

# Recruitment and Retention in the Community Sector: *A snapshot of current concerns, future trends and workforce strategies*

Researched by the Victorian Council of Social Service as part of the Showcasing the Community Sector Project funded by the Victorian Government through the Community Sector Investment Fund.



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# Introduction

In April 2007 the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) commenced the Showcasing the Community Sector project, funded for three years by the Victorian Government through the Community Sector Investment Fund (CSIF). Showcasing the Community Sector will help address two project areas identified in the CSIF Ministerial Action Plan, knowledge development and workforce strategies. The knowledge development component of the project focuses on promoting good organisational practice in the community sector enabling organisations to share information and learn from each other through business forums, achievement awards and other activities. The workforce strategies component takes the form of a marketing campaign aiming to increase awareness of community sector employment options and entry into community sector jobs and training courses.

As a first step towards the development of a marketing campaign strategy, VCOSS conducted an audit of available industry workforce data and initiatives proactively addressing recruitment and retention concerns. Studies indicate people who are not directly involved in community service organisations have little awareness of, or misconceptions about what it means to work in the sector. However research also confirms community service professions have much to offer in the way of personal and job satisfaction. This suggests an opportunity to use the positive experiences of community service workers to build public awareness of and interest in the wide-ranging roles the industry has to offer.

Research and anecdotal feedback from workers and managers within the sector shows there are a number of structural issues that must be resolved to address current workforce shortages and meet predicted future demand for suitably qualified and experienced community service workers. While tackling these issues falls outside the project brief, unless they are addressed quickly any positive impact from the marketing campaign will be short lived.

This paper does not purport to be exhaustive, its purpose is to draw attention to sector strengths and weaknesses real or perceived, and to generate further input from stakeholders to augment understanding of future workforce needs and successful strategies to address these requirements. The next step for the project will be to identify information gaps and conduct further research to determine campaign target markets and activities.

Community service organisations are invited to share relevant research or experiences of projects to address recruitment and retention in the sector. To share your organisation's experiences or for further information please contact Nicole Wiseman, Showcasing the Community Sector Project Officer on 03 9654 5050 or email [nicole.wiseman@vcoss.org.au](mailto:nicole.wiseman@vcoss.org.au)

# The Community services workforce

The Health and Community Services industry is the third largest industry in Australia employing over one million people. (1) Trend analysis paints a rosy picture for industry growth and job creation. However the outlook is not so bright for employers looking to fill job vacancies. According to the Australian Community Sector Survey 58% of organisations surveyed experienced difficulty in attracting qualified staff in the past year (2). This problem is likely to worsen as demand for services grows and the pool of available workers declines.

## Growing demand for services

Between 1999 and 2004 the community services workforce grew 22.6% more than doubling the average occupation growth for the same period (3). Job growth has been fuelled by growing demand for services brought about by a multitude of factors including an increased need for services as the population ages and lives longer and changing social policies and technology that have altered the level and variety of services required, such as shorter lengths of hospital stay and deinstitutionalisation. As an example community aged care which offers low level home-based care increased 600% in the eight years to 2003-04. (4) Changes in family situations are also pushing up service demand. Higher divorce rates, declining birth rates and increased female workforce participation are reducing the number of people available to care for family members. A study commissioned by Carers Australia in 2004 indicates the current estimate of 57 primary carers per 100 people aged over 65 with a severe or profound disability will drop to just 35 carers per 100 people by 2031 (4)

According to the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (CS&HISC) *Industry Skills Report* unmet demand currently exists in a number of service areas, particularly child care, residential aged care and mental health workers. (4) Shortages are likely to be exacerbated as a result of an ageing workforce, retirement and migration and rural to urban migration.

## Community services workforce profile

Ageing of the workforce is a global trend that will affect the supply of workers across industries and impact on many nations including Australia. According to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) *Industry Employment Outlook for the Community Services Sector*, industries with "a high proportion of workers who are aged 45 years and over, and have recorded large increases in mature-age workers in recent years are likely to face the most disruption from population ageing". With a median age in 2006 of 43 years, significantly higher than the all industries median age of 39, the Health and Community Services industry is the third oldest in Australia and is likely to be hit hard by this demographic trend. (5)

The community services workforce is predominantly female with men making up less than 15%.<sup>(3)</sup> Professions strongly dominated by women include child care (96%), personal care assistance (84.5%) and social work (82%)<sup>(6)</sup>. One of the few professions dominated by male workers is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers (58%).<sup>(3)</sup>

A high number of workers in the sector are employed part-time with only 55% employed fulltime compared to an Australian workforce average of 70%<sup>(18)</sup>. The Victorian Government Department of Human Services, *Disability Services Workforce Study* shows full-time workers in the disability sector dropped in a ten year period from 65% in 1993 to just 34% in 2003<sup>(7)</sup>. Given the high proportion of the workforce that is employed part-time it is no surprise the majority are secondary bread winners from two income families.

## **Recruitment and retention challenges**

Any industry faced with growing service demand coupled with a declining labour pool will face recruitment challenges. In the community services industry this problem is exacerbated by a poor image of the sector as a place to work (real or perceived) and difficulty in retaining staff. In the January 2006 *Not-For-Profit Industry Survey Report* over two thirds of respondents cited lack of candidates as a major problem in the recruitment process. The *Australian Community Sector Survey* found average staff turnover across respondent agencies is 13.9 percent, marginally higher than the industry average of between 10 and 12 percent. This figure understates the magnitude of the challenge to retain staff in some job roles. According to the National Institute of Labour Studies one in four personal care workers has to be replaced each year<sup>(4)</sup>. When investigating why people leave the community sector, unhappily remain, or do not consider working in this industry consistent themes emerge regardless of profession. These are summarised below.

## **Public perception**

Commissioned by the Queensland Government, Hudson Global Resources partnered with Ogilvy Social Marketing (Hudson and Ogilvy) conducted qualitative research from September to November 2006 to gain knowledge from Queensland community service organisations, other stakeholders and the wider community of the perceptions, viewpoints and opinions on branding, attraction and retention in the community services sector. Preliminary research findings suggest the general public has either little knowledge of or negative perceptions of work in the community services sector with people outside the sector viewing the work as “highly challenging and requiring a ‘special person’” and that working in the sector was a “purely altruistic career choice”.<sup>(8)</sup> Hindering promotion of the sector is the hidden nature of much of the work conducted and understandable reluctance by users to talk about the services received. The Home and Community Care pilot project discusses the ‘invisibility’ of

Community Care work and its difficulty competing with similar conditions in industries like hospitality and retail that people interact with on a daily basis. (9)

## **Recruitment practices**

Community service organisations are frustrated with the costly and time consuming burden of recruitment, and this is particularly the case for smaller organisations lacking dedicated human resources staff. (11) The study by Hudson and Ogilvy found that while recruitment practices are generally professional in terms of standards and procedures they often fail to promote the attractiveness of the organisation and the job role. (8) The preference for a blanket approach to advertising in daily newspapers often results in the need to readvertise positions. In addition to not recruiting appropriately skilled staff, failure to attract non-traditional workers is causing a mismatch between client requirements and the demographic of service providers. This is occurring across age, gender and also cultural and linguistic background. Discussions with several community service organisations in Victoria indicate while the majority of agencies are experiencing difficulties attracting the right staff for the job, few feel they have the time or resources to tackle this problem.

## **Remuneration**

The Community Services workforce is roughly divided into low pay care positions and better paid professional positions. Overall wages for the community sector are lower than industry and government averages (3). According to the CS&HISC, *Industry Skills Report, May 2005* this figure is significantly lower when looking at just full-time positions. Community service organisation roles are in competition with government and the private sector that can offer more attractive pay and conditions for the same or similar job roles. Residential aged care facilities are losing nurses to the better paid and valued health sector. Similarly there has been a large exodus of pre-primary school teachers from childcare into the education sector. (10) Low pay casual and part-time care roles offer similar salary and conditions to a number of other 'pink collar' service industries but without the advantage of high visibility and usually requiring a more complex skill set, formal qualifications and /or significant on the job training. (12)

## **Underemployment and casualisation of the workforce**

In the Australian Services Union *Building Social Inclusion in Australia, Priorities for the social and community services sector workforce* members' survey, 97 percent of respondents rated job security and maintaining working hours as personally important. In particular young people are concerned with the 'increasing outsourcing and casualisation of staff roles'. (3) Lack of capacity for smaller organisations to offer full-time work, the high reliance by some agencies on use of casual staff and lack of funding security has meant a large proportion of the community services workforce is employed on a short-term contractual or casual basis. Many positions do not offer sufficient hours to attract new workers or make the income

viable. According to (11) this is a key reason why people are leaving the disability sector. Lack of permanency and underemployment have negative implications for other remuneration benefits, limiting opportunities for long service leave, impacting on superannuation and reducing prospects for promotion.

## **Career pathways**

*The Challenge of the Care Workforce: Recent Trends and Emerging Problems* talks of the functional underemployment in community service industries, as “an increasing proportion of workers is employed in job categories for which they are strictly speaking, overqualified as measured by the level of their qualifications”. (10) This is attributable to limited career paths, something many reports and anecdotal feedback suggest are a major driver of skills shortage. Limited opportunity for career pathway development is caused by the size and flat structure of many community service organisations, lack of job role permanency and core funding for salaried positions as well as a lack of transferability between sectors within the community services and health industry.

## **Training**

A number of concerns were raised by the sector about training qualifications and ongoing professional development. These include: a lack of recognition by employers of some qualifications; failure to acknowledge prior learning; training does not match skills required to complete the job and; the perception that the wider community does not recognise professional capacity or qualifications. While the Showcasing the Community Sector project does not focus on training standards, understanding industry and government attitudes around training and qualifications is important given the potential for conflicting messages to arise from the need to boost professional recognition on the one hand, while on the other targeting job candidates without formal qualifications but relevant life experience.

## **Work environment**

Concerns raised by employers in the community services sector about their working environment include lack of adequate support and supervision, particularly for small to medium sized organisations (4) and the increased reporting requirements ‘with no apparent way to compensate for time lost to service delivery’ (8). Other concerns include the higher than average incidence of workplace injuries. The Community Sector is consistently one of the highest claims area for Worksafe Victoria who have included the sector as a priority areas for 2006 – 2008. The majority of workplace injuries occur as a result of the everyday interaction with clients with manual handling putting workers at high risk of musculoskeletal disorders.

## **Attracting and retaining community services workers**

The recruitment and retention challenges facing the community services sector are significant and need to be tackled on a number of fronts: through changes to human resource practices at organisational level, by raising the profile and status of the workforce, and sector wide strategies to address workplace remuneration and conditions.

### **Workforce strategy**

The Department of Human Services has administered a number of CSIF funded workforce strategy initiatives to “establish practical means of assisting CSOs with workforce recruitment, support and retention”. (20) To date these are:

- A feasibility study into a portable long service leave scheme for the Community Services Sector in Victoria prepared by Bendzulla Actuarail Pty Ltd;
- A staff bank modelling project conducted by URCOT an applied research and development centre affiliated with RMIT, investigating options for sourcing appropriately skilled and reliable labour to meet casual, short term and emergency staffing needs;
- A workforce training project designed to assist community organisations and the public better navigate and utilise the Health and Community Services Training Packages.

The Stronger Community Organisation Project (SCOP) has identified workforce strategy as one of four priority strategies for the Victorian government and the community services sector to commit to achieving. A recent proposal has been submitted by VCOSS to the Department of Victorian Communities on behalf of the sector aiming to address remuneration, training and development career pathways and long service leave portability.

### **Human resource practices**

Recent pilot projects to boost recruitment in care professions have revealed some valuable lessons both for a broad based marketing campaign and employer recruitment practices. Pilots showed success when candidates had a clear understanding of the job role including its challenges and opportunities, through information provided by current workers and the opportunity to participate in pre-recruitment training. To attract staff, organisations need to provide challenging and interesting work as well as a degree of flexibility. Consideration should also be given to the hours of work offered. The Home and Community Care (HACC) New Entrant Development Project pilot found at least 15 hours of employment should be offered to attract workers, preferably 20 to attract men.(12) The New Entrant Development Project is part of the broader Victorian HACC Workforce Development Strategy which began in 2001. Three pilot projects were developed to test particular recruitment strategies designed for the home and community care sector. Pilot one focuses on attracting men utilising Area Consultative Councils and existing employment and service networks. Pilot two focuses on attracting young people to work in community care and pilot three develops resources to assist agencies with recruitment. For further information including access to the

HACC Community Care Worker Resource Kit visit  
<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/hacc/index.htm>

The DHS Funded Agency Channel CSO Information portal provides access to a wide selection of recruitment and retention resources. It is located at <https://fac.dhs.vic.gov.au/home.aspx>. Other sources of recruitment information are the *Community Employing Handbook, a guide to employment issues for community organizations* produced by VCOSS and the recruitment resources located on the Our Community website [www.ourcommunity.com.au](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au)

## **Marketing strategy**

Lack of knowledge and understanding about job roles in the community sector by the general public, careers counsellors and job networks provides the opportunity to promote a positive and true profile of the community services sector. The implementation of an effective marketing campaign requires an understanding of what employees are looking for in a job as well as the current benefits offered by the community services sector.

## **Employee Value Proposition**

An Employee Value Proposition (EVP) is the set of benefits or values an employee receives from an occupation compared to the work that they do. Based on the information obtained from interviews and discussions with community service organisations in Queensland, Hudson Global Resources determined employees are looking for:

- professional occupations
- make a difference to people's lives
- challenging work – go beyond comfort zone
- lots of variety – no two days ever same and can be lots of fun
- opportunities to be innovative and creative
- flexible working hours – relaxed environment
- entry level opportunities – most positions do not require a degree
- salary sacrifice often available
- growth industry – lots of work available (12)

## **Feel good factor**

According to *Building Social Inclusion in Australia* 'interaction or 'meaning' in the relations they have with clients is most often rated as a key attraction of employment in community services' (3). This was echoed in the recent VCOSS Congress *What I Love About My Job Competition*. The majority of entrants wrote about meaning – the chance to contribute to positive social change and the interactions they experienced with other people. Similarly the Home and Community Care (HACC) New Entrant Development Project found that new workers to the sector felt rewarded by the 'sense of personal satisfaction development of

new and different relationships and the chance to connect with other people in the community'(12).

### **Work-life-balance**

The ASU member survey conducted in 2006 found the top six desired conditions for community service workers are: flexible working hours; maternity/paternity leave; carer's leave; work from home; work place based child care, and; time in lieu. (3) Whether based on values of the organisation or due to lack of funding for overtime and other benefits the community sector has been at the forefront of flexible working practices. (21) Given the increasing importance placed by society on finding a balance between work, family and leisure time, work-life-balance could prove a valuable tool to sell the sector, and is currently being used by some community service organizations for this purpose. However anecdotal feedback from community sector workers indicates that while the sector may offer flexible hours this often includes cramming a full-time job load into a part-time role. Further investigation is required before determining how genuinely the notion of work-life-balance can be used to promote the sector as a whole.

### **Target markets**

Recent studies and pilot projects addressing workforce recruitment in the community sector suggest a number of market segments could be targeted. These are summarised in Table 1. Information obtained about each target group while conducting a desktop audit of community services sector workforce data is summarised below. This summary serves as a starting point for considering market segments to be targeted by the Showcasing the Community Sector marketing campaign and the methods used.

#### ***High school students***

As the workforce ages it will be crucial to attract young people into the community services industry. Anecdotal evidence suggests young people have very little knowledge of the sector and lack an understanding of the breadth of roles available. In the reports reviewed two techniques were suggested for encouraging young people to enter the sector. Firstly to promote the community services sector as an industry with interesting and challenging work and great career prospects. Secondly to consider the potential of attracting young part-time or casual workers who may be interested in working in low level roles within the sector for a short period of time. The Victorian Government Department of Human Services, Home and Community Care (HACC) New Entrant Development Project Final Report raises the point that almost half of working 15-19 year olds are employed by the retail sector. (12) This group could be a target for working in the similarly remunerated community care sector. Current industry activities targeting school students include:

- The Health and Community Services Careers web site. Funded by the Department of Human Services and developed by Kangan Batman TAFE, this website provides comprehensive information about job roles, career pathways and training courses including careers quiz and training links, class activities and a hotline for further

information. As the original project brief was to target students from regional and rural Victoria funding has been allocated to distribute resource kits to schools, Local Community Partnerships (LCPs) and DHS offices in regional Victoria. It is hoped further funding may be found to promote the website and distribute kits in the metropolitan area. Visit the web site at [www.hcscareers.vic.edu.au](http://www.hcscareers.vic.edu.au)

- The CSH&ISC project Increasing Take-Up of School Based New Apprenticeship Pathways. The Community Services and Health Industry Council is working on a project to develop a comprehensive communication strategy and regional development models to increase the take up of School Based New Apprenticeships (SBNA) within the Health, Disability and Children's services industries. For further information, including the Final Report to Department of Education, Science and Training Industry Pathfinders Project, July 2006 go to <http://www.cshisc.com.au>
- Banyule/Nilumbik Local Learning and Employment Network (BNLLEN) in partnership with the Community Services and Health Industry Training Board produced promotional materials for interested young people that showcase young trainees in the community services and health sector and their work. In addition BNLLEN implemented a range of initiatives including training scholarships to encourage take up of health and community service courses.
- Community Active Careers website. Part of the Australian Government's Care Advice Australia Initiative, Community Active Careers provides career education to help young Australians transition smoothly through school and on to further study, training or work. The site has input from the Australian Government, CS&H Industry Skills Council and CS&H state advisory bodies as well as relevant employer organisations. Further information visit the website at <http://www.communityactivecareers.com.au/>

### ***University students***

The fact that many university students work part-time to support themselves while studying presents the opportunity to recruit students into lower level roles from both related disciplines such as psychology, allied health, social work and human services and also non related disciplines. Provision of valuable life experience and complementary work experience can be promoted as an incentive to students to take up such roles. The Home and Community Care New Entrant Development Project had a number of successes through directly approaching tertiary institutions and advertising vacancies on university websites. Some of the larger community service organisations spoken to have established partnerships with local universities as an effective way of attracting new graduates. Partnership activities include guest lectures by staff, annual study tours, and scholarships.

### ***Return-to-work***

According to *Working Futures*, prepared by Victoria's Workforce Participation Taskforce Victorian participation rates for women with dependents is lower than in comparable countries suggesting the opportunity to increase participation by this group. (22). The part-time nature or many community service jobs combined with the relative ease of entry into the sector (usually a certificate III or certificate IV level), could make community services roles a rewarding career alternative to other 'pink collar' services largely undertaken by women such as work in the retail and hospitality sector.

### ***Career change***

In a recent article published in *The Age*, H. Van Nimwegen discusses the growing number of professionals who are retraining to be teachers. According to the co-ordinator of Monash University's graduate diploma of primary education, David Zyngier the explanation for this is that people are "tired of the corporate dollar chase" and "want to do something useful with their life". They are also looking to work less hours for important quality-of-life reasons like spending time with their families (15). According to the Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education both the community and teachers themselves have a positive view of teaching as a profession and career choice. (16) While the community services sector does not attract the same positive image as teaching, it has much to offer people wishing to add value to their lives. Boosting the profile and reputation of the sector may provide the opportunity to attract professionals looking for a career change.

### ***Unemployed / underemployed***

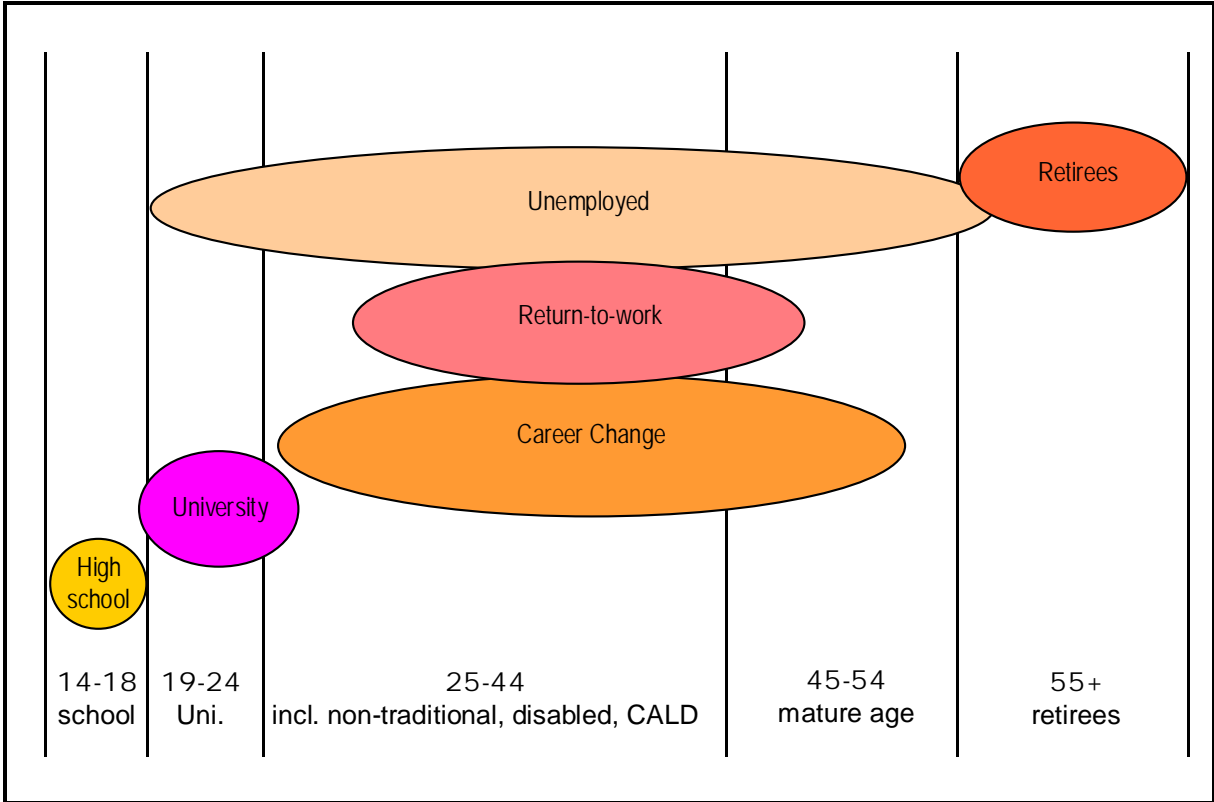
While a number of professionals are choosing a career change, many others are forced into change by industry trends such as the drop in work available in blue collar industries. For older men aged 40 – 54 "job insecurity and constant change is a source of depression rather than optimism"(17). Opportunities exist to attract employees from this and other groups currently under-represented in the employment market. Despite near full employment conditions growth in the employment rate for people with a disability has been modest in recent years (14). Another group of workers under-represented in the labour market are people who speak a language other than English at home. A number of programs are offered by the state and federal government to assist organisations to recruit long-term unemployed workers and other disadvantaged groups. These are detailed in chapter 6 of in the *HACC Community Care Worker Human Resources Kit* (9). Many CSO's have expressed reluctance in utilising such incentives because of previous problems with job networks supplying inappropriate candidates or the lack of available resources to provide inexperienced staff with the training and support they require.

### ***Mature Age Workers***

Mature Age workers (workers aged 45 and over) may fall into a number of target categories. They may be looking for a career change by choice out of a desire to do something different or to scale back hours as a step towards retirement, or by necessity due to unemployment or

retrenchment. Studies show that a large number of people either want to, or feel the need to, continue working past retirement age. (19) While older Australians want to keep working, a survey by career management firm Linkme.com.au found that nearly three-quarters of Australians believe that by the age of 50, finding new employment is almost impossible.(18) As the population ages industries will increasingly need to target older workers. Sending out a genuine message that the life skills and experience of older workers is valued and needed in the community service sector may help attract new groups of mature workers.

One project that has successfully targeted older workers is Mature Age Givers in Care (MAGIC). Developed in response to the research findings published in the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) report *Engaging the Untapped Workforce, Training solutions for the community services and health industry*, DEST and the CS&HISC established the MAGIC program to recruit and train mature aged workers and non traditional workers in the Aged Care, Children’s Services, Youth Work and Disability Work sectors of community services industry. Further information about the MAGIC program can be found on the CS&HISC website at [www.cshisc.com.au](http://www.cshisc.com.au)



## Recommendations

There are a number of barriers to successfully promoting the community services sector, as an employer. The sector is far from homogenous. The Victorian community sector is made up of thousands of organisations employing staff in hundreds of job roles requiring a variety of qualifications, skills and experiences. There is contradiction within the sector as to how the industry should be perceived. On the one hand there is a push to promote entry level care roles to a casual, low skilled labour market, on the other there is an increasing need for the professionalism of the sector to be acknowledged and valued. The wages and conditions in the community sector are often poorer than in comparable industries. Even the sector's biggest selling point – the feeling of satisfaction gained by working to improve the lives of others - can have a negative impact creating the perception that you need to be a special kind of person, a 'do-gooder' to work in the community services industry.

Recent pilot project findings suggest attracting new workers to the community sector can be achieved when people have a realistic understanding of the work involved. Given the challenges faced in promoting the sector it is recommended the Showcasing the Community Sector Marketing Campaign focuses simply on boosting the public's awareness and understanding of community service roles by sharing stories from a variety of people who work in the sector and the clients / service users they work with.

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