

NDS Workforce Census Report 2024





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NDS Workforce Census Report 2024

Executive Summary

Last year in our summary of the Workforce Census findings, we announced that after deteriorating for some years, the situation for sector employment had stabilised. But that was small comfort when most organisations were looking to grow.

This year, covering 2023, the flattened trend continues and there's little sign of recovery. Indeed, the workforce shortages look as if they are becoming entrenched. We might take heart from a rise in full-time employment, but the sector is still over-reliant on casual disability support workers, who have a high turnover rate. For providers, the costs for training and onboarding are high and there's no realistic accounting for it in NDIS pricing.

More than ever, providers need action on these and other workforce challenges that are a drag on sector growth and service quality.

The proportion of full-time employees in the survey grew from 20 per cent to 30 per cent in the year. This is welcome news but, looked at more closely, it isn't the turning point it appears to be. The growth was largely due to a huge jump in New South Wales, which almost doubled from 20 per cent to 39 per cent. The cost-of-living crisis, a problem everywhere, hit hardest in that state and, it seems, more workers are seeking stable hours and income. In other states, the move toward full-time work is much smaller, though, if cost-of-living pressures continue, we may see the trend spread.

In 2023, the take up of new employees was more than those lost, giving our respondents a net gain in staff. However, staff turnover was worse, rising to 24 per cent among casual staff and 16 per cent for permanents – the highest it has been since the survey began. The metaphor that comes to mind is the leaky bucket.

And putting aside the human and social cost of turnover, the bucket is also leaking money. With the Australian Services Union (NDIS Review 2023) estimating that onboarding a new staff member can cost between \$2130 and \$3320, the 361 organisations that responded to this survey spent at least \$40 million in 2023 to replace staff. Even if casual staff are excluded, their costs were still \$17 million.

Clearly, if the sector is to solve its workforce issues and be sustainable, workforce retention must be given as much attention as workforce attraction.

The census confirmed that more needs to be done to attract people with disability to work in the sector. Despite only 3.8 per cent of staff being people with disability, providers are in a great position to boost their numbers and lead the broader community in this. The responses to our detailed questions gave us a good sense of the enablers and the barriers involved, and we will use the data to encourage providers to recruit more people with disability into the sector.

The representation of people with disability on organisation's boards is better than the rate of employment, but there is still room for improvement. To address this we have joined with other key groups in the Across the Board Project to find ways get more representation and for the representation to have greater influence on governance.

This year the survey took a closer look at Behaviour Support Practitioners (BSPs). In a service area in which many participants have complex support needs, that require multifaceted, well-developed skill sets, we found that more than half of BSPs were at Core skill level, the lowest of the four levels of expertise. Clearly, we need structures and incentives to build the skills and capacities of this vital workforce. We need to move practitioners more easily up the skills pathway to expertise and, through that, raise the quality of behaviour support in the sector.

Case study

Gateway to Industry Schools Program (Qld)

The Gateway to Industry Schools Program (GISP) for Community Services builds partnerships between schools and industry partners, giving Queensland school students learning experiences that help them in their career choices and employment pathways. Students can complete work trials in a range of community services, including disability support, aged care and community health services.

GISP for Community Services is a key industry engagement strategy for the Queensland Department of Employment, Small Business and Training. NDS has been contracted by the Queensland government to deliver the GISP since 2022.

NDS staff who administer the program attend career events and job expos, run capability-building events for schoolteachers and arrange student opportunities down VET pathways.

In 2023 the program supported:

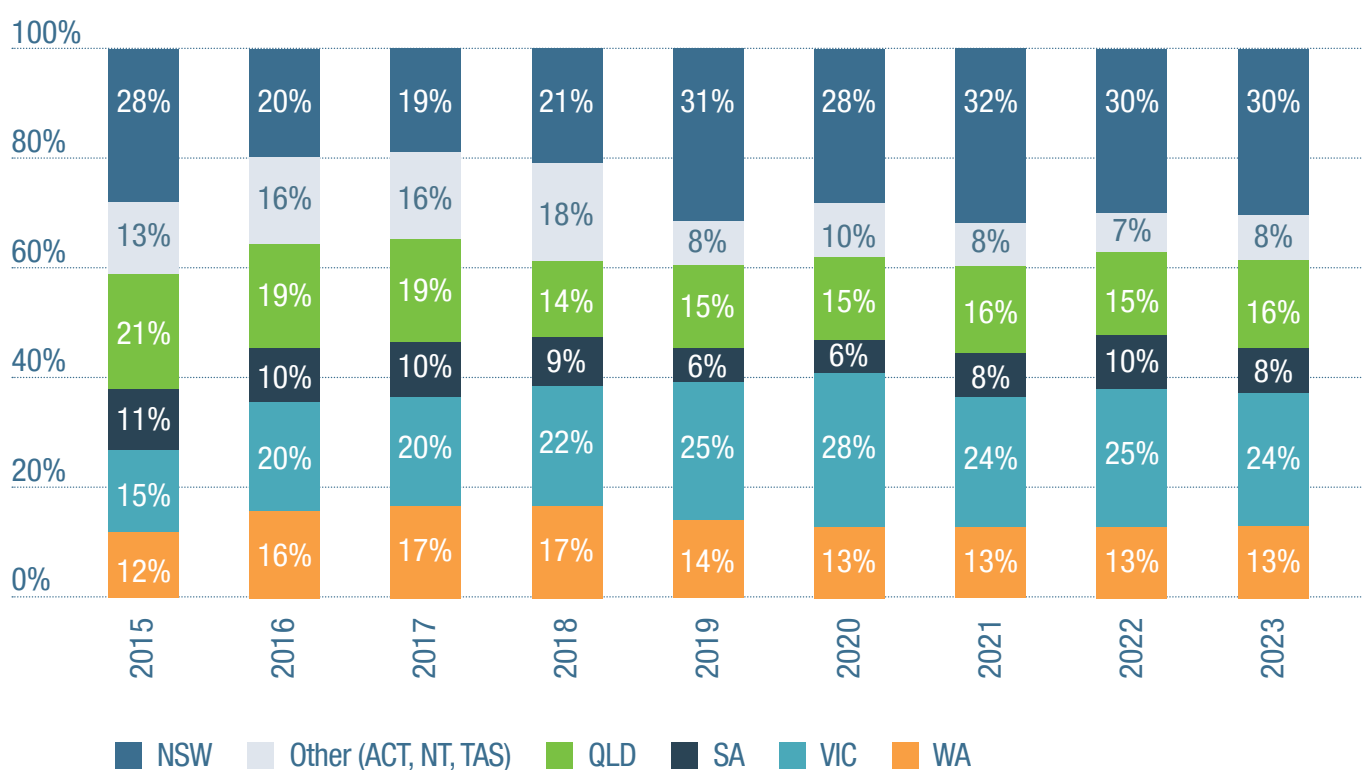
- 1603 students in industry-related VET pathways
- 58 schoolteachers in industry-related capability-building activities
- 53 partnerships with Queensland secondary schools
- 46 VET providers in the GISP
- 226 industry partners in the GISP.

Overall results

The 2024 National Disability Services Workforce Census received responses from 361 organisations representing 67,363 disability support employees (disability support workers, allied health professionals and allied health assistants) across Australia. Data were analysed by researchers from the Centre for Disability Research and Policy at the University of Sydney.

Responses by state and territory have remained consistent over time, with only minor changes. This year, 30 per cent of respondents were from organisations with head offices in New South Wales, 24 per cent from Victoria, 16 per cent from Queensland, 13 per cent from Western Australia, eight per cent from South Australia and eight per cent from other states and territories (ACT, Northern Territory and Tasmania). These response patterns have been remarkably consistent over the last five years.

Figure 1 Respondent organisations by state and territory over time



Organisational size

Over half the organisations that responded to the survey had fewer than 200 employees (33 per cent were classified as small organisations, meaning that they had fewer than 50 employees, and 41 per cent were classified as medium, having between 50 and 199 employees). Twenty-two per cent of responding organisations were defined as large, having between 200 and 999 employees, and four per cent were defined as very large, having 1000 or more employees. Organisation size also remained consistent with those who responded in 2022, indicating that our results remain relatively consistent within the broader sample of providers across Australia. Ninety-five per cent of respondents (342 out of 361 organisations) were registered to provide NDIS services.

Permanent, fixed term and casual workers

Among the 67,363 employees accounted for in the survey, 64,209 were employed as disability support workers, 2721 as allied health professionals and 433 as allied health assistants. Sixty per cent of staff were employed permanently, while 37 per cent were casual employees, and three per cent were on fixed-term contracts. These numbers have not changed much over time.

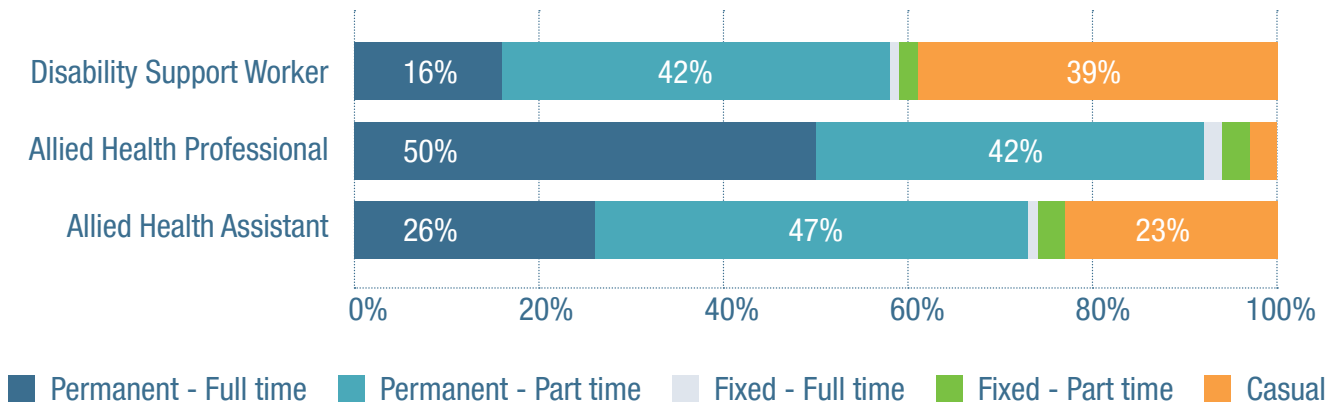
Figure 2 Type of employment over time, all states and territories



Employment status (permanent, fixed term and casual), when separated by employment type (disability support workers, allied health professionals and allied health assistants), varied considerably.

Ninety-two per cent of allied health professionals were employed permanently, compared to 73 per cent of allied health assistants, and 58 per cent of disability support workers. Conversely, only three per cent of allied health professionals were employed casually, while 23 per cent of allied health assistants and 39 per cent of disability support workers were employed casually.

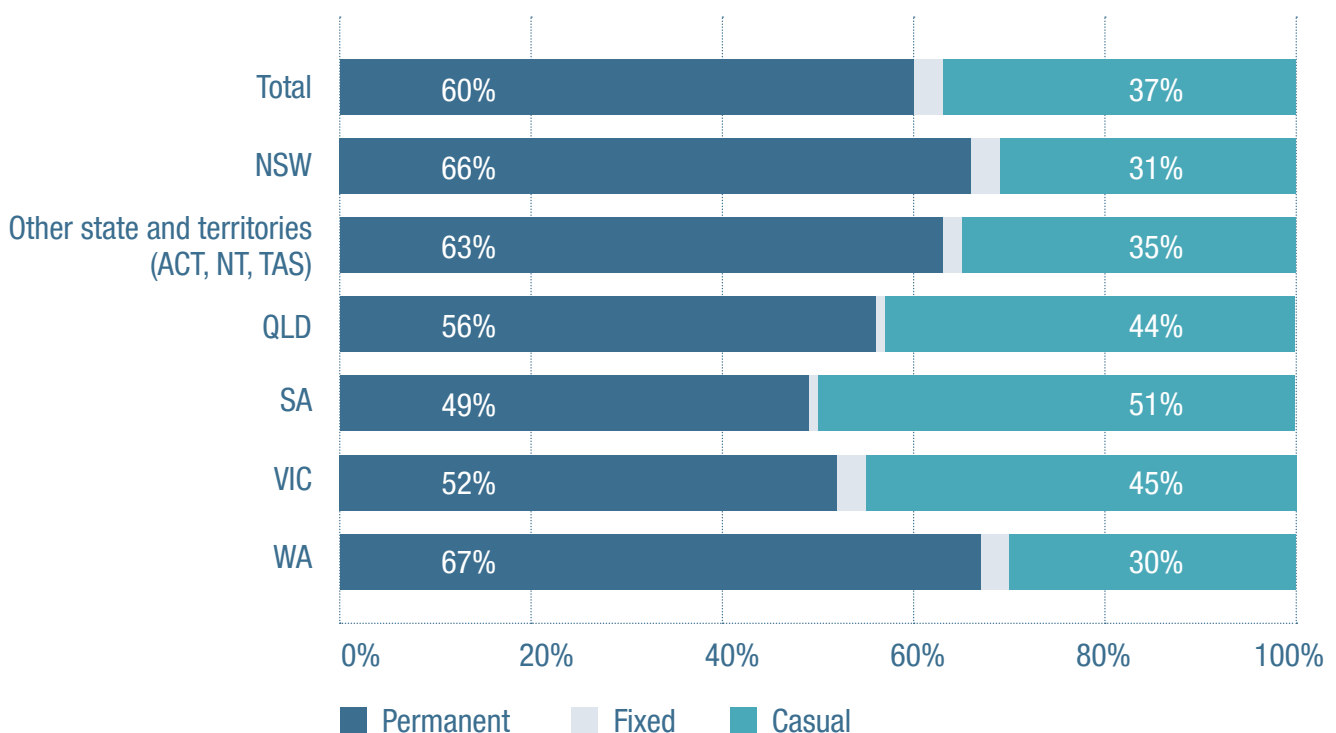
As can be seen from Figure 3, the most marked difference in employment type is a much larger proportion of allied health professionals being employed as permanent full time, with larger proportions of disability support workers and allied health assistants being employed as casuals.

Figure 3 Employment type by employment category

When looking at each state, we found that South Australia had the smallest number of permanent staff at 49 per cent, followed by Victoria at 52 per cent, Queensland at 56 per cent, other states and territories (ACT, Northern Territory and Tasmania) at 63 per cent, New South Wales at 66 per cent and Western Australia at 67 per cent.

Conversely, South Australia had the highest number of casual staff (51 per cent) followed by Victoria (45 per cent), Queensland (44 per cent), other states and territories (ACT, Northern Territory and Tasmania — 35 per cent), New South Wales (31 per cent), and Western Australia (30 per cent).

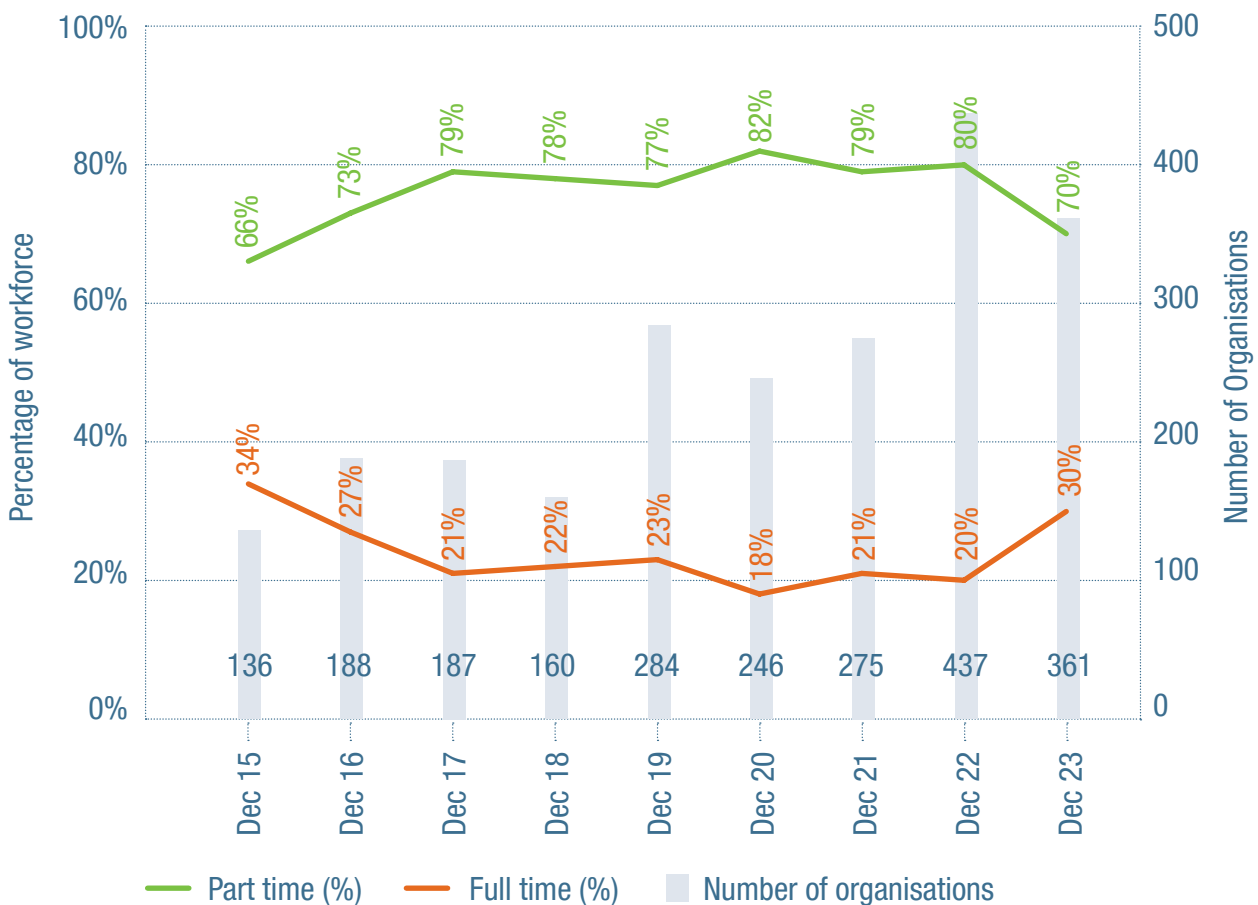
The percentage of fixed-term staff ranged between one and four per cent for all states and territories.

Figure 4 Type of employment by state and territory

Full-time versus part-time employment

This year, we saw a considerable change in the proportion of permanent employees who work full time, with the number of full-time employees growing by 10 percentage points from 20 per cent in 2022 to 30 per cent of staff this year. This is the highest full-time employment has been since 2015. Conversely, part-time employment dropped to 70 per cent this year.

Figure 5 Comparison between full-time and part-time employees, over time (permanent employees only)



This change in the proportion of full-time workers was largely driven by changes in New South Wales, with the percentage of full-time employees almost doubling in 2023 (from 20 per cent in 2022 to 39 per cent in 2023). Other states and territories (ACT, Northern Territory and Tasmania) went from 16 per cent full-time employees in 2022 to 21 per cent in 2023. Victoria went from 24 per cent in 2022 to 27 per cent in 2023; Queensland went from 18 per cent in 2022 to 20 per cent in 2023; and South Australia went from 16 per cent in 2022 to 17 per cent in 2023. Western Australia stayed stable at 22 per cent full-time employees.

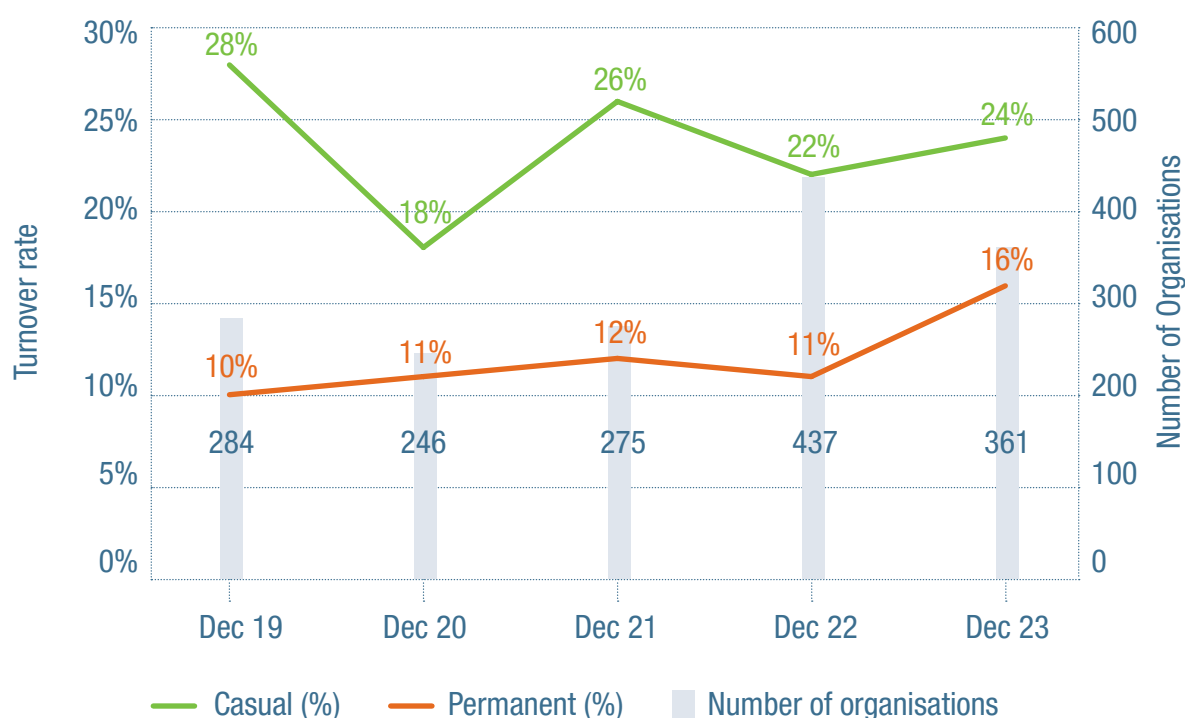
These increases in full-time employment may be related to the cost-of-living crisis, where high levels of inflation have led to higher costs for food, housing and other necessities (Black, N. et al., Section 3. 2024). The notable difference between states may be due to increasing cost of rents in New South Wales (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023).



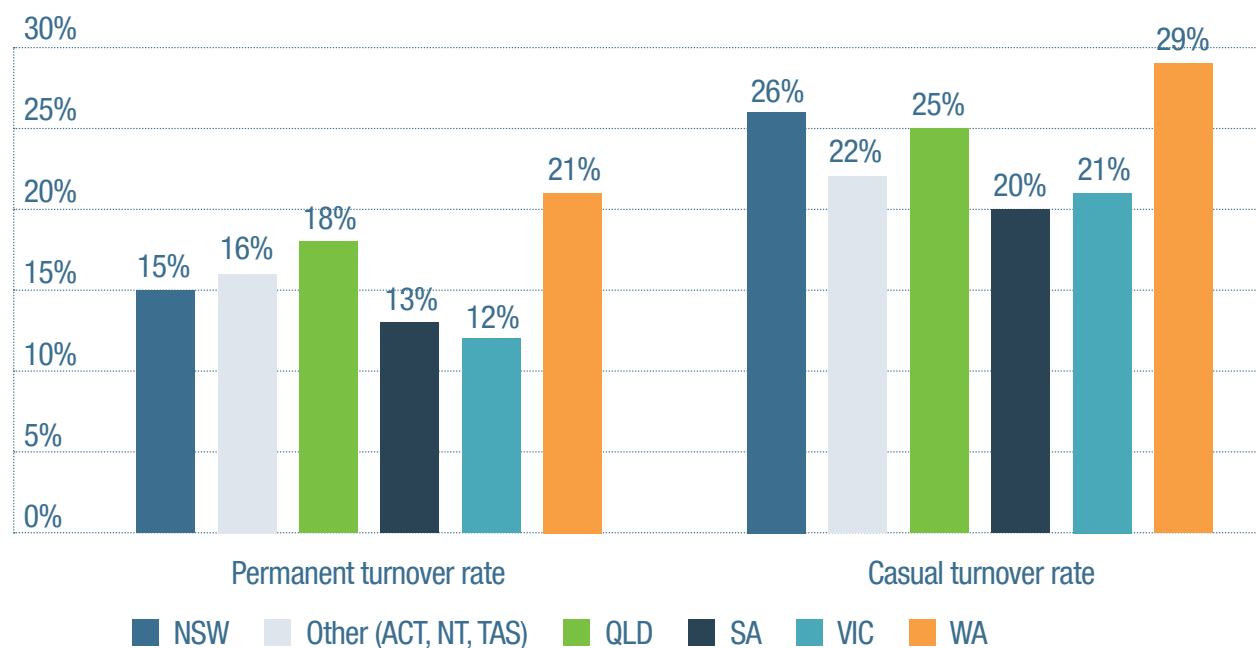
Turnover

Turnover for casual staff grew slightly to 24 per cent. Turnover for permanent staff was more marked, jumping to 16 per cent, the highest it has been since this survey began. These turnover rates are substantially higher than the 14 per cent reported in the overall workforce (Australian HR Institute 2023).

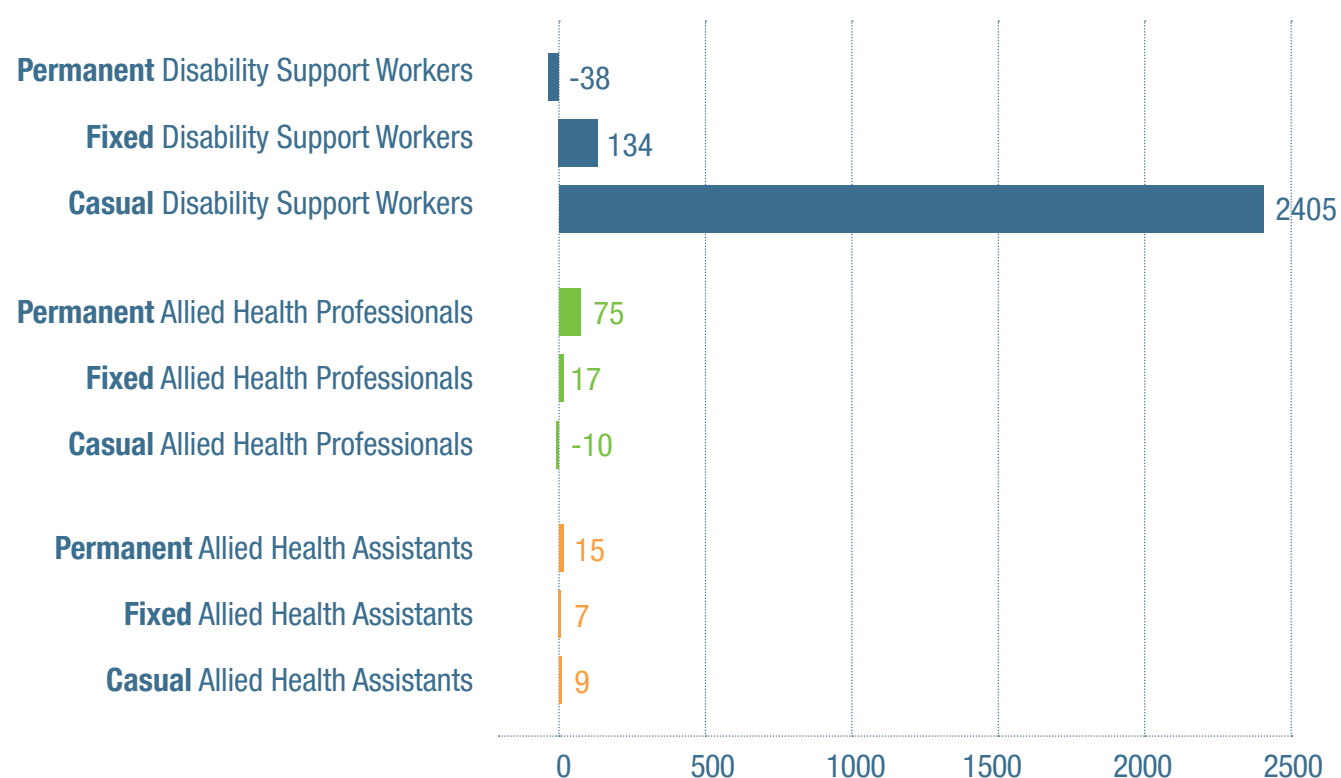
Figure 6 Turnover rates for permanent and casual staff, over time (all occupations)



Disability support workers make up most of the workforce represented by these data, and rates of turnover for this subgroup were equivalent to the overall proportions — that is, 24 per cent turnover for casual disability support workers and 16 per cent for permanent disability support workers. Across different states and territories, there was some variation, with organisations headquartered in South Australia and Victoria reporting the lowest turnover rates and those in Western Australia reporting the highest. However, these figures should be treated with caution, because the differences are not statistically significant.

Figure 7 Turnover by state and territory

For change in staff numbers across all types of employment, respondents reported a net increase of 2614 staff members across their organisations. The most dramatic change was seen in casual disability support workers, which is similar to the last survey.

Figure 8 Net change in headcount by occupation and category

When we consider turnover as a whole over the year, these figures represent a churn of almost 16,500 individual employees leaving their jobs and over 19,000 new appointments.

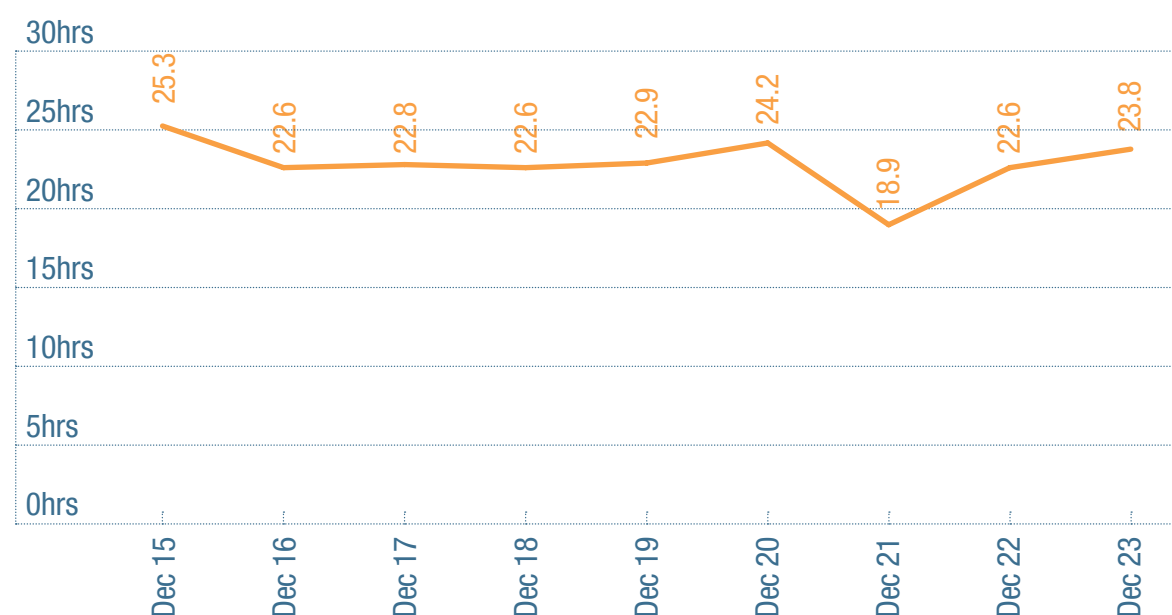
The Australian Services Union has estimated that it can cost between \$2130 and \$3320 to on-board a new staff member (2023 NDIS Review. Part 2 Markets and Support Systems). Using the lower end of this estimate, this represents a potential invisible cost of \$40.5 million across the 361 organisations in this year's census. Even when one excludes casual staff members, the costs are still \$17 million.

Using the 2022 workforce estimates or the NDIS service ecosystem (312,000 support and allied health profession workers; 2023 NDIS Review. Part 2 Markets and Support Systems), onboarding would cost the sector between \$80 to \$190 million each year.

Staff hours

Average hours of work per week remained relatively stable, rising from 22.6 in 2022 to 23.8 in 2023. This varied by state, from a high of 28.8 in Victoria, followed by New South Wales (24.3), other states and territories (ACT, Northern Territory and Tasmania — 24.0), South Australia (23.4), and Western Australia (22.8). Queensland was lowest at 19.7. This may hint at a return to pre-pandemic stability, though only time will tell if the sector has truly recovered.

Figure 9 Average hours of work per week, over time



Staff gender

Two-thirds of all staff reported (66 per cent) were women. Though when we looked at this by occupation, 88 per cent of allied health professionals or allied health assistants were women, while only 12 per cent were men. None of the responding organisations identified non-binary allied health professionals or allied health assistants. Gender differences were smaller for disability support workers; however, the difference was still quite large. Sixty-five per cent of disability support workers were women, 34 per cent were men, and one per cent were identified by another term.



There was a very small change in overall proportions of staff members by gender: women were down one per cent from 67 per cent in 2022 to 66 per cent in 2023; men stayed stable at 33 per cent; and the representation of other identities grew to one per cent.

Staff age

Half of staff were between the ages of 25 and 44. Nearly half (49 per cent) of disability support workers and 64 per cent of allied health professionals and allied health assistants were within this age group. Twenty-one per cent of staff were aged 45 to 54 (17 per cent of allied health professionals and allied health assistants, and 21 per cent of disability support workers) and 19 per cent of staff were 55 or older (10 per cent of allied health professionals and allied health assistants, and 20 per cent of disability support workers). The smallest age group was those aged 15 to 24, of which nine per cent were working as allied health professionals and allied health assistants and 10 per cent as disability support workers.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff

When asked about whether organisations employed Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff, 163 organisations responded that they did not know, did not keep records or did not have staff disclose this information. Of the 187 organisations who did keep records of this, 1195 employees identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander out of 33,556, which is 3.6 per cent. The majority of organisations who were able to report on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Staff were small- or medium-sized organisations (66 per cent and 51 per cent respectively) with fewer in large organisations (43 per cent) and even fewer in very large organisations (38 per cent).

Culturally and linguistically diverse staff

Similarly, when asked about culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) staff, 182 organisations reported that they did not know, did not keep records or did not have staff disclose this information. Of the 170 organisations who reported having CALD staff members, 4032 staff members out of 17,782 identified as being from a CALD background (22 per cent).

Similarly, of those organisations who did report whether their staff were CALD, the majority were in small (70 per cent) and medium organisations (46 per cent), with fewer in large (32 per cent) and very large (14 per cent).



Staff with disability

When asked about records for staff members with disability, 129 organisations reported that they did not know, did not keep records or did not have employees state their disability status. From the 198 organisations who did report on number of staff with disability, 1627 staff members were reported as having a disability, which is 3.8 per cent of the 43,275 staff members of these organisations. (Note, these figures do not include people with disability in specialist supported employment positions).

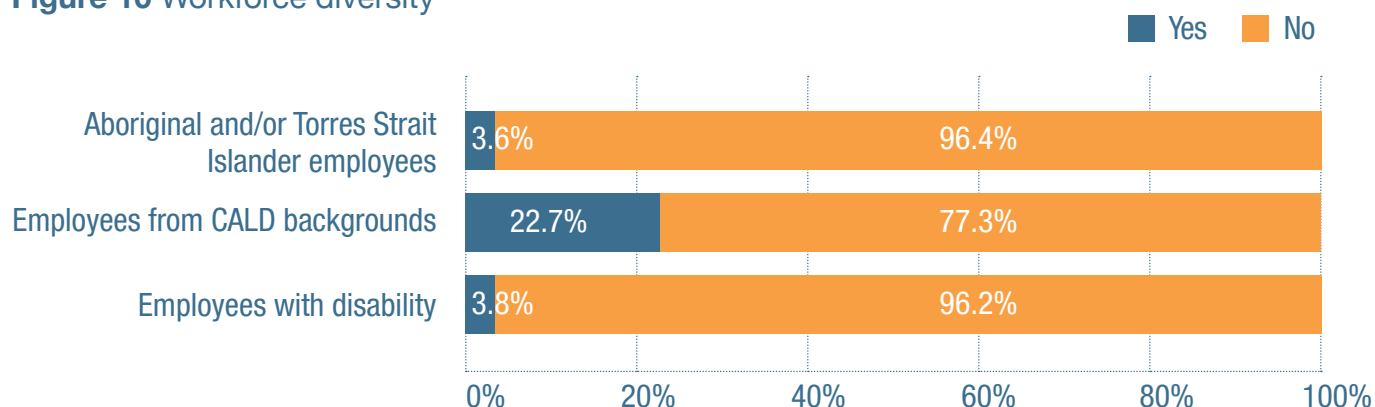
The proportion of organisations able to report on disability status of their staff was reasonably consistent across the sizes of organisations: small at 64 per cent; medium at 60 per cent; large at 56 per cent; and very large at 60 per cent.

Overall, figures for workers with disability in the disability services suggest more effort is required. For example, according to an anonymous employee census by the Australian Public Service (APS) Commission, 10.9 per cent of staff report a disability (Australian Public Service Commission 2023). But in the workplace, disclosure rates are much lower. The APS reports that just 5.1 per cent of all employees reported a disability to their workplaces (Australian Public Service Commission 2023).

Overall workforce diversity

Figure 10 below summarises workforce diversity across various categories as described above.

Figure 10 Workforce diversity





Key challenges faced in recruiting people with disability

Respondents reported diverse barriers to recruiting people with disability. Prominently reported challenges included:

- a lack of skills or qualifications to meet inherent job requirements:
“literacy and numeracy barriers” (Large, NSW)
“identifying suitably qualified staff” (Small, WA);
- competition from other employers and salary expectations:
“competition for specialist expertise including with private practice, meeting salary expectations” (Medium, SA)
“the amount of money [people with disability] want per hour” (Small, NSW);
- and people with disability not applying for positions:
“a lack of candidates applying” (Medium, Qld)
“people with disability not applying to the job ads” (Medium, SA).

Respondents also reported stigma and discrimination against people with disability as another barrier:

“lack of awareness of the value and capabilities that people with disabilities can bring to the organisation” (Small SA)
“for people with intellectual disability our job descriptions and roles are likely to bias against people with intellectual disability and is something we need to work on into the future”
 (Small, Vic).

One employer-specific barrier was the challenge to consistently provide environments that are accessible to and accommodating of people with disability:

“selection process might present barriers” (Small, Vic)
“one building inaccessible” (Medium, Vic).

Yet another frequently reported barrier was a lack of resources to employ and support people with disability:

“limited time and resources” (Medium, NSW)
“not enough shifts to have an employee” (Small, Vic).

Key enablers and supports in retaining staff with disability

Conversely, a number of respondents reported on wide-ranging enablers and supports that allow organisations to retain employees with disability.

Respondents mentioned the role of making accommodations or adjustments to support the recruitment and retention of people with disability:

“wherever reasonably practicable, we provide support and accommodate to facilitate employment” (Large, NSW)

“we support finding ways to accommodate versus not accommodate someone’s needs and have a number of flexible work options” (Very Large, WA).

Flexible, accommodating, accessible and inclusive work environments were prominent among responses:

“being open and flexible” (Large, Vic)

“provision of reasonable adjustment” (Medium, WA)

“ongoing ability to provide work from home” (Small, Vic)

“accessible spaces, safe working environment” (Very large, Vic).

Respondents also often raised the need for workplace supports, services and programs:

“easily accessible employee assistance program” (Medium, Vic)

“knowing how the person wants to be supported” (Large, SA)

As well as training and mentoring for employees with disability:

“ongoing training” (Medium, WA)

“mentoring and coaching” (Large, NSW).

Respondents recognised the need to create an inclusive workplace culture:

“supportive workplace culture” (Small, WA)

“neurodiversity (ND) affirming culture” (Small, WA).

And provide career pathways and development opportunities:

“generous professional development opportunities” (Medium, NSW)

“we offer career development opportunities tailored to individual needs” (Medium, SA).

Respondents also often expressed support for disability-confident and competent leaders and managers:

“increased leadership capability in disability confidence” (Very large, Qld);

“capable managers” (Small, NSW).

The importance of lived experience of disability was also recognised through respecting staff with disability:

“treating them with respect and appreciating what they contribute” (Medium, Vic)

“recognises and genuinely values the unique expertise that employees with disability bring” (Very large, Vic)



And valuing lived experience led and co-designed workplace supports:

“ensuring our workplace practices are informed by lived experience” (Very large, Qld)

“employee-led networks of lived experience” (Medium, NSW).

Inclusive workplace policies and planning as an enabler was also raised:

“we have policies relating to the employment of people with a disability” (Small, Qld)

“we have a formal process and plan” (Very large, NSW).

Respondents also spoke of policies and planning that help recruit people with disability:

“we have comprehensive policies and a very open and inviting workplace for people from any walk of life” (Medium, SA)

“KPI’s for the organisation — 15 per cent of the workforce must [have a specific condition or disability]” (Large, Vic).

Highlighting notable gaps in knowledge about retaining staff with disability, some respondents reported being not aware of enablers:

“we don’t know ... that’s why we struggle so hard with this” (Medium, NSW)

“unknown if there are any key supports or enablers” (Medium, WA).

Key barriers to reporting the number of staff with disability

Many respondents raised the issue of staff not being willing to disclose their disability in the workplace:

“the key barrier is that a number of staff do not inform us if they have a disability” (Very large, NSW)

“some people choose not to disclose level of disability” (Medium, WA).

Respondents reported a variety of reasons for non-disclosure of disability among staff. A prominent reason was seeing disclosure of disability as opening a risk of discrimination:

“some people wish to not disclose this information, for fear of being treated differently or potentially missing out on shifts” (Large, Vic)

“may be seen as someone who isn’t capable of adhering to their role requirements” (Very large, Vic).

Employers also spoke about staff concerns for a loss of privacy:

“staff not necessarily willing or open to share sensitive personal information with their workplace” (Medium, WA).

“privacy and data collection concerns” (Large, NSW)

“disclosure and privacy” (Medium, NSW).

Employers’ responses also focused upon the legal rights of employees to choose whether to disclose their disability in the workplace or not and the illegality of employers asking an employee if they have a disability.

Respondents often recognised disability discrimination law that gave choice to disclose:

“people are not legally required to disclose their disabilities” (Small, NSW)

“no requirement to disclose disability when in mainstream employment roles” (Medium, NSW).

Respondents often noted gaps in their data collection:

“we don’t collect that information” (Small, Vic)

“we currently do not keep records in this area” (Large, Vic).

Or they pointed to HR system and technological deficiencies that impeded their reporting on people with disability:

“generic HR systems do not offer disability as a reporting field” (Medium, Qld)

“our current HR Information Systems do not have a spot to hold this information” (Large, NSW).

Some respondents spoke about their inability to report on staff who are not aware of their disability:

“staff not aware what may constitute a disability” (Small, WA)

“may not be aware of all disabilities” (Medium, ACT).

Finally, respondents also said that staff can be unsure if a formal diagnosis is required and lack confidence to self-identify:

“whether there needs to be a formal diagnosis in place to consider in the reporting data” (Small, SA)

“level of confidence in self-identifying as a person with disability can be a barrier” (Medium, WA)

And some staff may not be comfortable in identifying as having a disability:

“some staff choose to disclose this information up front and some wait until they feel comfortable” (Small, Vic)

“some people do not like to be identified as having a disability” (Medium, NT).

Board members with disability

This year we wanted to get a better estimate of how many people with disability served on the boards of the disability service organisations we surveyed. Instead of only asking about the number of people with disability on the boards of organisations, we also asked about board headcount.

One hundred and ninety-four (194) organisations reported on the number of people with disability on their board. From these, there were 120 board members with disability out of 1260 board members (10 per cent). Seventy-two organisations had at least one board member with a disability, while the rest (122) had none.

One hundred and ninety-five (195) organisations reported as having board members who had lived experience of caring for or supporting a family member or loved one with disability.

From these, there were 423 board members with lived experience of caring for or supporting a family member or loved one with disability out of 1268 board members (representing 33 per cent). One hundred and seventy-one (171) organisations had at least one board member with lived experience and the remaining 24 had none.

Of those organisations who did not give numbers for this question, 104 (35 per cent) reported that they did not know, did not keep records or did not have board members state or disclose whether they have disability. Notably, for those 195 organisations that provided data, only 17 boards (nine per cent) did not have representation from people with disability or people with lived experience of caring for or supporting a family member or loved one with disability.

We have summarised the data for workforce board diversity in Figures 11 and 12:

Figure 11 Board member composition

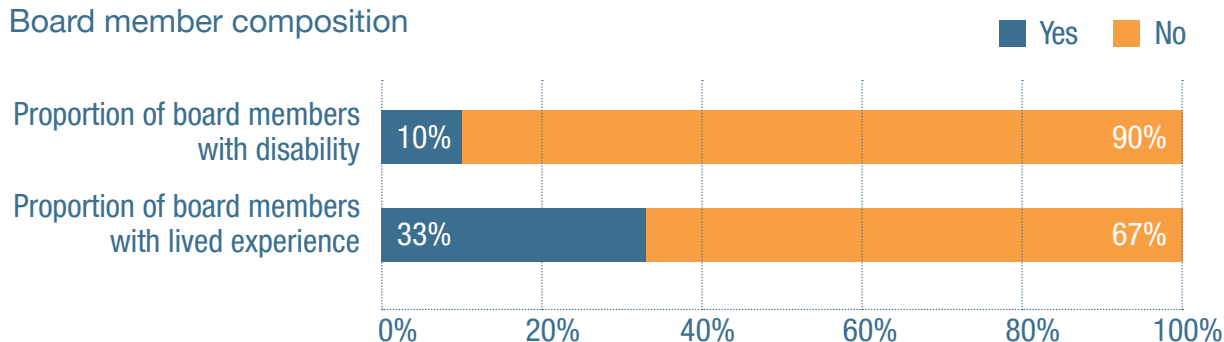
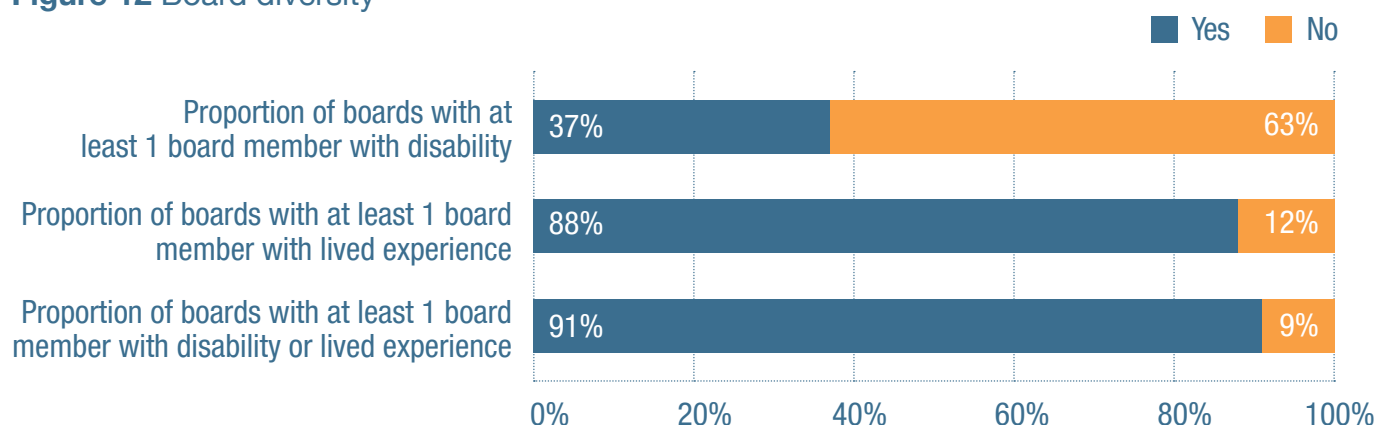


Figure 12 Board diversity



Case study

Across the Board project

In 2023, NDS joined major sector organisations in the Across the Board project. It will create an action plan to increase the number of disability service providers that have at least two people with disability on their boards. After considering the key barriers and enablers for board representation for people with disability, the plan will outline what boards, board members and disability organisations need to do.

However, we believe that it is not just about the presence of a person with disability on a board but also about the impact of inclusion of people with disability in the governance of disability organisations. Therefore, in the long run we hope to see three or more people with disability on boards of disability service providers so they can change the governance of the organisation.

To achieve this, we need to create the right conditions and environment.

In Across the Board, NDS partners with the NDIA, the Department of Social Services, the Australian Network on Disability, the Australian Institute of Company Directors, the Observership Program, Purpose at Work and People for Purpose.

We will keep tracking board representation in this annual Workforce Census. This year's report shows an increase in the number of providers that have people with disability on their boards, up from 21 per cent to 37 per cent.

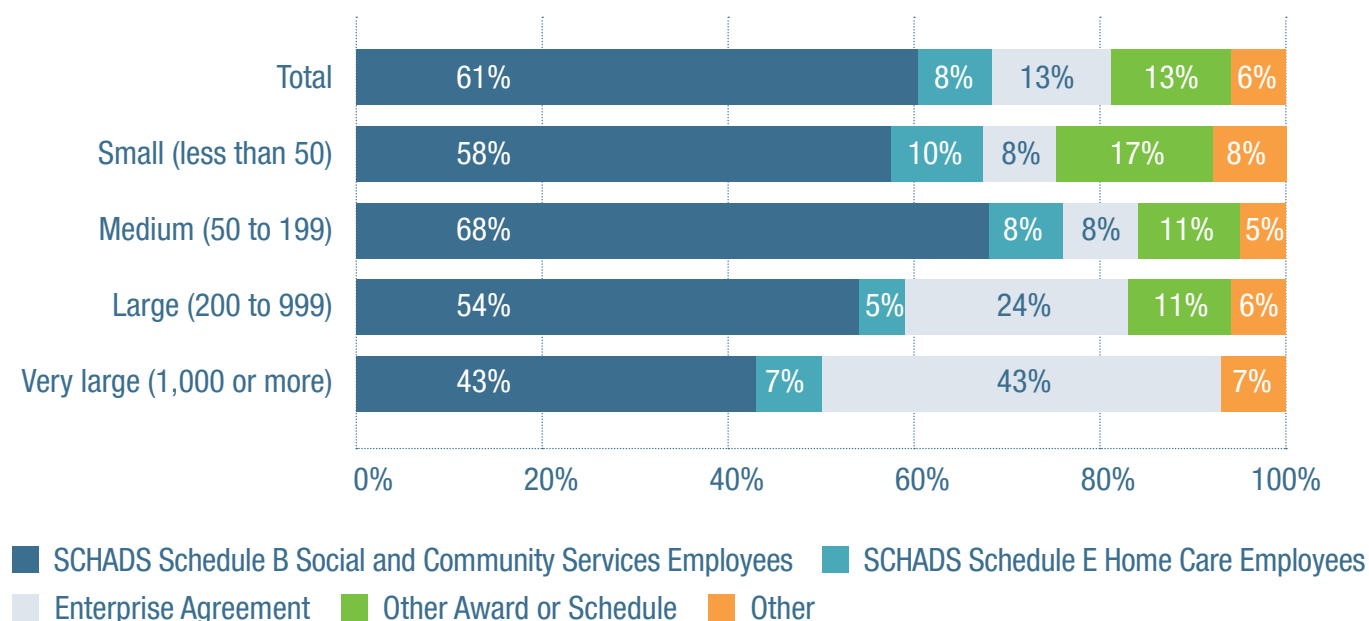
NDS encourages all providers to at least ask their board members, management and staff whether they would like to disclose their disability status. The overall aim is to achieve greater visibility and impact of people with disability in our sector, and develop tools and resources that can be used across the board.

Industry awards

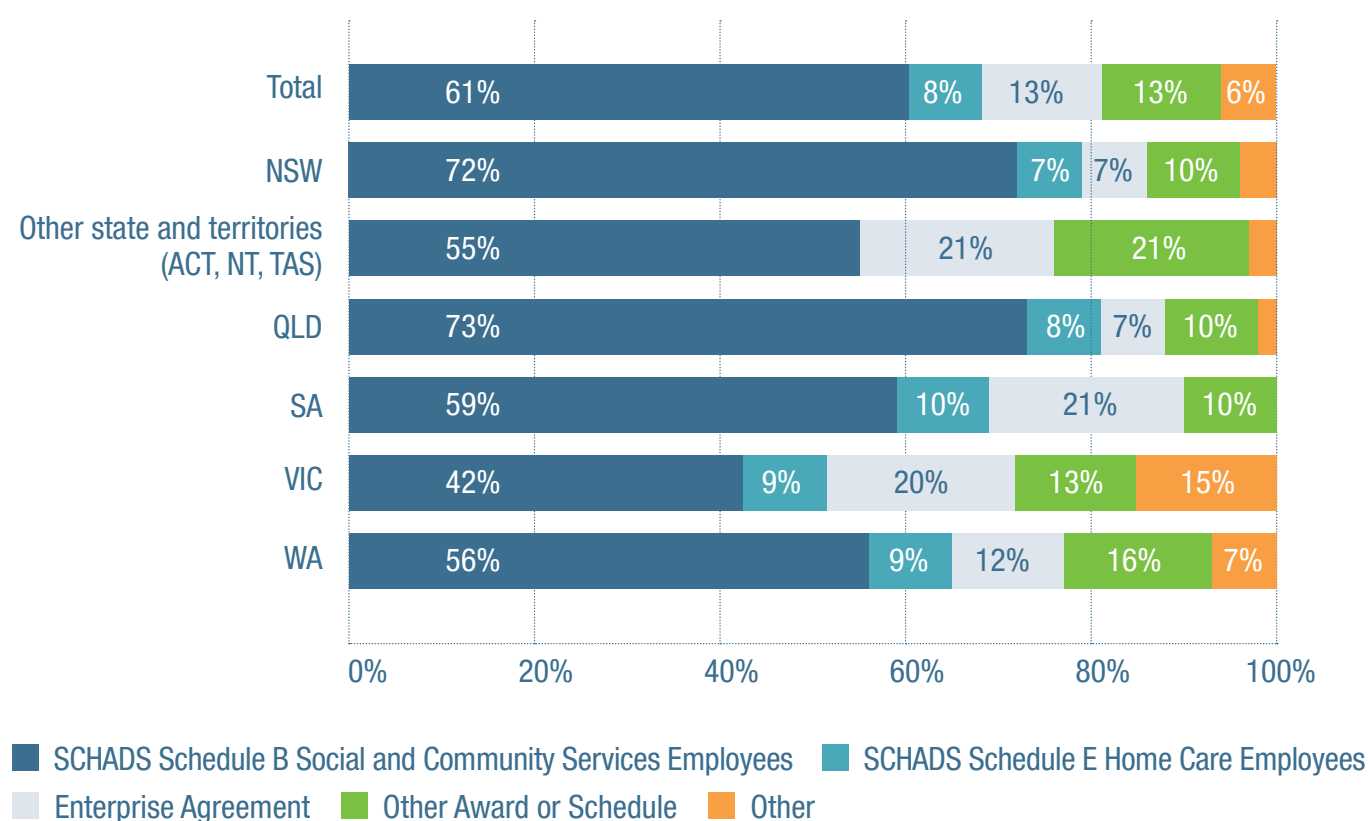
We asked about industrial awards or agreements that organisations used to determine pay and conditions for disability support workers. Similar to last year, 61 per cent were covered under Schedule B of the Social and Community Services Employees (SCHADS) Award, 13 per cent were covered under an enterprise agreement, 13 per cent worked under another award or schedule, and eight per cent under SCHADS Schedule E.

This means that 37,356 employees were covered under SCHADS Schedule B, 18,942 were covered under an enterprise agreement, 3987 were covered under another award schedule, and 2999 were covered under SCHADS Schedule E.

When we explored this by size of organisations, a higher percentage of medium organisations used SCHADS Schedule B and a larger percentage of very large organisations used an enterprise agreement.

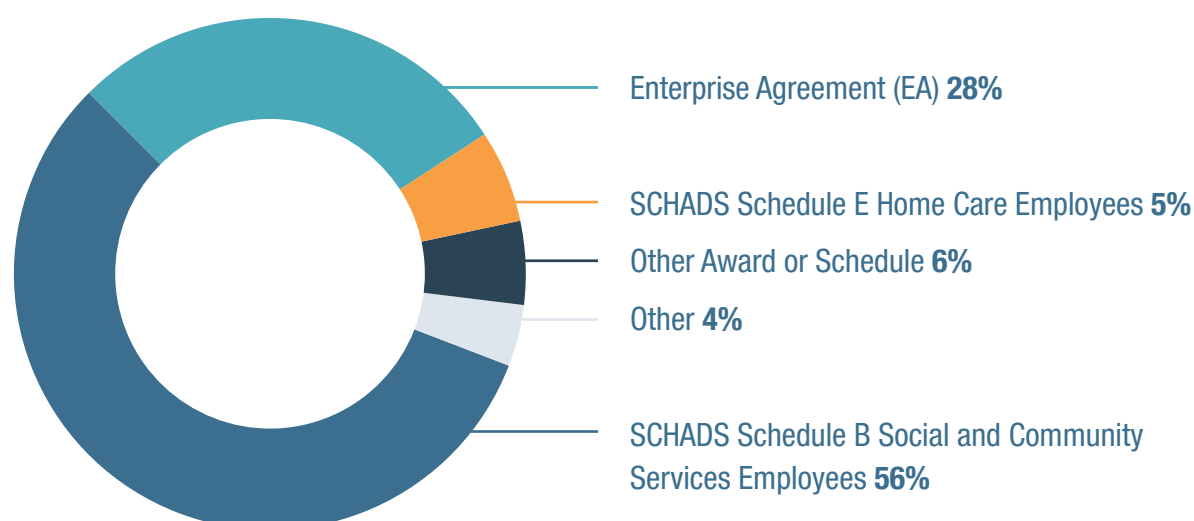
Figure 13 Industrial instrument used by size of organisation

By state and territory, 73 per cent of organisations in Queensland used SCHADS Schedule B, followed by New South Wales (72 per cent), South Australia (59 per cent), Western Australia (56 per cent), other states and territories (ACT, Northern Territory and Tasmania — 55 per cent) and Victoria (42 per cent).

Figure 14 Industrial instrument used by state and territory

Overall, 56 per cent of the workforce of organisations in this year's census are employed under SCHADS Schedule B, followed by Enterprise Agreements (EAs), covering 28 per cent of the workers in the census. This is a slight change from December 2022, when 53 per cent of employees were covered by SCHADS Schedule B and 35 per cent covered by EAs. The reduced coverage of EAs may be due to the Secure Jobs, Better Pay Act, which led to the termination of many EAs registered before 2010.

Figure 15 Proportion of workers covered by various industrial instruments



Spotlight Topic: Behaviour Support Practitioners

The spotlight for this survey was on behaviour support practitioners. The NDIS Commission reports a growing cohort (7817) of suitable practitioners (NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission 2023), yet little is known of the behaviour support workforce (Kelly, G. et al 2024) and providers consistently identify challenges in finding quality practitioners.

A fifth (21 per cent) of organisations in the survey employed behaviour support practitioners — 673 practitioners.

Before working as a behaviour support practitioner, they must self-assess their capability and then be deemed suitable by the NDIS Commission. The Commission assesses practitioners at one of four capability levels based on their self-assessment and supervisor endorsement (NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission 2019).

Progression through the capability levels is based on supervisor endorsement alone, with no cross-checks required by the NDIS Commission. The Commission publishes no data about the capability levels of the full cohort of practitioners.

In this collection, 60 per cent (401) were at Core level, including 312 in permanent, full- or part-time roles and an additional 84 practitioners as casual.

One-hundred-and-fifty-six were at the Proficient level, the majority of whom were either permanent full-time (106) or permanent part-time (46). One staff member was fixed-term part-time and there were three casually employed staff members.

Forty-one were at the Advanced level (22 permanent full time, 14 permanent part time, one fixed-term full time, and four casually employed).

Finally, 75 were at the Specialist level. Fifty-nine were permanent full-time, nine permanent part-time, six subcontractors, and one casual staff member.

Numbers of practitioners at each level is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Behaviour support practitioners

	Core	Proficient	Advanced	Specialist
Permanent full-time	132	106	22	59
Permanent part-time	180	46	14	9
Fixed-term full time	0	0	1	0
Fixed-term part time	3	1	0	0
Casual	84	3	4	1
Subcontract	2	0	0	6
Total	401	156	41	75

Developing practitioners is crucial. It needs a combination of professional development and supervision, focussed on case work and capability development. Indeed, supervision is a requirement for all behaviour support practitioners (NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission 2019).

When asked about supervision for behaviour support practitioners, 54 organisations (76 per cent) reported providing supervision, 13 organisations (18 per cent) reported that behaviour support practitioners source their own supervision, and four organisations (six per cent) reported that they did not know whether the organisation provides supervision.

Behaviour support practitioners work with participants with complex support needs, and require a multi-faceted, well-developed skill set. While there are experienced practitioners in the workforce, the vast inexperience in the field (Kelly, G. et al 2024) poses multiple challenges, including the market's capacity to support practice development.

Consequently, the quality in the development and implementation of plans is variable. In 2021, the NDIS Commission identified that eighty per cent of plans in a sample review were underdeveloped or scored poorly on quality categories (NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, 2022).

The demand for skilled practitioners causes delays in the development of positive behaviour support plans and increases the need to report unauthorised restrictive practices. What this data suggests is that the number of experienced practitioners in the behaviour support workforce is not high enough to provide support at the required volume and quality.



Conclusions

This year's NDS Workforce Census continues to give an important snapshot of the disability workforce. Maintaining our consistently high response rate has allowed for continued trend analysis and for a more nuanced view of the sector.

Largely, results have stayed consistent from year to year, suggesting that some of the workforce issues have become entrenched. This is consistent with results from our 2023 State of the Disability Sector Report, which also reflected little improvement in long-term challenges within the sector.

Despite an increase in full-time employment this year, the disability sector continues its heavy reliance on casual support workers, who have a very high turnover. Given the costs associated with training and onboarding, this should be a concern for government and the sector.

Also, despite working in a disability-conscious area, a considerable number of organisations are still not tracking their employment of staff with disability. Of those who track, less than four per cent of their staff had a disability. Board representation was stronger, with 10 per cent of board members having a disability and 33 per cent of board members having lived experience of caring for or supporting a family member or loved one with disability.

It will be interesting to see how things change in the coming years within the sector, particularly with reforms on the way. As a priority to support the sustainability of the workforce, we should reduce staff turnover and our reliance on casual support workers.

Also, we should support an increase in employment for people with disability in the sector and focus more on workplace adjustments and how they can reduce barriers.

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National Disability Services is Australia's peak body for non-government disability service organisations, representing over 1000 service providers. Collectively, NDS members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability.

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