

NewAccess workplaces

Final Evaluation - Findings Summary,

June 2022

Context

Mental health and wellbeing is a key driver of economic participation and productivity in Australia. Mental ill-health has a direct impact on employers. Unplanned absences due to mental health is estimated to cost organisations around \$10 billion per year. Lost productivity due to mental illness is estimated to cost organisations \$7 billion per year.¹ In 2018-2019, the median cost of a psychological injury was \$45,900, with a median length of incapacity of 26.6 weeks. This is more than double that of a physical injury, excluding diseases, of 6.4 weeks and valued at \$12,900.²

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to the workplace and has caused great disruption to people's mental health and wellbeing. Widespread restrictions of movement, physical isolation, blurring of boundaries between work and homelife, remote working and 'lockdowns' have impacted the mental health of many Australians. Recent studies reported that up to 78% of the population experienced worsening of their mental health since the COVID-19 outbreak in Australia.³

With the pandemic coinciding with the Australian bushfires, floods and extended drought which, are well documented in causing increased mental health issues and higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)⁴, the significance of the support and implementation of protective systems in the workplace has risen in importance.

Workplaces present an opportune setting to prevent mental illness, support recovery and return to work. Employers, therefore, have a key role to play in providing mentally healthy workplace environments and supporting better mental health outcomes for their workers.

In this context, following a successful six-month trial in 2018-2019, Comcare implemented 'NewAccess workplaces' (the Program) across 16 Australian Public Service Agency partners, over a two-year period (2020-2022).

Comcare engaged PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting (Australia) (PwC) to undertake an independent evaluation of the Program over the two-year period. The objectives of the evaluation were to assess the appropriateness of the Program, ease of implementation, uptake and return on investment.

¹ Productivity Commission (2021). Mental Health Inquiry Report: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report>

² Safe Work Australia Australian Workers' Compensation Statistics 2019 - 20: <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-11/Final%20Australian%20Workers%20%20Compensation%20Statistics%202019-20.pdf>

³ Black Dog Institute: <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media-releases/three-quarters-of-australians-claim-their-mental-health-has-worsened-by-covid-19/>

⁴ Mental Health Commissions. National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan: <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/1b7405ce-5d1a-44fc-b1e9-c00204614cb5/National-Mental-Health-and-Wellbeing-Pandemic-Response-Plan>

Key Findings

The findings are based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data and information collected during the evaluation period (June 2020 – Feb 2022). A summary of key findings is provided below:



1. **NewAccess workplaces delivers a consistent recovery rate and is an appropriate service for workplace settings**

The Program achieved a recovery rate of 72 per cent, above the clinical threshold of >60 per cent. The Program's recovery rate is higher than the NewAccess Community Program (65%), small business program (65%), and the UK IAPT model (51%). This indicates that evidence-based psychological therapies can be delivered successfully by a non-clinical workforce to help people manage mild to moderate signs of anxiety and depression in Australian workplace settings.

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> 72% Recovery Rate

Agency NewAccess Trial	NewAccess Community Trial
> 90% Recovery Rate	> 65% Recovery Rate
Comcare NewAccess Pilot	NewAccess for Small Business Owners
> 78% Recovery Rate	> 65% Recovery Rate

Clinical Threshold:
>60%

UK IAPT Model
> 51% Recovery Rate

While the Program participants were predominantly female, men also accessed the program and achieved a higher recovery rate (75 per cent) compared to women (71 per cent).



2. **NewAccess workplaces met the needs of workers using the service and contributed towards improvements in their engagement in the workplace**

The majority of post participant survey respondents were very satisfied (60 per cent) or satisfied (29 per cent) with the service and reported that NewAccess workplaces either exceeded (50 per cent) or met their expectations (39 per cent).

Survey respondents noted that the Program helped them identify triggers for stress and anxiety and provided them with the appropriate skills to manage their symptoms. Confidentiality was identified as a key factor in employees' motivation for participating in the program.

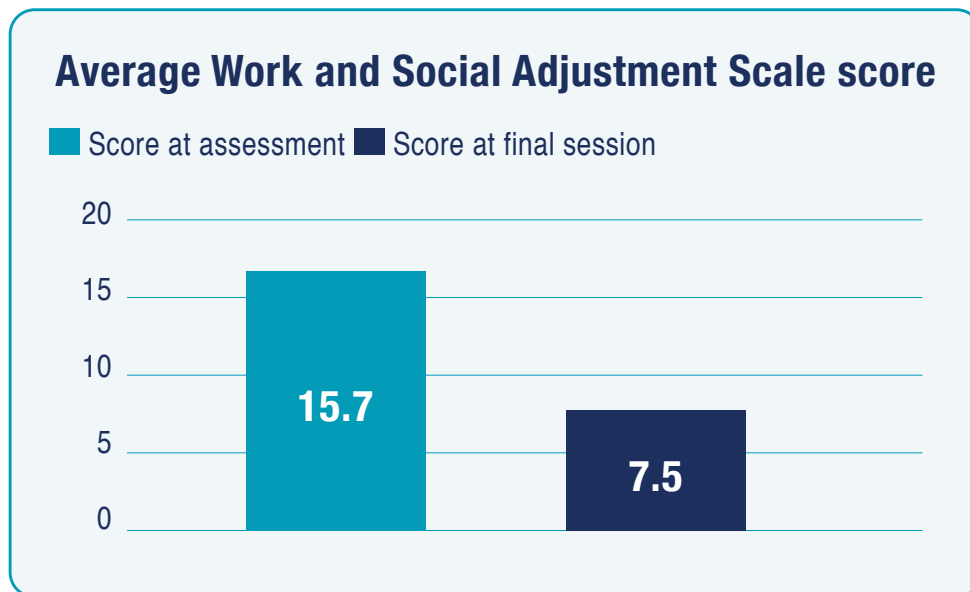


3. NewAccess workplaces enhances self-reported job satisfaction and productivity

The majority of post participant survey respondents (56 per cent) rated their job satisfaction as very good or excellent after completing the program, compared to (25 percent) before completing NewAccess workplaces.

Employees were asked to rate their problems using the validated Work and Social Adjustment Scale (WSAS). They achieved an 8.2 reduction in their WSAS scores between assessment and final session, indicating that the service helped them reduce or manage their symptoms.

There was an improvement in self-reported productivity, with 78 per cent of survey respondents reporting their productivity as very good or excellent after NewAccess, compared to 48 per cent prior to NewAccess.



4. NewAccess workplaces is contributing to the promotion of mental health prevention and/or early intervention

NewAccess workplaces appeared to give greater choice to workers regarding mental health support at work. It is viewed as a useful and alternative and/or complementary service to Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). Increased availability of mental health supports such as NewAccess workplaces coupled with the impact of COVID-19 has meant that workplaces are more open to having conversations about mental health.



5. Greater education and awareness is required to encourage participants to attend follow up sessions

Greater awareness and modifications to current promotions are required to raise awareness that follow up sessions are part of the Program structure and visibility of its purpose.



6. Agencies need a sustained approach to manage capacity to promote and manage the Program on an ongoing basis

Agencies noted that while promotional materials were managed well in the first year of service implementation, regular promotional activities receded in the second year due to limited time and management capacity.



7. More education and training is required to raise awareness of NewAccess workplaces and Low-intensity Cognitive Behaviour Therapy among Agency partners and the Australian workforce, respectively

- › Pathways for Low-intensity Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (LiCBT) training should be created and maintained on an ongoing basis to develop a workforce that is capable and experienced in LiCBT delivery and supervision.
- › It may be beneficial to consider how the name 'NewAccess workplaces' can be adapted to promote the Program in a way that resonates with workers and more clearly convey its value and purpose.
- › More clarity on (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), LiCBT and the coaching model (i.e. that it is about working through triggers) is needed to raise awareness of the program.



8. Economic viability

An analysis of indicative costs and potential opportunities for cost savings suggest that NewAccess could generate \$1.60 in productivity benefits from every dollar invested into the program indicating economic viability.

Conclusion

Overall, this final evaluation highlights the effectiveness of this Program in supporting the needs of employees across the APS, particularly as an alternative and/or complementary option to other mental health and wellbeing offerings such as EAP services. Feedback from participants suggests that they are satisfied with the Program and that there is an appetite for ongoing engagement. The evaluation also indicates that the Program is economically viable.

Implementing evidence-based programs like NewAccess workplaces enables workplaces to better support mental health and wellbeing in a way that is compliant with regulatory requirements and uplifts psychological safety.

For more information, please contact NewAccess@comcare.gov.au

Adapted from original report from PricewaterhouseCoopers.



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