



Down Syndrome
Australia

Right to
work

Supplementary resource for support workers

**Supporting a person with Down
syndrome in their workplace**

Role of the support workers

Since the implementation of the NDIS, the role of the support worker has become quite varied and diverse. Having more flexibility to choose who will provide support to the person with Down syndrome and what that support looks like, allows for many positive changes to come about. It is important for people with Down syndrome to be matched with a support worker that they feel comfortable and safe with, but also with someone who will enable and empower them to be as independent and included in their community as they can be.

People with Down syndrome will often be supported by various support workers, and the support that is being provided will be adapted to the individual and the various settings that they may be in. The key elements of any good support worker are:



Not making assumptions and having low expectations



Supporting the person to become more independent



Support communication



Be creative

Much of the work that support workers do is to support the person to achieve their goals and build their confidence. When looking at the role of a support worker for a person with Down syndrome in the workplace, this can involve them not only being a mentor to the person with a disability, but also to the employer.

It is important for the support worker to know the person with disability well, and can assist the employer to support the person in the workplace. The support worker will need to be guided by the needs of the person with Down syndrome and the employer.

DES (Disability Employment Services) providers may only be able to provide limited hours of support in the workplace for those people who have high support needs. People with more significant disability will soon be able to access greater hours of support in the workplace through their NDIS plan.

*Please note the difference between the various definitions of “support person” in the workplace that we will refer to in this resource. We will use the term “Job Coach” for the support worker in the workplace going forward.

- **Job Coach** – A support worker who is employed directly by the person with a disability or an agency, who provides employment support in the workplace. They are also a mentor to both the person with a disability and the employer.
- **Trainer** – Staff members who naturally provide the training in the workplace to new employees (e.g. HR, Manager, other staff members, etc).



How can job coaches best support a person with Down syndrome in an employment setting?

When supporting people with Down syndrome in the workplace, the key elements of support work that were mentioned before, should be consistent in all settings. However, the main things that a support worker can be focusing on when supporting an employee with Down syndrome would be to:

Maintain relationships

As with any work relationships, it is important to work as part of a team and to establish good relationships with work colleagues. Job coaches should encourage the person to communicate directly with staff members at their workplace (and vice versa – for work colleagues to speak directly to the person and not via the job coach), and to help identify ways that they can engage in positive and appropriate workplace conversations. Enabling the person to have positive connections with their work colleagues will ensure that they naturally have a good support network in the workplace, but to also feel included and part of the team.

Maximise skill development

When a person starts a new job, learning new skills and tasks can be quite an overwhelming experience. The role of the job coach will be to work with the employer to ensure that the person is being supported to learn the new task/skill that is going to best suit their learning style, and to make sure that the person will have the ability to eventually carry out these tasks independently and confidently. The job coach will need to also have a good understanding of what the tasks are, in order to work alongside both the employee and employer to best support them.

The role of the job coach is to be a support in the background – When the job coach steps in and performs the tasks for the person, they are not allowing them the chance to have a go, learn from their mistakes and understand where they may have

gone wrong. As it would be in all circumstances of providing support to people with disabilities, the concept of “dignity of risk” is also imperative when a person is being supported in a work setting.

For more information on dignity of risk, you can click on the links below:

- www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZR6fm7pA2c
- <https://mable.com.au/newsroom/what-is-dignity-of-risk-and-why-does-it-matter>

Build independence

As much as the job coach may be heavily involved at the initial stages of a new job to assist the employer and employee to carry out their role, there will come a time when the job coach will no longer be there to provide support – And this may vary from a few days, weeks, to even months down the track, depending on how long it takes for the person to feel confident in carrying out their work duties.

The job coach will need to assess when the right time is to step back and allow the support to be provided by the employer.



So when will you know when to step back and no longer provide onsite support?

You will know when the person has reached a level of confidence with their work duties, as they may not request or require as much support – They may only request assistance when they get really stuck. This is usually a good time to gradually start decreasing the level and frequency of support that you are providing, and seeing how they go on their own without the job coach being present.

When and if they do get stuck, have a process in place (that has been practiced) for them to follow to try and problem solve on their own. If they still require assistance after taking this step, they can then reach out to their co-workers or managers for assistance. Before the job coach completely withdraws support, there may need to be some explicit teaching required to assist the person to identify when they might need help, and how and who to get help from in the workplace.

The job coach should always be available as backup support, if any concerns arise in the workplace both for the employee and the employer. Slight changes in the workplace can cause disruptions for the person and consequently their work productivity, so it is always good to ensure that the employer has good communication procedures in place to notify the person of such changes well in advance, if possible.

Once the job coach has withdrawn onsite support for the person, how often should they be checking in?

During the final stages of the job coach transitioning their support out of the workplace, the team should be reminded that the job coach will no longer be onsite on a regular basis soon and that the point of contact for support for the person will now primarily be the employer. This should have been something that was set up well from the beginning, and if this was the case, there should be no issues with this transition when the job coach is no longer providing support onsite.

The frequency at which job coaches will check in with the employee and the employer may need to be based on an assessment of ongoing support needs. It may be about having a conversation with the employee and employer about how frequently they would like the job coach to check in (as is reasonable). It may be that the employee/ employer decide that they:

- **Only require support on an episodic basis** (i.e. support provided only as requested). It may still be good to keep in regular contact (e.g. once a fortnight/month) during the initial stages of the job coach not being there to make sure that things are going smoothly.
- **Require regular check ins frequently** – Check ins do not necessary have to be onsite visits. They may be a call after every shift, once a week, or every fortnight, again especially during those initial stages of transition with no onsite support.

Employees and employers will feel a sense of reassurance if they can call on the job coach to be a reliable point of contact to provide the support required if any questions or issues arise.

Other useful links

- DSA Support Decision Making Resource - www.downsyndrome.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DSASupporteddecisionmakingforwebsite.pdf
- NDIS Employment Supports - www.ndis.gov.au/understanding/supports-funded-ndis/supports-employment
- Disability Employment Services - www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/disability-employment-services