

# Supported employment: Recommendations for successful implementation in South Africa

**Lana Van Niekerk – B OT (UOFS) M OT (UOFS) PhD (UCT)**

Associate Professor, Division Occupational Therapy, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Cape Town

**Zelda Coetzee – Dip Occ Ther (Vona du Toit College) MSc OT (UCT)**

Lecturer, Division of Occupational Therapy, University of Stellenbosch

**Madri Engelbrecht - B OT (Stell) MSc OT (UCT)**

Clinical Educator, Division of Occupational Therapy, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences University of Cape Town

**Zerina Hajwani - BSc OT (UWC) MSc OT (UCT)**

Lecturer: Division of Occupational Therapy, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Cape Town

**Susan Landman - B OT (Stell), MSc OT (UCT)**

Clinical Educator, Division of Occupational Therapy, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Cape Town

**Mapheledi Motimele – BSc OT (UCT)**

Clinical Educator, Division of Occupational Therapy, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Cape Town.

**Santie Terreblanche - B OT (Stell)**

General Manager: Training Workshops Unlimited

## ABSTRACT

*Introduction: This article reports on the findings of a descriptive qualitative study in which supported employment (SE), as a potential strategy to facilitate the employment of persons with disability in the open labour market in South Africa, was explored. A brief description of SE and its success in other countries will be provided before the challenges faced in South Africa that might prevent its successful implementation will be discussed.*

*Methodology: A focus group interview was utilised to explore the suitability and possible modifications needed for SE in the South African context. Questions were asked to explore barriers to successful implementation and adaptations required to make it a workable strategy with which to facilitate employment of persons with disability.*

*Findings: Four themes emerged; 'the envisaged nature of SE in South Africa', 'key role-players necessary for the service to be successful', 'barriers to successful establishment of SE services' and 'the disability grant mechanism in South Africa'. Recommendations are made for successful implementation of SE service in South Africa.*

**Key words:** Supported Employment, Disability, Job coaching, Employment Equity, Reasonable Accommodation

## Introduction

Supported employment (SE) is an effective service approach to promote the inclusion of persons with disability in work<sup>1</sup>. SE has been defined as "competitive employment<sup>a</sup> in an integrated setting with on-going support services for individuals with the most severe disabilities"<sup>2:548</sup>. The SE concept is based on the assumption that when the right type and intensity of support is provided, persons with the most severe disability can (and should be) integrated into competitive employment<sup>3</sup>. Essential steps taken as part of SE comprise assessment, job finding, job analysis, job matching and job coaching<sup>3</sup>. SE affords employment opportunities for persons with disability who meet the requirements of the job and are paid accordingly. In SE, job coaches<sup>b</sup> provide on-going support that is determined by the worker's individual needs and by the particular SE programme.

Evidence for the use of SE as a preferred model is increasingly found in the international literature. A systematic review comprising eleven randomised control trials, undertaken in the United States of America (USA) provided evidence for the effectiveness of SE in achieving participation in competitive employment<sup>1</sup>. In the review SE was compared with traditional prevocational training.

The conclusion was drawn that subjects in SE were more likely to be included in competitive employment than those who received prevocational training. Furthermore, participants in SE earned more and worked more hours per month than those who had had prevocational training<sup>1</sup>. In another USA-based study, Becker et al examined the aspects of the SE approach that most strongly correlated with better employment outcomes<sup>4</sup>. They found the provision of community-based services and the use of employment specialists to be the strongest indicators. Interestingly, the zero-exclusion policy used in their study proved to have strong or moderate correlations with success in competitive employment. In line with this policy individuals were not screened for work readiness; everyone was encouraged to consider work opportunities and was supported in their efforts<sup>4</sup>.

Despite strong evidence for the effectiveness of SE internationally, it has not become part of mainstream practice in South Africa. Several factors have restricted the development of SE in South Africa; the most relevant of these will be explored throughout this article.

## Socio-political and economic factors impacting on SE in South Africa

Important developments in the South African legislative framework require consideration because these can provide the foundation for development of services such as SE. The Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997 reduces risk of exploitation of all employees.

<sup>a</sup> Employment that is not earmarked for a person with disability.

<sup>b</sup> An employment specialist that offers ongoing support to a person with disability in the workplace.



Employees and job-seekers are protected against unfair discrimination based on their disability, particularly with regard to unjust dismissal and hiring. The Skills Development Act of 1998 funds skills development, including learnerships and simulated training opportunities for persons with disability through Sector Education Training Authorities (SETAs). The Employment Equity Act of 1998 (EEA) emphasises employment equity and legislates affirmative action strategies to redress employment disadvantages experienced in the past, including persons with disability. Medium and large companies are now expected to employ persons with disability; financial incentives have been put in place to reward employers who comply with recommendations to employ persons with disability<sup>5</sup>. The Code of Good Practice (2001) and the Technical Assistance Guidelines (2002) on the Employment of People with Disabilities were developed to guide the implementation of the EEA and provide a foundation for the development of affirmative action initiatives and for the implementation of reasonable accommodation<sup>6</sup>. The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000) provides a framework within which appeals against unfair discrimination will be reviewed. Furthermore, South Africa signed a treaty to adopt the international UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (2006) that makes a strong argument for meaningful work for persons with disability, as well as the Optional Protocol that allows people to seek redress for treaty violations at an international level (once every avenue has been exhausted to get the situation changed at the national level).

The EEA sets out to redress inequalities experienced under the Apartheid dispensation by persons with disability<sup>4</sup>, amongst other groups, who were not afforded equal access to education, job opportunities and social benefits<sup>6</sup>. Before the strong human rights directive on which the EEA is based, persons with disability seeking employment were mostly placed in protective and sheltered workshops where earning potential is limited. These practices directly supported social segregation and reinforced the perception that all persons with disability were incapable of maintaining and sustaining work in the open labour market<sup>6</sup>. Some of the imperatives of the EEA are to promote "the constitutional right of equality and the exercise of true democracy"<sup>7:1</sup>. Our rationale for exploring SE, as an enabling strategy, is supported by the South African Department of Labour's statement that disparities created "such pronounced disadvantages for certain categories of people that they cannot be redressed simply by repealing discriminatory laws"<sup>7:1</sup>. At present persons with disability continue to be disadvantaged and are "amongst the poorest of the poor"<sup>6:13</sup>.

South Africa's high unemployment rate (40%)<sup>8</sup> results in strong competition for mainstream employment. According to a recent Employment Equity report<sup>9</sup> only 0.9% of the total number of employees (that were reported on) were persons with disability. The private sector was reported to be doing slightly better (1%) than the government sector (0.6%). If the above is to change, South Africa needs a strategy to ensure inclusion of persons with disability in the economy<sup>10</sup>. Not only will the opportunity to work lessen the 'economic burden' on the government and provide the person with disability an opportunity to be an active and contributing member of society, but it will positively influence the disabled person's health and well-being<sup>10,11</sup>. The cost associated with disability grant payments might be reduced and persons with disability could become tax payers.

In countries where SE has been successfully implemented, i.e. member countries of the European Union of Supported Employment<sup>12</sup> and the USA, the service is being supported by legislation

<sup>6</sup>Any modification or adjustment to a job or to the working environment that will enable a person from a designated group to have access to or to participate or advance in employment – as used in the Employment Equity Act of 1998 by the South African Department of Labour.

<sup>4</sup>The term 'persons with disabilities' is used here in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

<sup>6</sup>All known service providers of SE in the Cape Metropole were included.

and policies<sup>13</sup>. Incentives are being made available to employers who participate whilst failure to comply could result in negative consequences, for example, legal action or the imposition of sanctions<sup>13, 6</sup>. No such framework exists within South Africa.

## Employment to facilitate integration

Work has been described as beneficial in many ways; apart from providing an income, it has been associated with personal development, also providing an arena for social development, self-esteem and identity<sup>14</sup>. Participation in work is essential for the achievement of wellness and for the management of identity<sup>15,16</sup>. Since work has great potential to facilitate the integration of persons with disability into mainstream society, the injustice of their exclusion is exacerbated.

We accept the Social Model of Disability argument that impairments are not the main cause of the social exclusion of persons with disability but rather the way society responds to their special needs<sup>17</sup>; disability stems from the inability of society to allow full integration and equal participation of persons with disability, as much as from the impact of the impairment itself<sup>18, 19</sup>. Beresford contended that:

"Disability is a form of social oppression and the social model highlights both social oppression and social understanding in relation to disability"<sup>20</sup>.

Thirteen years after the enactment of the EEA, the situation is much the same for persons with disability, suggesting that legislation alone is not sufficient to achieve equity. In fact, unemployment of persons with disability increased from 81% in 2001 to 88% in 2004<sup>21,22</sup>. The need for affirmative programmes that are developed to facilitate the entry and the sustained participation of persons with disability in competitive employment was therefore recognised as a priority. SE was recognised as a potential affirmative strategy that required further exploration in terms of suitability for use within the South African context. The aim of the study was therefore to explore the potential use of SE in South Africa.

## Methodology

This article reports on the first, of a two-phased study, which explored SE as a strategy to facilitate the employment of persons with disability in the open labour market in South Africa. The aim of Phase I was to explore the suitability of SE as an employment strategy, with recommendations for modification and implementation within the South African context. (Phase II, currently underway, explores the cost and utility of SE in the Cape Metropole.)

Data was collected during a single focus group discussion addressing potential barriers to successful implementation of SE and modifications needed to make it a workable strategy in South Africa. The focus group comprised a saturation sample<sup>6</sup> of service providers who had initiated SE programmes in the Cape Metropole; eight participants employed by government, the NGO sector and two universities in the Western Cape contributed. The rationale for utilising a focus group for data collection was based on the explorative nature of this technique<sup>23</sup>.

The focus group interview was transcribed and an inductive content analysis<sup>24</sup> was done by the authors. Trustworthiness was established through investigator triangulation<sup>25</sup> of raw data and reflexivity<sup>26</sup>. Ethical approval had been obtained from the University of Cape Town Health Sciences Faculty Ethics Committee (REC REF: 281/2009).

For the purpose of this study we adopted the following criteria to delineate SE:

- Participation in competitive employment.
- Conditions of employment (including remuneration) are directed to the person with disability and are market related.
- On-going support (e.g. job coaching) is provided as a form of reasonable accommodation.

## Findings and discussion

Analysis of the focus group discussion revealed three themes that will now be discussed. The first two themes delineate the values, principles and priorities, as well as essential components deemed



necessary for SE. The third theme captures barriers faced when attempting to develop SE services in South Africa. The themes will now be introduced. Refer to *Table 1* for a summary of findings.

Table 1: Themes and categories

Themes	Categories
The envisaged nature of SE in SA.	Values and principles of SE.
	Essential components of SE.
	The Nature of Support.
Who is involved in SE?	Consumers of Supported Employment services.
	Partners in SE.
Barriers to the establishment of SE services.	Lack of funding for SE services.
	Lack of SE specific legislation.
	Realities of the South African employment context.
	The disability grant mechanism in South Africa.

## Theme 1: The envisaged nature of SE in SA

### Values and principles of SE

Focus group participants felt it important that specific values and principles should guide the provision of SE services. They argued for the following principles:

- ❖ competitive employment should always be the ultimate outcome,
- ❖ a client-centred approach should be used and
- ❖ support should be provided to ensure long-term sustainable employment.

These principles support values such as equality, fairness, respect, and integration; values highly espoused within all government legislation and policy documents. Similar practice values and principles are applied in SE services provided internationally<sup>27</sup>.

The following statement by a participant proposes that SE creates opportunities for integration of persons with disability, through the mechanism of work:

*"...basic assumptions of why supported employment started and evolved are because people with disability were segregated and marginalised from mainstream society. And that is the very basic thing you want to eliminate by employing them."*

Hajwani<sup>28</sup> confirmed that SE can counteract stereotyping and promote the integration of persons with disability into the open labour market because realistic expectations are cultivated through the experience..

Hastings<sup>29</sup> emphasised that in order for the service to be consumer-driven and integrated in the open labour market, it must support consumer goals and empower them with choices and information. She promoted a zero-exclusion policy when considering eligibility for SE service based on consumer choice alone. The authors agree with this principle in that we believe persons with disability should not be excluded from SE programmes on the basis of diagnoses or level of performance.

The authors and focus group participants agreed that foundational legislation for promoting the employment of persons with disability in South Africa is advanced, however, specific policies or legislation to promote and guide the implementing of appropriate work-focussed services, including SE, remain neglected.

*"There is no structure to SE in this country, so everyone – kind of – does their own thing."*

Priority should therefore be given to development, implementation and evaluation of effective strategies such as SE. To this end, sustainable sources of funding need to be identified and secured.

*"A fundamental difference [in SA], compared to international practices of SE is that there is federal funding to get employers to participate in employing somebody with a disability via a SE agency"*.

Data from the focus group highlighted participants' dissatisfaction with the fragmentation of current services and the limitations

brought about by situating services mainly in the health sector.

The duration of support offered within SE services was acknowledged as a contested issue because (a) it is resource-intensive and (b) it requires the adoption of interdependence as a value. In this research the principle was adopted that the support provided should be "No more support than needed and no less than necessary"<sup>30:8</sup>. Consensus was reached that it is important to accept that some persons with disability need indefinite support, for example, persons with intellectual disability. Acceptance of the principle of on-going support was premised on the understanding that persons living with particular impairments might have specific needs that impact directly on employment and

their ability to maintain work.

Participants warned against a tendency to fall into a short-term bias that often characterises service delivery. Persons with disability will not necessarily succeed in the first work placement as explained in the excerpt below:

*"People with psychiatric disabilities go through at least three jobs before they have a sustainable job and the reason for losing jobs was not because of productivity, it was more about interpersonal relationships and about fitting in..."*

### Essential components of SE

Participants identified components that were characteristic of SE in South Africa; these were similar to, but more demanding than those in developed countries. Job coaches in South Africa are more involved with creating infrastructure and marketing their services to employers in order to secure employment. The following components received attention in the study:

**Sourcing of job opportunities** for placement of persons with disability was regarded as one of the essential components of SE, particularly in South Africa, where jobs are not readily available to all citizens, disabled and non-disabled.

Employers are gatekeepers to job opportunities and as such, they become important partners in the SE programme, and clients of the job coach. Negative employer attitudes, perceptions and expectations about the work abilities of persons with disability have been found to constrain work opportunities for PWD in the open labour market<sup>31,32</sup>.

A further priority of SE that was identified by the participants is that the **process of making decisions about disclosure** should receive deliberate attention during preparation for work. Participants felt that the process, and ultimately the decision to disclose or not to, is closely linked to the concept of self-determination after having explored the consequences with candidate workers. A participant confirmed the positive effect of disclosure in the workplace by saying:

*"...disclosure was probably the biggest positive influence on employment and not for management, [but] for co-workers."*

**Education of employers and co-workers** was also identified as an essential step to take in preparation of a work placement for a person with disability. Such education should focus on disability awareness and include workers' rights.

*"Desensitisation, awareness and education [should be] initial and on-going components for the rest of the work environment, and the people working with the person."*

**Practical assistance**, including financial support, was similarly identified as an essential component in preparation for work. Examples given of such support were sorting out transport needs, a cash advance to cover initial costs and advice regarding appropriate work clothing.

*"When we start with placing someone, we have to do a cash advance because they have costs to cover before they get their first payment.. like clothes and transport."*



The 'start-up costs' of employment pose a significant challenge to persons with disability as explained in the following quote:

"...it is much more expensive to find a job and to keep a job than to be at home and draw a [disability grant]. You have to have quite a bit of money to actually find a job."

### The Nature of Support

Participants shared their own views, based on their experience, on what the nature of support should be when it is offered in a SE service. They acknowledged the benefit of family involvement and gave consideration to the point at which support should commence. The flexibility required in support offered was emphasized together with the fact that an SE approach considers the individual specifically.

"understanding the degree of support - and the purpose for it - with the 'significant others' of [the person receiving SE services] is important."

### Theme 2: Who is involved in SE?

Participants debated the profile of consumers who should be eligible to access a SE service in South Africa. Three categories emerged that respectively describe the consumers, stakeholders and structures that need to be involved in the implementation and rendering of such a service, as well locations at which the services should be run.

### Consumers of Supported Employment services

The international practice of SE is designed to meet the needs of persons with disability who are unemployed<sup>11</sup>. Participants in the focus group agreed with this practice, however recognised a much wider population of consumers who may also benefit from a comprehensive SE service in South Africa. The statement below draws attention to populations and groups in South Africa who do not have an impairment, but who face overt barriers to employment due to life circumstances such as poverty and insufficient education.

"...maybe in the South African context...it's more realistic...or accurate to include all the other vulnerable groups...Like very impoverished people, refugees...who also obviously...struggle with the same kind of lack of skills, lack of education, all those things."

Persons with disability who are not eligible for a disability grant because they are capable of working in the open labour market were also identified as consumers of a SE service due to the support that they require (for example in terms of job finding skills).

"... the clients that come there thinking they have a disability and they can get the traditional disability grant and after being assessed found that they actually can work in the open labour market, but the problem is they don't have the skills to find a job."

Persons with disability as consumers were further defined as those who are motivated to enter the open labour market, but are in need of a range of support services:

"...[SE] is for people who are wishing, wanting to operate in the integrated open labour market but lack support..."

The experience of participants revealed the need for other partners in delivery of successful SE services as will now be discussed.

### Partners in SE

Government institutions as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were identified as important potential partners. Representation of the participants in this study showed that SE practice has taken shape in NGO settings, occupational therapy programmes within the Department of Health. No forum currently exists for driving and regulating SE in South Africa.

"...we shouldn't only think state institution; NGOs should actually be part of the whole thing."

The government's main functions were identified as being responsible for the policy environment and funding of SE.

"...the government will fund centres, work skills centres or job shop centres with all the professional bodies under one roof."

Business partners were similarly recognised as potential funders of SE:

"I got some referrals from an insurance company who will pay for ten session for supported employment/ job coaching as part of going back to work first before they consider termination...but it takes a lot of negotiation to explain why supported employment can be part of [vocational] rehab[ilitation]."

NGOs have been funding SE to date, thus making early developments of SE in South Africa possible. Participants all agreed that government funding is required if SE is to develop into a service that will meet employment needs of persons with disability.

Finally, participants also mentioned the need for role players with particular skills such as the ability to negotiate, and business-focused people who would afford job coaches the opportunity to turn their attention more exclusively towards the client, by taking responsibility for creating opportunities for SE:

"...you use persons with negotiation skills and business people to create the opportunity. And the people with the job coaching skills have the opportunity to focus on the needs of the people..."

It is important for providers of SE services to develop partnerships with obvious stakeholders, namely employees and employers. However, the strategic importance of other partners should not be underestimated.

### Theme 3: Barriers to the establishment of SE services

#### Lack of funding for SE services

SE is a new idea in South Africa; there are very few programmes available currently. However, practice experience and research evidence confirm SE as being more successful in achieving competitive work outcomes than traditional vocational rehabilitation focussed on training work skills in simulated environments or institutions that are not situated in competitive employment. The success with which SE can be implemented in South Africa will depend on our ability to overcome barriers. A number of barriers that could potentially interfere with the development of SE were mentioned in the focus group. These will now be discussed.

The very few job coaches that are currently available are employed in the NGO sector. As such, their services are limited to people who are served by these NGOs and this sector.

"At the moment... the job coaches are employed by the NGOs."

Government subsidy in South Africa currently tends to cover vocational services up until the point when placement in employment occurs. The problem is thus that job coaches employed in the NGO sector are often not able to continue their support once their clients are placed in employment. Continued support in the workplace is therefore dependent on the employer's ability and/or willingness to pay for job coaching. Participants speculated whether NGOs could provide a paid job coaching service to employers; however, this had not yet been done and the viability of such a service has not been considered.

Hajwani<sup>28</sup> conducted a qualitative study in Cape Town and found that, for some employers, the availability of a funded job coach was appealing; they thus preferred to work with an organisation providing job coach services (in this case it was a free service). Participants ascribed the reason why job coaches in South Africa are employed predominantly in the NGO sector to the fact that these services are usually made possible by international funding provided without a profit motive.

The fragmentation of current funding sources within the South African context is a serious barrier hindering the development of SE services. Learnerships have been explored in terms of providing funding and structure for the development of SE. However, based on our experience the structure of learnerships are not what is needed to improve employment for persons with disability. Whilst learnerships offer the opportunity to learn new skills and temporary placement to practice such skills, with support, these generally do not lead to long-term work outcomes.



Service providers, including occupational therapists, require good knowledge of South African labour legislation in order to develop and maintain SE services effectively. Without good knowledge, opportunities that might exist to place persons with disability in work or to maintain work participation are missed.

### Lack of SE specific legislation

Whilst acknowledging the complex world of work within which SE services are being developed, good knowledge of supportive labour legislation is seen as an important factor that will facilitate good practice. Internationally, legislation is in place to support the implementation of SE and to incentivise employers who employ persons with disability.

*“So nobody can step out of line, it’s actually legally punishable if they don’t do it [expenditure of funds for SE in Germany] that way.”*

Conversely, a concern which was raised in the focus group was that SE is not clearly defined in South African legislation and that the scope as well as the remuneration of a job coach is not specified.

*“...there are so many loopholes, there’s no structure to supported employment in the country, so everyone is, kind of, do their own thing...”*

*“[The Department of Labour] do not have any provision to pay for a support person or a job coach.. they do not sound as if they think that a job coach is anything that could fit in to that category [reasonable accommodation].”*

### Realities of the South African employment context

Participants reflected on their experiences of the realities that exist within the South African labour market, and commented on the undeniable fact of high unemployment rates in the country.

*“You can work until you’re blue in the face but there will never be employment for everybody.”*

These reflections further led participants to consider that conventional views of work may create barriers to work, when such work is not available. Therefore, alternative types of work may need to be explored. Many workers in South Africa work in the informal labour market as labourers, taxi guards, hawkers and other such positions. Members of the focus group, who worked as job coaches, often have difficulty in performing their duties as these kinds of informal labour are not legislated and defined. Employees are therefore not protected under the same laws as those in formal work.

*“...I’m saying that legislation pertains primarily to the open labour market within formal work systems within employment structures. I’m saying that there is currently to my knowledge very little, at a policy level around, and there’s probably more a worker rights and a human rights issues, in terms of disabled people who can dig a trench.”*

### The disability grant mechanism in South Africa

Engelbrecht and Lorenzo<sup>33</sup> reported how the positive effects of finding employment in the open labour market can be negated for someone with a disability by his/her dependence on a social security grant that was cultivated over an extended period of time. They then asserted that the relationship between the South African social security system and economic empowerment for persons with disability needs to be revised through the implementation of the relevant legislative regulations and guidelines.

In the focus group, participants of this study also expressed a general sense that the disability grant, as applied and utilised currently in South Africa, contributes to a disabling environment, rather than to enhance independence and economic empowerment of PWDs. The extent to which the receipt of a disability grant impacts on someone’s access and/or commitment to the process of SE requires thorough investigation; research in this area should be undertaken.

### Conclusions

The authors propose SE as a model of choice to drive the process of economic empowerment for persons facing disabling conditions. In following this directive, we emphasise the need to (1) create

awareness about the potential for SE and (2) establish a legislative framework accessible to stakeholders (as described earlier) and consumers of SE services. It is recognised that best practice models and evidence based practice should inform the development of such a policy.

In developing a SE model suitable for South Africa, funding and infrastructure should be used in such a way that integrated career management is a viable option for persons with disability. A holistic approach is needed because components of SE, such as the assessment of work skills, placement in suitable work and reasonable accommodation do not necessarily follow a linear process. The proposed SE model should therefore allow these components of service delivery to be offered when it makes most sense. Adoption of the principle of holism, that a person is more than the sum of his/her parts, will expect the service provider to keep an open mind and allow him/herself to be surprised by the person with disability who might be able to succeed in work, despite personal limitations.

### Recommendations

This is the first study in which SE as a new strategy for promoting the inclusion of people who face disabling conditions in the South African economy has been explored. Whilst the study suggests that SE has the potential to facilitate successful employment outcomes for people facing disabling conditions, a cost analysis of a SE service will assist in assessing the viability of such a service in the South African context. A cost-utility study is currently underway; it forms the second stage of the project reported on here.

A sustainable source of income is required for SE services to be implemented. A government allowance to cover the cost of SE requires serious consideration. We suggest two different types; (1) a temporary ‘work placement allowance’ to assist persons facing disabling conditions to find employment and (2) a permanent ‘work support allowance’ (which could be less than a disability grant) and is used to cover the cost of support required for work to be maintained.

Specific legislation to guide the implementation of SE will have to be developed. Without focused legislation the employment rate of persons with disability will not improve (as shown in the decline of employment statistics for persons with disability in the last 12 years).

In advocating for SE services, the silo-approach that currently characterize the functioning of government departments will have to be challenged in order to allow for cross-departmental cooperation. Relevant departments would be Social Development, Health and Labour.

The authors encourage relevant stakeholders to engage in development of a SE knowledge base to inform South African practice. An exchange of information, open to employers, potential job coaches, service providers and consumers will put us on par with our international counterparts.

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□

Corresponding author

**Lana Van Niekerk**

Lanavn@sun.ac.za

