

Re-imagining supports: Creating the right blend

Sarah Scown has worked in the disability sector for almost twenty years. Starting her career as a Support Worker in large institutions in Canberra and in Brisbane highlighted for her the need to demand more from the sector. Over the past nine years, Sarah was involved with coordinating a small, local, not-for-profit disability service before working in her current role in case management for a Brisbane based NGO. In addition to her formal roles, Sarah has also been a member of a Circle of Support and sat on a Management Committee for a small disability service.

I believe there is a place for paid roles in people's lives. We all access services for a range of reasons. I go to a dentist, mechanic, and use a telco. Typically we access these services knowing exactly what outcomes we expect from our interaction. Similarly, there is a role for human services to support people in areas defined by and expected by the individual.

As a person who has been privileged to have held a number and range of paid roles within the sector, my view of the role of a paid supporter is to stand beside an individual and (where appropriate) their family to help them achieve an ordinary, good life- whatever this may look like for each person. Anything is possible when people tap in to their passions and strengths and work creatively with these. Everyone has the potential and capacity to contribute in a meaningful way; it is about discovering a pathway based on what really excites and motivates each person, and then making sure they get the support they require, whether this is from family, friends or with assistance from paid supports.

My introduction to this way of thinking came when I started to work with a young woman, Melissa. Melissa had recently left school when I first met her, and she was living in a group home with two other people she and her family had not selected. Melissa was also attending a centre-based, post-school service. Her family quickly determined that despite lots of formal, paid support, she was not experiencing purpose, enrichment or relationships in either of these group environments and they set about seeking change.

Melissa's family were very driven to see their daughter happy and in an environment where she could succeed in safety. It was not a quick or easy process; however Melissa's family made two significant changes. Firstly they switched service providers and found a support model that enabled their daughter to live on her own in a privately rented home, with support staff of their choosing. I became Melissa's primary support worker in her new home. Although there was an overarching hosting organisation, I considered my direct employers to be Melissa and her parents. It was a very exciting time in Melissa's life.

After making the decision to use the post-school funding in a different way, Melissa and her family and friends met to develop primary goals to work on. These people were Melissa's parents, brother, a past school teacher and a family friend. After discussion and refining ideas, it basically came down to a fairly simple notion. Melissa and her family really wanted two things: friends and paid employment. So my role then extended to include both support in the home and support to find a meaningful way for Melissa to spend her work days.

We began this journey by brainstorming all the things that Melissa enjoyed in life. This list was long, but other than family and friends, it was noted that nothing excited her more than dogs. We were a good match in that regard and this was a deliberate act on behalf of her family. We were at a similar age and stage in life. Melissa's family felt this was more appropriate than having mum and dad directly involved.

Initially Melissa volunteered at the local animal shelter, taking the dogs for a walk. While Melissa enjoyed this role initially, she found it upsetting to contemplate the future if the dogs did not find homes.

She changed tack and started fundraising for the shelter instead to help the dogs in a different way. However, there was not a lot of direct contact with the dogs so another change was needed.

Next Melissa tried starting a dog walking business. She was known to many within the community and quickly generated some clientele after posting flyers, word of mouth and advertising through a contact she had on the local radio station. However, a few months in to the business, it became apparent that Melissa much preferred to cuddle and play with the dogs rather than walk them- which was wonderful for the dogs, but not the service for which the owners had paid.

It was again time for the circle to re-think what form Melissa's passion for dogs could take. There was a lot of brainstorming with people who knew her well and were keen to see her succeed. While ideas were still being generated, an offer came from the small, local vet practice who were looking for a volunteer to perform minor cleaning duties, in addition to offering companionship and affection to the animals in care. The practice had heard that Melissa was seeking a role with animals through word of mouth.

This was the right role for Melissa. She and her new workplace were a good match. She was happy with the direct contact with animals and she also liked having colleagues.

We really wanted to make this offer work. Initially it took time and intentional effort to ensure that Melissa's workplace saw her as their new employee, rather than identifying and developing a relationship with me. My role was necessary to help the workplace understand Melissa's intricate communication style and what additional needs she may have within the workplace, yet it also felt that there was a risk.

I needed to model an interaction style that was appropriate for the workplace, rather than our usual, more familiar style so that co-workers could follow my lead without having to rely on having an established relationship. While the workplace was still learning Melissa's communication methods, I made sure to refer all questions and instructions from Melissa's colleagues back to Melissa. Even if I ended up answering on her behalf, I made certain she was included and consulted in the process.

In order to resource her colleagues well, we were unfortunately accentuating her difference, so we kept daily visits short and positive while everyone was getting to know each other and these visits grew longer on a very gradual basis. It was important during this period to ensure that Melissa participated and contributed towards any special workplace events such as fundraising morning teas or staff birthday celebrations within the workplace.

Lastly, although it was a very small staff team, we noticed which staff were more inclined to have the time and the attitude to support Melissa in ongoing ways, and would offer to assist them with parts of their roles in order to further develop relationship.

Melissa eventually became a paid employee and a valuable member of the workplace, joining her co-workers for many of their social events and thus continued to build her personal networks. In addition to the relationships that developed, this role also generated an income and provided Melissa with meaningful purpose to each day whilst simultaneously celebrating her passions and talents.

Melissa's story highlighted for me the distinction between the role of informal and formal supports in a person's life. The people on Melissa's circle gave their time and energy freely. These people were not professionals or experts, they were ordinary folk who had developed relationships with Melissa over the years and who had a genuine interest to see her succeed and realise her potential. Melissa and her supporters used her formal, paid support intentionally, purely to assist with achieving specific parts of Melissa's vision.

Melissa developed new levels of independence and learned many new skills through having a job but importantly she developed new relationships and friendships which brought meaning and joy to her life but interestingly, also reduced some of her need for formal support.

Over the two year period that I have described, I could see that the combination of informal and formal supports really worked for Melissa and helped her achieve some of the happiness, engagement and purpose that she had been seeking.