

Comment by Nikki Brouwers, Managing Director of the Interact Group

Whilst there is a general consensus in Australian academia of the health benefits of work, the prevailing view of Australian personal and business communities is the need to be 100% fit to work; the need to complete the full complement of the role and consequently, if we are sick or injured we should stay away from work until we reach the "100%" fit state.

For our welfare system to reform we need to shift the current accepted cultural view that if I am sick (physical/mental/emotional) or injured that I should rest and be away from the workplace. We need reframe our assumptions and create a cultural view that the best place to recover from injury, illness or disease is within the workplace.

Page 95 of the Interim Report indicates that progressive businesses recognise the importance of meeting social responsibilities through a diversified workforce. A progressive community also needs to accept that we do not need to be 100% fit to engage in work. Therefore a diversified workplace includes re-engineering of traditional roles and traditional hours that would better meet the needs of people with injury, illness or disease and their recovery through work.

We do this by being honest with workers, changing the expectations and the culture of organisations so that when people are sick, injured or disabled we are "prescribing" work, rather than prescribing incapacity without outlining the risks. We need to share the research that workers get better quicker if they stay engaged with work. Managers and Supervisors play a large role in this through tailored engagement strategies and capacity based employment intervention solutions.

A commitment to change our cultural view on capacity to work should be at the forefront of the country's welfare reforms. As an organisation with over 20 years' experience in assessing capacity for work and assisting people to return to work and realising the health benefits of work, we support efforts to simplify and reform the Australian Welfare system. Any reform of the benefits structure also requires structural and perceptual changes with employers and the wider Australian culture. There needs to be a genuine and clear education program that promotes the health benefits of work so that any reform can be viewed through the prism that "work is a tonic that makes you well" and therefore remaining at work, early return or re-entering the workforce is supported by all levels of Government, business communities and the wider community.



Nikki Brouwers (BAppSc(OT), MBA, GAICD) as an Occupational Therapist has for the past 22 years assisted people with an injury, illness or disease into Employment. She is the founder and Managing Director of The Interact Group; a Disability Employment Services (DMS) provider servicing 5 ESA's in regional NSW. Nikki's expertise in mental health, disability and the health benefits of work is recognised in her invitations to present at National and International conferences including the IFDM in London, Berlin and Los Angeles. She combines her industry knowledge with strong governance experience to provide a unique perspective and practical insights to the NESA board and wider membership. Nikki has participated in numerous working parties and reference groups for DEEWR over the past decade.

