

AUWU Longitudinal Survey on Workforce Australia – Survey #1- Qualitative Analysis

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July 2022

In July 2022 the Australian Unemployed Workers Union (AUWU) distributed a survey – The Longitudinal Survey on Workforce Australia – Survey #1 (LSWA#1) – to people engaged in the new Workforce Australia system. Because the survey was posted during the first week of Workforce Australia's operations, its primary focus was on transition and implementation issues.

The AUWU previously did a survey in June 2022 – The “AUWU Workforce Australia and Points-Based Activation System Survey”, which reported on unemployed workers' expectations and understanding about the then impending Workforce Australia. The analysis of that survey has been provided previously.

407 people responded to the survey, which was advertised on the Union's website, its Facebook page, which has more than 22,000 followers, and its Twitter account, which has more than 7,000 followers. Participation was voluntary. Providing name, gender and age range were all optional fields – 162 identified as female, 148 identified as male; 4 participants were 16-20 years old, 15 participants were 21-24 years old 64 participants were 25-34 years old; 67 participants were 35-44 years old; 95 participants were 45-54 years old; 135 participants were 55-64 years old; and 24 participants were 65 years old and over. 3 participants did not indicate their age range. Participants chose the preferred level of anonymity for their responses ranging from completely anonymous through to publicly sharing their responses with their name and the demographic information they provided. Participants were also asked if they wished to participate in future surveys for the AUWU.

This report details a qualitative analysis of three open ended questions in the survey. The use of verbatim quotes throughout the report are for purposes of illustration of the analytical points and generally represent the balance of feeling in the overall responses. In choosing quotations to use in this way, preference was given to those that were expressed succinctly.

Survey Design

The LSWA#1 was delivered through a webform using the survey service Typeform. The survey instrument consists of X questions including:

- Demographic information (optional) and consent for data sharing.
- Information about the respondent's interaction with Workforce Australia.
- A ranked choice of issues by priority constructed from enquiries AUWU has fielded about Workforce Australia.
- Three optional open comment boxes about
 - Communication about the system,
 - Agreement to the terms and conditions of Workforce Australia, and
 - General comments.

A quantitative analysis is presented in a separate report.

273 participants offered additional comments, which were analysed using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). The purposes for using an inductive approach are to condense raw textual data into a brief, summary format; and to develop a framework of the underlying structure of experiences that are evident in the raw data. The general inductive approach provides an easily used

and systematic set of procedures for analysing qualitative data that can produce reliable and valid findings.

The overriding theme to derive from the comments is the level of frustration experienced by participants with the design, implementation, and initial follow-up of the new system, which is perhaps best summed up by this comment:

“The whole thing is an utter shitshow. Nothing works, I have been left to my own devices to navigate the system and I can't get any information or help from anyone or anywhere”

Anonymous

Open Comments 1: Communication and understanding about the system.

The first group of open comments related to how information about Workforce Australia had been communicated and how this had been understood. This generated 273 individual comments.

Almost all participants reported that they did not have adequate information about the system and their attempts to find out information had been unsuccessful:

“I looked up the DSS website to find out about Workforce Aust. The Govt has provided no information to me personally (apart from meeting reminders via text msg). Centrelink also had no information to offer clients when I enquired in person at the local office in Brunswick Heads. My job active support person wasn't aware of the new system last month and I sent her links and The Guardian article I'd read after our meeting. She wasn't aware the new Workforce Aust website was up and running during our meeting on 6th July. She couldn't access the site during our meeting as the internet connection wasn't working again!!!”

Michele

“I have not received any information from a provider or the department about how the change will impact my mutual obligations, what stream I am in, or what I can expect from the appointment. I don't know what I can do if I find the provider appointment unhelpful, they refuse to take my disability into account, or in general not listening to me. I don't know the “rules” of what they can do. My mutual obligations were met simply by studying and casual employment but it seems that will change. I've only received an email from the department with a link to the website, that's all the information that's been provided.”

Louise

As was noted in the previous report: *A consistent theme is the lack of information about system changes. If the Department of Employment has a communication strategy for Workforce Australia, our evidence suggests that it is too late or if it has happened then it has failed to achieve its intended audience.* The feedback from this survey suggests that this issue has not been addressed in the interim.

Open Comments 2: Agreeing to the terms and conditions of Workforce Australia.

The second group of open comments referred to unemployed workers' experiences with agreeing to the terms and conditions of Workforce Australia. This generated 130 individual comments.

Participants were provided with an excerpt from the Workforce Australia app's terms and conditions with regard to your consent for the app handling your "sensitive information". Below this excerpt from the terms and conditions participants were provided with the legal definition of "sensitive information". Participants were asked to please read this information before proceeding to the next question.

While the language of the terms and conditions is written in plain English and this is commendable, comments reflected a widespread unease with the terms and conditions both in terms of understanding what was being agreed to but also the feeling of not being able to disagree because of unknown consequences of not agreeing to them:

"At the time it seemed like I was signing away all rights to privacy, and I was very uncomfortable with that. But how else was I able to get into the "dashboard" area?"

Anonymous

"It was extremely long and I have not had time to read it all. It was evident that if you did not agree, it would block workers from accessing information about you, making it harder to help me. Due to already having to deal with that block for years now, I agreed to be transparent, BECAUSE I WANT THE HELP!"

Jessica

"I'm confused and I genuinely don't understand these conditions. It's frustrating I'm not sure what I'm agreeing to or not agreeing to. I have to get someone to explain it to me."

Anonymous

From the open text responses, it was clear that some participants have read the terms in conditions in some detail and had an informed and nuanced understanding. Condition 10.3 of the privacy section in the terms and conditions - *"We will not provide You with the names of Businesses who may have accessed Your resume, video resume and profile online"* generated particular comments:

"Why can businesses freely access information about me, but I am not allowed to know who they are? I find that unfair and concerning. It's like I am forfeiting my rights to basic information, privacy and choice about who accesses my personal details and what they will do with that information. I feel like I've become a commodity in return for income support."

Anonymous

“The whole thing seems invasive. It was suggested that I provide details of doctors, next of kin etc. How is this their business? And what guarantees are there of privacy? I didn't see any, and distribution to third parties was explicit. The company is in no way helping me look for suitable work so I can't fathom why they need any of this information”

Anonymous

While the website indicates that ‘jobseekers’ may withhold ‘sensitive information’ it does not explain nor give examples of what constitutes sensitive information and it was clear from the responses that until this detail had been provided by the AUWU, participants in Workforce Australia do not understand this element of what they are agreeing to. The terms and conditions agreement also informs participants that by withholding sensitive information “your access to some functionality on the Workforce Australia digital platform may be limited” but does not explain what this means. This is an opportunity for improvement.

Open Comments 3: General Comments.

At the conclusion of the survey, participants could provide any additional comments. 231 general comments were made. While some of these comments reiterated comments made about the implementation and information, the overall sense of the comments was that Workforce Australia was not an improvement on the previous jobactive in terms of offering a viable labour market program to help people get work:

Still seems to be about catching people out, looking as though the system is working (when it isn't) and not providing tailored help to those who really need it. Provider knowledge of new system is worrying.

Anonymous

“... This system is not an "employment services system"; it is a compliance system...”

Anonymous

This suggests that participants in Workforce Australia do not see that it will improve their chances of finding work. As has been noted elsewhere, Workforce Australia’s primary focus on compliance repeats the same mistakes of jobactive in that it does not provide a meaningful labour market program. In times of critical labour shortages, this focus on compliance serves neither employers nor unemployed workers (O’Halloran, 2022)

In addition, many comments related to the poor functionality of the system:

The site has too many redirections for you to find information quickly. There is no capacity to engage in real up-skilling for those of us who have been out of work for a while. Why have they not used OCR (Optical Character Reading) so we can send a softcopy of our resumes and they can convert for their data collection? Why do I have to list each "Experience" of the last 30 years of my working life?

Anonymous

"The link to some of the free courses had some that were asking for money!"

Anonymous

"...outages, unfair terms and a poor design. What is it with all these mega IT design failures?..."

Anonymous

As has been noted by others, information technology (IT) projects in the public sector experience significant challenges and despite decades of research, remediation attempts have not appeared to have reduced nor mitigated the problems faced when the public sector undertakes large IT projects (Carlton, 2018). Survey participants who appeared to have some expert knowledge of IT, were particularly scathing of the new system's lack of responsiveness and utility. Dunning (2011) has noted that the skills required to do the job are the same skills needed to identify competence in others. It is worth questioning therefore if the role and contribution of political interference and non-IT executives have played a part in achieving what appears to be yet another poor outcome for a major Australian Government IT project.

References

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