



How to turn the jobs pact into reality

Toni Wren

Andrew Forrest's proposal for employers to offer up to 50,000 jobs for indigenous Australians has the potential to revolutionise Australia's employment and training system. It offers great benefits for all disadvantaged, unemployed Australians and the potential to improve productivity for businesses.

But how do we move from the great offer to reality? It will take a lot of work from employers – not just the offer of jobs. Leadership at the top can bring employers to the table with job offers but they need to release their human resources and other managers to review their recruitment, retention and promotion practices to ensure they are fair and appropriate for a diverse workforce. Discriminatory practices need to be exposed and resolved, and this can mean significant changes to how employees and managers treat newcomers from different backgrounds.

Some of the things I found working with top industry leaders in the United Kingdom through the National Employment Panel echoed

the comments made recently by indigenous leader Warren Mundine – people need to see a job at the end of the training.

Job seekers need to meet employers at information days – to hear them directly explain their jobs and the training required. It's a powerful tool for motivating job seekers – to spark their interest in the job, to obtain a high commitment to training and work experience opportunities, and to maximise performance at job interviews.

We got results of more than 70 per cent of job seekers graduating from training and taking up a job – with retention rates of more than 80 per cent six months later.

The Australian Employment Covenant released last week commits the government to provide training through the Job Network to the specifications of the employers offering the jobs, a great step forward. In practice, it requires making the employment and training system demand led, rather than supply driven.

Job Network providers will need to know as much about employers as they do about their job-seeker clients to create a match that will stick. These agencies need to spend time

with employers getting to understand their businesses, recruitment channels and challenges, hard-to fill vacancies and future workforce planning. They need to get precise about jobs with vacancies now and in the future – the key competencies and selection criteria, knock-out factors, behaviours and aptitudes. All this requires a rethink by employers and training staff of the skills required and for the government to recast funding and contracting.

Andrew Forrest's initiative and the government's acceptance of it is timely. The imperative to adopt a demand-led employment and training system and reform the way employers and training providers work with indigenous and other disadvantaged Australians will only increase as the fallout from the global financial crisis feeds through into higher unemployment.

■ *Toni Wren, a Sydney-based employment and social policy consultant, has advised governments, employers and non-profit organisations in Australia, Britain, the United States and Japan.*

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