



STRENGTH IN  
COMMITMENT  
A 25th Anniversary Publication





Image: The first Board of Job Futures 1997.  
 Clockwise from left: Steve Lawrence, Chris McGuigan, Martin Titherley, Tony Mylan, Uri Windt, Ian Carter, Jeremy McAuliffe, Maureen Beckett



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# STRENGTH IN COMMITMENT 2008 – 2022

## CELEBRATING COACT'S 25 YEARS OF SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES AND CHANGING LIVES



Image: The Community Solutions Group Team,  
CoAct Excellence Awards 2018



Image: The Workways Australia Team,  
CoAct Excellence Awards 2018

*In 1997, a group of organisations imagined a way they could combine their strengths to carve out a continued place for community-based employment services providers in a market of privatised employment services. The model they designed was unique – Job Futures.*

An organisation owned by its members, it planned initially to tender collectively to government, through Job Futures, for employment services business, with service delivery subcontracted to the members. Harnessing the expertise of its partners, the organisation would look to broaden these opportunities in the future.

The 10th anniversary publication, A Shared Vision 1997-2007, told the story of the growth of Job Futures from its beginnings to being a major provider of employment services, despite the challenges of a competitive and demanding environment and some inherent frictions of the model.

For a quarter of a century, Job Futures has thrived and played a leading role in an industry that has experienced constant change and consolidation. While the organisation's name has now changed to CoAct, its network continues to support the most vulnerable in our communities. Our purpose continues to be helping individuals put poverty and disadvantage behind them by developing their capabilities, securing lasting employment and ensuring they have access to ongoing support.

Strength in Commitment 2008-2022 outlines CoAct's key events, challenges, driving forces and achievements and the organisation's continuing evolution to maintain its relevance.

## DEDICATION

To the founders of Job Futures/CoAct, who had a vision and worked so hard to bring it to life.

To those who followed and, by their efforts, have kept the vision alive in a constantly changing environment.

To our service partners and their staff across the network who, by their work day by day, make Australia a better, more inclusive place to live.

To our CoAct staff who contribute to the success of the network, making a difference and improving lives.

And to the many thousands of people who have come through our doors over 25 years and worked with us to find a way around their challenges, develop their skills and gain sustainable work and a better life, and to those who keep on trying, despite ongoing challenges.

*Thank you for  
being part of the  
CoAct journey.*

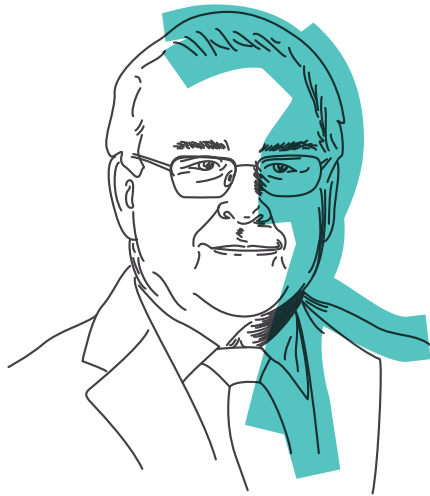
To our funders and government departments who recognise the value of our work and have supported us on our journey. Thank you.

While every effort has been made to check and cross reference names, facts and figures we realise that there may be a few oversights. Please accept this as our apology for any errors or omissions.



## FOREWORD

*Twenty-five years ago the founders of CoAct stood by their belief that the not-for-profit community sector had a significant role to play in the way in which Australian society is shaped and refused to be pushed out of the new competitive employment services arena.*



**Robert Fitzgerald AM**  
**| Commissioner**

*NSW Ageing and Disability Commission*

*Former Chair, Job Futures*

Under the original name Job Futures a new collaborative model was forged and immediately became a significant provider of employment services in the emerging market. Moreover, Job Futures was constantly seeking to improve the policy settings and market conditions based on its members' front-line experience and robust evidence of the real impacts on marginalised employment seekers.

The CoAct model has enabled small, medium and large organisations to work together in a cooperative spirit but still be highly competitive. The power of the CoAct network through collaboration in addressing local problems is demonstrated by ongoing success at tenders, but more importantly the thousands of people whose lives have been changed through training and employment opportunities.

As outlined in this publication, over the past 15 years, as the market has become more sophisticated and government benchmarks are set higher, CoAct has had to make changes to meet an ever-evolving environment and remain relevant, having an impact on all areas of operations, governance and partner engagement. Despite the inevitable ups and downs of employment services, CoAct continues to prove that with the ongoing commitment of its partners and a suitable framework to support excellence in performance, the future is positive.

As a former Chair, I was inspired by the tireless commitment of so many to improving the wellbeing of those who experienced unemployment. My message to the CoAct network is to keep alive the passion for not-for-profit endeavour and the vision, to change lives through collaboration with like-minded organisations. What you do matters.



Image: Bridle, CoAct / VisAbility jobseeker

## INTRODUCTION

*Just as in 2007  
at its 10th  
anniversary,  
CoAct celebrates  
its 25th  
anniversary in a  
time of significant  
uncertainties  
due to the  
complex and  
often-changing  
environment  
of government  
tenders and  
short-term  
contracts.*



**Matt Little**

*CEO, CoAct*

However, unlike 15 years ago, we're witnessing a shift in government policy from 'one-size-fits-all' to a future of reinvestment in intensive tailored support to assist the most disadvantaged in breaking the cycle of poverty. Those changes suggest greater opportunity and a bright future for the network.

Through changes achieved in CoAct over the years, the network is now stronger, confident and mature, and is no longer beholden to the tender success of one program. Rather, the network's future success will be determined by harnessing the expertise and aspirations of its committed partners.

All organisations have their own journey but many fail to capture the key milestones and invaluable lessons of the past. This publication represents a continued commitment at CoAct to documenting our history with its successes and failures along with the events that helped shape the organisation and the people who have influenced our journey along the way.

Our founders didn't have it easy when CoAct was envisaged in 1997. They travelled the country promoting the value of an organisation like CoAct for the community services sector. The organisation's stewards over the years have had similar challenges, leading the network to embrace the changes required to not only remain relevant, but also, to thrive into the future.

CoAct was founded with a shared purpose and vision, driven by the outsourcing of government employment services. But, to survive and flourish, it needed more than vision.

As demonstrated in the following pages, that shared vision also required shared commitment and long-term strategic alignment to withstand the rapidly changing environments experienced over the past 15 years. Together we are stronger and will continue to deliver on our purpose to support disadvantaged Australians access employment opportunities and build a more inclusive Australia.

I am truly humbled to have played my small part in leading the organisation for a period of its rich history.

# NAVIGATING CHANGE

## 2008 – 2013

### BUILDING RESILIENCE IN TURBULENT TIMES

#### *Into the second decade.*

Writing in the introduction to Job Futures' A Shared Vision 1997-2007, Lisa Fowkes, the then CEO, noted:

*"As this publication goes to print (November 2007) there are some significant uncertainties that will impact on our direction for the next ten years. The programs we deliver are under review and a federal election imminent. On a wider front, the employment challenge is shifting from one of addressing widespread unemployment to one of addressing workforce participation and skills shortages. New technologies are opening up new ways of working that we are only just beginning to understand. We will need to continue to adapt and to take advantage of the new opportunities as they arise."*

Lisa had been appointed in February 2007 following the sudden departure of the previous executive, precipitated by concerns in the membership about the organisation's direction. Lisa had a dual focus. First, to rebuild the confidence and trust of the network in Job Futures value. It was expected that several existing programs (Job Network, Personal Support Program (PSP), Job Placement, Employment Training (JPET), and Community Work Co-ordinator) would be merged into one. Many members delivered these programs in their own right and their confidence in bidding with Job Futures was important to the organisation's success. Second, to gain membership support for the strengthening of processes so that contracts could be removed

from underperforming members in a timely manner before they had a negative impact on the future of the network, while at the same time create a membership charter that clearly set this out.

While these were difficult discussions, following extensive consultation the members agreed to this greater control by Job Futures, which would protect the network as a whole. Members confirmed the importance of a coherent contracting entity controlled by its member organisations through a board.

Other key points of the membership charter approved in May 2008 included an agreement that members would only deliver Job Network and any subsequent programs through Job Futures, and members would commit to delivering two contracts of three years' duration to ensure return on investment for the network. An 18-month notification period for non-continuation would allow Job Futures time to find an alternative provider. The need for this safeguard was dramatically highlighted when just weeks before the submission of the Job Services Australia (JSA) tender, two members, whose CEOs were Job Futures' Board directors, announced they were tendering in their own right, resulting in a considerable loss of business to the network. This created feelings of anger and betrayal amongst the members and at Job Futures.

An application was made to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission

(ACCC) with successful endorsement of these non-compete clauses, along with re-authorisation of Job Futures' collective tendering arrangements. In considering the application, the ACCC affirmed the public benefit that the Job Futures model had generated.

The election of a Labor government in November 2007 was welcomed by the network as was the Apology to the Stolen Generation in February 2008. The new government undertook a review of employment services with extensive consultation. Job Futures participated in this review, pushing back against proposals to transfer Centrelink functions to providers, and proposing greater recognition of the value of local providers. The outcome of the review was, as expected, a substantial merger and refocusing of programs. On paper at least, the new proposal, Job Services Australia, emphasised social inclusion and the most disadvantaged, areas of strength for Job Futures.

The JSA tender was enormous, made even more challenging by last-minute changes to selection criteria. Both Job Futures and member staff worked long hours (including some memorable all-nighters) to complete more than 80 bids. The due date was extended by two weeks, giving Lisa time to write an additional tender for the Tiwi Islands. It was also the first tender to be submitted online, which greatly reduced the stress of getting multiple boxes to Canberra in time.



## JSA RESULTS: SUCCESS, SHOCK AND SADNESS

*The results of the JSA tender saw a larger-than-expected consolidation of the market.*

It also appeared that the department placed greater weight on promises of innovation over demonstrated performance. In some areas new entrants, including a US-based multinational, were chosen in favour of organisations that had delivered exceptional services.

For Job Futures the overall results were not far off expectations, with new business secured in urban and regional labour markets, particularly Queensland. However, the network was shocked by the decrease in Job Futures' geographic footprint; in particular, the failure to gain business of some exceptional and experienced members in Victoria and WA, despite their demonstrated capacity to deliver the government's skills and social inclusion agenda. Many were long-time members who had been integral to the success of Job Futures. Lisa Fowkes recalls, "I was at a meeting in Melbourne with departmental officials and CEOs of other providers discussing the delivery of the new program when the announcement of successful tenders was made. I was not the only one in the room who was shell-shocked by the news.

"We hadn't realised the impact that the closure of PSP and JPET would have on our geographic spread. When I saw the list of regions we had won, I thought that there was a page missing; there was clearly no interest in awarding small contracts. I think the industry as a whole didn't anticipate the enormity of the consolidation and the loss of many specialist providers. This certainly wasn't what we expected from a Labor government."

Lisa continues, "It was terrible calling the CEOs of member organisations whose bids had not been successful. Oddly enough, the most gracious were those who had lost the most, while some of those whose chances we had thought were fairly slim were most angry. Inevitably some blamed the quality of the tenders or felt that they would have done better on their own."

Many providers contested the results and, in the case of Job Futures, strong objection and support from the local Perth MP led to a last-minute allocation of business to the high-performing member in that area. Feedback from the department's tender review sessions confirmed that the tenders from the Melbourne members had been assessed highly. However, with Melbourne the most strongly contested region in the tender, the department's focus on promises of 'doing things differently', rather than on proven experience, had an impact on the results.

Concerns about the tender assessment process and outcomes were sector-wide and led to a Senate inquiry. While steps were taken by the department to avoid similar problems in future tenders, that was of little comfort to those who had lost contracts. The JSA results were a stark reminder of Job Futures' vulnerability to any change in government approach. The impact of the loss of key business for some of Job Futures' long-term members would have ongoing implications for the network.

Job Futures had the challenge of providing support to these members who had to grapple with staff losses and office closures while concurrently managing implementation of the new contract and other tenders.

Members that had been awarded contracts made an extraordinary effort to gear up and were ready for the July 2009 start. Job Futures restructured its operations team to strengthen delivery support by developing the skills of leaders at site level. This enabled early identification of performance issues with swift action to address them and showed a commitment to compliance and quality processes to the satisfaction of the funding body. The approach achieved strong performance, which led to rollover of 98.2% of the JSA contracts in 2011.



Image: Imanpa Green Corps (Anangu Jobs) participants Paul and Andrew

**INDIGENOUS  
EMPLOYMENT SERVICES**

*As detailed in  
A Shared Vision  
1997-2007.*

The Howard government's Northern Territory Emergency Response legislation in mid-2007 had a major impact on Job Futures' Indigenous members delivering Remote Area Services (RAS). The organisations and their communities had to cope with a raft of reforms and regulations affecting all areas of their lives. In employment services, 'remote area exemptions' were lifted. Job Futures members were required to move people, many of whom had significant personal and health challenges, into mandatory Work for the Dole programs. Members were concerned with the discriminatory nature of the Intervention and the impact on their

communities. Job Futures joined with peak bodies to raise concerns with some aspects of the legislation (particularly a proposed exemption for employment services providers from the Racial Discrimination Act). Contact was made with the Minister and a submission put to a Senate hearing that, we later heard, had raised the ire of some senior department officials. Meanwhile, the Job Futures operations team and other members provided support to the Indigenous members to meet these new requirements during 2007 and 2008. RAS was then incorporated into JSA in 2009.



Image: Stephen, Job Futures SEQ



Image: Bernie, CoAct / Worklink jobseeker

## THE GROWTH OF DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT SERVICES (DES)

*Concurrent with the preparation work for JSA, Job Futures made a strategic investment to grow Job Futures' involvement in DES.*

Lisa put to the Board that while the general caseload and market were shrinking, the numbers of people on Disability Support Pension were growing markedly, which was of increasing concern to the government. Disability employment would be a key ongoing business area and it was critical that Job Futures could open up this opportunity to its members, a view the Board supported.

The decision was not without controversy, as some members who were disability service providers in their own right saw Job Futures' potential expansion as a threat. This led to the inclusion of a clause in the 2008 membership charter regarding Job Futures not tendering to deliver new services in a location where that tender is likely to damage the pre-existing

business of a member organisation in that location. This somewhat ambiguous clause would be the subject of much vigorous discussion a few years later.

In preparation for the DES tender at the end of 2009, Job Futures recruited a dedicated industry expert who worked with members with contracts in their own right, providing strategic advice and performance coaching as a demonstration of the value of being part of a Job Futures bid, with some of these members joining the successful bid. From March 2010, nine members delivered DES from 35 sites.

The network's ability to engage with the client group was demonstrated through early commencement numbers that almost doubled

the national average. Over the next few years, Job Futures built up its DES capabilities, with several more members choosing to novate their own contracts to access service delivery support and robust contract management.

The DES tender was quickly followed by successful tenders for the Access Apprenticeship Program (Access) and then a new National Green Jobs Corps (NGJC). With less than 30 days' notice (including the 2009 Christmas/New Year period), Job Futures and its network demonstrated the speed at which it could move due to strong local connections. Job Futures providers were among the few to have NGJC projects and Access courses available from day one of the contracts.

## ADDRESSING FINANCIAL STRESSES

*In late  
2008/2009  
Job Futures  
significantly  
downsized  
national  
office staff.*

A range of factors contributed to this – in particular, the government’s abolition of the Green Corps program in 2009 – at the same time as needing to manage the first year of the JSA contract that modelling showed would be extremely tough. Green Corps had been a major contributor to revenue from 2002 with Job Futures receiving direct payment from the department to cover national office costs and its closure was a considerable loss. This also meant several long-standing members who delivered only Green Corps left the network.

The financial situation led to the Board’s decision to sell Job Futures’ Sydney office at 281 Clarence Street, with the sale finalised in August 2009. A unique, heritage building, 281 Clarence was not the most practical, with staff spread over three levels and siloed in individual offices. However, the roof-top garden was great for staff get-togethers and a life-saver as a break-out space for training groups. The Sydney staff moved to rented premises at 117 Clarence St.

## EXAMINING THE MODEL

*During 2008/2009,  
the Board introduced  
an internal audit  
program, undertaken  
by an external  
provider and overseen  
by the Board’s audit  
and risk committee.*

Initially, this focused on strengthening core financial controls before expanding to other areas to ensure best practice in operations.

As part of a fundamental review of the business model, the Board, led by Chair, Bob Sendt (appointed November 2007), developed a diversification and growth strategy that aimed to retain value for members while ensuring long-term sustainability and ongoing social impact. One of the questions raised in a series of discussions with members was whether the structure of six member directors and two non-member directors allowed for the breadth of skills and experience necessary to oversee a larger, more diverse business. In 2010, the

Board commissioned an independent review conducted by Alan Cameron of Cameron Ralph.

Recommendations included the need to modernise the structure of the Board with an increase in non-member directors to better meet skill requirements and to introduce longer terms (at that stage one year). Relevant amendments were taken to members in May 2011 but failed to gain the required 75% support, due largely to some ongoing member dissatisfaction with the JSA results. It would take another two years to move forward.



Image: Green Corps, installing fencing Cooloola Coast Qld



Image: John, CoAct / SkillsPlus jobseeker

## CHANGE OF LEADERSHIP

*In July 2010, Lisa Fowkes stepped down after three-and-a-half years as CEO.*

As Bob Sendt wrote, “Lisa took on the position in difficult circumstances and succeeded in improving our relationship with key stakeholders [members, the department, peak bodies]. She gave tremendously of herself as CEO and was an inspiration to her staff. Her advocacy made Job Futures a name to be respected.”

Matt Little, Manager Performance Strategy, took on the acting CEO role, with the new CEO, Bill Davidson, commencing in September 2010. Bill came from a commercial background and found the constraints of the department’s one-sided contracts challenging, describing it as ‘running a business with one hand tied behind

your back.’ At the same time, his fresh eyes on the business and his frequent question of ‘Why not?’ made staff reassess approaches and established procedures.

Bill felt that, to succeed, the network required the commitment of members to deliver all contracts through Job Futures. His infamous ‘All In or All Out’ sign at his first Chairs and CEOs Forum in November 2010 certainly stimulated discussion! While not the most sensitive, Bill’s approach highlighted Job Futures’ ongoing challenge of how to develop a strong national network with a shared agenda when each member organisation had its individual strategic plans and aspirations.

## ATTRACTING NEW MEMBERS

*Building on strong DES performance, in the lead-up to the next tender for contract commencing in March 2013, Bill Davidson and other senior staff carried out a recruitment drive, traversing the country to talk with current and potential members.*

There were robust discussions with a few members delivering DES in their own right who tried to prevent Job Futures tendering with other members across a whole metropolitan area, drawing on the ‘location’ clause from the membership charter outlined earlier. The recruitment drive succeeded with a number of new organisations joining Job Futures to be part of the tender and novating their contracts. From mid-June 2011 to mid-2012 Job Futures’ combined caseload doubled to 4,000.

One of these new members was CHES Connect, a disability specialist operating in the NSW Northern Rivers area. CEO Paul Kelly explains, “I believed that for a mid-sized, regional service provider, CHES Connect had to decide if it was going to be a subcontractor and focus on the customer service delivery or build corporate capacity and focus on being

the head contractor. CHES Connect was well engaged in the regional community with a reputation for excellent customer service, especially helping the most disadvantaged in the community, so focusing on these strengths as a subcontractor was the better option.

“With the department looking to reduce contractor numbers, being a part of a national network tender made sense for a regional provider. Also strong competition in our labour markets, especially from local high-performing JSA providers, meant CHES Connect needed to build employer engagement and marketing capability with which Job Futures could assist. So, we joined Job Futures and novated our contracts. This gave us a clear direction for strategy and business model investment with like-minded service providers.”

## SUCCESS AND CHALLENGES

*In the DES tender, Job Futures demonstrated the effectiveness of its strategies and performance support in achieving employment results for people living with a disability.*

The results saw a 30% increase in caseload and 16 members delivering services. It cemented Job Futures as a key provider in the DES arena.

However, this increase came with the challenge of achieving consistent quality of service and strong performance. While some members excelled, others struggled with the different demands of DES compared with general employment services, while others were unwilling to make the investment in staff resources required to achieve satisfactory performance.

Historically, the cost of tenders had been carried fully by Job Futures and prepared in-house along with some tender writers co-opted from member organisations. With no financial investment required, members were at times aspirational in bidding for more Employment

Service Areas (ESAs) than they could realistically manage. And despite everyone's best efforts, the quality across a tender was not always consistent.

To professionalise Job Futures' approach, a tender fee was introduced based on the number of ESAs for which a member wanted to bid. This had a significant impact, enabling the engagement of professional tender support and, having paid a fee, members were more committed.

While the tender fee can be a significant cost for an organisation, it's still considerably less than if they were to prepare a tender alone. The fee approach has been refined with each tender to ensure quality tenders and fairness to each tendering partner.



## WORKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

*Between 2010 and 2012,*

funding through the Innovation Fund and the Indigenous Employment Program (IEP) enabled Job Futures and its members to step outside the restrictions of the mainstream contracts and deliver innovative projects, benefiting the participants and providing valuable learnings for the network.

The diverse Innovation Fund projects included:

### **Diversitat in Geelong, Vic**

– a two-year project helping refugees build on their previous horticulture experience in their home country.

**Bridging the Gap in Kwinana, WA** – an 18-month project that worked with several families with a history of intergenerational unemployment to break the cycle.

### **School of Social Entrepreneurs**

– a three-year project to identify and support potential social entrepreneurs to develop their business and strengthen their communities.

Through IEP, Job Futures itself delivered a highly successful Developing Indigenous Leaders program to address the lack of Indigenous staff in management roles across the network. The 12-month program was a mixture of accredited training plus mentoring and support.





Images: Diversitat Innovation project jobseekers and Calum, HR Manager Boomeroo Nurseries

*Another Job Futures' undertaking was the Endeavour Project, Sailing Towards Reconciliation.*

On 15 April 2011, HM Bark Endeavour set sail on a historic year-long circumnavigation of Australia managed by the Australian National Maritime Museum. The Department of Employment funded 32 places on the voyage for Indigenous people receiving employment services, with two joining the vessel for each leg of the journey. Given its experience and connections in Indigenous employment services, Job Futures was invited by the department to manage the recruitment and support of the participants.

As well as developing their skills and confidence, for most participants it was also an emotional experience, as expressed by participant Gary Fridolf (Brisbane to Gladstone Leg), "For me, this journey was a chance to walk in the footsteps of my ancestors who experienced the arrival of the First Fleet and to heal and move on to a better place where all Australians can know and understand each other better. It was a chance to share some of my culture with others."

**MAJOR CHANGE TO INDIGENOUS SERVICES**

*After more than a decade of provider advocacy for a separate program to meet the needs of remote communities, in 2012 the government announced the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) to begin in June 2013.*

This affected most of Job Futures' remote contracts, with the exception of Broome and Darwin that remained within JSA.

RJCP combined several programs with a single provider in each of the 59 areas, and a requirement for the provider to be embedded in local communities. As presented, the traditional model of Job Futures holding the contract and then subcontracting down was no longer relevant. In collaboration with the members, Job Futures developed an alternative model whereby a subsidiary entity, Remote Futures Australia, would provide the same range of support services but on a commercial fee for service arrangements.

At the time of tender, Remote Futures Australia had a substantial potential caseload. Unfortunately, with the results of the tender, a number of organisations withdrew from the arrangement. This resulted in the Board decision not to proceed and meant seven organisations didn't renew their membership after June 2013. In 2015, the Darwin-based

provider Ironbark exited employment services and then the final Indigenous member, Kullarri Employment Services (KES) in Broome, left the network in 2019.

Despite the challenges for Job Futures of managing these remote contracts, the Indigenous members brought a richness to the network as a whole, increasing understanding of Indigenous communities and culture, along with the challenges of employment in remote Australia. Our Indigenous members also gave Job Futures exposure to the importance of Country and its beauty. The network as a whole benefited greatly from the innovative approaches of the remote contracts that could be applied in their own work. Tailored support of Indigenous jobseekers has, of course, continued across the network through general employment services programs.



## 2013: A YEAR OF CHANGE

*From 2013, the Job Futures company reporting obligations moved from ASIC to the newly established Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), although as a Company Limited by Guarantee it still has obligations under the Corporations Act.*

In May 2013 the Sydney office moved to Level 30, 477 Pitt St that, despite its great views across the city, was less expensive than the previous office space.

At the same time, attention turned to the organisation's leadership. Bill Davidson resigned as CEO in July to take up the position of managing director of Australian Hearing. Once again, Matt Little was called on as acting CEO, but this time decided to apply for the position. And with Job Futures Chair Bob Sendt's six-year term due to end in November, a recruitment campaign began, with Jenni Mack appointed the new chair to begin in August.

As Chair, Bob Sendt had been a steady hand during some of the company's most turbulent times. Bob drove a focus both at board and management level to strengthen the organisation's financial and risk management systems and to ensure a suitable governance framework for the future.

Having served as Chair of CHOICE for seven years, Jenni Mack brought to CoAct particular expertise with member-based not-for-profit organisations operating in a commercial environment.



### Images:

*Steve Lawrence Social Innovation Award (opposite).*

*Images of some of the Award recipients:*

- 2013** ACSO for The Pantry, with Sponsor Community Sector Banking.
- 2017** Youth Projects for Youth Space, with Sponsor JobReady.
- 2018** The Personnel Group for Shining a Light on Me, with Sponsor Church Resources. Presented by Prue Gregory (Steve's wife) and daughter Rebecca Lawrence.
- 2019** Recognition of Frontline Staff at ConnectUp 2019.





**FAREWELL TO  
STEVE LAWRENCE AO  
(1952-2012)**

*In May 2012 the  
Job Futures network  
sadly said farewell  
to Steve Lawrence,  
the leading force  
behind the concept  
and creation of Job  
Futures Ltd, and a  
founding director  
1997-2001.*

Steve, the founder, and for many years CEO, of Job Futures member WorkVentures Ltd, was at the forefront of establishing social enterprises in Australia with a particular focus on giving disadvantaged communities access to IT resources and training.

Throughout his career, Steve had been a mentor and inspiration to those involved in community development, social enterprise and social innovation in Australia and internationally. In recognition of his work, in 2010 he was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia.

In 2013, the Job Futures Board established the Steve Lawrence Social Innovation Award to honour his legacy. The award, funded by Job Futures and its generous sponsors, recognised

innovative projects that strengthened local communities. Since 2019, the focus of the award has shifted to recognising the contribution of frontline staff to achieving the network's goals of individual staff development and strong community connections.

Steve's rich legacy to both the CoAct network and the wider community sector continues to inspire.



# STRENGTHENING THE FOUNDATIONS 2014-2017

*Building the supports for network  
success and sustainability*



Image: Will Martin, Customer Experience Coordinator, CoAct / Youth Projects

## ADDRESSING IMMEDIATE CONCERNS

*When Jenni Mack started as Chair of Job Futures in August 2013, some immediate concerns needed addressing.*

Not only was the organisation experiencing rapidly declining finances and board instability, but a new CEO was still to be appointed. Recruitment began in August 2013 with Matt Little appointed to the role in October. Paul Synnott was promoted to General Manager Operations, replacing Matt.

Jenni recalls, “Given I was required to start the process for CEO recruitment on day one, and given my limited knowledge of employment services, we needed a CEO with deep sector knowledge. That was Matt in spades. He not only understood the sector but also our network. Matt was the CEO-ready internal candidate. But what made the decision for the Board was the outstanding strategic vision he presented, along with his demonstrated commitment to the network and capacity to lead it. Looking back, Matt was an outstanding choice.”

The 2013 financial year saw a revenue decrease of \$27.7 million from 2012, and an end-of-year loss of \$338,438. This result reflected the financial stress across the network with JSA performing below expectations, the first year of a new DES contract and the loss of JSA remote services revenue. Despite tight management of expenses, the downward trend continued into the 2014 financial year resulting in a revised budget only four months into the year, which included a restructure of the team along with, sadly, a number of redundancies. It

was a difficult decision for the new CEO.

One of Jenni’s first initiatives was the establishment in September 2013 of an ad hoc finance strategy committee, with the initial purpose to support the acting CEO in the preparation of a revised budget and strategies to achieve it and then to provide close monitoring of financial health until the Board was confident that finances had stabilised. The committee had a longer-term goal of developing a resilient and sustainable financial model.

The committee, initially chaired by Paul Miles, Managing Director at BUSY At Work, and then by Jenni, played a key role in ensuring Job Futures got through a difficult period without destabilising its ability to support the contracts. It supported the development of a financial model with strong financial analysis capabilities and especially robust forecasting and business line reporting, which gave Business Unit Managers clear oversight. With the committee’s purpose achieved, the Board closed it in 2017.

When Jenni joined the Board, there had been 23 member directors in the previous five years, with 11 serving less than one year, and half of the current Board having served less than three months. The situation was largely the result of directors leaving their organisation or a significant increase in their CEO workload, making a director position untenable.

At her first Board meeting in August 2013, Jenni laid out her aspirations, “I would like to build a Board culture that revolves around a can-do problem-solving culture, a dynamic Board that guides and supports management, and is an active leader of strategy and culture for the organisation.”

Key to this was improving stability through longer terms and an increase in independent director numbers, as recommended in the 2010 governance review. As a first step at the 2013 AGM, the members supported an increase in tenure of directors from one to two years, and a staggered tenure period for member directors.

These steps to strengthen CoAct’s governance framework were supported by the introduction of an Enterprise-Wide Risk Management system (EWRM). Developed in partnership with Deloitte during 2012/2013, the EWRM framework supports the identification, mitigation and management of risk across all sectors of the business, with effective reporting lines through the executive management group, the Board’s audit and risk committee and up to the Board.



## A NEW BRAND: COACT

*High on Bill Davidson's agenda was giving Job Futures a cutting edge through better and expanded use of technology and marketing.*

Working with brand designer Cameron McDiven, a project was launched to create a new look and change of name to better reflect the network, its functions and purpose.

The name CoAct was chosen to reflect the way the organisation operates. Collaboration has always been at the heart of the network with a strong belief that through the power of communities, industry and government acting together, communities can be activated and lives changed for the better. The swirls of the colourful logo represent the connections within the network, industry and government, along with the myriad connections each member has in its own community.

The new business name was adopted in 2014 and introduced to funders in the jobactive

tender and others. The official launch of the brand was part of the June 2015 Power of Many Conference held in Canberra. Ministers, local MPs and sponsor partners joined the members and their local heroes (jobseekers and supportive employers) to celebrate the launch. Matt Cowdrey, Australia's most successful Paralympian, was engaged for 12 months as the CoAct brand ambassador. The colourful new look was well received within CoAct and across the network.

The Strategic Plan 2014-2017 developed in consultation with members further highlighted the collaborative strength of the network, with the ambitious aim of being recognised as Australia's leading community employment services network. Key to this was the goal of raising our profile both through the new brand

project and involvement in industry discussions. This included CEO Matt Little successfully standing for election as a director of the National Employment Services Association (NESA) in November 2014.

Writing to the network in February 2015, Matt noted, "Our culture needs to embody the invested partners that our model represents. Our success is reliant on both parties contributing to achieving our shared goals. It's not subcontracted clauses that will make CoAct Australia's leading community network but rather our shared commitment to achieving the very best outcomes for the disadvantaged in our communities. When we do that better than all other providers, we will have achieved our vision."



Image: Sophie Gambet, then CoAct Marketing Coordinator

## MORE TENDERS, MIXED OUTCOMES

*2014 was another year of tenders with several new contracts on the horizon, including the major jobactive contract.*

In the lead-up, the government held a number of consultations into which CoAct had input. This included Matt Little presenting to the Parliamentary Backbench Committee on Employment in October 2014, at which he built awareness of CoAct's model, the network's impact and how the delivery of employment services contracts through the CoAct arrangement strengthened local communities.

The jobactive request for tender saw a move to 51 larger regions instead of 144 ESAs; the move raised coverage challenges for some partners and ended specialist contracts. It also meant CoAct's specialist providers had to tender for, and demonstrate their capability to service, all jobseekers.

The jobactive results released in April 2015 did not meet expectations despite a slight growth in overall caseload market share and CoAct being in the top 10 providers. CoAct was successful in seven regions out of 38 for which it bid. A total of 22 partners bid with Job Futures but only nine were successful, with a loss of business in many areas of long-term solid performance. Business was predominantly regional and specialist providers did not gain the new generalist contracts. While in some ways the results were puzzling, two areas were identified that may have affected CoAct's results – first, the decline of CoAct's performance profile over the preceding 15 months, and second, the site coverage across CoAct's offered regions compared with the winning providers' site offers. This is always a double-edged sword balancing cost of sites promised and an unknown caseload.

2014 also saw the revival of a Green Army program but this time under the Department of the Environment and Energy, with a strong focus on workplace health and safety compliance. Potential providers were required to present their model for delivering the program. CoAct was once again able to engage smaller community organisations to deliver 'green projects'. Sadly, despite incredible success and impactful participant stories, the Turnbull government made the decision in 2017 to cease funding the program, which delivered its last project in June 2018.

In 2014, CoAct member BUSY At Work, a Queensland-based apprenticeship organisation, approached CoAct with a proposal for CoAct to tender as a subcontractor to BUSY in the Australian Apprenticeship Support Network (AASN) tender. The partnership combined BUSY's Queensland expertise with the CoAct network's expertise in NSW and WA. While a departure from CoAct's usual approach, this arrangement presented the opportunity to address an ongoing area of weakness regularly raised by the department in tender feedback – CoAct's lack of large and national employer partnerships. The arrangement also supported local member providers with increased apprenticeship opportunities for their jobseekers.

CoAct was successful in WA but not in NSW, with delivery to commence 1 July 2015. This was a significant win for CoAct – the only new provider to enter the WA market.

*Image: Launch of the Apprenticeship Community (AASN) 2015, Matt Little (CEO), Jo Eagle (AASN State Manager), Simon Brown (then General Manager, Operations)*

Despite its challenging beginning and the ongoing state government changes to apprenticeship funding, the Australian Apprenticeship Support Network (AASN) – delivered through the WA Apprenticeship Community and expertly led by State Manager, Jo Eagle – since inception has steadily developed and is now at the forefront of providing apprenticeship connections between employers and apprentices in WA. The record stimulus injected into the AASN program during the COVID-19 pandemic ignited new sign-up volumes. AASN has become an integral part of CoAct’s operations, contributing to its expertise and sustainability.

Unfortunately the 2015 tender outcome and commencement of the new AASN business in WA coincided with the loss of the jobactive contract for a long-term WA member and the financial decline of another. The two members were angered and distressed at what they considered was CoAct supporting BUSY At Work to encroach on their service area, even though they did not, and could not, deliver AASN. This highlighted the challenges of the CoAct model where steps taken for the good of the network as a whole were occasionally seen by some members to be at their cost.

This discussion also became entangled with proposed changes to the membership charter (including addressing the paragraph regarding where CoAct could tender) and application for renewal of CoAct’s two Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) authorisations, this time with reduced ‘non-compete’ requirements. This led to an ACCC public hearing with an extension given to CoAct to enable further member consultation and the achievement of consensus. After nine months of intensive member consultations, the revised membership charter was approved in June 2016 and in July the ACCC issued its authorisations for CoAct’s collective tendering and non-compete arrangements for 10 years to 2026.



*Image: Paul Miles, Managing Director, BUSY At Work*



Image: The Job Futures Team 2012

## CLOSING OF THE MELBOURNE OFFICE

*From the early days there had been a Job Futures Melbourne office, first in Queen Street and then William Street.*

Initially the Melbourne office was only Green Corps staff but then became the hub for the performance unit for JSA and DES. The committed team of business advisers criss-crossed Australia providing service delivery support to their portfolio of members.

The 2015 jobactive results meant a significant shift in revenue source, with Queensland accounting for 60% of CoAct's business, NSW 20% and Victoria and WA each around 10%. This shift, combined with the new skills required to support members' jobactive contracts, led to a restructure of the performance unit from May 2015. All member support roles moved to Brisbane to join the recently created quality

assurance and learning and development functions, and the Melbourne office closed.

While relocation was offered, sadly these changes resulted in the retrenchment of most of the Melbourne-based staff, all valued colleagues who had contributed so much to the network and the success of the business over many years.

Initially the Brisbane office consisted of just Matt Little and one business adviser. In 2015, office space was rented in Woolloongabba but by early 2017 it was more than a full house, so in May 2017 the Brisbane team moved to the Endeavour Foundation's centre in Cannon Hill.

## FOCUS ON PERFORMANCE AND ASSURANCE

*In an ever-changing employment services landscape, one constant has been the critical importance of sustained strong performance to achieve ongoing business.*

This was clearly demonstrated through CoAct's declining performance in 2015, the disappointing jobactive results and then in late 2016, a DES reallocation that saw the loss of 21% of the business.

The learnings from DES were obvious – addressing poor performance was time-critical and required the leadership of our members. They needed to be engaged, invested and able to act fast. The Board made it clear that, moving forward, service partners needed to be committed to the agreed service delivery model and have the investment capacity to support it. While all partners committed to this, relationships were tested when partner organisations found themselves performing poorly.

In 2015, Simon Brown was appointed General Manager of Operations with a remit to further develop CoAct's suite of support services and develop intervention strategies to ensure strong performance and financial sustainability across the network. The resulting Performance Improvement Framework went on to drive a marked improvement in performance and enabled improved member value through the introduction of fee incentives for high performance.

Given the critical need for CoAct and its members to be working in partnership, there was a shift in language to refer to subcontracted members as 'service partners'.

Simon invested in creating a culture that recognised that service partners' staff brought a deep knowledge of their client group and local employment area. An open relationship with strong communication between CoAct and its partners became vital to performance success. This view is strongly supported by two of the network's most experienced practitioners/service managers: Wendy Caspar, Executive Manager Employment, Training and Social Enterprise, at Youth Projects; and Liz Leadbeater, originally with Job Futures SEQ and then, following the organisations' merge, National DES Manager for Workways Australia until September 2020.

Wendy Caspar says, "I'm a big supporter of the CoAct subcontractor approach – I think it's because Youth Projects operates to fulfil obligations under contracts. My experience is that once the service delivery model is agreed, we're able to apply this to the way our local areas and clients need us to operate to get the results.

"Having the back-end support of CoAct in terms of contract management and reporting is very helpful and makes sure that my teams can focus on the front line – and that's getting our young people jobs and keeping them there!"

Liz Leadbeater considered the regional strategy specialists (RSS) a lifeline for DES managers. "As the contracts became more complex, having someone to interpret the data has been so important. Working together with my RSS, we could then come up with a formula to get the desired outcome. We didn't always agree and there were plenty of healthy conversations but this was always underlined by mutual respect."

Liz also noted the significant improvement in consistency and quality of training and resources developed by the Learning and Development unit. "In the early days of DES, the quality of support and resources you received depended on the strengths of the individual business adviser. Consequently, there was no consistency across the network. The staff training provided for the current DES contract was fantastic and the library of quality resources available has given all service partners consistent, quality information."





*Image: Liz Leadbeater, former National DES Manager, Workways Australia*



*Image: Wendy Caspar, Executive Manager Employment, Training and Social Enterprise, at Youth Projects*

The success of these critical service partner relationships has been largely driven by the development and stability of key leadership roles within the CoAct team. They've provided a 'trusted colleague' approach to the respective network support functions.

The introduction of CoAct's shared services, including Centralised Claims and Post Placement Support, along with the work of the Assurance team, has also significantly improved the quality and efficiency of network operations. In fact, the dreaded departmental recoveries of non-compliant claims, that can occur months or years after the event, have been reduced across the network by 97% (JSA \$1,700,000 vs jobactive \$50,000).

Contingent with the focus on performance was CoAct's work to support partners to meet the ever-increasing program compliance requirements of the department, with responsibility for the auditing being moved to third-party auditors and the cost to providers. A quality manager was appointed in 2013 to build a quality and assurance culture within CoAct and lead the network through the changes. The team grew from one role in 2013 to eight in 2022.

As a DES provider, from 2006 CoAct was required to gain and hold ongoing accreditation under National Disability Service Standards covering both itself and its partners.

In the lead-up to the 2015 jobactive contract, the department introduced its own Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) standard. CoAct was one of the first providers to undergo the QAF pilot in 2014 and went on to maintain certification across all jobactive sites. The department then decided that in addition, providers needed to be accredited to a Quality Management Systems (QMS) standard. This certification was gained in 2016.

In addition to QAF and QMS, from 2016 the department started on a pathway for employment services providers (jobactive, TtW, CTA) to also gain information security accreditation. After several changes in approach, the department's Right Fit For Risk (RFFR) required providers to meet ISO 27001, the international standard for an Information Security Management System. After many hours of painstaking work, CoAct and its service partners achieved RFFR accreditation in September 2021.

While the accreditation requirements are program-driven, the audits cover all aspects of the business and consequently form part of CoAct's Enterprise Wide Risk Management (EWRM) framework. Quality management accreditation across all key aspects of our business activities provides an independent assessment of CoAct's business processes and controls, as well as offering opportunities for improvement.

CEO of CHES Connect Paul Kelly summarises, "For service providers, the operating conditions have changed dramatically since 2012. CHES has the benefit at the organisational level of being able to tap into industry-specific strategy development, a strong public affairs voice and effort, modern and sophisticated information technology solutions, service model design and quality assurance services. Having the CoAct quality assurance function that is 'arm's length' from service delivery reduces risk and builds reputation and confidence."

With the increasing growth and complexity of CoAct operations, there was an internal restructure in April 2018 that saw Simon Brown appointed to the role of Chief Operations Officer with responsibility for all operational areas of the business. Simon's appointment ensured strong oversight of these key areas while enabling the CEO to give more focus to strategic matters.



Image: DES Service Partners training

## PROTECTING THE NETWORK

*CoAct has always endeavoured to structure contract fee payments so that, while ensuring quality services, as much revenue as possible returns to service delivery partners and communities.*

This means that CoAct has never held a war chest of funds. At the same time, due to the principal contractor arrangement, our funders consider CoAct responsible for compliance and any financial recoveries from claims not sufficiently substantiated.

A year after the end of JSA, the department undertook a sector-wide claims review with a considerable quantity of recoveries issued across the industry. This impacted two former service partners, one which had exited employment services and another that had closed with contracts taken over by other members. After considerable effort, funds were gained from the former member but

CoAct had to cover the rest with a substantial impact on financial results for the 2016 and 2017 financial years. This highlighted CoAct's vulnerability in such situations and the flow-on impact to other service partners.

In consultation with partners, it was agreed that as part of the relevant fee policy, in the final two years of a contract, CoAct could withhold funds in trust to safeguard against future recoveries, with funds returned to the partner, or former partner, once any recoveries were settled. To give service partners full assurance, the CoAct Trust was established in July 2018 to hold and administer these funds.



Image: CoAct / Youth Projects jobseekers



Image: CoAct volunteer day



Image: Priya, CoAct / CHESS Connect employer

## NEW PROGRAMS AND APPROACHES

*In March 2016, three CoAct partners commenced the delivery of a new Transition to Work (TtW) program.*

The program was introduced by the department following the realisation that jobactive was not succeeding with young people. As youth specialists, the partners quickly built up their caseloads with early delivery of good results, demonstrating the advantage of specialised services for specific jobseekers.

Building on this reputation as a youth specialist, CoAct put in a successful proposal for the Smart Skilled and Hired program, funded by the NSW government. The program aimed to assist young people to connect with training, mentoring and work experience, enabling them to become work ready. Using an impact investment model, CoAct developed the delivery model and the proposed outcomes in consultation with the NSW Department of Industry.

While the delivery of government contracts can be all consuming, CoAct has continued to trial innovative approaches that increase performance and give evidence for upcoming tenders.

In anticipation of a change in the service model for Employment Services 2022 to a focus on the most disadvantaged, CoAct ran Intensive Case Management (ICM) projects with a CoAct Case Manager embedded in a partner's site working alongside their staff. Trialled in three locations, this project demonstrated that results can be achieved for significantly disadvantaged people with the right consultant providing intense servicing. These learnings have led to the inclusion of ICM principles in every program CoAct delivers.

With the department continuing to call out the inability of jobactive providers to meet the needs of employers, CoAct created CoRecruit in June 2018. This was an innovative approach that aimed to address the fact that single providers rarely met the workforce requirements of a medium to large employer through its own caseload.

A recruitment partnership was established with three employers – Uniting NSW, Kelly Services

and Manpower Solutions – all committed to increasing diversity in the workplace. CoAct employed consultants to work within these organisations' HR departments to manage the recruitment process, and agreements were reached with a number of jobactive providers to refer potential candidates for the vacancies, along with CoAct jobseekers.

Discussions were held with the department regarding the funding method for these positions that drew on jobseeker subsidies and some of the outcome funds. While initial referrals and placements were promising, it became clear that support at all levels of the employer's organisation was essential for the program to succeed, which was not the case at one of the partners. The department, while supportive of the concept, raised concerns about the operating model replicating the core funded services and finally, Manpower Solutions withdrew from the blue collar market in Australia. Consequently, CoRecruit was disbanded in 2020.

## GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE TO MEET CURRENT AND EMERGING ENVIRONMENTS

*Alongside the strengthening of performance, assurance and financial stability, the Board worked to ensure that CoAct's governance structure was fit for purpose.*

Over the years, member organisations gave generously of their time, skills and expertise to support the growth of the organisation.

From 1997 to 2021, 45 member directors served on the CoAct Board, bringing strong experience and understanding of the employment and community services industries, and their challenges, along with insights into opportunities that could benefit the network.

At the same time, while values were aligned across the network, there were also inherent governance tensions caused by the dual role of member directors – with a duty to act for the good of the network while at the same time shouldering a responsibility for looking after the interests of their own organisations that were largely subcontractors to CoAct. To balance these conflicts, from early days CoAct had recognised the value of having two directors from outside the sector to bring an independent view of the industry to deliberations.

The Cameron Ralph Governance Review in 2010 recommended a modernisation of the Board composition through an increase in the number of non-member directors in order to meet the increasing complexities of the business and manage potential conflicts of interest caused by the member/subcontractor dichotomy. However, there had been resistance to this. By 2015, the Board considered the matter pressing.

While CoAct had successfully managed the inherent conflict through formal procedures and practices, by 2015 changes in operating markets meant that members were delivering multiple programs – some through CoAct, some in their own right – and at times competed directly with CoAct. This created untenable

conflicts of interests at board level. Necessary safeguards such as withholding of papers and financial information from conflicted directors, and requiring conflicted directors to remove themselves from discussions, would make it impossible for the Board to carry out its duties effectively.

In addition, with a decrease in member numbers and the increased demands on CEOs in their own workplace, the pool of available member directors was diminishing, and specific skill sets desired by the Board were not necessarily available. This also resulted in several uncontested elections.

At a special general meeting in June 2016 following extensive member consultation, the Board proposed to change the terminology from 'non-member' directors to 'independent' directors, to allow for a simple majority of independent directors and increase terms to three years with a maximum of nine. This in no way implied that member directors did not come to the board with an independent mind; rather, independent directors were from outside the sector and so brought an independent view in line with good governance practice. The proposed changes passed by a substantial margin.

The following years saw further changes in the operating environment with the introduction of open markets in the DES contract (2018), and discourse in the sector turned to impact investing models.

While CoAct was well placed to respond to these challenges, some potential funders saw inherent instability in CoAct's governance due to the election of member directors who were also subcontractors.

After further consultation with members, amendments to the Constitution were proposed to allow for a fully independent board. An agreed transition process ensured board stability and transfer of knowledge, with the final member director finishing in June 2021.

These historic changes to CoAct's governance model were endorsed unanimously at the 2019 AGM. The unanimous vote was the culmination of seven years of work and member consultation to achieve a suitable governance structure and to support CoAct in the current and emerging environment.

From a member perspective, Tanya O'Shea, Managing Director, IMPACT Community Services, considers the move to an independent board a positive one. "With an independent board there is no legacy and the focus of the Board can be on what is best for the member network."

Tom Mangan, General Manager, Community Solutions Group and the last member director, agrees the change was necessary to ensure that the Board has the right combination of skills and experience to steer CoAct in a rapidly changing and challenging environment. He says, "In addition it takes away the incorrect perception that member directors may have unfair influence or access to information and opportunity that others do not.

"Of course the risk for CoAct in an all-independent board is that the first-hand member/service partner experience and opinion which is similar, but not necessarily the same, as management's, is not as readily available. To overcome this risk, it is simply a matter of working out a number of different channels to keep the information flowing."



*Image: Jenni Mack, CoAct Chair 2013-2020*





Images: ConnectUp 2013, 2010, 2019

## COMING TOGETHER: THE ANNUAL CONNECTUP CONFERENCE

*Throughout its history, the annual conference has been a highlight for the network, bringing together diverse organisations from across Australia to share their experiences and expertise and form connections.*

Each year, the CoAct team strives to bring together a program of speakers and discussions that inform, challenge and inspire participants. Equally as valuable is the opportunity to catch up with old and new connections from across the network.

For CEOs, it's the perfect occasion to network and set up new business opportunities. For operational staff, it gives the chance to discuss their challenges, share strategies and form ongoing relationships with other service partner staff.

Says Liz Leadbeater, JF SEQ/ WorkWays, "I loved attending the ConnectUps. In particular the celebration of the network (CoAct does 'celebration' so well!), feeling involved and valued and able to contribute to sessions. It was always inspiring hearing about what other service partners were doing and celebrating their successes together."

At the ConnectUp conference, achievement across the network is recognised through Excellence Awards. These awards recognise 5-star achievement at the site/ESA level, as well as individual awards.

Fiona Sander, now Performance and Partnership Leader at Community Solutions Whitsundays, reflects on her award of Employment Consultant of the Year in 2018, "I was humbled to receive the Award – after all I felt I was just doing my job! However, when I thought about it, it was a great recognition of the big journey the Cannonvale site had been on, from a 1-Star DES site to 5 Stars and I was very proud of what we had achieved. For the site, the increase in star ratings was great but the true achievement was the benefit gained by the clients with ongoing meaningful employment that increased their confidence and future outlook.

"I was excited to attend the ConnectUp in Sydney and feel part of the wider network with the opportunity to talk with staff from CoAct and other service partners who shared my passion. I came away feeling very motivated to achieve even more. Interaction with staff from across the network is so valuable, both to pick up new ideas and strategies and, just as important, to receive confirmation that you are on the right track."

And of course, how better to celebrate the achievements of hard work than with a good party!

The conference dinner had always been quite an event, held at a unique location. In 2009, given the tight financial situation, the conference budget was slashed. To brighten up the dinner, attendees were asked to wear something with spots or stripes. Dorothy Cox, the inimitable former CEO of IMPACT, bought yards of spotty material from Spotlight and distributed it to her staff attending the conference. The colourful result won IMPACT the team prize, sparking the competitive streak in other partners and the CoAct dress-up dinner became a highly anticipated annual event.

Some great themed dinners over the years included Disco Night, Come as Your Hero, 1930s Speakeasy, Hawaiian Luau and Hollywood Red Carpet to the more sophisticated hors d'oeuvres and movie night at Brisbane's GOMA in 2017, dinner by Sydney Harbour in 2018, and then back to a rollicking Roaring 20s evening in 2019.

Sadly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ConnectUp conference wasn't held in 2020 or 2021.

# HARNESSING THE NETWORK'S SMARTS 2018-2022

*Innovation and evolving partnerships*

## A SAD LOSS TO THE NETWORK

*With signs of a profound sector change with the introduction of open markets for the 2018 DES contract, in November 2015 Chris Gratton was appointed General Manager Growth to guide CoAct's new business and positioning for the next generation of DES.*

Chris brought with him years of experience in government and the community sector.

Chris worked intensively with management consultancy the Nous Group to formulate and articulate CoAct's strategic direction and build consensus with service partners for the network shifts required. He was also the driving force behind CoAct's successful Smart Skilled and Hired proposal and the development of a program proposal with icare that saw CoAct working with people at the end of their worker's compensation period to move back into suitable and fulfilling employment.

Chris's work was outstanding and highly regarded. In late 2018 Chris also completed a deep dive survey with the network CEOs to better understand member support for CoAct's strategic direction and value proposition – conversations that were greatly appreciated by many members.

Sadly Chris passed away in March 2019. Writing to the CoAct team and network CEOs, Matt Little praised Chris's significant contribution over such a short period and noted the enormity of his loss to both the CoAct network and the sector as a whole.

"Chris was an incredible intellect, a very warm and genuine human being who cared greatly for the most disadvantaged in our communities. He had an unwavering sense of social justice and worked tirelessly to better understand the challenges faced by those who could not help themselves. Chris was someone who was never afraid to challenge us to think differently, always focusing on those whom we strive to help. Above all, Chris was a great friend and colleague. He will be missed terribly", Matt wrote at the time.



## PREPARING FOR OPEN MARKETS

*As anticipated, the DES tender released in 2017 introduced open markets to the sector with successful providers receiving the right to operate in certain areas but with no assured caseload percentage.*

This meant that each provider needed to attract and recruit their jobseekers to build up a workable caseload.

With strong competition for customers expected, CoAct believed that a centralised, co-ordinated approach to marketing and customer acquisition was critical. To successfully navigate the new world, CoAct and its partners worked closely on two fronts – the co-design of the service delivery model, and the building of customer acquisition capability, led by CoAct but supported with capability at each service partner.

Kirsten Ibbotson, General Manager Customer and Brand, drove the development of the new customer acquisition capability. This included the complete rebuild of the CoAct website. Local marketing included three retro caravans – the Can Vans – that could be booked by service partners and set up in local parks or shopping precincts where people could have a chat about CoAct services, with a free cuppa and a jobseeker starter pack.

Another change, welcomed by the whole sector, was a much less onerous tender application that meant, for the first time, CoAct was able to successfully outsource the writing of a major tender through a partnership developed

with i-exchange. While CoAct staff were still closely involved in analysing data and providing information, the shift meant that it was no longer necessary to take key staff off their regular jobs supporting current contracts in order to write tenders, which had always been a challenge and source of service partner dissatisfaction.

The combined efforts of CoAct and its service partners led to a strong result of 71 services in 39 ESAs and a considerable expansion of CoAct's DES geographic footprint. High performers were rewarded, with some partners winning the right to expand their base, and others gaining market access for the first time.

The new DES contract began in July 2018. CoAct's customer base grew more than 50% from 2018 to 2020 thanks to a strong reputation and innovative approach in customer acquisition.

All new contracts bring challenges and some partner staff found the new focus on marketing and customer acquisition, with the consequent impact on the skills they required, excessive. However, a review 18 months into the new contract showed that for those partners who worked with CoAct to adhere to the agreed service delivery model, placements and outcomes were strong and brought sustainable returns. The

management of DES procurement, leadership in open market thinking and engaged co-design approach were overall highly regarded by the network and formed the blueprint for future procurement. Above all, it demonstrated that sophisticated preparation and strong engagement with service partners harnessed expertise from the wider network and resulted in clear service delivery direction to ensure successful results.

As part of the customer acquisition strategy, CoAct co-ordinated the innovative Change the Story Festival that ran from 2017 to 2019. The festival aimed to inform and change thinking about disability by promoting the abilities of jobseekers to employers and familiarising the jobseekers with CoAct services.

Through a number of short films produced by local film makers, the project followed people across Australia who were changing the story of disability employment. Each film gave an insight into what navigating the world of work means through the eyes of people with disability, their employers and support workers. CoAct partners hosted movie evenings at local cinemas inviting employers, customers, their families and the wider community.





Image: CoAct Chairs of the Board, Bob Sendt, Jenni Mack, Robert Fitzgerald

## CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

*In May 2018, CoAct celebrated its 20th anniversary at a ConnectUp and dinner held in Sydney.*

With the theme of Change Makers, the event was a celebration of the survival of the CoAct network in such a challenging and competitive industry and the network's positive impact on individual lives and communities.

The event was also an opportunity to catch up with many of the wonderful people who had contributed to the network's success over the 20 years – former Chairs, CEOs, directors and staff along with the current partners, staff and sponsors.

In his opening address, Robert Fitzgerald AM, CoAct's first independent Chair, reflected on changes in the community sector over the past 20 years and the sector's ongoing importance in community support and social inclusion.

At the anniversary dinner held at Pier One on Sydney Harbour, Robert Tickner, CEO from 2000 to 2004, shared some of his memories of the early days of CoAct and set a challenge for CoAct to remain true to its roots and keep its

focus on the most vulnerable while responding to changing markets and government requirements. Prue Gregory, wife of the late Steve Lawrence, spoke of Steve's passion for helping local communities develop their own skills. Prue and Steve's daughter Rebecca also presented the Steve Lawrence Innovation Award. The contribution of the network's staff was recognised through the annual Excellence Awards.

Also acknowledged at the dinner was Member Director, David Curd. David, then Managing Director of Community Solutions, was first elected to the Board in 2009 and served the maximum nine years as a director and chair of the Governance Committee – an unparalleled contribution. As Jenni Mack noted, "David has been a huge asset to the Board and a great steward to the organisation. He has been, in words and actions, 100% committed to the network. As a director David has had a laser focus on our strategic future. His contribution will be greatly missed."



Image: CoAct CEOs, Bill Davidson, Matt Little, Lisa Fowkes, Robert Tickner



Image: CoAct Executive Management Group 2018, Matt Little, Melinda Everett, Kirsten Ibbotson, Michael Willett, Simon Brown



Image: CoAct Board 2018, Wendy Field, Bryan McCormick, Dianne Hill, Matt Little (CEO), Jenni Mack, David Curd (absent: Paul Kelly, Jacob Hook)



Image: 2013 Floods IMPACT Community Services, Bundaberg



Image: Visit from Governor General, Dame Quentin Bryce, Job Futures Patron

## MAKING THE HARD DECISIONS

*Over its history, an area of strain on the CoAct model has been the financial sustainability of service partners, particularly at times of considerable expansion and the beginning of new contracts.*

Several organisations have collapsed in CoAct's time, requiring CoAct to manage the aftermath. In more recent years, as part of its risk management CoAct has monitored the financial health of its service partners through biannual checks, putting steps in place to intensify reporting in areas of concern. However, as CoAct contracts form only part of a partner's activities, it can be difficult for CoAct to gain a complete understanding of their financial situation and there are limitations on what actions CoAct can take to turn things around.

At the end of 2018, following a considerable expansion of its DES footprint, one of CoAct's largest service partners requested fee relief to weather the impact on their cash reserves. It had suffered heavy losses in the first five months of the year, along with declining performance.

The Board's approach was that in principle CoAct did not give fee relief or other financial assistance due to the flow-on impact on the network as a whole. The only exception was where there was an exceptionally high probability of significant damage to the network if the applicant could not continue to trade. Any financial support provided by CoAct is agreed to in a sense of good faith and co-operation in order to assist both the individual service partner and the whole network.

Given the size of the contracts held, the request was approved with an agreement put in place regarding both the financial situation and adequate resources to gain performance improvement. Repayment terms were met and the partner's financial situation improved; however, despite considerable support from CoAct staff the contracts continued to be

under-resourced to meet the service delivery model, with continued under-performance. This had a negative impact on CoAct's network performance profile, particularly in the lead-up to the New Employment Services Model (NESM) 2022 tender, requiring CoAct to take steps to safeguard the contract by transferring some business.

Such discussions with service partners are never easy and these decisions aren't taken lightly by management or the Board. CoAct strives to ensure that the way it addresses those partners exiting contracts is aligned with its purpose and values and the underlying logic of the network model that is supported by the ACCC authorisation. At times, for the network to best achieve its purpose, steps may need to be taken that have a negative impact on an individual service partner.

**WORKING TOGETHER  
TO NAVIGATE CHALLENGES:  
COVID 19**

*With an Australia-wide network, over the years CoAct partners have experienced the impact of various natural disasters, including fires, floods and cyclones, on their activities and financial health. CoAct and the network have provided support wherever possible.*

The 2020 bushfires directly affected some CoAct partners; in particular, Workways and CHES Connect. Others were indirectly affected through a reduction in mutual obligation activities. Following the bushfires, with the DES contract bedded down and 12 months before work needed to start on the NESM tender, CoAct and the network were looking forward to a year of 'business as usual'.

At the end of February 2020, when the Board held its planning session for the new strategic plan, COVID-19 hadn't yet reached Australia. Within a matter of weeks the world was turned on its head with the World Health Organisation declaring COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March and Australian borders closing to the world on 20 March, along with the introduction of a raft of state-based restrictions.

CoAct acted quickly. All staff moved to working-from-home arrangements within the first few weeks and were encouraged to take one day's annual leave per week. Unfortunately, a small number of redundancies occurred, mainly from the marketing team whose activities were most affected. Board meetings moved to Zoom, with management reporting to a separate COVID-19 budget developed to run alongside the regular budget.

Service partners swung into action to protect their staff while continuing to provide necessary services to their jobseekers, particularly the most vulnerable young people who, along with

the homeless and those living with disability, were often the first to be put off work.

CoAct's Board and management were united in their commitment that CoAct's activity for the next year would be on partner engagement and high-value support during lockdown and recovery.

Monthly CEO forums were held to enable partners to express their concerns and share their strategies for managing the situation. Communications to operational staff kept them updated with the department's ever-changing instructions about services and mutual obligations.

With CoAct and partner investment, CoAct rapidly, within six weeks, developed a digital solution called The Campus. This online jobs hub was aimed at assisting with servicing the expected increase in short-term jobseekers. By June 2020 there were 7,000 jobseekers registered. The Campus enabled partners to deliver a quality, cost-efficient service to this new caseload without incurring a massive staff cost. The Campus platform continues to be used for other programs.

CoAct staff returned to normal hours in August 2020 with a staggered return to the office. A staff survey revealed that many preferred a mix of working from the office and from home. Where possible, these arrangements were put in place. As a result, at the end of September,

the Sydney staff moved to a smaller office space in the building.

Despite some expected dips in placements and consequent impact on outcomes, the network emerged from 2020 relatively well. Prudent management and some JobKeeper support helped. However, the ongoing events of sudden and extended lockdowns in 2021, along with the Omicron wave in early 2022, required, and will continue to require, both service partners and CoAct to be agile and inventive in order to continue to provide quality services and support while safeguarding the health – both physical and mental – of staff and customers.

## OUTSIDE THE MAINSTREAM PROGRAMS

*Aligned to its strategy of achieving the best outcomes for the most disadvantaged, in 2018 CoAct established a partnership with Bridge Housing,*

a community housing provider supporting more than 3,000 people in over 1,800 households across metropolitan Sydney.

This valuable experience in delivering tailored employment services support to disadvantaged Australians provided the basis for a successful bid through Jobs Victoria Employment Services (JVES). This program started in July 2021 and replicated our Bridge to Work model in a larger environment with five employment specialists embedded within partners' Launch Housing and Housing First sites.

In 2021, the Career Transition Assistance (CTA) program, put on hold in 2020 due to referral issues and COVID-19 impact, was revived with CoAct delivering in six regions in regional

VIC, NSW and the ACT. The intensive eight-week program provides targeted assistance to jobseekers aged 45 years and over. CoAct digitised the training component ensuring that training was not interrupted by lockdowns and at the same time built digital competence and confidence in the participants.

## BEHIND THE SCENES

*As part of the new strategic plan and financial year 2021 budget process, the Board approved a three-year digital strategy.*

Delivering a cutting-edge digital experience for customers, service partners and staff is central to CoAct's execution of its overall strategy. An initial project was the implementation of a cloud-based accounting system to provide the sophisticated level of data required by the business and to facilitate the work of the Finance Team in processing increasingly complex service partner payments. In the second half of 2020, the Finance team led by General Manager Devina Balendran worked tirelessly to implement the new system, and it went live in February 2021.

With CoAct reaching revenue of \$100 million in the 2020 financial year, it became

a requirement to publish a Modern Slavery Statement that addressed modern slavery risks in business operations and supply chains.

In December 2021, Reconciliation Australia endorsed CoAct Reflects – the first stage of the organisation's Reconciliation Action Plan. Led by CoAct's Indigenous staff, the plan drew on input from across CoAct and provides guidance both in educating staff and supporting reconciliation activities. This was an important undertaking given the representation of Indigenous people in our caseloads and the valuable contribution to the CoAct network of the Indigenous member organisations in past years.





Image: Karleen, CoAct / A Bridge to Work Jobseeker

## LEADERSHIP CHANGES

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*Having served for almost eight years, in September 2020 Jenni Mack announced her resignation as chair and director of CoAct, effective May 2021.*

The governance committee worked quickly to identify a potential successor, ideally a sitting board member, to support a smooth transition with minimal disruption.

Lynn Smart was appointed Chair of the Board Designate. Lynn had joined the Board in April 2020 bringing strong governance, finance, risk and stakeholder experience to the position. Importantly, Lynn had an understanding of both the employment services sector and CoAct, having been on the board of a former service partner member for five years. Lynn commenced as Chair in June 2021.

In her farewell comments Jenni noted that, over her tenure, CoAct had been nimble and innovative, successfully making the changes required to meet an evolving environment and remain relevant while ensuring that the members were an integral part of the journey and the solutions.

Said Jenni, “The thing about change is that it seems very slow when you are in it but looking back you see utter transformation. I have loved my time at CoAct and am very pleased to be leaving the organisation in such a healthy financial position – much stronger than when I arrived. I’m also very proud to be leaving it with a fully independent board, with diverse program revenue, with increasingly sophisticated digital and customer capability, and with a diverse executive that includes more women than men, reflecting the make-up of our work force.

“I will say, however, that CoAct has been a bit like a rollercoaster ride – plenty of thrills, but we’ve always stayed on the tracks and we always manage the uphill hauls.”

At the 2021 AGM in November, Dianne Hill retired after 10 years as a Director of CoAct. Over this time, Dianne made a significant contribution to the good governance of CoAct

both as a director and chair of the audit and risk committee. In particular, her guidance and support were instrumental in the development of CoAct’s strong audit and risk framework. And Dianne’s challenging line of questioning certainly always kept management on its toes!



## TENDERING AGAIN

*Preparation for the NESM tender (RENEW22) went into full swing in early 2021 with pre-set milestones to ensure a strong tender bid built on service partner consultation and input.*

CoAct sought intensive feedback on the initial service delivery model to ensure maximum buy-in, drawing on learnings from the DES 2018 tender process.

Tanya O'Shea comments, 'Feedback from IMPACT staff attending the co-design workshops was extremely positive. They felt they were being listened to and their comments, based on local experience, were taken on board. While we realise that everything we say and want may not be included in the final service model, the critical thing is that we have been listened to and feel that our local experience is valued. Of course, with the service model, it will be critical that CoAct's promises of support are upheld.'

The project involved an enormous amount of work in:

- developing and articulating the service delivery model with partners
- determining the support required to maintain the competitiveness of the model
- financial modelling to inform partners and form the basis for future pricing
- developing strategies for professionalising the workforce.

Contingent with NESM was the work for the Transition to Work (TtW) tender. CoAct met early in the year with government officials to push for program changes to further improve its effectiveness, and undertook a similar process of co-design with service partners. The TtW tender was submitted in September 2021 with NESM a month later.

Reflecting on the project, the foundational work undertaken was instrumental in building trust and engagement between CoAct and its partners, maximising the potential for consistent delivery. A survey of partners for both contracts asked about the co-design process, quality of the service delivery and financial model and CoAct's approach and support services. Results were positive.

While the network awaited the results, and after a short break to recoup and revive, the CoAct team shifted gear to implementation preparation for the two new contracts and the start of preparation for a new DES tender, with the current contract due to end June 2023.

## **FUTURE-FITTING THE OPERATING MODEL**

*Over the past eight years, the CoAct support model has developed to ensure ongoing relevance in performance and assurance*

and the board model has also been altered to meet current and emerging environments. However, CoAct's membership and subcontracting structures have remained largely unchanged.

This was brought into sharp focus with the call for expressions of interest for NESM 2022. Several service partners wanted to tender for NESM in their own right while delivering another program such as DES through CoAct. The requirement that CoAct members only deliver the 'main' employment services program through CoAct (unless they have CoAct's consent), as embedded in the membership

charter, the membership policy and the subcontract agreement, has been a core safeguard of the network's business and good governance since 2009.

CoAct worked intensively with these partners to find solutions that considered the aspirations of the individual organisations but also protected the business of the network as a whole. The issue of consent was managed with consistent application of the framework grounded in CoAct's purpose and the integrity of the network model. The framework led to a change in membership status for some service partners.

This experience highlighted the reality that for CoAct to respond effectively to changing environments and continue to prosper, shared commitment and strategic alignment are critical, and has led to a governance review of CoAct's operating model. This will be followed by consultation with partners on any proposals for changes arising from this review.

However, the underlying tenet remains that together we are stronger as we deliver on our shared purpose of supporting the most vulnerable members of our communities.

## **TENDER RESULTS: REINFORCING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE COACT MODEL**

*The results of the TtW tender released in February 2022 once again highlighted the challenges of delivering government contracts with regular periods of procurements.*

The results saw high performing incumbents across the sector losing business completely or at best being awarded new greenfield areas. For CoAct, while the total business was maintained, it all went to one service partner, Youth Projects, and in a new region. The outcome had negative impacts on CoAct's other TtW partners who, for six years, have invested in the program, acquired their own referrals and smashed targets. Not surprisingly this result caused some nervousness across the network in regard to the NESM results.

When the NESM results were released, with the new name of Workforce Australia, success was much clearer for CoAct. We were successful with all six tender partners, securing nine

contracts in seven regions. This includes three existing service partners - BUSY At Work, Community Solutions Group and IMPACT Community Services, as well as welcoming three new partners - Ability Options, Indigenous Workstars and Five Bridges. The win represents over 50% percent growth from the existing caseload.

Combined, the two tenders represent over \$500 million in future contract values over the next five to six years, putting CoAct into the top five of all providers nationally. Our future strategic pathway has been confirmed and ongoing sustainability ensured for the near future.

**COACT NAMED AN  
'EMPLOYER OF CHOICE'  
2019 AND 2021**

*Success in  
employment  
services is  
very much  
dependent on a  
highly engaged,  
highly effective  
workforce*

that enables CoAct to collaborate with its community partners to help solve problems and ensure the programs delivered match the needs and priorities of those the network seeks to help. As a not-for-profit, CoAct has had to be innovative in finding affordable ways to engage staff.

CoAct was recognised as an Employer of Choice in the 2019 Australian Business Awards. Of the 52 companies awarded in the category, CoAct was one of just five not-for-profit winners.

Speaking at the time, CEO Matt Little said the prestigious award was recognition of CoAct's deliberate investment in staff. Matt noted, "Becoming an Employer of Choice certainly hasn't happened overnight. It's taken time to get the mix right and shift our culture. Through listening to our staff, we've learnt that lots of little things add up and nothing motivates employees more than feeling genuinely valued and rewarded for their efforts."

To receive a second Employer of Choice Award in 2021 was special. While COVID-19 has caused added stresses for staff and management, CoAct was well placed to manage this. Matt noted, "Our culture was already embedded in family-first, trust and digital solution. This has helped us adapt to the new COVID way of working. What we've seen is the continued effectiveness of meetings, interaction, operations and impact."

While many initiatives focusing on work-life balance and personal and professional development were in place pre COVID-19, more staff took advantage of them during the pandemic; for example, 91% of staff took up flexible and remote working opportunities.

The ongoing stability of CoAct staff enables the development of strong service partner relationships and, in the Australia Apprenticeship Support Network, strong employer relationships, critical to the success of the business.





## REMAINING RELEVANT IN AN EVER-CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

*Job Futures was established in 1997 to ensure a continued place for community-based employment services providers.*

# A CONTINUING EVOLUTION

*CoAct's ongoing commitment to transforming lives and communities*

Its goal was to enable them to use their expertise and strong local connections to help disadvantaged Australians into employment. Over 25 years, Job Futures – now CoAct – has partnered with more than 120 community-based member organisations that have shared values and purpose. Each of these organisations has added to the rich tapestry of expertise and innovation that is the CoAct network.

Throughout this period, the fluctuation of service partner numbers has been closely aligned to new contract opportunities and changes in the sector; particularly, the constant consolidation of the market driven by government policy. While the CoAct model for many years provided protection for smaller organisations, these changes have overall led to only larger service partners with more sophisticated systems and financial capacity remaining relevant.

While some smaller partners sadly have closed, the relationships others have formed within CoAct have led to several mergers within the network and ensured that local communities have continued to receive critical support services.

As CEO of NESAs, the peak body for employment services providers, Sally Sinclair has seen the changes in the sector at first hand. Sally knows CoAct well from its earliest days as she was on the board and then CEO of Work Placement, one of the original Melbourne-based members.

Sally confirms, "I can confidently say that CoAct and its member network model has been invaluable in retaining the participation of local community organisations in delivering vital employment services to disadvantaged people

and communities, through a period when the government has overseen the consistent reduction of the number of service providers in every contract."

Sally notes that throughout its 23-year membership with NESAs, CoAct has been a committed and involved member, actively contributing to the growth and development of the contracted employment services sector in Australia.

"CoAct staff have been strongly engaged in informing NESAs's representation and advocacy for the sector, which has enabled continual policy, program and practice improvements for the betterment of Australia's jobseekers – particularly those who are disadvantaged – and employers. This contribution has included the appointment of Matt Little, CoAct's CEO, as a NESAs Board Director and the current Chair of the Board."

Showing they don't have to be large to remain relevant, two of CoAct's oldest service partners – IMPACT Community Services in Bundaberg and Youth Projects in Melbourne, that both joined in 2002 – have continued successfully as small organisations to deliver on their purpose despite pressure at times to merge with larger partners.

Tanya O'Shea comments, "The CoAct model, with its focus on local presence, has given IMPACT the ability to access employment services contracts and maintain a presence in the local community. This helped us get through several cycles of department consolidation. There have been lots of challenges to get our model right to ensure we can continue our local presence. Along with delivering the contracts we have had to be responsive to everything

around us – bushfires, floods, COVID. This has required agility and the ability to pivot when needed.”

Wendy Caspar considers that Youth Projects has survived the many versions of the employment services environment because they strategically align where they need to while focusing on overlaying other services into their larger employment services to better meet the needs of their clients.

She remarks, “While this creates many different contracts, relationships with funding bodies and everything that comes with that, we do this because this is what our young people need us to do.”

Both Tanya and Wendy stress the value of a mix of organisations across the CoAct network. Says Tanya, “Small organisations bring strong local knowledge and expertise and also have great ideas. They also have the agility to put trials in place for CoAct to ensure that for the new tender we had an evidence-based model that is tested, tried, refined and we know works.”

For those CoAct service partners who have remained engaged through this time, their service footprint and contract values under CoAct have grown considerably, with a fourfold increase in average annual contract revenues per partner from \$1.65 million per annum in 2013 to \$7.38 million per annum in 2021. When combined with a high-performance profile, based on a consistent customer promise approach and profitable effective service delivery models, CoAct partners’ confidence and sustainability have improved dramatically.



## TAKING STOCK

*Lynn Smart,  
Chair of CoAct,  
notes, “While  
there have been  
many significant  
changes in the  
employment  
services sector,  
two things  
have remained  
constant.”*

First, the extent of unmet need in the community for support and assistance to move into employment-funding models skewed towards recruitment rather than support (although there are signs of movement to a more holistic model). Secondly, a strict financial model for the services that providers are expected to deliver.”

Lynn considers that the collective purpose of the CoAct network has not wavered. However, the expertise, capacity and aspirations of CoAct and its service partners have changed dramatically. “As recent events with the NESM tender have shown, service partners have differing levels of commitment to the network due to their own strategic plans. For CoAct to continue to grow and prosper, key points for the Board’s focus going forward are: what is our value proposition, and how do we provide an individual value offering and engagement method, rather than one size fits all.”

Over the years, CoAct has worked through several challenging situations with its partners to ensure CoAct remains relevant. One outstanding tension can be CoAct’s membership and subcontracting structures, which have remained largely unchanged and are at times no longer appropriate to the environment as demonstrated in the NESM tender.

Matt Little adds, “When considering the CoAct model and our future, a big elephant in the room is that the organisation came into existence out of a government policy change in the delivery of employment services and so ‘chose’ to be beholden to these government contracts for its very existence.

“In some ways, its noble vision to carve out a continued place for community-based employment services providers has been dictated to by government agendas and policy. The impacts of sector consolidation and larger service areas, plus the focus on investment required in quality, assurance and performance (the predominant reasons for the loss of small providers), have been dictated to us by government since 2007 (the beginning of rewards and sanctions). The changes made in all areas of the business, especially over the past decade, have allowed for our purpose to be delivered upon through a more flexible and agile approach and this will continue.”

David Curd, CEO of MS Queensland (former Executive General Manager, Community Solutions Group) gives this perspective: “Organisations have always joined CoAct for the introduction to business opportunities and then access to the services it provides that, due to scale and expertise, are better or less expensive than what we could do.

“In addition, CoAct membership gives an organisation the opportunity to be part of something greater than itself while allowing it to keep its identity; it continues to provide an environment for organisations to work together, connecting like-minded people to address common problems.

“CoAct is a facilitator of opportunity, but for it to work there has to be mutual responsibility, engagement and obligation. Membership gives a ticket into the room but why hold on to it if you are not going to engage? If a service partner is not willing to engage or chooses to act entirely in its own interest, it then becomes untenable. We know there is an ongoing tension between the member/business interest, but this can be managed.

“Overall, we’ve moved away from the individual member emotion of ‘CoAct is ours and exists for us’. There has to be an understanding and acceptance that while we all have a common interest, CoAct’s role is to act in the best interests of all. But of course, CoAct needs to continue to present a value proposition for both membership and subcontractor or similar arrangement.

“The tendering environment has become much more fluid but if good relationships and trust have been developed, most situations can be worked through and some arrangements reached so that the value of the partnership to the network is maintained.”

David remarks it would be a shame to go to a purely head contractor/subcontractor model and points out, “Members also need to take into consideration that as ‘just a subcontractor’, while they may have fewer obligations than a member, they can also easily be dropped, unlike the multiple chances and support CoAct gives its members to improve performance.”



## LOOKING AHEAD

*In an industry renowned for rapid change, looking ahead to even five years in the future is likely to be futile.*

However, understanding what CoAct service partners value remains central to success. This goes beyond quality contract management and service delivery support.

“Long term, the Board’s task is to ensure CoAct and its network of committed members continues to flourish and delivers on its purpose,” says Lynn Smart. “Our partners value the leadership CoAct can show on future focus in government policy so that the network and individual partners can prepare, adjust their functions and upskill their workforce to deliver a quality service.”

Wendy Caspar observes, ‘For specialist providers such as Youth Projects whose clients have unique service needs, advocacy at a government level is vital. CoAct has built up good departmental relationships. A continued approach is needed to support service partners

in our endeavours. I realise it’s always tricky in the government space when you hold their contracts and call out the hogwash (so to speak), but I think the sector, as a whole, needs to become more courageous.”

As contracts get tighter and tougher and it becomes more difficult for CEOs and other key staff to get away from their organisations to attend workshops and conferences, David Curd considers that CoAct’s role as facilitator making connections between partners will become increasingly valuable.

“But most importantly” confirms David, “CoAct needs to be on top of contract and market changes, provide these insights to the network and continue to adapt the model to its nuances.”

Back in 2007, Robert Fitzgerald AM, former Chair, cautioned against Job Futures’ dependence on a small number of government programs delivered through the same structure, commenting that, “If the government sneezes, you catch pneumonia”.

Seven years on, in 2015 the situation had scarcely changed with gross contribution coming predominantly from subcontracting of three contracts; namely, DES, Green Army and JSA (that was finishing). With the results of jobactive not yet released, CoAct didn’t know what the future held. However, over the next eight years, through a deliberate strategy, the situation has changed dramatically. As CoAct awaited the results of the NESM tender, just over 40% of gross contribution revenue now comes from programs CoAct directly delivers or additional support that is offered to partners outside of the core suite of services, giving CoAct a much more stable financial base.



Image: CoAct / Youth Projects jobseekers and their employers

Matt Little explains, “Going forward we need to constantly look at what is best for the CoAct network as a whole, with each opportunity to deliver on our purpose assessed to see what is most efficient, effective and attractive in terms of delivering the services. This may include subcontracting, direct delivery and other partnership arrangements.”

So 25 years on, does the 1997 vision of a network of community-based employment services providers with a common purpose remain true?

Lynn Smart and Matt Little agree that supporting partner organisations to deliver in their communities most certainly remains core to CoAct’s vision, but the methods of engagement with partners has already changed to meet demands of the environment and will no doubt continue to do so.

Notes Matt, “Together with the network, we’ve built a more confident organisation, and unlike 25, or even 10, years ago, CoAct does not plan to be beholden to or reliant on one government program, one large member or one style of partner engagement.

“Today, CoAct’s sustainability is built on highly valued support and program approaches that our partners choose to engage with because they add value to their organisation. Core to CoAct’s activities will remain our engagement with valued partners who have an inbuilt recognition of quality service delivery and commitment to the network approach. This is what enables us to continue to deliver on our shared purpose to support disadvantaged Australians into sustainable employment and change their lives for the better.”

*I feel there is nothing more important to helping people who are socially excluded in our community make significant changes in their lives than enabling them to move down the pathway to work and lifelong learning.*

Steve Lawrence AO  
(quoted in A Shared Vision 1997-2007)



*Image: Maureen Kam with Devina Balendran, General Manager Finance*



*Image: Maureen Kam with Harathi Vinod, Contract Administrator*

## THANK YOU

*To all those who agreed to be interviewed and who have been quoted in this document.*

*Lisa Fowkes, former CEO of Job Futures*

*Jenni Mack AM, former Chair of CoAct*

*Fiona Sander, Performance and Partnership Leader, Community Solutions, Whitsundays*

*Tanya O'Shea, Managing Director, IMPACT Community Services, former Director of CoAct*

*Nathan Spruce, General Manager Innovation, IMPACT Community Services*

*Wendy Caspar, Executive Manager Employment, Training and Social Enterprise, Youth Projects*

*Liz Leadbeater, former National DES Operations Manager, Workways Australia/Job Futures SEQ*

*Paul Kelly, CEO CHESS Connect, former Director of CoAct*

*Tom Mangan, General Manager, Community Solutions Group, former Director of CoAct*

*David Curd, CEO, MS Queensland, former Executive General Manager, Community Solutions Group, former Director of CoAct*

*Sally Sinclair, CEO of NESAs (National Employment Services Association)*

*Matt Little, CEO of CoAct*

*Lynn Smart, Chair of CoAct*

This history was compiled by Maureen Kam, former Manager Governance and Member Relations and Company Secretary, who retired in September 2020 after 16 years with CoAct. Prior to joining Job Futures in July 2004, Maureen had been at WorkVentures for 12 years with Steve Lawrence, and so was involved with Job Futures from its inception, attending all the early meetings to form the Company and then working on the early tenders along with Job Futures staff.

Maureen believed firmly in the strength of the network and always ensured that a 'member filter' was run over all relevant proposals and decisions. As the last person in the network to have been 'here' from the very beginning, Maureen was very much CoAct's 'walking encyclopaedia' of Company history and could always add an interesting anecdote to any discussion.

**ANNIVERSARY BOOK  
CONTRIBUTORS**



**Lisa Fowkes**  
*former CEO of Job Futures*



**Jenni Mack AM**  
*former Chair of CoAct*



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**Tanya O'Shea**  
*Managing Director, IMPACT Community  
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**Nathan Spruce**  
*General Manager Innovation, IMPACT  
Community Services*



**Wendy Caspar**  
*Executive Manager Employment, Training  
and Social Enterprise, Youth Projects*



**Liz Leadbeater**  
*former National DES Operations Manager,  
Workways Australia/Job Futures SEQ*



**Paul Kelly**  
*CEO CHESS Connect, former Director of  
CoAct*



**Tom Mangnan**  
*General Manager, Community Solutions  
Group, former Director of CoAct*



**David Curd**  
*CEO, MS Queensland, former Executive  
General Manager, Community Solutions  
Group, former Director of CoAct*



**Sally Sinclair**  
*CEO of NESA (National Employment  
Services Association)*



**Lynn Smart**  
*Chair of CoAct*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COACT STAFF 5 YEARS PLUS 2013-2022

At CoAct we appreciate the efforts of every person who works for the organisation, however long they are with us. In a short history it was just not possible to mention by name each person that has made a significant contribution but we would like to acknowledge you all in some way.

The list below is of staff who have been with CoAct for five years or more from 2013 to current, plus a few individuals who, despite a shorter period, made a valuable contribution. Unfortunately the available records didn't allow us to go back further. And of course, some people's time with CoAct was cut short due to restructures to meet business requirements.

If we have inadvertently missed anyone, our sincere apologies.

Current staff are highlighted.

Aimee Jones	Qld
Alison MacDonald	Qld
Bernadette Or	NSW
Carmen Kwok	NSW
Carolyn Brown	WA
Carolyn Wynn	Qld
Chloe Heck/Thomas	NSW
Chris Gratton	NSW
Deenie Adams	NSW
Darren Rose	Qld
David Rabey	WA
Deeann Natividad	Qld
Devina Balendran	NSW
Deyaana Kerbelker	WA
Emma Ralston	Qld
Harathi Vinod	NSW
Holly Morrison	Qld
Jade Aitkin	WA

Jo Eagle	WA
Jo Laffan	NSW
John Grant	Vic
Karen Plume	NSW
Kary Macliver	NSW/WA
Kate Campbell	Vic
Kerry Robson	WA
Kirsten Ibbotson	NSW
Kristy Clinch	WA
Kyle Egan	Qld
Lisa Smith	WA
Louise Ward	NSW
Louise Young	Vic
Marian Marshall	Qld
Maureen Kam	NSW
Matt Little	Qld
Melissa Gleeson	Qld
Michael Willett	NSW

Milvia Harder	NSW
Nyssa de Waard	Qld
Paul Synnott	Vic
Pauline Disseldorp	Vic
Sally Small	NSW
Peter Ha	NSW
Sharon Hill	WA
Shelley Ralston	Qld
Sigrid Appel	NSW
Simon Brown	Qld
Stuart Bate	NSW
Tina Bierhuizen	Qld
Tracey Walsh	Qld

*Note: For former staff the list may not include all those who were in their 5th year, due to the records we had available.*



# MEMBERS AND PARTNERS 2022

## FULL MEMBERS

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EverAbility Group



## PARTNERS

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## ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

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# COACT BOARD DIRECTORS 2008-2022

Sincere thanks to all our Directors who have generously given of their time and expertise over the past 15 years, providing leadership and guidance.

Current Directors are highlighted.

Lynn Smart (Chair)	Independent	Qld
Wendy Field	Independent	Qld
Guy Freeland	Independent	Qld
Jennifer Leslie	Independent	NSW
Andrew Thomas	Independent	NSW
Dianne Hill <i>2011-2021</i>	Independent	NSW
Angat Sandhu <i>2020-2021</i>	Independent	NSW
Tom Mangan <i>2018-2021</i>	Community Solutions Group	QLD
Jenni Mack (Chair) <i>2013-2021</i>	Independent	NSW
Paul Kelly <i>2017-2020</i>	CHESS Connect	NSW
Bryan McCormick <i>2016-2019</i>	Workways Australia	VIC/QLD
Jacob Hook <i>2016-2019</i>	Independent	NSW
David Curd <i>2009-2018</i>	Community Solutions Group	QLD
Larissa Daniels <i>2014-2017</i>	Access Community Group/ACSO	NSW
Poul Bottern <i>2014-2016</i>	IntoWork Australia	VIC
Vaughan Winter <i>2014-2015</i>	ACSO	VIC
Paul Miles <i>2013-2015</i>	BUSY At Work	QLD

Melinda Everett <i>2013-2014</i>	Bridgeworks Employment & Training	QLD
Karenza Louis-Smith <i>2013-2014</i>	ACSO	VIC
Marc Davies <i>2012-2014</i>	Job Futures-SEQ	QLD
Patricia Frost <i>2009-2014</i>	Inner West Skills Centre	NSW
Bob Sendt (Chair) <i>2007-2013</i>	Independent	NSW
Samantha Hill <i>2012-2013</i>	Access Community Group	NSW
Alison Edwards <i>2012 - 2013</i>	Darwin Regional Advancement & CDEP (inc)	NT
Janet Brown <i>2011 - 2013</i>	Ashburton Aboriginal Corporation	WA
John Fordyce <i>2011 - 2012</i>	MRAEL	QLD
Colin Kerr <i>2009 - 2012</i>	Bridging the Gap	WA
Tanya O'Shea <i>2008 - 2012</i>	IMPACT Community Services	QLD
Shaun Fowler <i>2010 - 2011</i>	Darwin Regional Advancement & CDEP (inc)	NT
Matthew Ellem <i>2009 - 2011</i>	Wana Ungkuntja (Anangu)	NT
Carol Holley <i>2006 - 2011</i>	Independent	NSW
Martin Titherley <i>2006 - 2010</i>	Job Futures Tasmania (Key Training Centre)	TAS
Pat Brahim <i>2008 - 2009</i>	Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation	NT
Phil Barwick <i>2007 - 2009</i>	IsaSkills	QLD
Stephen Fiyalko <i>2006 - 2009</i>	Employment Focus	VIC
Bernadette O'Connor <i>2004 - 2009</i>	Education Centre Gippsland	VIC

*Note: Member Directors were usually elected at the AGM in November*

# COACT MEMBERS

## September 2008-2022

Ability Options	NSW	Darwin Regional Indigenous Advancement & CDEP/ Ironbark Employment and Training	NT	Interact Australia	Vic	Open Minds	Qld
Access Community Group	NSW			IntoWork Australia	Vic	PEEDAC Pty Ltd	WA
Advance Employment	Qld	Direct Employment Services	Qld	IsaSkills	Qld	PEP Community Services	WA
Advance Personnel	ACT	Diversitat	Vic	Job Care (Spiritus)	Qld	Settlement Services International (SSI)	NSW
AnglicareSA	SA	Djerriwarrh Employment & Education Services	Vic	JobCo Employment Services	Vic	Tangentyere Job Shop/ Tangentyere Council	NT
Anglicare Tasmania	Tas	East Kimberley CDEP	WA	Job Futures – SEQ	Qld	Thamurrurr Development Corporation	NT
Apprentices Plus	NSW	Education Centre Gippsland	Vic	Job Futures Tasmania (Key Training Centre)	Tas	The Personnel Group	NSW/Vic
ASCO	Vic	Employment Focus	Vic	Job Quest	NSW	Upper Hunter Community Services	NSW
Ashburton Aboriginal Corporation	WA	Employment Directions	SA	Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation	NT	VisAbility	WA
Auswide Projects	NSW	Employment Options	SA	Kullarri Employment Services	WA	Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation (Waltja)	NT
BJL Connecting Communities	WA	Environmental Training & Employment (EnviTE)	NSW	Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation	NT	Wana Ungkuntja (Anangu Jobs)	NT
Bridging the Gap	WA	ET Australia	NSW	Marillac	Vic	WCIG Employment Services	Vic
Bridgeworks	Qld	Finding Futures	Vic	Marnda Mia	WA	Western College	NSW
Brotherhood of St Laurence	Vic	First Choice Employment	WA	Melbourne Citymission	Vic	Wollongong City Employment Training (WCET)	NSW
BUSY At Work	Qld	Five Bridges	Qld	MRAEL	Qld	Workbridge	Vic
C.A.R.E. Employment	NSW	Great Lakes Community Resources Association	NSW	MS	Vic	Workforce Plus	Vic
Central Desert Shire Council	NT	Hanover Welfare Services	Vic	MS Queensland	Qld	Worklink Employment	Qld
CHESS Connect	NSW	Horizon Foundation	Qld	MSWA	WA	WorkVentures	NSW
Community Employment Options	Qld	Hunter Workways	NSW	MTC Australia	NSW	Workways Australia	Vic
Community First	WA	IMPACT Community Services	Qld	Namtec	Qld	Wunan Foundation	WA
Community Solutions Group	Qld	Indigenous Job Connections	Qld	New Hope Employment & Training Services	Vic	Youth Projects	Vic
Co Scope Job Link	WA	Inner West Skills Centre	NSW	Newtrain	NSW	YWCA Downs & South West Queensland	Qld
				Northnet	NSW	YWCA NSW	NSW



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