team who were present to facilitate discussion between the employers. Employers commented that the Workshops enabled employers to dedicate time to focus on their Pilots and learn from their peers in the process:

I think the onsite events were powerful parts of the Lab because they pulled you out of there every day. You committed the time you made the connections and you were really present and less distracted, hopefully, on most occasions. - Organisation G

And then we had another reconnect session a couple of weeks ago which was really good to connect with the other organisations and hear how some of the other organisations are progressing with their Pilot. - Organisation B

In addition to the Workshops, employers spoke very highly of the **coaching** sessions, reinforcing the expertise and skillset possessed by the SVA and CYDA team and their capacity to support participants in designing and implementing change in their organisations. The employers consistently discussed the importance of being kept accountable whilst receiving ongoing support and assistance throughout the process:

They've kept us on track. It would have taken us a lot longer to get there if we weren't being held accountable at each meeting and coached and guided along... it's just been an incredibly busy time and if we didn't have those coaching calls we wouldn't be where we are today. - Organisation A

We were provided with a great number of tools in terms of ideas, particularly some of those were incredibly valuable. For example, filming as we went into the recruitment process, filming a day in the life video, which was provided to

employment partners[9] to then share with potential candidates to be able to, I guess, give a bit more of a sense of what the role we were recruiting for actually is, and rather than just a position description. And it was a really good experience for both our team, but also a visual tool for our potential candidates as well. And suggestions around hosting an information session for interested candidates for our role as well, which is also something that we built into our recruitment process and we hosted an information session. So potential candidates had the ability to come to our site, learn more about the project, meet the team in which the role would be sitting, have a walk around of the actual facilities itself, and then opportunity to network with our team and ask any questions and so forth. So that was also incredibly valuable and then some actual physical resources around workplace adjustments and having those conversations and some of those more informative tools to be able to support practical implementation on an ongoing basis. - Organisation E

Notably, **the complementary expertise and experiences of SVA and CYDA** allowed for "a really strong sort of synergy that [employers] could tap into" (Organisation F). CYDA provided lived experience and YPWD subject matter expertise that enabled employers to gain a better understanding of what would work best for the YPWD:

I think it's also been really great to have the CYDA representative on those calls as well, so having [coach] in as just that person or that resource to run ideas by, or to go "okay we were thinking of this, how does this sound, how does this look?" and having her with her expertise at CYDA and also as someone with lived experience as well to give that really honest feedback throughout the process has been really great. - Organisation B

So having those two teams be a part of the training [referring to disability awareness training by CYDA] and they learned so much from not just the slides, but when [coach] and his other team member were just talking to us about their experiences and what they feel. And like when we were asking the questions, like the responses we were getting. So it was just, it was really beneficial... it's opened our eyes to a lot of things. - Organisation C

On the other hand, SVA provided expertise on youth employment, rebuilding the career ladder for young people, and how employers could reduce barriers through their recruitment and retention policies. Moreover, the SVA team leveraged its

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[9] This refers to organisations that provide employment support to candidates and to employers, usually employment service providers

experience from previous iterations of the Lab by advising employers how to best focus their efforts, for example:

> *Around December of last year, we actually had attempted a three-month business support advisor role to be worked out with SVA and CYDA. But when I actually consulted [coach], [coach] was like we wouldn't be, it's not feasible because it's only three months. And then all of the effort that we are going to put in there, the training, all of the resources, yeah it's only three months so it's not going to create obviously a good case study or maybe a good story out of it because the opportunity that we have is quite short. So [coach] advised us that I think it should be more than six months to a year at least. So we are able to solidify that role, make a good story out of it and also champion the hiring managers and also champion the team itself. -* Organisation F

Similarly, the SVA and CYDA team provided valuable feedback on participants' Pilot programs to ensure their projects were well-designed and likely to deliver the desired outcomes. As explained by Organisation H, the coaching process was very valuable in enabling them to develop their Pilot project:

> *...what we did is before the coaching sessions, we would provide some examples of what we'd done. For example, we provided a job ad that we'd worked on, so we would provide it to them prior to the coaching. So then they had a person with a disability go through and provide feedback and then they would present that at our coaching. That was very valuable and the person with a disability was in the coaching sessions and going through feedback. So I would say that was the most valuable interaction that we've had and as long as we were prepared and gave them something before the coaching, we got a lot out of it. Interview questions was another example that we'd sort of worked on, but because I don't have experience with disability or a person with a disability, I learnt a lot. We also did a survey to go out to our managers about the Pilot and how to get involved, and they also went through that. So there were a number of things that we've developed that got reviewed by a person with a disability. So that's been the most powerful.*

6.2 Specific experiences associated with the youth consultants

All of the employers interviewed perceived that **speaking with people with lived experience** through CYDA and the youth consultants was important. Employers articulated that the inclusion of YPWD youth consultants was beneficial and

differentiated the Lab from other similar programs by integrating the voices and lived experiences of the target group:

> *So I attended the second workshop and probably the thing that stood out to me was just the fact that there were people there who also were part of that group of the youth disabled group, so actual people who had that lived experience. So for me that was something that stood out because a lot of the times you go to these kinds of information sessions or you go to learning opportunities and you don't hear from the people themselves who are a part of that program; you only hear from people with theoretical knowledge or some experience of working with a particular group of people or working in those kinds of environment. But it was really amazing to just actually meet face-to-face with those youth consultants and listen to their feedback, it was very eye-opening in terms of what we learned on the day from those people. So it was a really innovative kind of – well it should be in everything, right – but it seemed really innovative because I personally have never really experienced that before. - Organisation F*

The YPWD youth consultants enabled **employers to understand the labour market and workplaces through the lens of YPWD**. More importantly, the employers obtained immediate feedback on their Pilot ideas from the YPWD's perspectives:

> *I did also really enjoy the youth consultants – I think that's what they were called – that came in from CYDA. It was a really good way to immediately test some of the ideas that we had just put on paper and get some real world, real life like lived experience to see if that's the kind of thing that people with disability would be looking for or that would make a difference to them in applying for a job or feeling welcome or included in an organisation. So I thought that was really cool. - Organisation B*

> *Day two was quite powerful when we got to sit with I guess the young people that have disabilities and got to pitch different ideas with them. That was very, very powerful and they were brave humans to be able to say that's not going to work for us. So I really took away a lot from that and have reprocessed it many times in my mind. - Organisation G*

It was evident from the interviews that participants gained a greater understanding of the difficulties faced by YPWD and how organisations could better accommodate and support them.

6.3 Key benefits associated with the Lab process

Participants' feedback concerning the Lab was overwhelmingly positive. In fact, **no disadvantages** of the Lab were mentioned. Overall, employers found the Lab process very beneficial to their organisation:

Only positive. I mean, it's such a great initiative. When we first saw it, we're like, we need to get involved in this. It's such a good initiative. I can't think of one negative and I'm trying to think of one, but it's just, it's only going to benefit our business by putting on someone. It's going to benefit individuals, the community, society in general, so, no. - Organisation H

I'm just shocked nobody else has been talking about it because even when we first started it, I was just like, "Oh, this is going to be a really fun experience." But then once the first Reconnect event, I just fell in love with the whole [Lab] process. And I think that was another driving factor for me and [name], because we were there from the start to kind of be like, we wanted to see results and start doing things. But now is the time we're going to put what we learned and did into practice into a document so we can actually put it as a plan moving forward. - Organisation C

The employers identified key benefits from participation in the Lab. These included an **increased understanding of YPWD's labour market challenges**, how to improve YPWD's access to jobs in their organisations, particularly by altering their recruitment and selection policies and practices, and by rethinking job design, as well as how employing YPWD contributes to their organisations and to broader society:

I think for me personally was just understanding what a youth with a disability feels and goes through in the workforce and the labour market, because it's not easy. And I feel like through the Lab, we've learned that we've got that opportunity to kind of create those little avenues for anyone who is interested in working. And just as a company, yes, we are giving back to the community as well. - Organisation C

I think that piece in particular, we didn't quite understand the gravitas of it... the recruitment process has definitely changed. It's more barrier free. We've also changed a number of things in the way that we've made it easier for people to contact someone about that job. All of those things that we were able to easily implement from the first set of workshops, we've kind of done those pieces. Some of the more challenging stuff that we're doing now is more

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around the adjustments to the accommodations piece and just being able to future proof how we support people. - Organisation D

Whilst increased understanding was important, participants also identified additional benefits of the Lab. The **key benefits** included:

i. Being supported by and tapping into the expertise of the SVA and CYDA team (6)
ii. Networking opportunities and learning from their peers (4)
iii. The ability to focus on their Pilot (3)
iv. Being able to see cultural and mindset changes in the workplaces (2)
v. Seeing the contribution to the customer experience (1)

The benefits arising from the YPWD process are depicted in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Summary of the YPWD Lab process and benefits
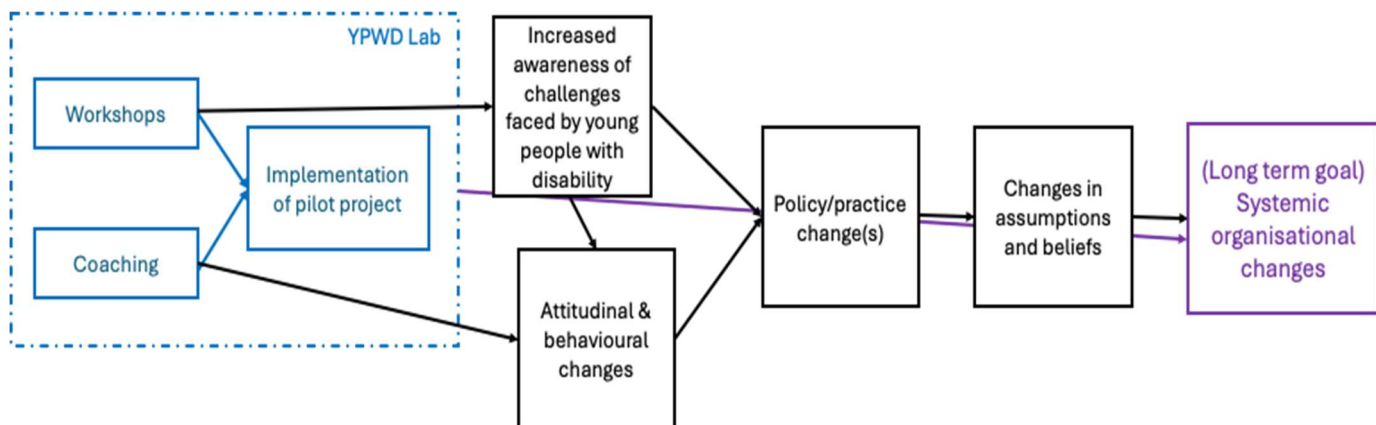
7. Main challenges faced by employers

Despite employers' overwhelming satisfaction with the Lab, they all reported that they faced challenges during the process. The **main challenges** included:

i. Obtaining buy-in from other members in their organisation (5)
ii. Organisational constraints – typically associated with: restructuring, hiring freezes, or other limited organisational capacity to hire during the project timescale (4)
iii. Time constraints of participants as a result of competing demands and other organisational priorities (3)
iv. Getting candidates to disclose their disability and limitations around the roles available and their suitability for YPWD (1)
v. Limited authority and autonomy to enact change in the organisation (1)

Unfortunately, there was limited action that the SVA and CYDA team could take in these instances to better support the employers. However, the coaching team and the Lab enhanced the participating employers' ability to navigate these challenges. For example, Organisation E explained that one of their key challenges was around their workforce's preconceived notions about YPWD and their participation in the Lab enabled them to confidently engage colleagues in constructive dialogue because of the tools and examples they were provided with, including the importance of adopting strength-based (as opposed to deficit-based) orientations:

> *I think, again, it goes back to the preconceptions and assumptions about what a young person with disability can and can't do. We had some really confronting conversations initially around even yeah, we had someone say we would need to understand what their disability is to understand if we could support that and we would need someone coming into this role to have a minimum level of experience with construction consumables. And I think what we found from the initial lab is that it helped us navigate those conversations and equipped us with the confidence and I guess some examples of what people with disability can do rather than what they can't and their strengths can support any workplace.*

8. Evidence of capability, practice change, and job (re-)design

All eight participating employers demonstrated evidence of capability building regardless of progress with their Pilot project. Table 1 below details YPWD employment status, examples of practice change and/or job (re-)design, and development of organisational capability to better support YPWD in the workplace.

It is important to note a number of caveats to these numbers which may underestimate the impact of the Lab. Firstly, the compressed timescale for this Lab and the expectation from the start of the Lab being that some employment was expected to take place beyond the period of the delivery of the grant. Secondly, that the focus of the Lab was on building capability and practice change (including job (re-) design, which is not only required to ensure that the organisation is ready to employ young people with disability but also contributes to lasting change within organisations in terms of processes, practices and, importantly, assumptions and beliefs. Thirdly, as described above organisational constraints (e.g. restructuring, hiring freezes) impacted on some organisations' ability to hire YPWD during the timescale of the evaluation. This was beyond the control of there SVA and CYDA.

Based on conversations with employers, it is anticipated that organisations will employ a further 11 young people with disability will be hired by August (12 months from starting in the Lab), meaning the total hired is likely to be 18.

	Practice change/Job (re-)design	Capability building	YPWD employed (at time of interview)
A	Altered position descriptions & recruitment & selection policy & practice Created 2 new roles for YPWD	Planning 2nd position for YPWD Establishing a disability board to review policies and procedures Identifying and supporting YPWD in existing workforce	1 YPWD employed
B	Altered recruitment & selection policy & practice, and workplace adjustment process to support YPWD Identified roles suited to YPWD	Formalised inclusion in recruitment & selection policy & practice– which led to an increase of YPWD applicants for the graduate program	Yet to employ YPWD
C	Implemented adjustments policy & practice for YPWD	Integrated organisational champions to support YPWD Increased understanding of the importance of accommodating YPWD	6 YPWD employed
D	Created career pathways for YPWD Altered recruitment & selection policy & practice to support YPWD	Development and implementation of formalised diversity program	Yet to employ YPWD
E	Development & implementation of inclusive employment process Identified suitable roles for YPWD	Reducing stigma and bias Trained line managers to increase retention of PWD	1 YPWD employed
F	Altered recruitment & selection policy & practice to support YPWD Implemented flexible work arrangements to support YPWD	Implemented induction training and ongoing support for YPWD	Yet to employ YPWD
G	Development of career pathways and training to benefit retention	Developed career pathways for YPWD Introduced organizational champions to support YPWD	Yet to employ YPWD
H	Altered recruitment & selection policy & practice to support YPWD	Developed plan to enable YPWD employment Introduced adjustments to support YPWD Increased diversity, equity & inclusion awareness in the workplace	Yet to employ YPWD

Table 1: Evidence of practice change and capability building within organisations

Overall, participation in the Lab enabled employers to **develop capabilities** central to supporting YPWD, including:

i.   Building knowledge and understanding concerning challenges faced by YPWD
ii.   Initiating conversations concerning the importance of recruitment and selection, and retention of YPWD in the workplace
iii. Identifying and designing suitable roles for YPWD and making reasonable accommodations to facilitate their integration and performance in the workplace
iv.   Enabling the employment of YPWD and providing appropriate support to ensure their success in the workplace.

The development of employers' capabilities was noted by numerous participants, as demonstrated below:

> *What we've been able to do so far is really influence, I guess, the rigid working arrangements that exist in particularly our blue collar roles within the organisation. So looking or challenging the requirements to work full-time over 50 hours a week, having those flex options available for someone who might need them. And also, really challenging things like our pre-employment medical process as well to look at how we can remove that particular barrier in our pre-employment processes as well.* - Organisation E

> *I think what I've come to understand is, it's a lot more than just "oh hey, we've advertised, we've created a job, somebody has come onboard" to actually "it's a lot more holistic, we've got to think this through, we've got to champion this". Because it doesn't come naturally in the competitive world that we live in to actually think that "oh there are people that are being left out in this whole process and how do we then bring them on the journey as well". It's that whole concept of diversity, equity and inclusion and belonging. So not just equity but there's equality to consider.* - Organisation F

More specifically, the theory of systems change usefully informed the Pilot design and implementation process by encouraging employers to think and do things differently. For employers, this process commenced with thinking about their existing policies, practices and resource flows and identifying the barriers for YPWD. Subsequently, they made simple/minor adjustments to their recruitment, selection and retention policies and practices (e.g. hiring criteria, language used in recruitment material etc.), which enabled quick wins and created momentum for ongoing change. Such changes also led employers to think about relationships and the power dynamics in their workplace. Doing so revealed the need for appropriate managerial

support to ensure the inclusion and wellbeing of YPWD at work. More importantly, by critically assessing their policies, practices, resource flows, relationships, and power dynamics, employers started to question their underlying assumptions and beliefs. This process contributed to wider change within the organisation:

> *It [referring to changes necessary to achieve their Pilot aim] was review entry level positions, make sure the job ads are inclusive, make sure that they aren't requiring skills that are not actually required, so that's sort of step one. Then in terms of retaining it's about making sure that we do some work on training and culture around inclusivity and making sure that if we do bring in someone with a disability that the hiring manager knows what the requirements are in terms of maybe modifications and how to approach that so that the person feels welcomed and can do their job and at the end of the day they're happy at work so that they stay in the role.* - Organisation F

> *For staff who live with a disability, they understand and relate to patrons, which makes patrons feel like they're valued; it also helps a staff member feel like they're doing something and they're helping with the knowledge they have. They're also teaching the other team members because there's been times that I would not know how to deal with certain individuals in the spectrum, for example. By seeing and talking to individuals who live with that disability, they've just said, "Oh, yeah, sometimes it's the noise. It's sometimes the colour, it's sometimes the light." And it kind of gives me that insight, "Oh, okay," that I can feed into the rostering team, "Hey, if this event is like this, maybe not – you know just reach out to these staff who have been rostered to see if they're comfortable." Like, so it just opens up that knowledge pool that I wouldn't have had .* - Organisation C

9. Suitability of the Labs for adoption/adaptation in other contexts

Overall, the data evidenced three levels of organisational change which are indicative of the suitability of the Labs to be adopted or adapted in other contexts or locations. Firstly, the **intra-organisation level**, that is to say *within the organisation*, in terms of the team or sub-unit, or specified positions.

For example, Organisation C hired six YPWD as part of their Pilot. Initially as part of their Pilot they hired casual staff as a first step. Following the success of this approach, the organisation extended their program and commenced hiring YPWD for more substantive roles:

> *But we are now looking at moving – because it is casual we are trying to get them into roles that they are happy doing and they have the – that the accommodations can be made as well as what they require. But we are also looking at down the line to kind of look at more long term into inside the other departments we have like the event management team. They could maybe be into logistics operations. And we've got the rostering team where we – with major events, we need help with uniforms and accreditation. So there's little other roles that we're kind of looking at getting someone in at least for a few longer periods so that they can get trained and see if that works well for them. And then they could maybe jump into another department. And then once they test out a few roles, they'll feel, "Oh, I might be really good at logistics." And then kind of have a chat with those departments and see if we could have a long-term role for that person.*

These findings demonstrate that there is opportunity for organisations to scale up their Pilots and implement further organisational changes that will have long term benefits to the organisation and YPWD.

The second level of change involved **intra-organisational diffusion** beyond the Pilot sub-unit, that is to say spreading of improved practices in other areas of the organisation, as demonstrated by Organisation E:

> *It's actually been quite a profound experience for me both personally and professionally because my partner has acquired physical disability from his time in the armed services, and he was also diagnosed with severe dyslexia about five years ago as he entered into study. He's been studying for the past five years and is now navigating the job search and also recently was diagnosed with ADHD. So from a personal perspective, it's really had quite an impact on me being able to navigate conversations with him as he goes into*

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employment around disclosure and workplace adjustments and working with his employment partner. But then also that translates to the people that we're working with on a daily basis as well and the opportunities and how we can make them more available to not just young people with disability, but all people with disability.

The third level of organisational change involved **inter-organisational transformation,** that is to say personnel involved in the Lab Pilots take the learning to a different organisation. For example, the champion responsible for developing and implementing the Pilot in Organisation H was leaving the organisation and had handed over the Pilot to a colleague. There was a plan in place to ensure continuity of the Pilot within Organisation H, and the learnings gained from the Lab would be disseminated to another organisation as a result of the initial champions' move to a new business:

> *Facilitator: Given that you are leaving the organisation next week, will you be using or taking with you any of the learnings from the lab about practice change to wherever you're going?*
>
> *Interviewee: Oh, a hundred percent. Yeah, definitely.*

Subsequently, individuals who participated in the Lab take their learning with them as their careers progress and their learning contributes to broader systemic change. These benefits also apply to alumni who share their learning within and between industries and sectors.

Based on the data obtained, the Lab structure, process and content are robust and effective, and there is no reason to suggest that it could not be replicated in other contexts. As such, the research team **considers that the Lab model is suitable** for adoption and/or adaptation in other labour market locations across a range of sectors, industries and workplace sizes. That said, the preliminary data suggest that implementation of Pilot projects was more straightforward in medium-sized organisations and/or when senior leadership commitment is secured. It was observed that employers appeared to particularly engage well with the focus on a specific cohort (young people with disability). However, it also notable that all except one of the employers had formal targets or commitments (e.g. social procurement) in relation to employing people with disability. This external driver was important in securing their commitment and providing a level of authorization for change from within the organization. Unfortunately, no commitment exists for other groups who are excluded, particularly young people from non-university or low socio-economic backgrounds which were the focus of the previous Labs. Nevertheless, the impact of the YPWD Lab is still important because disability is too often considered 'too hard' for employers to address, despite already having statements and plans in place.

However, making workplaces accessible for people with disability can lead to a more inclusive workplace for all, including those without disability who face demand-side barriers to employment.

Moving forward, a key dimension on which to focus is how to build on the momentum achieved by the Lab in order to scale up its activities and gain buy-in from a larger number of organisations.

10. Reflections from the research team

At least one member of the research team attended and engaged with all Workshop and Reconnect sessions in order to reflect on the YPWD Lab and develop critical insights.

It was clear that organisations want to make a positive change to hire YPWD but do not know where to start or how to go about supporting YPWD. The Lab process addressed his need, effectively creating attitudinal changes and increased understanding of disabilities. It also led to organisations developing skills, knowledge and abilities to support the recruitment, selection and retention of YPWD. The lived experience of youth consultants as well as feedback from peers, CYDA and youth consultants helped organisations design, develop and refine their Pilot, and it also informed wider policy and practice change/workplace adjustments.

In their presentations about their Pilots and related discussions, employers spoke very positively about the involvement of CYDA, in particular CYDA's workplace disability awareness and inclusion training and CYDA being 'critical friends'. Also highlighted was the importance of being able to ask questions and raise concerns in a safe environment and the opportunity this provided for CYDA to dispel myths about disability. With our experience attending and evaluating the regular Labs, it is apparent that the addition of CYDA to help facilitate a Lab that is focused on a specific cohort has been beneficial to the achievement of identified outcomes. In particular, we found that the focus on a specific cohort seemed to help organisations design and implement their Pilots in a more targeted and advanced manner. The disability focus of the Lab helped organisations to be clear about the cohort they are targeting, how to ensure that they are setting up policies and practices that would best attract and retain YPWD, and be able to make adjustments and accommodations to best support YPWD candidates and employees that have not necessarily been seen in other iterations of the Lab in such a short time frame. However, as stated above, it must be noted that all except one of the participating organisations had formal targets or commitments (e.g. social procurement) in relation to employing people with disability.

The feedback from the YPWD at the Reconnect underscored the significant journeys that organisations were on and the step-changes in their thinking and approaches that had taken place between the initial Lab and the Reconnect event. Overall, the Lab process has been essential in supporting the participating employers in the design and implementation of their Pilot project but also to contribute toward broader systematic changes that are necessary to support YPWD into sustainable employment. The employment and retention of YPWD not only benefits the individual employees but also the organisation, local communities and society.

It is important to note here that SVA was not just pushing employers to roll out a Pilot for the sake of it but the focus is really on supporting the employers to develop and implement a Pilot that will benefit both the organisation and the YPWD that will be joining. For example, Organisation F mentioned that they originally developed a

three-month program but the SVA coach advised them that it would not be an efficient use of resources or deliver optimal outcomes. This example demonstrates how SVA is invested in making an impact and generating long-term outcomes rather than simply producing short-term compliance-driven outcomes that yield suboptimal impact.

11. Recommendations

Overwhelmingly, the participants interviewed endorsed the Lab, emphasising that it challenged their preconceived ideas as well as their existing policies and practices with respect to recruitment and retention. In doing so, the Lab positively transformed their attitudes toward young people with disability and created a catalyst to develop policies and practices capable of delivering more sustainable win-win outcomes along with the knowledge and support required to achieve those outcomes. Based on our data analysis of this specific Lab focused on young people with disability, we suggest recommendations directed toward ensuring the success of future Labs conducted by SVA and CYDA:

1. The structure, process and content of the Lab were strongly endorsed by participants. In particular, the Lab Workshops' content were consistently supported. The overarching structure, process and content of the Lab should therefore be retained.

2. All participants indicated that the data regarding the employment of YPWD and the challenges they face, along with the integration of youth consultants' lived experiences were critical. These aspects of the Lab transformed participants' attitudes and fundamentally shaped the development of their Pilot programs. These aspects of the Lab should therefore be retained.

3. Several participants felt that the exchange of information and feedback between participants benefited their progression and the development of their Pilot programs. These aspects of the Lab should therefore be retained.

4. The coaching component of the Lab was highly valued by participants and should be retained in its existing format. In particular, the interviewees highlighted the importance of the support and guidance provided on a one-on-one basis. Participants also benefited from the often-challenging nature of their coaching sessions, which facilitated the development of Pilot programs more inclined to succeed. The coaching sessions also maintained momentum and created accountability, which will also contribute to the success of their Pilot programs.

5. Multiple participants discussed the difficulties they faced in trying to convince other organisational actors to support their Pilots and/or the organisational changes required. Although the Reconnect session provided information about resistance to change, how change can be supported, and how to change behaviour, components of this material could be included in day two of the initial Workshop to assist employers in developing their Pilots.

6. In addition to the previous point, advice and materials could be provided in the Workshops or Reconnect to assist employers in maintaining momentum in the face of obstacles. For example, Organisation B and Organisation G were unable to implement their Pilots during the Lab process due to restructuring and a hiring freeze. However, they could progress smaller changes that could support the implementation of their Pilot, or other organisational changes in the future.

7. It was common for some participants in the Lab to struggle with balancing their operational day-to-day workload and the additional load that the Pilot placed on them. SVA and CYDA might consider how they could help participants navigate these sometimes-conflicting priorities, which can compromise their Pilot programs.