



So...podcast – Episode #16 CEOs Disability Message

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John: Greetings. John, McKenna, SoPodcast. "I'm not shaking your hand, mate. I don't care who you are." This is one of the quotes that stuck in my mind as I was producing this episode you're about to experience. It's a response from a client who's interacting with a chief executive officer from an Australian disability service provider. The CEO acknowledged, I quote, "that sometimes you've just got to stop and reflect so that we can be reminded when we need to do things rightly. Advice can come from people we wouldn't normally expect". No matter what business you are in I believe there are many takeaway messages that you will relate to with this episode. My takeaway message after listening to this episode is that organisations are responding quickly as situations are continually changing. There are hopefully now less boxes to be ticked before things can be approved. Right now it's all about being responsive with creative, innovative ways to support people whilst at the same time continuing to listen to the people who are being supported.

I would like to thank the eleven CEOs from disability service providers from around Australia who contributed by leaving short recorded messages of innovation, support and creativity during the COVID-19 period. Another great highlight for me was understanding just how organisations are uniquely different. Thank you also to National Disability Servicicers for assisting in finding organisations who chose to be a part of this episode.

Jenny: Hello everyone. It's Jenny Fitzgerald here, a CEO of Scope. We're based in Victoria and provide services to around 4,000 Victorians with a disability, including children and adults. I'm sure, like me, you're feeling a bit worried about the COVID-19 pandemic and what it means for your safety. I find at times like this communication is more important than ever. You need access to information to be able to ask questions and tell others how you're





feeling. Scope has prepared a whole lot of resources in plain English and keyword sign to help you through this difficult time. They're available on our website and Facebook page. Please feel free to download and use them. They will give you the information and tools you need to access information and to tell others what you need to feel safe and heard.

Feeling safe and being safe are a priority for everyone at this time and like many other service providers Scope has implemented the advice of the Chief Medical Officer. We've implemented our pandemic plan and business continuity plan. In simple terms this means that we're ready to respond to your support needs. We have the policies, procedures, training and support for all our staff in place. They know what to do and when to seek help in order to keep you safe and well.

If you need support from a doctor or a hospital they will make sure that you have a family member, or a member of your support team, with you to ensure that your wishes and needs are understood and responded to. I've spoken to many people with disability and their families over this period. I know how resilient you are in the face of challenge. Each of you is determined and brave. You seek solutions to problems and you think up innovative ways to address any barriers you face. We're here to support you and together we'll work towards a better future.

My hope is that as a result of the challenges we're facing together we'll build a better and more inclusive community. So stay safe, keep positive. We're all here for you. We'll listen to you and support your decisions. I always find doing it together is better than facing a challenge alone. Bye for now.

Donna: Hello, my name is Donna Baine. I'm the general manager of Self Help Workplace. We are an Australian disability enterprise employing 56 adults with a disability at our business in Launceston, Tasmania, Australia.

During the height of the COVID emergency almost a third of our support employees were at home because of their own health or the health of their





carers but we were really keen to keep in contact with them so that they knew what we were doing here at Self Help Workplace. So what we did was create an extensive and colourful range of materials for employees to use at home to keep them connected to work.

There are find-a-word puzzles, mazes and quizzes and through these fun and educational activities our employees are staying connected with their friends and work. They are learning and practicing work and life skills, including reading and writing, healthy eating and safe work practices.

But we're also keen to really celebrate the hard work of the team who are still able to come into work. With individual stories and videos on our Facebook page and fun lunches we are looking out for each other and staying well. We have a great team here at Self Help Workplace and I'm really looking forward to all getting back to work safe and well once the COVID emergency is over. Self Help Workplace, the team is awesome and getting it done.

Joanne: Hi, my name is Joanne Jessop and I'm the CEO of Multicap, an organisation based in Queensland, Brisbane in Australia. We deliver services across Queensland and Northern New South Wales. Many of the people we support have complex needs so ceasing services during the pandemic was never an option for us. Leisure and social support are just as important as personal care.

At the start we set three priorities; keep delivering services that enhance people's lives, keep our customers and staff as safe as possible and keep as many people employed as possible. Surprisingly we are opening up a whole new world of opportunity for our customers that we might not have otherwise identified. We now offer music therapy sessions via video conferencing. People in regional areas who couldn't previously participate now can and new customers want to get involved. We've had fantastic feedback.





Our social experience program, Avigates, is also online. We've run choir rehearsals, trivia nights, virtual theme park adventures and dinner parties. Our customers tell us that Avigates may be the only time they can meet their friends. We wanted to assist them to maintain their health and wellbeing during isolation.

We were able to repurpose short term accommodation beds for people with disability in hospital who were ready for discharge but who did not have accommodation to go to. We're so proud to assist these people return to community.

Our Mother's Day art exhibition is the biggest event for the year for our artists with disabilities. This year it's been run both virtually and physically with the whole exhibition catalogued in a new online store. The speed that things changed for us here at Multicap pushed us to be agile and flexible in finding new ways to support our customers. It has been challenging but also very rewarding. Thank you.

Danielle: Hi everyone. I'm Danielle Newport, the CEO of Active, a leading Western Australian based disability service provider who supports more than 2,000 individuals living with intellectual disability. We offer a range of services that includes accommodation, employment and community access.

We made the difficult decision early on in the pandemic to restrict unnecessary visits to our supported accommodation sites. This was to protect both our customers and staff. Instead we've been supporting our customers to use technology to connect to their loved ones.

Our employment services have remained open. While some of our customers have taken leave, many have chosen to continue working. Honestly, this was a difficult decision to make but in the end we took the lead from our customers and if they wanted to work they could come to work. We always work with customers to make decisions with them that affect them and we respect their choices.





From early on in the pandemic our community supports have been delivered on a one-to-one basis only. Staff members have changed how we support customers, particularly those who are vulnerable, to ensure that everybody has opportunities to connect and interact with someone during a time when many people are feeling isolated.

Throughout, our top priority is always the safety and wellbeing of our customers and staff. Every decision we have made, and will continue to make, is with this in mind. Thank you.

Andrew: Hi, I'm Andrew Richardson, the CEO of Aruma. We're a four purpose disability support organisation supporting around 5,500 people across Eastern Australia. The corona virus is having a huge impact worldwide. At Aruma we've been working hard to keep our customers and staff safe and well, and to comply with all the government guidelines. We've had to move quickly, close some services and make changes to others.

In these challenging times ongoing connections with friends and family are vital. Virtual video chats, discos, karaoke sessions, concerts, cooking lessons and even video pen pal exchanges are all helping ease the impact of social isolation.

Little things matter a lot. Our customer, George, is an example. He's a real social butterfly who loves music and going to work, but doesn't really understand why his day-to-day life has changed. With the help of our staff George is now video chatting regularly with his Mum. A new experience. George's Mum, Mary, says this is making a big difference for both of them. In fact, Mary, feels that this whole experience has led to even stronger relationships between Aruma's staff, their customers and their families.

Yes, the circumstances are challenging but these challenges are pushing all of us, people with a disability, family members, carers and support providers to learn, innovate and improve. our Australian community spirit is alive and well. I'm confident we'll get through these challenges together and emerge stronger and better as a result.





Therese: Hello everyone. My name is Therese Desmond and I'm the CEO of OC Connections. We provide accommodation, in home support, day support, support coordination and employment support for about 450 adults and school leavers living with disability in the South-Eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia.

The impact of COVID has been challenging for the whole community. Like everyone, our staff, participants and their families have had to manage huge adjustments and while some restrictions hopefully will soon ease, it's likely that we'll need to continue to adjust to social distancing for quite some time. Yet, resilience and ingenuity are at the heart of our community. I could not be prouder of how everyone has worked together to make the most of this situation. Every day I see participants, families and staff overcoming daily hurdles and embracing change with innovation.

Many of us have discovered how to work and learn at home. We've embraced Zoom and Microsoft Teams, and delivered our programs where we can through video conferencing. This has enabled us to continue support people where they need us the most. Above all, we've learnt how to stay connected to one another in spite of social distancing. The measures we've implemented are designed to keep people safe from disease. People have learned to love hand sanitiser and personal protective equipment. Most of us have never had our temperatures checked so often, yet humour and resilience has been front and centre through it all.

Finally, I offer my sincere thanks to people in the broader community for their continued support, encouragement and positive feedback. Stay well and stay safe, and let's keep connected with each other.

Phil: Hi everyone. My name's Phil Hayes-Brown and I'm the CEO at Willara, Australia. We support 500 clients and their families across Melbourne and South-East suburbs. During the lockdown period we've been doing less emails and a lot more video and our staff and families are really loving it.





Recently I spoke with 42 residents and about five families all on one Zoom call to share what we had been doing and hear how everyone was coping. It was so much fun to give and be part of all that, and so much easier for everybody.

The COVID crises has fast tracked online communications and technology is such a powerful enabler. Hopefully more openness and better communication can be something good that makes us better from a terrible situation.

Tony: G'day everyone. My name is Tony Burns and I work for an amazing organisation called HPA Helping People Achieve. We're located up in the Northern Territory in Australia. This company was inspired back in 1963 by Harold and Peg Garner. They had a dream that their child living with a disability had a passion and this organisation was born. Over the last 64 years it's gone through the ups and downs of the not-for-profit sector and our organisation is incredible. I took over as CEO five years ago. The company was called HPA Disability Services. My focus is about inspiring, so I changed the company to Helping People Achieve and our incredible company employs 12% Indigenous and over 144 people. Seventy-seven of those are with a physical or intellectual challenge and we give them real meaningful work on a daily basis across seven arms of the business.

We're really focusing on what we can do in this COVID-19 outbreak, about what we can do on the ground but also going forward, what are our learnings. At the end of the day this outbreak has gone throughout the world and the world as we know it will never be the same. But importantly, what we can do is remember to focus on possibilities and not disabilities. Every single day we have an opportunity to inspire, not only the people in our organisation but also the community at large. So we are committed to do that, we're empowered to make a difference and thank you so much for listening today and I wish you all the best.





Graeme: Hi, I'm Graeme Kelly. I'm the interim CEO at GenU. GenU is a disability employment and aged care provider. We're based in Geelong. We operate across Australia and we support around about 3,500 customers and clients.

COVID-19, like many other organisations, has had a huge impact. But what I've seen, generally speaking, is a rise in the decency and humanity of the people that I deal with. I'll give you an example. Second week I started here, around about the middle of March, I went and visited one of our service sites and as you would normally do, social distancing had not started at that time and I went to shake hands. I put out my hand in greeting and in friendship, to be reminded by the person I was greeting, who I later found out was called James, he said, "I'm not shaking your hand, mate, I don't care who you are". And what that taught me is that sometimes you've just got to stop and reflect but we can be reminded about what to do rightly by people that we wouldn't normally expect it from. James taught me to be both humble but also to learn, we've got to do things differently.

What I've seen, generally speaking, is that people have been positive and constructive. It reminds me of a poem by a man called Adam Lindsay Gordon, which says "*Life is mostly froth and bubble. Two things stand like stone; kindness in another's troubles and courage in your own.*" What I'm seeing is a lot of kindness and a lot of courage. Thank you.

Mark: Hi everyone. I'm Mark Kulinsky. I'm the chief executive of Community Living Australia and we're based in Adelaide, Australia. We provide services to people with disabilities in many different ways. From accommodation, 24/7 accommodation, to in home support, respite services and day time support. We support people that may be children or adults, and people with different types of disabilities.

In terms of our communication, more importantly it's more about engagement. It's been founded on two key principles and one is to keep people safe during these unprecedented times so essential supports can continue uninterrupted. We're using different communication channels





regularly to engage and inform, and receive feedback from both our clients and their carers. These include the telephone, social media, virtual meetings, videos and easy read material. We're supporting people to gain access to technology devices through the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and also access to the internet, and often we pay for that for people.

We are holding virtual support sessions. So it's a different way people can get support, so it doesn't have to be face-to-face in these times. We're also supporting our people to connect by social media and other challenges and they're inspiring each other in terms of what they can do. One of the examples is a cooking class where people with disabilities actually are cooking online and engaging with other people who cook along with them. Even running competitions of who comes up with the best dish, and try it and we look at facial expressions to judge the winner.

We're also working with a team to work together to develop tools to support each other in the understanding of the pandemic and how to keep people and themselves safe, and how to enjoy new activities in these times of social distancing.

Thank you everyone for listening and I particularly would like to say thank you to John from SoPodcast. Fantastic job in getting the message out there to the world and how we're working and supporting people in this challenging time.

Rohan: Hi there. My name's Rohan Braddy and I've been the CEO of Mambourin, which is a disability services provider in Victoria, Australia, for the past 18 years. This sounds like a long time but I still feel like I'm always learning, particularly how we can better meet people's needs. This is especially true currently as we continue to adapt our services due to the impact of the COVID-19 virus.

Our key focus has been keeping everyone healthy. We implemented social distancing, hand hygiene, enhanced cleaning, temperature checks,





education for everyone around good cough and sneeze etiquette, and planning for if someone actually got sick. These changes will stick beyond COVID and will help to keep everyone healthy and safe in the future too.

Most of the supports we provide are under community and social participation, and they were in centre based groups. When the Victorian government decided to close these centres, and with some of our supported employees choosing not to attend work, we had to radically and quickly rethink what we could do to support people in other settings. We started by asking each person what they needed and how we could help. What emerged was a whole range of new services, typically visiting a person in their home or supporting them online.

We've played online bingo, taught participants in virtual classrooms, taken people out to exercise and stay healthy, or to do their essential shopping or attend medical appointments, all whilst meeting all government requirements for social distancing et cetera and keeping everyone healthy and safe.

Thanks for this opportunity to speak with you and I wish everyone well.

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