

**Evaluation of Social Ventures Australia's Employer Innovation Lab  
Final Report – February 2026**

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**Executive Summary**

A recognised limitation of employment services is that they are underpinned by a predominant supply-side approach focused on case management and preparing individuals for employment, without accounting for the behaviours and practices of the demand-side (employers)<sup>1</sup>. Based on an evidence-based model in the United States adapted for the Australian context, in 2022 Social Ventures Australia (SVA) began delivering 'Employer Innovation Labs'. The Labs adopted a unique approach focused on working intensively with organisations to build employers' capability to offer career pathways for unemployed young people from low socio-economic backgrounds. Academics from the Australian Catholic University and the University of Sydney were commissioned to evaluate the effectiveness of SVA's eight Employer Labs delivered across Australia between 2022 and 2025. This report is the final phase of the evaluation. Using qualitative research methods involving non-participant observation, content analysis of relevant Lab documentation, 62 interviews with participating employers, and a focus group with the coaching team, the evaluation explores the extent to which the Labs achieved their intended outcomes.

Overall, the evaluation revealed that the Labs met their objectives, as outlined below:

- 83 per cent of employers reported practice changes
- 95 per cent of employers demonstrated increased understanding of the labour market challenges impacting young people
- 100 per cent of employers stated that they found the tools and resources provided by SVA throughout the Lab process useful

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<sup>1</sup> Ingold, J., Kakhkharov, J. and Lee, Q.Y. (2025) The case for reorienting active labour market policies towards the demand-side, *Australian Economic Review*, 58(4), pp. 326-331.

- 80% of the employers who had completed their pilots at the time of the follow-up interview had already or reported plans to embed, replicate, or build on the learning from the Labs, or had already done
- Almost half (49%) of the participating employers had completed their pilot projects at the time of this report, noting that others are continuing with implementation.
- At this point in time, 445 young people otherwise at risk of exclusion have secured ongoing employment.

Importantly, the evaluation revealed that the Labs were effective in initiating employer actions to address the demand-side barriers to youth employment and career sustainability. Employers reported that the Lab process provided structured time, coaching and peer learning that enabled them to step back from day-to-day operations and consider how to create more inclusive employment practices. The Labs also supported employers to identify and establish effective and sustainable partnerships with local community organisations, including employment service providers who have caseloads of unemployed young people. These partnerships further strengthened employers' capacity to design and implement inclusive workforce solutions<sup>2</sup>. Amongst participating employers, emerging evidence highlighted changes in practice, mindsets and behaviour, although progress varied given differing organisational structures, priorities and resourcing. Some pilots were paused due to changes in key personnel or organisational constraints, such as hiring freezes. Ultimately though, by equipping employers with new perspectives, practical tools and a stronger commitment to inclusion, the Labs have created a platform from which lasting employment practice changes have emerged that have been, and continue to be, sustained both within and outside their organisations.

Within the lifespan of the Labs so far, 445 young people who had faced barriers to workplace inclusion successfully moved into employment. This is significant in and of itself but is particularly meaningful because lasting organisational change is

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.socialventures.org.au/about/publications/working-with-employers-to-advance-opportunity/>

notoriously difficult. The Labs model of unique delivery, support and education for employers, underpinned by behaviour change principles, has established strong foundations for longer-term impact. In so doing, the Labs have equipped employers with the knowledge, tools, perspectives and commitment to improve employment pathways for young people from low socio-economic backgrounds across their organisations and, in some cases, in their broader industries and sectors.

The findings from this multi-year evaluation, considered alongside wider research on the barriers to implementing good jobs<sup>3</sup>, underline the significance of the demand-side approach adopted by the Labs in the Australian context. By bringing together the demand and supply sides of the labour market, the Labs “conceal the wiring” of labour market complexity across the ecosystem<sup>4</sup> and create a unique environment for employers to design job pathways that benefit both young people at risk of exclusion and businesses seeking workforce solutions in the short, medium and longer terms. This represents a critical proof of concept with strong potential for further scalability and impact. As such, the 445 direct job outcomes to date arising from the Labs represents a minimum. As additional pilot projects within participating organisations mature and more employment outcomes materialise, the number of direct and indirect job outcomes from the Labs is likely to be much higher.

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<sup>3</sup> Daguerre, A., Vincent, S., Ingold, J. and Lee, Q.Y. (2025). *Beyond Work-First: Aligning Activation, Procurement and Commissioning in the UK, US and Australia. Final Report of the ESRC-funded Project Activating Employers: The Politics of Regulation in the UK, the US and Australia*, Brighton: University of Brighton.

<sup>4</sup> This is a key recommendation of the House of Representatives Select Committee Inquiry on Workforce Australia:  
[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Former\\_Committees/Workforce\\_Australia\\_Employment\\_Services/WorkforceAustralia/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Former_Committees/Workforce_Australia_Employment_Services/WorkforceAustralia/Report)

## 1. Introduction

Since 2022, Social Ventures Australia (SVA) has delivered Employer Innovation Labs<sup>5</sup> ('Labs'), an evidence-based program designed to help employers improve recruitment and retention by addressing the barriers young people face in entering the workforce. Adapted for the Australian context from a proven U.S. model developed by Talent Rewire<sup>6</sup>, the Labs were initially funded by the Citi Foundation, with subsequent three-year philanthropic support from the Paul Ramsay Foundation and Macquarie Group Foundation. In addition, SVA, in partnership with Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), received Federal government funding through the Local Jobs National Priority Fund to deliver a targeted Lab aimed at fostering career opportunities for young people with disability (YPWD)<sup>7</sup>. Between May 2022 and October 2025, SVA facilitated a total of eight Labs across Sydney, Melbourne, and Hobart. The findings presented in this evaluation report draw on the experiences of participating employers, the expertise of the coaching team, non-participant observation, documentary analysis, and insights.

## 2. Context

### ***2.1 The challenge for young people***

Many young people in Australia continue to experience entrenched inequality, exclusion and disadvantage in the labour market, driven by limited job opportunities and disrupted career pathways. Despite Australia's overall unemployment rate being relatively low at 4.3 per cent, youth unemployment was more than double that at 9.7 per cent in August 2025<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.socialventures.org.au/about/programs/employer-innovation-lab/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.talentrewire.org>

<sup>7</sup> <https://cyda.org.au/resources/employer-innovation-lab/>  
<https://www.socialventures.org.au/our-impact/a-new-way-forward-for-youth-disability-employment/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/aug-2025>

Development (OECD) reported a global youth unemployment rate of 11.3 per cent in October 2024.<sup>9</sup>

Unemployment rates also vary across states and regions. In Victoria, the overall unemployment rate in August 2025 was 4.4 per cent, with youth unemployment at 10.4 per cent<sup>10</sup>. Western Melbourne reported higher figures, with overall unemployment at 5.7 per cent and youth unemployment reaching 12.4 per cent in May 2025<sup>11</sup>. In New South Wales, the overall unemployment rate in May 2025 was 4.0 per cent<sup>12</sup>, while youth unemployment was 7.9 per cent. In contrast, the unemployment rate in Western Sydney recorded slightly higher rates, at 5.0 per cent overall and 8.6 per cent for youths<sup>13</sup>. These figures highlight how unemployment is not evenly distributed across regions, with young people in low socio-economic areas facing greater barriers to securing and sustaining employment.

Table 1. Underemployment by age group in Australia, May 2025<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/insights/statistical-releases/2024/12/unemployment-rates-updated-december-2024.html>

<sup>10</sup> [https://djsir.vic.gov.au/what-we-do/employment-and-small-business/victorian-labour-force#:~:text=Table title:%20Menu%20Table content:%20header:%20%7C%20%7C%20Latest,sinc,e%20COVID%E2%80%9119%20Mar%202020:%20%2D0.4%20ppt%20%7C](https://djsir.vic.gov.au/what-we-do/employment-and-small-business/victorian-labour-force#:~:text=Table%20title:%20Menu%20Table%20content:%20header:%20%7C%20%7C%20Latest,sinc,e%20COVID%E2%80%9119%20Mar%202020:%20%2D0.4%20ppt%20%7C)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-07/Labour%20Market%20Dashboard%20Western%20Melbourne.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/may-2025#:~:text=in%20May%202025,-,unemployment%20rate%20remained%20at%204.1%25.,unemployment%20rate%20increased%20to%209.2%25>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/Labour%20Market%20Dashboard%20Sydney%20Greater%20West.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/underemployed-workers/latest-release>

Age	All underemployed (Percent) (%)	Prefers more hours (Percent) (%)	Hours reduced (Percent) (%)
15-19 years	24.9	22.0	5.1
20-24 years	19.6	18.4	2.8
25-29 years	12.4	11.4	2.2
30-34 years	10.7	9.9	1.7
35-39 years	10.8	9.8	1.7

Underemployment further compounds these challenges. In 2024, overall underemployment was at 6.0 per cent but youth underemployment was at 14.1 per cent<sup>15</sup>. Young women had a higher underemployment rate at 16.2 per cent compared to 12.1 per cent for young men. Additionally, a recent study found that one in three young people had been exploited by employers revealing widespread issues of underpayment and unfair treatment in the workplace.<sup>16</sup> These challenges are compounded by declining real wages and fewer entry-level job opportunities<sup>17</sup>, which SVA has described as the ‘broken career ladder’.<sup>18</sup>

This combination of high unemployment along with evidence regarding underemployment and workplace exploitation among young people highlights an urgent need for systemic change. Targeted strategies are necessary to improve both the quantity and quality of job opportunities available to young people. More and better jobs will enable young people to enter employment and more effectively support retention and career progression. The engagement of employers in particular is central to this endeavour as they determine the job and career progression opportunities provided to young people.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/unemployment-rate-rises-40-december>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.unimelb.edu.au/newsroom/news/2025/july/a-third-of-young-people-ripped-off-by-employers,-study-shows>  
<https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/youth-income-decline/youth-income-decline.pdf> <https://www.unimelb.edu.au/newsroom/news/2025/july/a-third-of-young-people-ripped-off-by-employers,-study-shows>

<sup>17</sup> <https://assets.pc.gov.au/research/completed/youth-income-decline/youth-income-decline.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.socialventures.org.au/about/programs/rebuilding-the-career-ladder/>

## **2.2 The challenge for organisations**

Contemporary organisations are operating in a labour market shaped by both opportunities and challenges on the supply and demand sides. In particular, employers face a number of demand-side issues. In August 2025 there were approximately 327,200 job vacancies nationally, with 288,700 of them in the private sector<sup>19</sup>. Despite these vacancies being available, there are systemic barriers within hiring practices: in the Australian Human Resource Institute’s (AHRI) Quarterly Australian Work Outlook for March 2025, 69 per cent of employers reported excluding certain candidate groups (for example people with a history of mental illness, drug or alcohol dependency) at the recruitment stage,<sup>20</sup> suggesting discrimination. Jobs and Skills Australia’s Recruitment Experiences and Outlook Survey for August 2025 found that only 50 per cent of surveyed employers were actively recruiting, yet recruitment difficulty remained high at 40 per cent. Moreover, just 25 per cent of employers expected to increase their workforce, suggesting cautious hiring outlooks amid uncertainty<sup>21</sup>. Together these factors point to some of the challenges likely to face employers seeking to trial new approaches and embed inclusive practices.

The specific workforce challenges of employers that participated in Employer Innovation Labs were captured by SVA in a self-assessment diagnostic survey which captured key organisational information, current HR practices and key workforce challenges prior to participation. The main challenges reported by employers prior to participation are depicted in Table 2 below. 51 unique employers participated in the Labs. Two employers participated in two rounds with different work teams. This table includes the responses from each of these work teams.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/jobs/job-vacancies-australia/latest-release#job-vacancies-over-time>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.ahri.com.au/resources/hr-research/ahri-quarterly-australian-work-outlook-march-2025>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/data/recruitment-experiences-and-outlook-survey>

Table 2. Workforce challenges reported by organisations pre-Lab

<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Number (multiple response)</b>
Filling roles that require specialist skills or knowledge	31
Attracting enough applicants for jobs	25
Delivering on diversity targets or social procurement commitments	24
Expected or actual loss of skilled employees	21
Increasing number of employees with mental health conditions	21
Lack of workforce diversity	20
Employee retention	18
Absenteeism	15
Outdated workforce skills or need to increase skills of workforce	15
Poor productivity	7
Low levels of employee engagement	6
Ageing workforce	2
Poor job satisfaction	3

These responses, particularly in relation to current and future skills and labour shortages, reflect common concerns of employers reported elsewhere<sup>22</sup>.

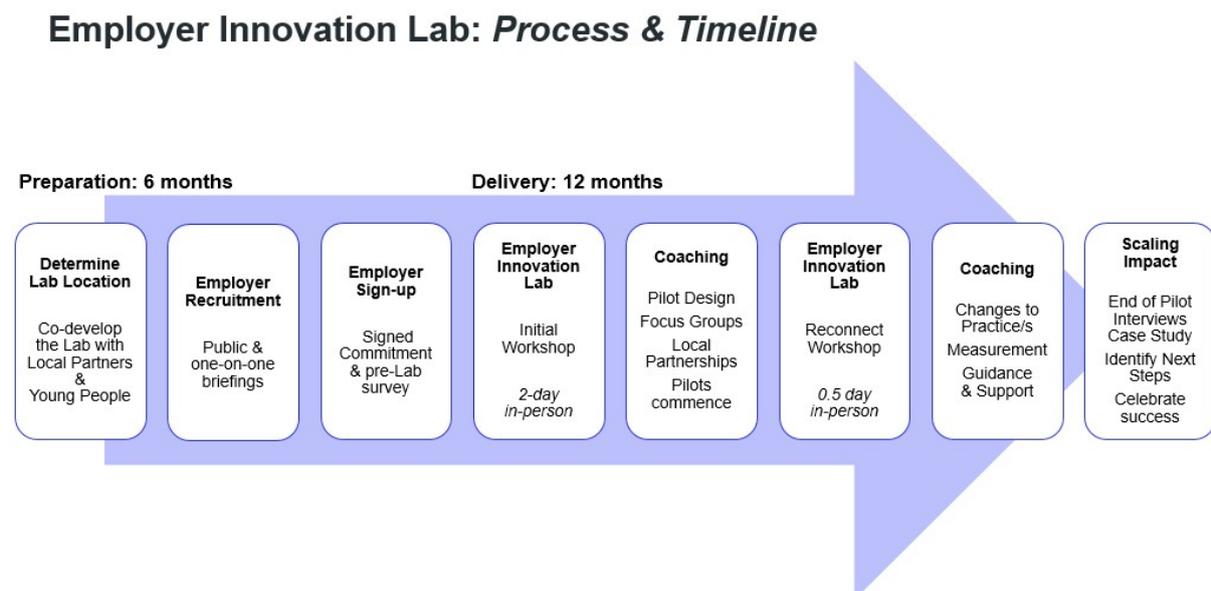
### 3. The Employer Innovation Lab process

The Employer Innovation Lab process comprised:

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/data/recruitment-experiences-and-outlook-survey>

- initial two-day workshops for employers led by SVA, which included support to design a pilot program to affect change in their organisations (the ‘Lab Workshop’)
- tailored coaching support across a 12-month period delivered by the coaching team from SVA (and CYDA for the YPWD Lab)
- connection to community partners such as employment service providers
- ‘Reconnect’ workshop sessions within a 12-month period following the initial Lab Workshop (seven-month period for the YPWD Lab).

Figure 1: The Employer Innovation Lab process and timeline



The Lab was provided at no cost to the participating organisations. However, participating employers were expected to:

- Be committed to improving employment opportunities for young people
- Have support from a senior leader or champion
- Allocate appropriate staff to participating in the Lab process (including at least two staff members participating in the initial workshop – usually a combination of HR, operations and frontline supervisors)

- iv. Develop a pilot program to affect change within their organisation and track their progress

The Lab workshops were designed to be interactive, applied learning experiences to assist participating employers to develop and implement pilot programs that would improve employment opportunities for young people from low socio-economic backgrounds while also meeting organisational performance objectives. A distinctive feature of the workshops was the inclusion of young people as *youth consultants*, who shared their insights and lived experiences of entering the labour market. They also provided feedback on employers' ideas for addressing their organisational challenges, strengthening the design and implementation of pilot projects.

Most workshops were delivered as two full-day sessions conducted in-person, except the first workshop, which ran across three in-person sessions (one full day and two half-days). Table 3 below provides an overview of the eight Labs facilitated by SVA.

Table 3: Summary of the Employment Innovation Labs

<b>Lab</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Workshop Day 1</b>	<b>Workshop Day 2</b>	<b>Workshop Day 3</b>	<b>Reconnect</b>
<b>1</b>	Western Sydney	27-May-22	3-Jun-22	17-Jun-22	24-Nov-23
<b>2</b>	Western Sydney	17-Nov-22	24-Nov-22	NA	24-Nov-23
<b>3</b>	Western Sydney	18-May-23	25-May-23	NA	24-Nov-23
<b>4</b>	Western Melbourne	5-Oct-23	12-Oct-23	NA	29-Feb-24
<b>5</b>	Western Sydney	9-May-24	16-May-24	NA	19-Nov-24
<b>6</b>	Greater Melbourne	8-Aug-24	15-Aug-24	NA	14-Nov-24 20-Mar-25

	(disability focus)				
<b>7</b>	Hobart	29-Oct-24	5-Nov-24	NA	27-Mar-25
<b>8</b>	Western Sydney	20-Jun-25	27-Jun-25	NA	16-Oct-25

The Lab delivery sites were selected based on socio-economic indicators including youth unemployment. SVA advertised the Labs widely through their networks and social media and employers self-selected to participate in the Labs. Prior to each Lab, SVA conducted interviews with young people in the local area about their lived experience of searching for, and being in, paid employment. The data were recorded in a *Youth Voices* report and videos which were shared during the Lab Workshops. Additionally, the Lab coaches met with local stakeholders in each location, including employment service providers, business networks, youth organisations, education and training providers to better understand the local labour market context, services available and local challenges and gaps.

During the initial Lab workshop, SVA presented to employers to key labour market data and insights on youth labour market inequality and the systemic barriers affecting entry and progression, including official statistics and data from the *Youth Voices* reports. Employers gained an understanding of how existing workplace practices could contribute to excluding young people from good quality jobs. They were also introduced to strategies for improving their organisational processes, enabling them to design quality jobs for young people as well as make changes to their hiring processes. The session also featured a panel of employers, including (in later Labs) alumni from previous Labs, who shared their experiences of successful approaches to employing young people. Employers then began designing their pilot programs. The second day of the initial workshop focused on refining and progressing the pilots ready for implementation. In both cases, employers received feedback from the coaching team, youth consultants, and peers to strengthen their plans.

Following the initial workshop, employers began a coaching journey that provided tailored support for pilot design and implementation. During this period the Lab coaches identified appropriate community providers and brokered partnerships with them to support a range of pilot activities. These included identifying appropriate candidates for roles, attending site visits or open days with young people, supporting training, recruitment and onboarding processes and in-work support for both candidates and employers. SVA also facilitated focus groups with existing young employees in participating organisations' workforces, and supported Lab participants in gaining executive approval and buy-in from their organisation. Around a minimum of four months following the initial workshop, employers reconvened for Reconnect sessions (two for the YPWD Lab) to share progress, reflect on challenges and key learnings, and celebrate successes.

#### **4. Evaluation methods**

In order to evaluate the Lab, the research team employed multiple qualitative methods, including non-participant observation, content analysis of documents, 59 semi-structured interviews with employers, and a focus group with the coaching team. At least one member of the research team attended the majority of the initial and second workshops and Reconnect sessions. Relevant Lab documentation was reviewed to provide contextual insights and track developments across the process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with employers who agreed to participate, focusing on understanding their views and experiences of the Lab and their pilot projects. The interview protocols focused on understanding the organisational practice changes that had taken place and the potential for embedding, scaling and replicating them. A further dimension of the interviews was to explore the potential for scalability and replicability of changes across industries and sectors, as well as the communities of practice comprised of Lab alumni. The research team attempted to contact the small number of employers who had disengaged or withdrawn from the Lab process, though this was largely unsuccessful. Finally, a focus group was held with the coaching team

to identify common themes that had emerged from the coaching process and organisations' journeys over the three years of the Labs, as well as to capture how the Lab process had evolved through several iterations. A summary of the participating employers interviewed to date is provided in Tables 4 and 5 table below.

Table 4: Participating employers by organisation size

Number of employees	Number
50-200	9
201-500	9
501-1,000	7
1001-5000	15
5001-10,000	8
more than 10,000	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>51</b>

Table 5: Participating employers by industry sector

Industry	Number
Retail Trade	2
Manufacturing	9
Health Care and Social Assistance	6
Education and Training	0
Accommodation and Food Services	2
Public Administration and Safety	7
Other services	4
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	5
Construction	4
Transport Postal and Warehousing	5
Information, Media and Telecommunications	3
Mining	1
Arts and Recreation Services	2
Insurance and Financial Services	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>51</b>

## 5. Evaluating the effectiveness of the Labs

Evaluation evidence across multiple rounds demonstrates that the Labs are an effective mechanism for fostering organisational change and improving HR practices. Employers consistently reported that the Labs allowed them to dedicate time to reflect on their workforce challenges, supported by a structured process that included ongoing tailored coaching and opportunities for peer learning. Participants viewed the Labs as being particularly effective in opening up critical conversations within their own organisations and amongst peers about systemic barriers to youth employment and the ways in which they as employers might contribute to addressing these challenges. Although the extent of progress inevitably varied across the diverse range of employers, there was significant, emerging evidence of shifts in practice, mindset and behaviour across organisations, with employers demonstrating greater awareness of the barriers faced by young people, and the majority taking steps to adapt their existing recruitment and workplace policies and practices.

*Table 6: Status of organisational pilots at time of writing*

	<b>Workshop Participants</b>	<b>Incomplete Participants</b>	<b>In progress Participants</b>	<b>Completed Participants</b>
<b>Round 1</b>	8	3		5
<b>Round 2</b>	5	2	1	2
<b>Round 3</b>	6	3		3
<b>Round 4</b>	6	1	2	3
<b>Round 5</b>	8	1	5	2
<b>Round 6</b>	8	1	1	6
<b>Round 7</b>	7		4	3
<b>Round 8</b>	5	1	3	1

Table 6 above illustrates the progress of employers through the Lab process. Note that two organisations participated in two different workshops with different teams and pilots involved. As such, there were a total of 53 employer groups that commenced a Lab but only 51 unique organisations that participated. While some employers paused

or discontinued their pilots due to personnel changes or shifting organisational priorities, the frequency of this declined with subsequent iterations of the Lab. It is likely that improved pilot completion rates reflected ongoing internal review of risk factors and continuous refinement of processes. For example, SVA increased the amount of time spent clarifying expectations with potential employers, assessing their readiness and capacity to participate, and screening out organisations with limited executive sponsorship or operational stability. It is possible that, as they accumulated experience in the program, coaches were able to apply this learning to improve progress and completion rates.

In terms of measurable outcomes, 445 young people have secured employment so far and more are in the pipeline. While it is still too early to expect larger-scale impact, (given that meaningful cultural, structural and systemic change is by necessity an incremental process), these results demonstrate the value of the Labs. By equipping employers with new perspectives, practical tools and a stronger commitment to inclusion, the Labs have created a platform from which lasting employment practice changes can emerge and be sustained both within and outside their organisation. An example of dissemination outside the organisation was the employer who noted that although their pilot had stalled due to wider labour market conditions, they drew on their learning from the Lab and support from the coaches to prepare a presentation for an industry association conference. This helped to spark broader conversations about how young people could be better supported in the workplace and the importance of moving beyond traditional 'business as usual' approaches:

*I know [name of coach] from SVA wanted to help us do a presentation at our association conference, we do one every two years... the talk that [name] did was about young people in the workplace – you know young people in the workplace aren't the same as your [industry] supervisor who's been there for 40 years, you've got to treat them differently. So that's something that [name of co-worker] did, she was inspired to do that because of what we were doing with SVA... sitting down with hosts or prospective clients, especially ones that had been a problem children in the past, and saying hey this is a problem, not just in your industry but every industry and it needs to change. But especially so because the [industry] is statistically ageing and if they don't replace their workers they're not going to have an industry soon and they need to stop being so old school and just like it doesn't matter if someone is a woman or not or if*

*they come from a different background. Some people can do the job and some people can't. You just need to look at them... train them... it doesn't matter who they are. Sometimes I'm always like at this point you don't have enough time to be picky, your industry is going to collapse if you don't fix it. So it's kind of given us the confidence to sit down and have those conversations because some of them need it. - 1B*

### *Summary of key findings*

- Approximately 83 per cent of the 40 employers interviewed described organisational practice changes that had occurred within their organisations as a result of their participation in the Lab. These changes ranged from small adjustments, such as simplifying position descriptions and job advertisements, to more significant shifts, including redesigning recruitment and selection processes, implementing workplace adjustments, and the design and rollout of training programs. A small number of employers faced organisational constraints that limited the extent of change but there was still evidence of mindset changes in these workplaces.
- A total of 25 out of 53 total employers in all Labs (approximately 47 per cent) had completed their pilot projects at the time of writing (February 2026). All reported that they were able to see the benefits and impacts of their pilot projects in their workplaces.
- 80% of the 15 employers who had completed their pilots at the time of the follow-up interview reported that they had plans to embed, replicate, or build on the learning from the Labs, or had already done so. The three employers who had no plans to embed, replicate, or build on their learning provided the following reasons: it was difficult to justify because of the lack of return on investment to show management (2B); a general lack of organisational appetite because of other organisational priorities (5C); or because the champion was exiting the organisation and there was uncertainty (3D).
- 100 per cent of the employers interviewed reported that they found the tools, resources or examples provided by SVA useful. In particular, employers highlighted the importance of the practical support offered - including access to relevant data,

structured resources, and coaching - and the opportunity to develop connections with other participants and community partners. The facilitation by SVA has led to an emerging community of practice and the ability for Lab participants to learn from peers to support the development and implementation of their ideas and pilot projects.

- 95 per cent of the 40 employers interviewed reported that their Lab experience had increased their understanding of the labour market challenges faced by young people. The opportunity to hear first-hand perspectives from youth consultants and understand relevant labour market data shifted employer thinking about the barriers that young people face. This led many employers to identify ways in which they could build more inclusive employment pathways, including adapting recruitment and onboarding processes, redesigning roles, and strengthening workplace supports to better attract, retain and develop young people, including young people with disabilities.

## **6. Employers' experiences of the Lab**

Employers' reflections, gathered through interviews and feedback across multiple rounds of the Lab, provide valuable insight into how the process was experienced in practice and where it generated the greatest impact. Employers joined the Labs for a range of reasons, including the opportunity to access new talent pools, align action with their stated organisational values, strengthen recruitment and employment practices, and learn from peers, youth consultants and external experts. For some, the structured nature of the Lab was key to their decision to participate, providing dedicated time, coaching and accountability that provided them the opportunity and space to focus on implementing change in their organisations.

While the specifics of each organisation's journey varied, several consistent themes emerged across the evaluation. Employers highlighted the dimensions of the Lab process that were most powerful, the organisational challenges that shaped their

ability to act, and the ways in which the Labs compared with other approaches they had encountered. Their accounts also illuminated the levers that can drive practice change within organisations, offering important lessons for strengthening future iterations of the Lab and for how similar initiatives might continue to build momentum for more inclusive employment practices.

### **6.1 The most impactful dimensions of the Lab process**

Employers identified several aspects of the Lab process as being particularly impactful. Coaching was consistently identified as important. The partnership developed between participating employers and SVA coaches helped employers to maintain accountability, stay on track and remain focused. Coaches provided impartial feedback, and challenged employers to move beyond existing practices to facilitate employment for young people.

*I just wanted to reiterate how helpful and supportive [coach] and [coach] have been throughout this time. I felt definitely those coaching sessions with them, that's been what's helped us to get any of this stuff done. And whether it's them sharing resources or providing suggestions or guidance that has saved me a bunch of time from having to sort of create from scratch or think off my own back. Or whether it's just that, as I said, keeping me accountable to keep the wheels rolling, you know. And they've been really supportive throughout that time as well and really helpful. - 4B*

*They've definitely kept me on track. I know being quite busy this is something that could have dragged out for a lot longer than it did but having those coaching sessions set up with some really strong measurables and a timeline in place definitely had me step through it, whereas I know for a fact that had I not had SVA as a partner to help schedule those and schedule those regular coaching sessions it would be on my backburner. - 3C*

*Knowing that you've been partnered up with someone who's as passionate as you are to make this successful. The ongoing meetings that we have. If I needed anything, they're prompt with providing me information and that support. So I think it's the seeing that we're on this journey together from the get-go is what I found quite powerful out of this experience. - 8C*

Employers valued the Lab and coaching process for its flexibility rather than the one-size-fits-all approach taken by similar programs. Rather than imposing changes, the SVA team worked with each organisation to identify what would be most feasible and effective in their specific organisation:

*They haven't been rigid in saying, "This is what we need the pilot to be like." They have understood our business practices and processes and tried to work around that to get a pilot off the ground, so a pretty low impact, if you like. They don't want to change the world for their pilot, it's more working around what we currently do. Also, they have some ideas about different ways of getting a pilot up and running, so if one thing isn't working, maybe the pilot takes a different shape and maybe we do something else that doesn't result in an employment outcome right now, but sets us up for when we do have an employment opportunity down the road. So I think they've been quite accommodating in working with us to just understand our business practices. - 4A*

Importantly, for Lab participants who were not the decision makers in the workplace, the presence and support of the SVA team (and coaches) as external inputs provided authoritative weight to their ideas:

*From my perspective, it's just having someone, the SVA, backing it and saying, "These are the reasons why I should do it. This is how it's led to great outcomes." It's like a bit of, I don't know, weight behind the pitch. You could say, "We're not really supporting our community as much as we could be. Why aren't we?" and here's SVA saying, "This is how we should do it." - 4E*

*You are bringing a third party in, like a different voice, and all of a sudden it adds credibility, there's a level of openness to it. Because I remember meeting with the branch managers for the last 18 months and then being probably sick to death of hearing my voice. And then we bring someone in from SVA and it's like "oh, how good is this; this is a great idea. Try this, try that" there is like this fresh energy. So having SVA come in as a third party has been wonderful... it's just created a level of openness from other stakeholders that probably if it was just me again leading the change with [name] and [name], they would be like "oh, here comes [name] again". You add [coach] to a call or someone else and all of a sudden it's like "oh great, let's have a workshop" they are all enthusiastic. "Try working with this person, try working with that person, your approach is right, but maybe alter it here."... we've been saying this for 18 months, you know, and the minute someone else says it, it's like gospel. - 5C*

Employers also reported that the input of youth consultants was especially powerful and allowed them to gain a better understanding of the challenges that young people face regarding labour market entry and their broader workplace experiences:

*I also loved when they had the youth consultants come in to talk about their journey so far and the barriers they're faced with finding employment and just hearing that people weren't giving them the chance or they were facing mental health problems and the work just kind of added to that because of the environment and things like that. So, I thought that was incredibly valuable to hear their perspective. - 1B*

*Getting to meet the youth face-to-face and have those face-to-face discussions I found really powerful because it was something that I didn't think I would have the opportunity to do to really ask the hard questions and get the hard answers, so that was very powerful. - 7B*

Being able to access direct insights from young people was an important foundation for employers to enact changes to job design, vacancy advertisements, recruitment and selection processes, and workplace adjustments:

*They brought in some young people into one of the initial sessions, and we got them to read our job ads, we got to speak to them one on one about what they're looking for. That, for me, was very insightful, because I think I definitely saw there be a shift in the way people thought about jobs compared to when say, [name] and I, who were involved in the pilot, were younger. I remember there was one girl that said she had quit her job because it didn't align with her values, and this is what she was looking for, and she wasn't going to get a new job until she found something that did, which was quite interesting, because that's not something that we really consider when we're writing our job ads, looking at trying to focus on some of the things that we do from trying to attract younger people into the workplace. So, I personally thought that that was very, very helpful, and something that forced us to look at things differently, when we got that feedback and information. - 1H*

*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. - 6G*

The structured workshops created time and space for employers to step out of their workplaces with routine responsibilities and reflect with colleagues:

*It was also good to bring us together. We three as a group have never worked together from different parts – [name] and I have worked together, but [name] sort of, it's a brand new thing for him. So it was good for him to come in and a good experience for him and to gradually realise how important the work that say SVA do, how many more organisations are involved. That was a bit of an eyeopener as well. - 1F*

*I think it's created drive, it created the opportunity for the [organisation] to provide some focus and some time for it, and just providing four people to go to the workshop for two days in itself was a great gift of the organisation that we could then continue to follow up and drive. So I think it provided an opportunity for us to be more cohesive and to actually have an end product. - 5B*

Additionally, the workshops provided opportunities for peer learning and networking, which employers viewed as highly beneficial for sharing of experiences and receiving feedback:

*It was great to be in a room I suppose with other organisations that were looking at implementing these type of plans and even just listening to some of the hurdles that they had, and I suppose, not objections, but pushback that they might have had from other people within their organisation was insightful for us. So we learned from some of those experiences as well. - 4C*

*The first thing that comes to my mind is I think having different people from different organisations, and all the organisations are quite different, but it was really interesting to have everybody come together and see the different challenges that each of them are facing, and the different focuses that each of them are facing, and be able to information share. It was interesting to see that a lot of the organisations had similar challenges to us. So, that was really impactful, I think, to kind of... When you're in your own organisation and your own role, it's very easy to kind of get tunnel vision. So, that was really an opportunity that if we didn't have the lab, we wouldn't have been able to experience. - 5D*

An employer reflected on the importance of peer learning in building confidence and commitment to the pilot within their organisation. The quote below illustrates how

observing successful implementation in another workplace offers a level of validation and tangible proof that the model works in practice:

*We also got the ability to go and visit [another organisation that had previously completed the Lab]... and that for us was huge. My production manager and my supervisor on the floor, when they see another business actually doing what they said they were doing and that it does actually truly work, you can't take away seeing with your eyes that it actually did work. You can say it, but seeing it is different. - 8A*

Finally, employers spoke positively about the facilitation and tools provided by SVA (and CYDA in the PWD Lab), noting that these resources, along with supporting connections and conversations with community partners (such as employment service providers), were instrumental in moving from ideas to pilot design and implementation:

*The information that they provided in the Lab was really insightful because we weren't aware of a lot of stuff that they talked about. So that was really good and the feedback that they provided on our materials and ideas and process in terms of setting up the pilot was very helpful and in fact has carried through to other things that we're looking at here. In fact, I just referred to it today, interestingly, just around more early careers type candidates and how we might interact with them and attract them. So that was really helpful. - 2A*

*They've been incredibly good at providing frameworks in which to run your project, so the whole project management tool. They've got really good infrastructures around helping keep your project on track; so regular check-ins have been really good. When we looked at implementing, because our model - or our project - is all based on retention, they've got a really good coaching methodology which they shared with us and they were able to connect us with an organisation who were running coaching training as well. So they've been really good at supporting you with a toolkit. If you don't have it - they can step in and go "hey, we've got this, why don't you try that". Or if you are going to try what you are doing in-house, "why don't you look at what we've got and perhaps that can build upon what you are doing". So yeah. I couldn't say it's one thing because every step along the way they've had this amazing toolkit where they go "here you go, why don't you try this, why don't you do that". - 5C*

*Through this employment pilot, we actually connected with [organisation] and [organisation] as well, so [organisation], so partners provided potential candidates who wanted to apply for the role, and at the end of the pilot, we actually made an offer to a candidate who was supported by [organisation], so we are continuing their relationship, obviously with [organisation], beyond the*

*life of the pilot, they'll provide follow up support... SVA was the introducing organisation. - 6E*

The SVA coaches provided a unique set of skills, competencies and knowledge, having combined experiences spanning decades of work across different organisations and industries, employment services, change management and conflict resolution and with a focus on well-being, fairness and social justice.

## **6.2 Organisational challenges**

Alongside the positive experiences of the Lab, employers also described a range of challenges that impacted both the progress of their pilots and the broader process of organisational and HR practice change. Resource and budget constraints were the most commonly reported, with some organisations unable to move forward due to hiring freezes or the absence of vacancies, while others struggled to sustain momentum and support for their pilot initiatives:

*I think getting further and further through the pilot for us it's become apparent that we probably don't have the amount of positions that we require to have a really successful pilot and for that pilot to really take off for us at the moment. We're also going through a number of changes in the organisation, things to do with our budgets and our salaries and salary savings as well that are meaning that we have to halt positions as well. So we're not really, I guess, going to be able to get the full value out of the pilot this year unfortunately and that's just the change in landscape in the organisation really. - 3A*

*It's been a little bit tough; we haven't been able to really make that much of an impact with the pilot so far. Since September there's been a few more organisational changes and we are going through a little bit of a restructure with some reductions at the moment. So we haven't been able to make a lot of, like a huge amount of change in this space. Like it really just has been around focusing more around awareness in the organisation and just getting ready in terms of a process for this pilot once all of this kind of organisational change happens. So yeah, I think I'm feeling like in a little bit of a holding pattern at the moment, which is tough but also kind of the support from SVA in this time has been really helpful to kind of get us to still progress, knowing that we are not going to be to implement anything major right now, but just to say "hey we have all this information, we have all this stuff ready to go" so that when our organisation is ready to bring some more people into the organisation, for example, we have everything set up. - 6B*

In some instances, organisations realised that they did not have the capacity to hire, which left them feeling limited in terms of what they could achieve during the timescale of their pilot implementation. In other cases, organisations found it too difficult to implement change at that particular point in time. In these situations, there was little that SVA could have done to better support them. Nevertheless, organisations reported that they acquired valuable learning about the challenges faced by young people and had identified how to initiate steps within their organisation towards change.

Despite the reported advantages of the structured Lab process, many participants found it difficult to balance pilot development and delivery with day-to-day operational responsibilities, reflecting the wider challenge of resourcing for longer-term, strategic change.

Personnel changes and shifting organisational priorities occasionally disrupted continuity, which in turn slowed or halted momentum towards embedding new practices:

*And as of myself tomorrow is going to be my last day. My contract has ended. So not sure who's going to be – there's no replacement as such. So there are Team Leaders who have taken over in the space that I was given the notice. So they have taken over. And they have taken the responsibility of this. I am not sure if they're aware of this pilot program or not because it was truly upon myself... because I was taking care of these people and managing them all the way through I'm not sure if it's going to carry on in the same way or not. - 3D*

While disruptions occurred, employers reported that the Lab process, especially the coaching, assisted them to bring about change in their organisations:

*As a high-level concept, it seemed from afar like it would be a bit of work but not too bad. Then probably about maybe two months out, when we started to get to a more detailed planning logistics, suddenly realised, "This is a lot.*

*There's a lot of work that needs to happen here to actually make this a success." That's where SVA was really good, because I was feeling a bit overwhelmed and like, "I don't know if this is doable, because I've got to now do it on my own, basically." Because the other people that had been working on it had either left the organisation or were pulled away. That's when they came in and helped me with some templates on... what does a good program template look like, and the buddy program stuff, and that sort of thing. So, that helped me manage at least comms and some of the paperwork stuff that I needed to put together. But yeah, as we got closer and there were more details, it was like, "Oh, I haven't thought of that. Oh, no, I haven't organised that." - 2B*

*I'm involved in another project and I basically had to, in order to stand this one up, I had to combine it with the other one. So this is now, because it's a coaching method, we are attaching it to an orientation rebuild that we've been working on because it is kind of within the same realm. They are not the most tangible links, but they are links nonetheless to keep the work going. Otherwise we would have just had to park it and I think we've learned some really valuable lessons, that there's too much good gone into it to have parked it... because we are not an agile business, so when we started this our [location] branches were perfect because they weren't going through this huge change. Three months ago they were now like "hey, we are now going through this transformation, stop everything you are doing". - 5C*

Employers also spoke about the barriers to the translation of Lab learnings into existing organisational systems and structures, particularly within larger organisations where HR policies and recruitment processes were highly standardised and the operating environment was constrained:

*It was really about systemic changes in most places, what we identified. We identified a lot of existing resources, but we think activating them is probably like the impact that you could have because if no one knows they're there, they're not going to be utilised. So I think sort of just some systemic structural opportunities, but because it is whole of government, it's major work to do that. And we're in a contracting budget environment. It's not the right time. - 6G*

Beyond the pilots themselves, participants acknowledged the broader challenge of securing buy-in across their organisations and ensuring that inclusive practices

became embedded in culture and systems, rather than remaining isolated efforts within a specific work area or team:

*I wouldn't say it's a disadvantage but I think it's a massive project for us, it's huge. We're breaking down generations of them thinking they know what their business needs and also them having some old school values. We're still trying to change their perspective a lot. Some welcome us with open arms and are really engaged and want to encourage it, where some are still a bit sceptical as well, particularly around young females in these types of hands on trade. So, I think of the other layers just it's internal, it's just having these big ideas and plans how we can actually communicate this out. But obviously we've got a whole other level of management that we've got to get this stuff across to and approval for budgets and things like that if you want to have morning teas and events and take up space in the members' newsletter and stuff like that. - 1B*

*In my unit and my team, we're doing it. Other units are doing it and some not at all, it's not even in their wheelhouse. So it's really difficult to make change across the board when everyone is at such different levels and preparedness to do things. I can do it on a small scale within the unit I sit in and do it fairly well. I try and take that across to other units and they're like, "I don't have time for this. I can't do it." Then you try and make the slow changes. I'm working with the HR team and there's a couple of people in there who really get it but it's hard to trickle that down everywhere. - 4E*

These findings highlight that while the Labs were effective in starting the conversation around inclusive employment, sustaining practice and culture change requires longer-term commitment and alignment from organisations themselves, in particular in relation to their strategy. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, there was evidence that the Lab process assisted organisations to put in place the building blocks for further change. The coaches played an important role here in supporting employers to obtain buy-in from their organisation upfront and throughout the process.

### **6.3 Comparison of Labs with existing approaches**

When reflecting on how the Lab process compared with other approaches in which participating employers had engaged, or considered engaging, many employers noted that they had not previously engaged with comparable external programs and a small

number observed that their previous initiatives had largely been handled within the organisation rather than engaging with external parties. However, we identified two key differences that separate the Labs from other approaches to date.

Firstly, the Labs offered a structured and comprehensive process that provided continuity, accountability and wrap-around support. This was distinct from conventional approaches to engaging employers in employment services, which largely focus on filling vacancies<sup>23</sup>. For many employers, the activity of participating in an externally facilitated program created momentum and discipline that would have been difficult to establish on their own. Employers contrasted the Labs with other forms of training or professional development, highlighting that the combination of coaching, facilitated workshops and opportunities to connect with peers and community partners created a uniquely supportive environment. In particular, coaching was seen as more than technical advice: it helped organisations to remain on track while providing an avenue for building partnerships that could extend beyond the pilot. The opportunity to hear from and work alongside other employers was likewise valued, as it allowed participants to compare experiences, see tangible examples of how inclusive practices could be implemented, and adapt lessons for their own contexts.

Second, a further distinguishing feature of the Labs was the involvement of young people themselves. Having both the supply and demand sides of the labour market in the same room helped to break down barriers. For example, employers emphasised that being able to hear directly from youth consultants made the Labs markedly different from any previous initiatives. Employers found that the first-hand input from young people enabled employers to challenge assumptions within their organisation that might otherwise have gone unexamined. Employers also noted that being able to have an open dialogue with young people within the context of the Labs added

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<sup>23</sup> Ingold, J., Kakhkharov, J. and Lee, Q. Y. (2025) 'The case for reorienting active labor market policies towards the demand-side', *The Australian Economic Review*, 58(4), pp. 326-331.

authenticity to ground their organisational initiatives within the lived experiences of young people.

Together, these reflections suggest that the Labs offered a distinctive model compared with employers' prior experiences: a comprehensive, supportive and participatory process that not only facilitated organisational reflection and experimentation but also created conditions for more sustainable and youth-informed organisational practice change. The uniqueness of the Labs model is also underscored by research. Active labour policies, which are the foundation for employment services, and a range of labour market initiatives to move the unemployed into work are based on a supply-side focus. This means an overriding focus on case management and preparing individuals for employment, without accounting for the behaviours and practices of the demand-side (employers).<sup>24</sup>

There are few examples in Australia of genuinely demand-led initiatives that work intensively with organisations to improve their practices. Effective engagement of employers by employment service providers involves more than providers taking job orders. However, to partner effectively with employers to foster opportunities for young people from low socio-economic backgrounds requires managers to build an understanding of their own organisation, identifying potential barriers and redressing them in order to improve their employment practices.<sup>25</sup> Good examples of this include pre-employment programs co-designed with one or more employers from a particular industry and focused on hiring candidates for specific roles, bringing together candidates and employers. The benefits of this type of approach are the breaking down of barriers on both sides – tailored support to prepare candidates for a specific organisation and role and close working with hiring managers to enact minor modifications to their hiring practices. There are a number of key differences between such demand-oriented approaches and the Labs process which is an in-depth

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<sup>24</sup> Ingold, J., Kakhkharov, J. and Lee, Q.Y. (2025) The case for reorienting active labour market policies towards the demand-side, *Australian Economic Review*, 58(4), pp. 326-331.

<sup>25</sup> Ingold, J., Knox, A., Macaulay, L. and Senewiratne, S. (2023). 'What about me?': An analysis of employers' engagement with employment service providers in Australia. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 65(3), 251-273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221856231159512>

approach to uncovering barriers on the demand-side including those that may not be immediately apparent, as well as the important role of coaches in the Lab process. A further difference is that, while the Labs led to 445 direct job outcomes, the Labs were not so much based on assisting particular individuals into specific job roles but, rather, focused on changing specific practices for the longer-term. This is important because the endeavour of changing organisations' practices involves different actors at different levels of the organisation as well as across different teams, policies, processes and practices, requiring a broader remit and in-depth work over an extended period. Importantly, the Labs also connected employers with community organisations such as employment service providers. Research recognises that employers lack knowledge about employment services and the Lab coaches provided support to foster relationships between such partners and employers, as well as to the wider labour market ecosystem.<sup>26</sup> The next section looks in more detail at the levers that led to employer practice change in the Labs.

#### ***6.4 Levers that enable employer practice changes***

This section identifies the enabling conditions that seemed to be most critical in enabling change to occur through the Lab. These included: leadership support; internal commitment and communication; flexibility and adaptation to organisational context and constraints; and pilot success and scalability.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.socialventures.org.au/about/publications/working-with-employers-to-advance-opportunity/>

#### 6.4.1 Leadership support

Senior leadership support was identified as a critical lever for achieving broader practice change within organisations. At this level, leaders set organisational priorities, allocate resources and signal the importance of new approaches. When senior leaders were engaged early, organisations reported far greater momentum and confidence to implement and embed inclusive practices:

*[name] is somebody who just says, "Don't talk about it. Let's do something." So, if you don't have a CEO who's like that, you're not going to achieve something. So, because I had a can-do attitude CEO who said, "Let's put something in place" and went and did it, we created something out of nothing. - 3B*

*There were no real holdups within the organisation. We're a company owned decentralised model. So for me, all the decisions for [location], [location], essentially it's up to me, unless there's something big. There's still some input from up the top but if I want to close a store, I'll close a store. If it's time to open a new store I'll put an argument forward and we'll open a new store. So all of that is up to me. We're quite, I guess, flexible in that way to be able to make change that suits our own area. So that wasn't really a holdup for us, which probably meant why we've been able to move pretty quickly and make it happen. - 3A*

Another organisation provided particularly rich insights into how senior leadership engagement shaped their pilot. The senior leader emphasised how their direct involvement accelerated decision-making and removed internal barriers:

*I can make a decision and it happens and we can make it go. So it's not just me. If anyone else has a good idea, we only have to have one or two conversations and it can fly. Yeah, there's not barriers there, we don't, we're not someone that says no, we're eager to hear and if someone says a good idea, we're not going to say no. - 1F*

From the perspective of the HR manager in the same organisation, senior leadership involvement combined with regular communication was equally critical to ensuring the pilot's success across departments:

*So as the CEO, he really oversaw everything, whereas I would say in a lot of organisations, the CEO would just be like, here you guys go and do it. Whereas he stayed very hands-on and has, even continuing with that. [name] and [name]*

*were obviously involved to get that up and running, and then once the program actually started, it was really, I was involved from making sure they all knew where they were going to be going for their rotations, all those kinds of things. The regular contact, building that relationship, and then it was the involvement from everyone within all those departments. So you had your team leaders or your mentors who would be assigned. So there was a presence across every part of the organisation to ensure that it was completed. - 1F*

In addition, when asked about how they continued embedding the changes, the HR manager reflected on why their pilot had been so successful compared with some other organisations in the Lab:

*I think it's cheating because I think it's the simple fact that we have a CEO that is so invested and motivated in the program, so he's really the one driving it and wants to see this succeed and not just be something that fizzles out, essentially. And so I think when you have someone at the top who is really driving that, why wouldn't it succeed? Whereas, yeah, I think for other organisations, it could be management below that level that are the ones driving it, but if the CEO isn't on board, it's really hard to keep that going. - 1F*

Together these perspectives from the CEO and HR manager illustrate how visible, hands-on senior leadership and buy-in in the early stages of the Lab, coupled with consistent communication and organisation-wide involvement, can remove barriers, accelerate decision-making and create the conditions for sustained practice change.

While SVA required formal sign off from a senior leader before accepting employers into a Lab, this support was not always sufficient, or sustained. Where senior leadership support was not present, considerable time was spent trying to secure leadership buy-in after initiatives began, as well as convincing other teams or departments to participate. This process was described as difficult and time-consuming, and in some cases led to changes stalling or failing to be embedded by the participating employers.

One employer explained that, while they were expected to report to their senior leadership and executive teams on inclusive employment initiatives, they were unsure how high a priority this would remain amid organisational changes, budget cuts and salary savings. They noted that recruitment for roles had already been halted due to financial constraints, which made it difficult to secure the resources and energy needed to act on the opportunities identified through the Lab:

*We're also going through a number of changes in the organisation, things to do with our budgets and our salaries and salary savings as well that are meaning that we have to halt positions as well. So we're not really going to be able to get the full value out of the pilot this year unfortunately and that's just the change in landscape in the organisation really... it's definitely given us something to think about and work over the next 12 months as well in terms of us not having probably the largest amount of entry level positions into the organisation or apprenticeships or traineeships as well... So that's really given us something to kind of think about and hopefully something that we're able to push, but again we report to a senior leadership team and an executive team and whether or not that's on their agenda too is something else. - 3A*

Another organisation indicated that when key senior leaders were not onboard early, there can be struggles to justify the costs associated with their suggested pilot project for little to no return:

*So, our ops manager has had a conversation with the chief operating officer and our HR director, just to figure out... The argument is that it's not fair for them to increase their headcount and cost over what [name] said, someone who probably won't be able to produce at a level of... how do I describe this? Yeah. You know what I mean. So, they were trying to negotiate a way forward and our HR director has agreed that for their first year, HR would cover 50 percent of that headcount. So, that's our commitment, and now it's still up to the operational business to decide the rest. - 5D*

Taken together, these experiences highlight the importance of involving senior leaders early in the design and implementation of change initiatives to create the organisational conditions necessary for sustained and meaningful practice change.

#### 6.4.2 Internal commitment and communication

Alongside senior leadership support, consistent messaging and broad organisational buy-in emerged as an important lever for sustaining practice change. While senior

leaders can set the vision and allocate resources, embedding inclusive practices requires the message to filter through all levels of the organisation - from executives to line managers and frontline staff. Messages from senior leadership can sometimes become diluted or misinterpreted as it moves through the organisation, so it is essential they are turned into clear expectations for managers and staff at all levels. One organisation described how they addressed this challenge:

*From our end on, okay, I can see that there's a challenge, why don't we put a system in place so if that does happen, we can overcome that straight away. An example of that was we developed supervisor training, and the reason why we developed that supervisor training is that I might be talking with executives at a high level about implementing a [program], but that doesn't always filter down to middle management. So in order for middle management to really know what the hell is going on with a [candidate], how do I manage this person and what are the expectations, we put together - we built an online training portal for that so they could understand that. - 4C*

This example highlights how developing training and systems can help translate high-level commitments into consistent practice and expectations across the organisation. A feature of organisations that enacted practice change was that their pilots were able to leverage existing commitments within the organisation - an example being Corporate Social Responsibility – and were therefore considered to be of value to achieving the organisation's strategy. A particularly important lever for employers who participated in the Lab in Melbourne focused on young people with disabilities was soft law in the form of social procurement targets. Here the coaching was identified as important in supporting people within organisations to identify the levers and budget lines which were important to enacting change.

#### *6.4.3 Flexibility and adaptation to the organisational context and constraints*

Although the Lab process was structured to provide a framework and guidance for employers, at the same time the process was not rigid. Building such flexibility into the design and implementation of pilots assisted organisations to adapt and modify their change processes and allowed for greater opportunity for success. While structured guidelines are necessary to ensure consistency in the implementation process,

organisations that are able to adapt timelines, pilot designs, and communication strategies to suit their own context and needs will likely have stronger engagement and a greater likelihood of embedding the changes. One employer described how feedback from participants prompted them to rethink their approach to training:

*I think from this experience I think we're looking at potentially changing the training module so it's a bit more on the job as opposed to just classroom... We find that the feedback from potential candidates is they'd like to do online at the same time as opposed to- we've run this program before where the candidates have just been in sort of I guess the classroom for a day or two, and the feedback is it just doesn't work especially for younger demographic where they need to keep engaged, won't understand why they're doing it. - 2A*

This example illustrates how within the Lab process, particularly their pilot initiatives, organisations have the scope to iterate and continuously improve their implementation. This meant that the process was able to bring about more responsive, youth-friendly practices in line with changing organisational priorities and resourcing, increasing the likelihood of embedding change.

#### *6.4.4 Pilot success and potential for scalability*

Our findings suggest that the successful implementation of organisations' pilots and their capacity to be scaled also emerged as a lever for employer practice change. Pilots that were designed in ways that allowed implementation across multiple teams, sites or cohorts were more likely to gain traction and support internally. Such pilots built stronger organisational ownership and created clearer pathways for embedding changes beyond the initial project. By contrast, initiatives that remained small or tightly contained were more vulnerable to staff turnover, shifting priorities or resource constraints, and often struggled to sustain momentum and to gain traction beyond their initial scope. This was succinctly explained by an employer:

*I don't think we had any vacancies in the teams in [location] for at least another eight or nine months after he'd done his internship. We just had a very low turnover period. So, whilst the biggest hope of doing the internship was that we could put him in an ongoing role, we then couldn't give him that opportunity, and I guess it's a massive investment, time wise, money wise, for us to create that opportunity if we're not getting anything back from a business point of view, in terms of a committed staff member. Then all that is, is a sunk investment, as much as it might feel good that we're helping those people, we're not getting a return on investment. So, the upscale and repeat it is not as attractive, as a business. It's not a win-win situation. - 2B*

It is also essential that organisations are able to see the impact and outcomes of the changes they introduce, with understanding of the real people behind the numbers. One employer highlighted how seeing tangible outcomes and the human stories can strengthen motivation to sustain and scale inclusive practices beyond the initial pilot:

*Scaling up would be important to me and also, I'm interested in real outcomes, you know, we're dealing with real people that have had real issues and this is a bit more me, I suppose, you know, I've been involved in major construction projects where you've got to have four per cent indigenous component or you've got to have this per cent something else. They are great benchmarks and goals to go after that I'm not just interested in satisfying the figures. There're real people involved behind those figures and I'm interested in a real difference and why should it just be the figures, also? If we opened the story up further and wider, maybe both internally and maybe a lot more employers out there would understand the pipeline that is available to them that maybe traditional recruitment techniques or whatever are preventing and causing those barriers from those young people getting the opportunities and firms missing out on the opportunities with those young people. - 5E*

These findings point to the value of encouraging employers to consider the longer-term potential for broader impact from the outset, even if full-scale implementation is a longer-term goal. As the Labs continuously evolved, SVA placed more emphasis on the aim of employers' pilots being to inform organisational conversations on embedding, scaling and replicating initiatives.

### ***6.5 Encouraging employers to increase the availability of quality jobs for young people at risk of labour market exclusion***

In addition to data analysis, we explored academic research and grey literature to understand the potential barriers to implementing good job opportunities and how they might be redressed. Existing research conducted by Warwick Institute for Employment Research<sup>27</sup> points to six thematic areas capable of creating barriers to implementing quality job opportunities. Firstly, financial constraints create a key barrier. The Labs assist with overcoming this barrier by supporting employers to build a successful business case to gain the required permissions and buy-in from leaders and other levels of management to embark on a project, task or policy. Typically, this involves an assessment of the costs and benefits associated with the decision to try out a different approach and the resourcing constraints which are evidenced through the evaluation data suggest this took place within the Lab process. Nevertheless, some employers cited issues regarding financial constraints, including budget cuts and hiring freezes.

Secondly, management attitudes and characteristics can create barriers to change. These include a range of managerial attributes and dispositions, such as managerial skills and commitment to the creation of new opportunities. Employers are more inclined to increase the availability of good quality opportunities when they demonstrate an awareness of the benefits linked to 'good jobs', and commitment towards advancing employee wellbeing. The absence of these elements can be a barrier to implementing good jobs. During the Labs, employers received information regarding the benefits of good jobs. Additionally, they were exposed to information related to the importance of good jobs through labour market and other data (such as the *Youth Voices* report) and young people themselves. This led to increased understanding on the part of participating employers concerning the importance of good jobs and how organisations were creating barriers. Participants then took this

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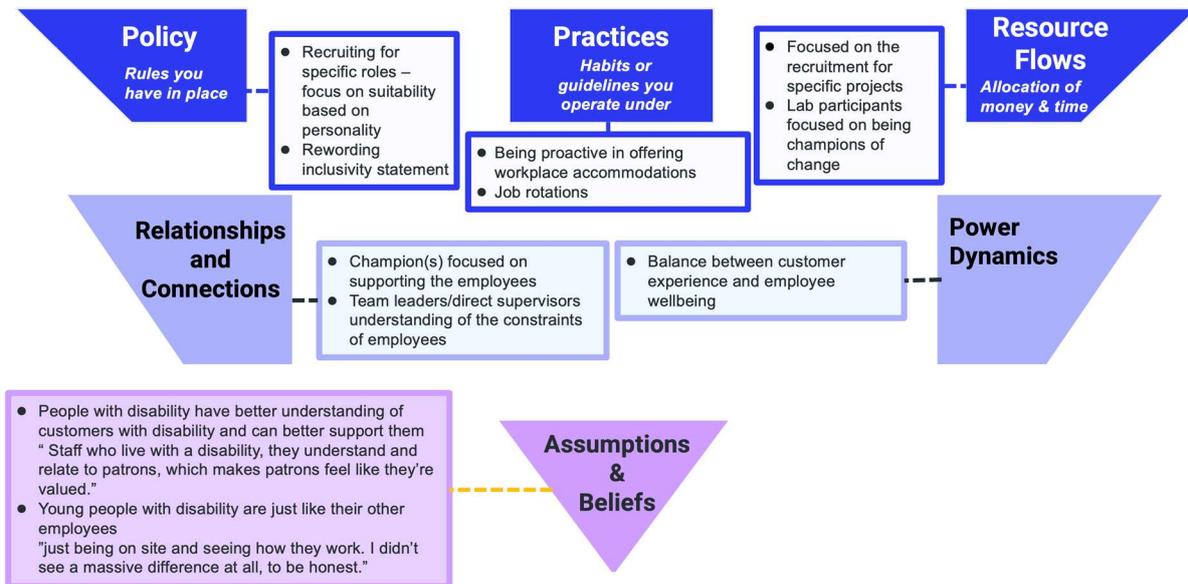
<sup>27</sup> Erickson, E., Harris, J., Lee, S. and Warhurst, C. (2024) "*Understanding barriers to implementing good work practices*". ACAS & Warwick Institute for Employment Research. Unpublished report.

learning back to their own organisations. The evaluation data above provide multiple examples of the Labs bringing about changes to managerial attitudes, which in turn led to practice changes.

Thirdly, organisational culture can be a barrier. Good jobs are more likely to be created when the organisational culture, that is the collective beliefs, values and behaviours that define the workplace environment, support change, value mutual respect and possess a management philosophy consistent with good human resource management. Importantly, the Labs process led to changes in assumptions and beliefs which underpinned existing practices. Uncovering and changing pre-existing assumptions and beliefs involved a process of peeling back the layers of rules, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections and power dynamics.

Figure 2 below depicts an example to illustrate how one of the employers who participated in the Melbourne Lab (focused on young people with disability) changed different elements of their existing approaches to recruiting and retaining people with disability. The figure highlights how changing assumptions and beliefs around employing people with disability were both fundamental to practice changes and contributed to the benefits accrued to the organisation, such as increased outcomes and performance.

Figure 2. Example of practice change aligned with SVA's theory of change model



Fourthly, organisational structures involving internal bureaucratic systems and procedures, particularly in large firms, can impede the implementation of good jobs. Firms with more flexible structures and procedures are more inclined to support the development of good jobs. The Labs included a diversity of organisations of medium to large size. While most firms effectively navigated their internal systems and procedures, some larger firms reported difficulties. These findings suggest that additional effort and capability may be required within larger firms.

Fifthly, implementation gaps that challenge the translation of high-level directives into practical actions can create barriers. Firms are better able to implement good jobs when their stated policies and actual practices are aligned and consistent. Participating organisations were expected to have secured buy-in from senior leaders prior to commencing the Lab process. The majority of organisations did have this support, making the process of enacting change easier than for those who had not obtained support upfront. Additionally, a number of organisations had stated policies to increase diversity, or had requirements to meet targets set by government social procurement. However, this still left an important implementation gap requiring the translation of policies into practices. The process of filling these gaps by aligning policy and practice was facilitated by the Labs, particularly through ongoing coaching.

Finally, external factors beyond the direct control of the firm can exert a significant impact on its operations and outcomes. Barriers include labour and product market factors along with national policies. For example, we observed the importance of government legislation and soft law (social procurement) in the Melbourne Labs focused on young people with disability. We also saw a small number of examples of hiring freezes (for example in the public sector) that unfortunately constrained organisations' abilities to change their practices. Nevertheless, even in these cases participants highlighted the value of what they had learned and how they could improve going forward.

In summary, the research to date demonstrates that good jobs can be better promoted among employers by: developing and supporting the business case; improving management education, skills and awareness; helping to plug implementation gaps; and encouraging more research in these areas to further advance understanding. The evaluation data show that the Labs assisted employers across all of these dimensions, although some issues related to budget constraints, hiring freezes and bureaucratic processes in larger firms remained. In particular, it is within the implementation process and plugging of implementation gaps that the Labs seemed to make a crucial difference to organisations' practice change<sup>28</sup>.

## **7. Recommendations**

Evaluation evidence from eight rounds of the Employer Innovation Labs over three and a half years has proven the Lab model and concept. Based on this proof of concept, it is clear that the Labs are a highly valued and effective mechanism for fostering organisational reflection, collaboration and initiating practice change. In particular, the Labs positively transformed the attitudes and mindsets of organisations towards young people and created a catalyst to develop policies and practices capable of delivering positive outcomes for both the organisation and young people.

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<sup>28</sup> van Gestel, N. and Nyberg, D. (2009). Translating national policy changes into local HRM practices. *Personnel Review*, 38(5), pp. 544–559. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/00483480910978045>

Throughout the lifespan of the Labs, SVA has continuously improved the Lab design in response to recommendations from previous evaluation reports.

The following recommendations are based on the strengths and challenges identified throughout this evaluation of the Lab process. They outline how future delivery and support could be refined or enhanced to further increase the impact and sustainability of the Labs:

1. As a counterbalance to the limitations of the overriding supply-side approach to employment services, the Labs' unique approach focuses on working intensively with organisations to build employers' capability to offer career pathways for unemployed young people at risk of exclusion. This approach should continue. Even where soft law such as social procurement targets are a lever for initiating change, employers still require education and support to implement change.
2. The Labs conducted between 2022 and 2025 provide an invaluable proof of concept. We recommend that the overarching Lab model be retained, including its structured workshop and coaching format, integration of youth advisors and their lived experiences, and opportunities for employer peer learning and reflection. These elements were consistently endorsed for creating greater understanding of issues and subsequently triggering attitudinal and practice changes, and increased accountability. At the same time, the Lab was able to offer sufficient flexibility to tailor the activities, particularly the coaching, to specific and changing organisational needs.
3. Maintain flexibility within the Lab process, allowing organisations to adapt timelines, areas of focus and implementation strategies to their specific contexts. This flexibility is critical to supporting organisations as they navigate their various workplace contexts when designing, implementing and embedding meaningful and sustainable practice change.

4. Explore options to offer a co-funded or fee for service model being offered to organisations. This could comprise a range of services including the whole Lab process or a condensed version and coaching. The evaluation evidence suggested that the coaching was a particularly important aspect of the Lab model. The coaches acted as organisational consultants for organisational change with a particular focus on social justice. The coaches also acted as 'connectors' between the supply and demand sides of the labour market and supported employers' conversations with employment service providers.
5. Explore options to capitalise on the Lab alumni community that has been created and further enhance this as a community of practice to share learning with each other and to communicate with policymakers at state and Federal levels. For example, an Employer Innovation Lab LinkedIn group has already been established as a platform for SVA Coaches, Lab alumni, practitioners and experts to share information, seek advice and communicate opportunities. (currently the group has 100 members). Such activities could be further leveraged to continue expansion of the Labs and their benefits.
6. Share and amplify artefacts such as the organisational case studies, *Voices on Work* reports and resources such as conversation guides to inform other organisations. For example, exemplar case studies and video material could be developed and disseminated, including via media releases.
7. Continue to draw on external research indicating that good jobs can be promoted among employers by: developing and supporting the business case; improving management education, skills and awareness; helping to plug implementation gaps; and encouraging more research in these areas to further advance understanding.
8. For the purposes of future Labs and alumni, employers could be encouraged and supported to develop and communicate strong business cases within and

beyond their own businesses. The most effective business cases and relevant evidence regarding how the barriers to realising these benefits can be overcome could be included in recommendation six, above. The dissemination of such cases could contribute to improving management education, skills and awareness concerning the benefits of good jobs and how they can be developed. SVA could also consider further developing management education offerings that specifically target job quality. Such management education could be conducted within the existing Lab structure, in an expanded form, and/or offered independently of the Labs. Equally, coaching provided within the Labs should continue to expand managerial awareness and understanding of plugging implementation gaps.

## 8. Conclusion

In the context of an ageing workforce and multi-generational workplaces, concealing the wiring<sup>29</sup> that supports a good labour market is critical<sup>30</sup>. Doing so enables stakeholders to focus on outcomes (such as workforce participation and inclusion) rather than being overwhelmed by the complexity of the systems that enable them. The Labs create this unique opportunity by bringing together the demand and supply sides of the labour market and thereby improving understandings and outcomes for both. In doing so, the Labs demonstrate how employers can create good job opportunities for young people at risk of labour market exclusion whilst concurrently producing benefits for business. This represents a critical proof of concept and highlights the significance of the Labs, which remain entirely unique in the Australian context. While the scale of the Labs could be further extended over time, 445 (otherwise excluded) young people have secured employment as result of the Labs conducted so far and more jobs are in the pipeline. Moreover, the theoretical potential for further scalability and impact remains positive and far-reaching.

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<sup>29</sup> A key recommendation of the House of Representatives Select Committee Inquiry on Workforce Australia:

[https://www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Former\\_Committees/Workforce\\_Australia\\_Employment\\_Services/WorkforceAustralia/Report](https://www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Former_Committees/Workforce_Australia_Employment_Services/WorkforceAustralia/Report)

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.socialventures.org.au/about/publications/working-with-employers-to-advance-opportunity/>

Subsequently, the findings of this evaluation along with academic research examining barriers to implementing good jobs, reveal critical insights that chart a clear course for building better job opportunities and creating beneficial outcomes for both young people (otherwise at risk of exclusion) and businesses in Australia by utilising the Employer Innovation Labs.

## **Annex: Additional materials produced by SVA alongside the Labs**

[Voices on Work: Young People in Tasmania - Social Ventures](#)

[Voices on work: Young people with disability in Greater Melbourne - Social Ventures](#)

[Voices on Work: Young people in Western Sydney - Social Ventures](#)

[Voices on Work: Young people in Western Melbourne - Social Ventures](#)

## **Resources for employer practice change**

[Resource Hub for Employers](#)

[Helping employers remove barriers for young people and meet workforce needs](#)

[How to Discuss Workplace Adjustments](#)

[Line Managers Guide on How to Support Young Workers](#)

[Working with employers to advance opportunity: A roadmap to strengthen the ecosystem - Social Ventures](#)

[What makes supervision successful for young workers: Core skills and effective training for supervisors - Social Ventures](#)

[Inclusion Habits for Operational Leaders \(2024\)](#)

['Should we make a TikTok?' - Social Ventures](#)