

Workforce development in early childhood education and care

The early childhood education and care industry in Australia is undergoing a shift in philosophy. Changes in policy are driving the industry towards a combined early childhood education and care focus, away from one on child care only. This move has implications for the skilling of the child care workforce.

This research overview describes the approaches of innovative employers, those who have excelled in the delivery of early childhood education and care services while also providing staff with a high-quality workplace and attractive employment conditions. The findings are drawn from workplace case studies in the child care sector, conducted as part of a three-year project on workforce development. The employers at the heart of this study believe they have found a 'high skills' way to develop the workforce in the sector. This overview details some of the experiences of Lady Gowrie Tasmania and Norwest Child Care in New South Wales in their search for the skill 'highway'.

Reading the skills road map in child care—understanding the challenges

The child care industry faces inherent labour market challenges—workers have a duty of care for small children, working hours can be long, and the work itself can be stressful.

Child care work is highly important, yet lowly paid

Despite the intense level of responsibility that child care work demands, the industry is characterised by a tension between the high value and importance of the work, and the low remuneration, benefits and status achieved by those actually undertaking the work. Beyond the intrinsic rewards derived from working with children, which may be significant, the pay and working conditions are typically poor.

For child care to be affordable, costs for parents must remain low. Yet, care of children requires high staff numbers to maintain high care standards. In the past, many employers have relied on a pool of low-skilled, low-paid workers to fill vacancies. As a consequence, high levels of casual employment, high turnover, and limited career development have all become accepted industry norms. The industry has been described as being caught in a low skills–low pay cycle.

Caught in a skills 'cul-de-sac'

Two main factors have contributed to the low-skills cycle, 'the skills cul-de-sac', in early childhood education and care, with few employers managing to escape from it. Ironically, while both formal, accredited vocational training and compliance frameworks are intended to help the sector to develop and maintain standards, they have produced a number of unintended outcomes, discussed below.

How VET has been used in the sector

The sector has relied heavily on workers with vocational qualifications, a strategy viewed as an expedient way to fill vacancies. Most direct care roles have been held by staff holding certificate III-level child care qualifications. This means that employers conform to mandated requirements while sourcing labour cheaply and quickly.

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

This approach has offered little skill or professional development to employees in the longer term. With few career prospects, staff tend to leave, not just their current employer, but the industry. This, in turn, encourages a further reliance on entry-level VET qualifications, with employers typically appointing new staff with entry-level qualifications because these workers can be 'trained up' quickly and put 'on the floor' to fill vacancies left by workers who have burnt out or left the sector.

Compliance standards add to stress for workers

While regulatory and compliance controls such as ratios are important to ensuring that high standards of child care are preserved, these present the industry with a skill dilemma. Conforming to compliance standards has created a number of detrimental and unforeseen consequences for the industry. Firstly, an intense level of compliance can profoundly affect the workload at the workplace level, with administrative and compliance paperwork contributing significantly to the long hours worked by staff.

Secondly, a highly 'compliant' industry culture can have the unintended effect of steering training away from innovative approaches to practice, towards skills that are based on adherence to regulatory standards. In this context, the scope for considering and encouraging new areas of knowledge, practice and skill for the industry are constrained.

The signposts to skill cul-de-sacs

The employers in this study identify high turnover as the key indicator of a workplace trapped in a cycle of low skill and low pay. While high turnover has a number of undesirable consequences (including high recruitment costs), it is also identified as the single biggest threat to high-quality early childhood education and care.

Developing a strategy to reduce turnover

Given the magnitude of these challenges, how then have some employers managed to steer away from low-skill routes towards a path which promotes the acquisition of a higher level of skills, at the same time encouraging staff to stay in the workplace?

The approaches that the innovative organisations identified in the study have adopted to combat turnover have strong similarities and are linked to other strategies designed to improve both the quality of child care and staff employment conditions.

Four basic principles underpin the low turnover, skill 'highway':

- * Staff are offered permanent employment.
- * Higher staff-child ratios than required by the statutory minima are adopted.
- * The philosophy behind early childhood education and care is explained to staff and practised in the workplace.
- * Employer-supported skill development is geared towards formal skills acquisition and higher learning.

In addition to these core features of practice, all employees are paid above the award. Furthermore, a commitment to making staff permanent does not mean that casual employees are not employed by these organisations. Casual staff are regularly used to backfill permanent staff vacancies, with these casuals drawn from a stable pool of workers accessed by the individual centre.

Employers with a fresh approach to the sector's problem areas, such as Lady Gowrie and Norwest Child Care, argue that the status of the sector can be raised if both employers and employees work to create a 'professional culture'. These employers insist that conventional child care roles must be challenged, and redesigned away from static 'care' roles (requiring only low-level training). For this to occur, staff must be encouraged and supported to develop skills—and to continue to develop them—an approach that is particularly beneficial when embedded within an overarching philosophy of care.

Encouraging staff to understand the philosophy of care and education informing the system of which they are a part also assists workers to build positive and constructive partnerships with families and communities. This knowledge equips workers with the skills necessary to develop appropriate programs for children and to explain and communicate the rationale behind these, and their outcomes, to parents.

Higher skill levels in the child care industry, however, must affect the economic structure of the sector. This would inevitably lead to increases in wages, which would have to be met through government subsidy or higher fees.

Case study: Lady Gowrie Tasmania

The turnover strategy used by Lady Gowrie Tasmania focuses on identifying high-stress roles and fine-tuning employment and workload management structures to reduce stress at these critical points.

We work out which roles are the focal points of stress, and give extra supports to these roles.

In a typical child care centre, staff members are rewarded by receiving promotion up, and out of, direct care roles. Lady Gowrie examined this practice and came up with two significant findings. Firstly, supervisory, management and 'leader' roles are hot spots for stress, and therefore burnout. Secondly, promoting staff 'away from children' means that important educator knowledge and experience are effectively lost. To address both of these issues, Lady Gowrie implemented a unique management model. Every centre now has two managers, with half of each person's time devoted to being 'on the floor'.

We believe we have the very best practitioners, and we help them to develop to become the very best practitioners, so we don't want to lose them . . . we want them working with the kids, having direct contact with the children.

Mentoring forms an important part of working relationships and is encouraged between junior and senior staff, and amongst peers. Managers are also encouraged to mentor and to share experiences between centres. Half a day every week is devoted exclusively to handover, mentoring and support activities. Other support mechanisms are designed to help reduce stress overall, for example, half a day per week of 'discretionary time' is also offered to staff to help provide a healthy work–life balance. Staff can use this time as they wish, including spending time away from work entirely. Staff with children and/or caring responsibilities outside work have found this measure particularly positive.

The Lady Gowrie organisation considers that a skills 'highway' is created when employers encourage employees to make a commitment to the workplace, with employers then supporting employees to upgrade their training and education. A crucial element in the success of this strategy is demonstrating to employees that the organisation is willing to make a commitment to them.

Case study: Norwest Child Care

Norwest Child Care uses an alternative strategy to address turnover. Rather than using qualification level alone as the criterion for employment, Norwest recruits people it believes are highly suitable for the industry and who represent a 'good fit' for the workplace.

If you find good people who are committed to the industry and want to understand what it means to work in early childhood—keep them.

Norwest frequently hires untrained staff, but then requires employees to complete a negotiated training and career development plan, with their employment being conditional on their addressing this plan.

People say, why train people if they only leave? I say, what happens if you don't train them, and they stay?

The ongoing (permanent) employment relationship between the employee and the organisation is also critical.

We find people who will fit and we fight to keep them and manage their transitions through life—having children, studying . . .

Norwest argues that training in the child care industry is a commitment that should involve both the employer and the employee. For this reason, all employees, whether at entry level, or highly experienced, are required to have training and development goals.

Children aren't machines, you can't defer to an operations manual. You have to have people prepared and able to function at a higher level of understanding, capable of making professional judgments.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

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Following the directions to a skills 'highway'

Innovative employers argue that implementing a strategy to reduce turnover is possible, and indeed necessary, if the status and profile of early childhood education and care work are to be raised. This will only be achieved by reflecting upon current operating practices, including the management of workloads.

As a first step, employers must consider the links between the child care outcomes being sought and the workforce development strategies that might be used to produce these outcomes. The workload and management commitments

associated with the provision of high-quality child care need to be acknowledged and addressed. The employers in this study argue this is critical because, if the workload implications can be anticipated and addressed, staff turnover may be reduced. If additional and supportive workforce development strategies are put into place, staff will not only stay, but further develop skills and thus provide higher-quality care for children.

The table below provides a model of how a workplace might identify and establish links between quality in service and quality of employment.

Links between quality in service and quality of employment

Quality in service outcome being sought	Workload management and operating implications	Workforce development strategies used to produce high-quality employment outcome
Environment allows children to form meaningful attachment to staff	Consistency of care required	Permanent contracts used to create consistent team of staff. Staff benefit from stability in employment and regular hours arrangements
Need to service diverse range of emotional, behavioural and developmental requirements of children	Staff require high levels of skill to interpret, manage, anticipate and respond to children's behaviours and needs	Employer-supported training in philosophy of care and formal qualification. Offers transferability of skill for worker and is beneficial in career terms
Workplace is responsive to children's needs 'on the floor'	Workload management strategies should maximise opportunity for 'quality' in engagements with children. Requires attentive, sensitive, and knowledgeable staff	Innovative employers ensure that child-staff ratios are higher than statutory requirements. This helps reduce work intensity for staff while 'on the floor' and reduces stress overall
Positive partnerships with family and communities	Staff able to negotiate and communicate with parents over potentially complex issues of behaviour, philosophy of care and development	Employer-supported training for staff. Enhances the ability of staff to engage with parents, and helps to reduce stress

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