

Why would you want to be a Disability Support Worker?

Peter Cookson
PhD Candidate
November 2009

‘The quality and stability of direct support
professionals are of fundamental importance
to the well being of people with intellectual or
developmental disabilities’

Larson, Hewitt & Lakin (2004)

‘The ability to find, train and keep direct support staff is one of the biggest barriers to continued efforts to expand ... and sustain community supports’

Test, Flowers, Hewitt & Solow (2004)

My Research Project

- Questionnaire sent to 842 DSWs in 10 Agencies in metropolitan Adelaide
- 201 (23.9%) responses returned, 188 of them were completed
- 65 DSWs volunteered to be interviewed over a six month period
- 15 selected volunteers currently being interviewed about their work and the issues that concern them

Some false assumptions?

- Most DSWs have not worked for a long period or have worked in low paid jobs

Previous work type before commencing support work (n=185^a)

Type of work	Percentage
Community service work (eg Aged and Child care, Youth work, Welfare)	17.8%
Student	11.4%
Management / Professional / Artistic	10.8%
Retail sales	10.3%
Office / Clerical	10.3%
Factory work	9.2%
Mother / Home duties	8.1%
Self-employed	6.5%
Nursing	2.7%
Other (eg Hospitality, cleaner, labourer)	12.9%
Totals	100.0%

^a Three respondents did not reply to this question

Some false assumptions?

- Most DSWs have not worked for a long period or have worked in low paid jobs
- The average length of service is very short
 - In Victoria, average length of service is 4.3 years
 - Casual 2.2 years
 - Part-time 4.6 years
 - Full-time 6.5 years

Victorian Government (2005)

Number of employers since commencing support work (n=187^a)

Employers	Female	Male	Total	Percentage
One	57	24	81	43.3%
Two	38	9	47	25.1%
3 - 5	30	17	47	25.1%
6 - 8	6	4	10	5.4%
> 10		2	2	1.1%
Totals	131	56	187	100.0%

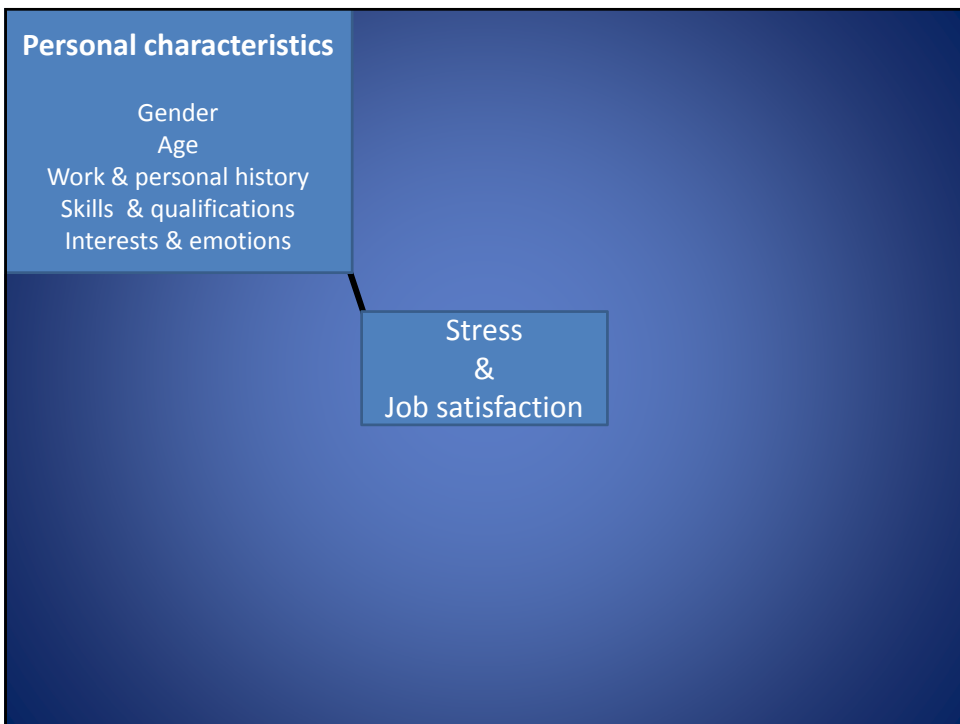
^aOne female did not reply to this question

Average length of service (Adelaide)

Length of service with current employer (years) (n=183)			
	Average	Median	Range
Female (n=129)	6.9	5.0	0.25 – 39.7
Male (n=54)	8.9	5.4	0.08 – 34.0
All workers	7.6	5.0	0.08 – 39.7
Total length of service with all employers (years) (n=187)			
	Average	Median	Range
Female (n=131)	10.3	7.9	0.25 – 39.7
Male (n=56)	12.5	9.8	0.08 – 34.0
All workers	11.0	8.3	0.08 – 39.7

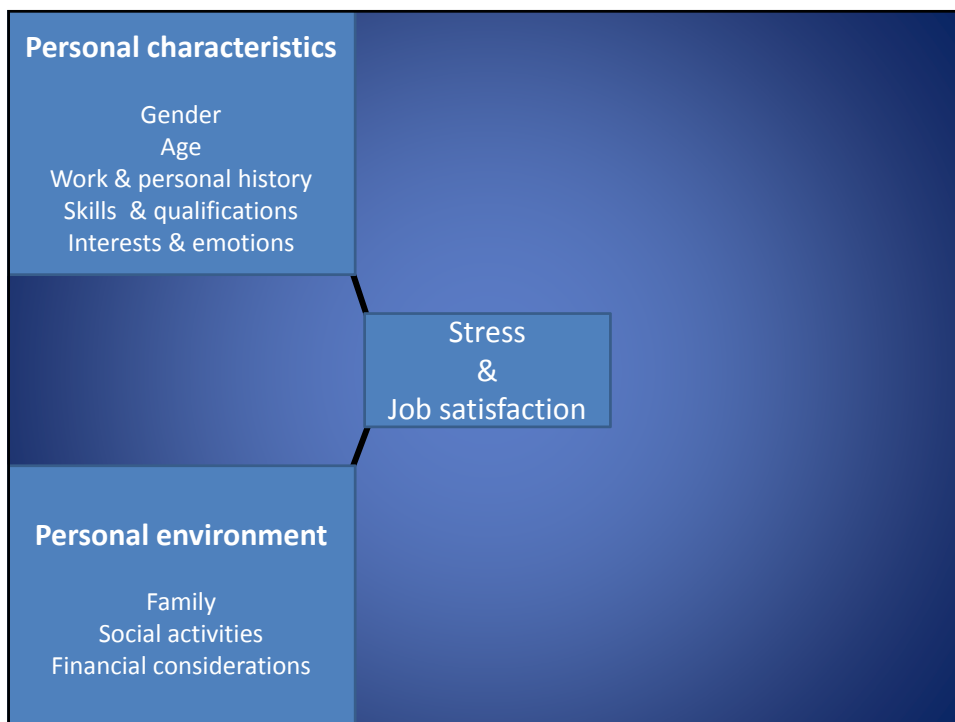
Some false assumptions?

- Most DSWs have not worked for a long period or have worked in low paid jobs
 - The average length of service is very short
 - In Victoria, average length of service is 4.3 years
 - Casual 2.2 years
 - Part-time 4.6 years
 - Full-time 6.5 years
- Victorian Government (2005)*
- In this survey, for all employers:
 - Average length of service is 11 years
 - Half of the DSWs have worked in the area for > 8.3 years
 - One quarter (25%) have worked in the area for > 15 years



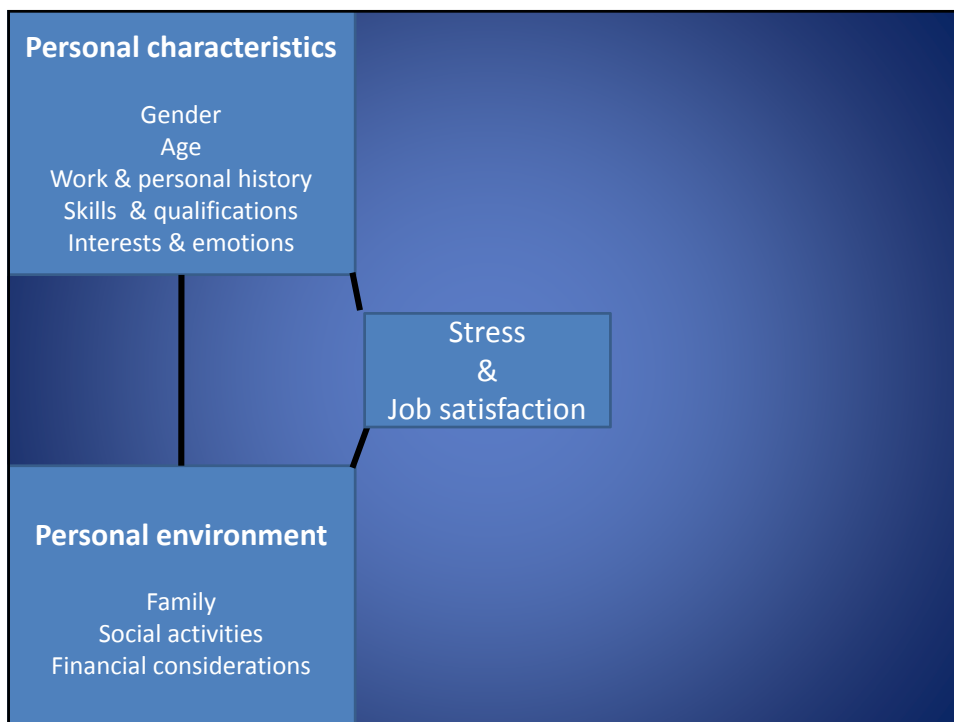
Personal Characteristics

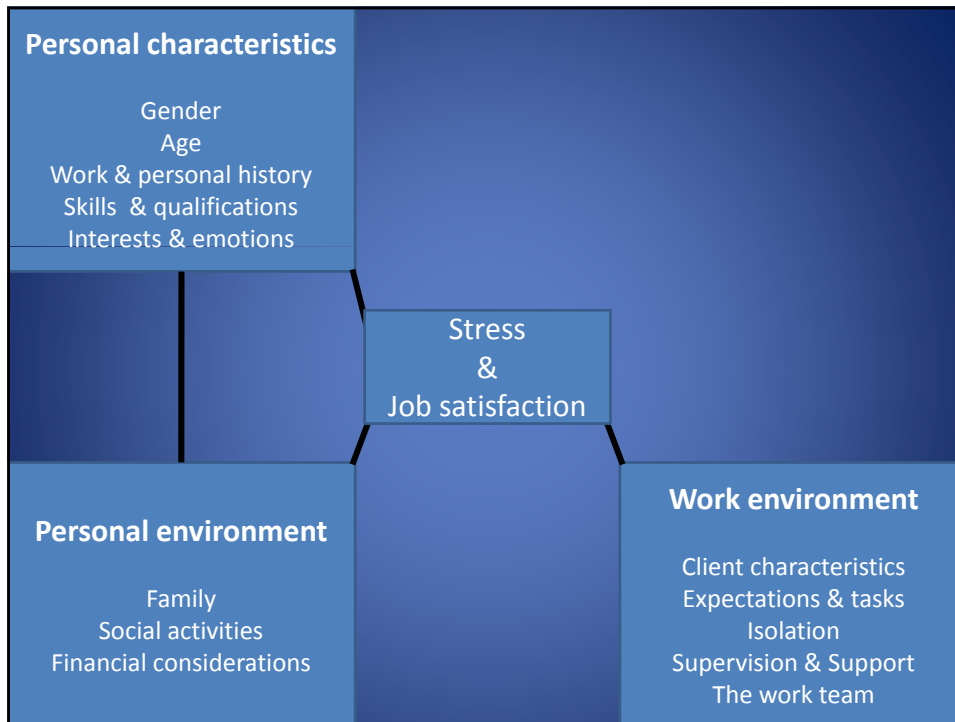
- Gender:
 - Female - 70.2% Male - 29.8%
- Age:
 - Almost two thirds (66.0%) aged > 45 years
 - One fifth (20.3%) aged > 55 years
- Previous contact with disability:
 - Direct family member – 34.5%
 - A direct relative – 24.1%
 - Previous contact a reason to work in the area – 35.9%
- Qualifications in Disability:
 - Cert III or Cert IV – 49.5%
 - University degree – 7.1%
 - Currently studying – 20.9%



Personal environment

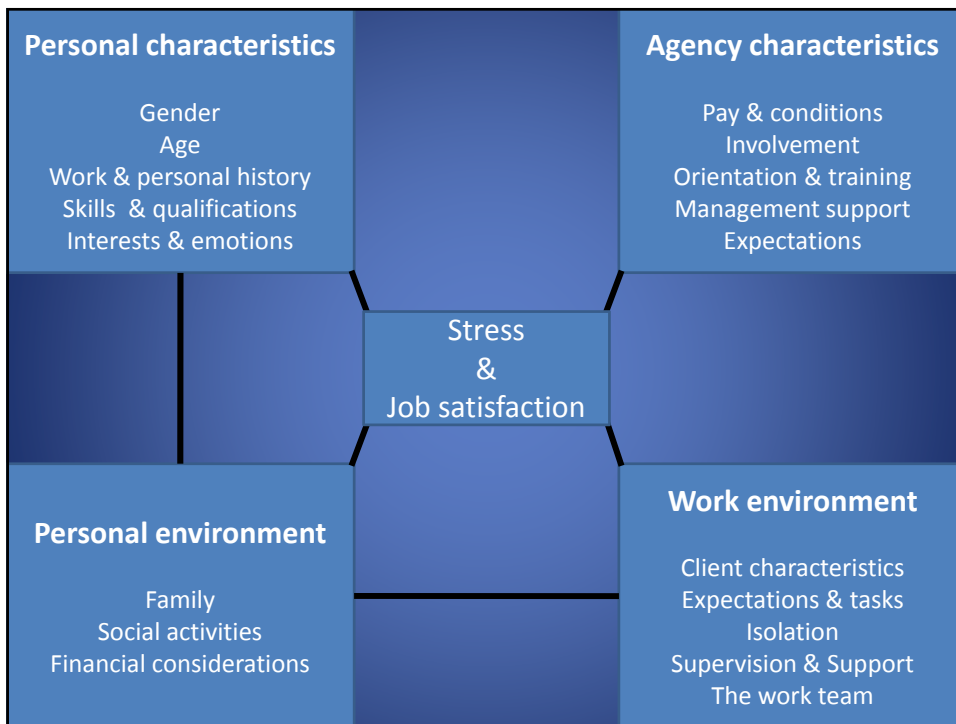
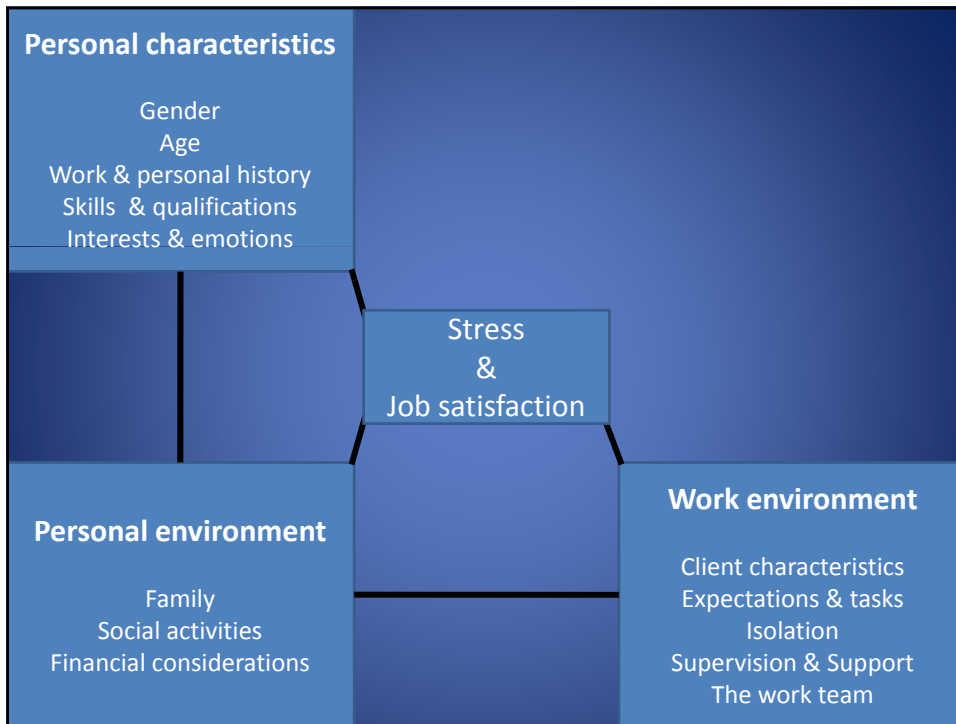
- **Work – life balance**
 - 24.2% of DSWs would prefer to work fewer hours
 - Of these, 46.7% stated they wanted more time with family
- **Overtime**
 - More than half of DSWs (54.8%) work unpaid overtime
 - And more than a quarter (26.3%) do so regularly
- **Emergency shifts**
 - Only 14.0% of DSWs do NOT work to cover emergency shifts
 - 8.9% covered at least one emergency shift/week
- **Financial considerations**
 - Almost one third (29.5%) of DSWs worked < 25 hours/week
 - About one quarter (25.3%) wanted more work
 - Of these, almost two thirds (64.3%) stated a need to earn more
 - 15% of DSWs work for more than one employer





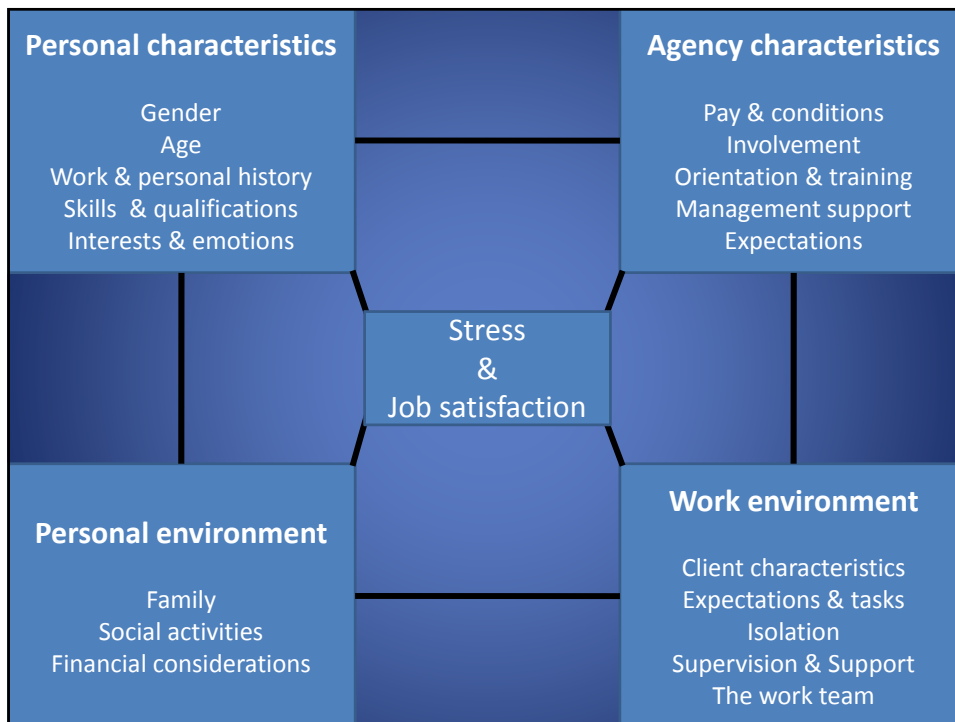
Work environment

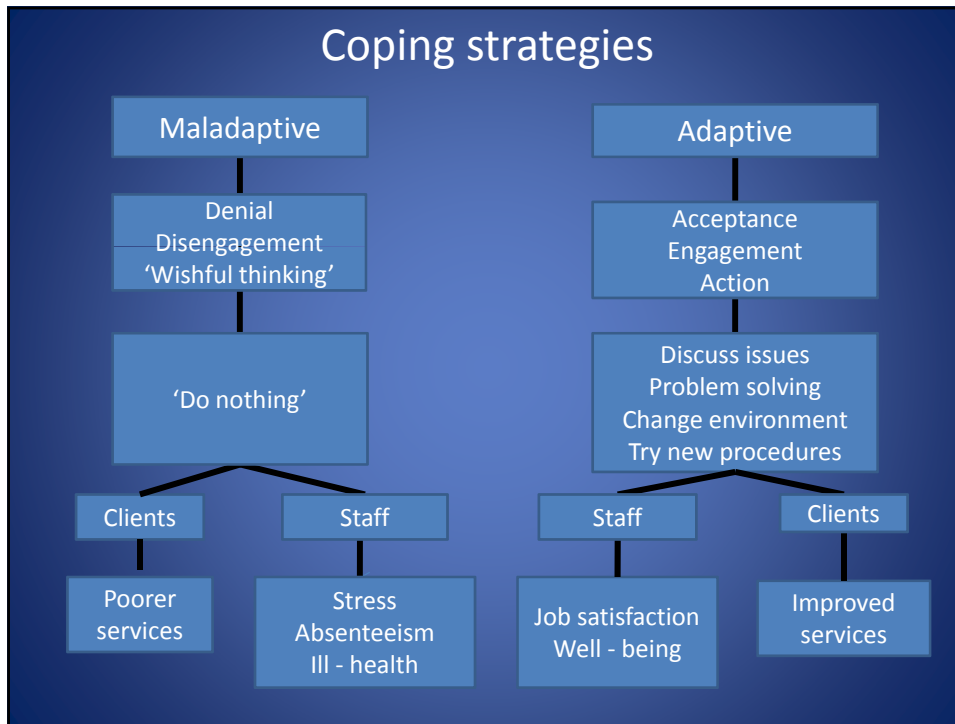
- Isolation
 - 24.6% of DSWs always work alone
 - 29.4% always work as part of a team
 - 46.0% work both alone and as part of a team
- On-the-job support
 - Only two thirds (66.3%) of DSWs stated they could access support 'whenever needed'
 - 17.6% of DSWs stated that meetings were held only monthly or less frequently
 - 80.3% listed co-workers as their main source of support



Agency characteristics

- Strong developing themes
 - Critical lack of funding
 - Increasing, and often unrealistic, expectations and demands on DSWs but constantly decreasing available time and resources
 - Lack of easy access to quality training
 - Induction and orientation
 - In-service training
 - Not feeling valued by management and the community
 - Poor support and supervision by management
 - Lack of involvement in decision making





References

- Larson S., Hewitt A. & Lakin C. (2004), Multiperspective analysis of workforce challenges and their effect on consumer and family quality of life, *American Journal on Mental Retardation* 109 (6), 481 – 500.
- Test D., Flowers C., Hewitt A. & Solow J. (2004), Training needs of Direct Support Staff, *Mental Retardation* 42 (5), 327 – 337.
- Victorian Government (2005), *Disability Services Workforce Study*, Melbourne, Victoria.

9th Annual DSW Conference
Melbourne, 18-19th November 2009

Table 1 Respondents by Age and Gender (n=188)					
Age in years	Respondents			Percentage	
	Female	Male	Total	Respondents	Cumulative
< 20	1	0	1	0.5%	0.5%
21 - 25	5	1	6	3.2%	3.7%
26 - 30	6	0	6	3.2%	6.9%
31 - 35	12	4	16	8.5%	15.4%
36 - 40	13	5	18	9.6%	25.0%
41 - 45	13	4	17	9.0%	34.0%
46 - 50	36	12	48	25.5%	59.5%
51 - 55	24	14	38	20.2%	79.7%
56 - 60	17	5	22	11.7%	91.4%
61 - 65	4	10	14	7.4%	98.9%
66 - 70	1	1	2	1.1%	100.0%
Totals	132 70.2%	56 29.8%	188	100.0%	

Table 5 People with disabilities known to the respondent (n=145 ^{ab})										
Age in years	Type of relationship with people with disabilities								Reason to work in area	
	Self	Spouse	Parent	Child	Sibling	Relative	Family friend	Acquaintance	Yes	No
21-25				1		2	1	1	2	1
26-30					1		1	1	1	1
31-35				1		5	4	6	3	10
36-40					6	3	3	5	7	8
41-45			1	2	1	3	3	6	2	11
46-50	2		3	6	3	6	10	20	17	22
51-55		1	4	4	1	8	5	11	8	21
56-60				4	4	5	4	9	6	11
61-65			1	4		2	2	6	6	5
66-70						1	1			2
Total ^a	2	1	9	22 15%	16 11%	35	34	65	52 36%	92

^a 27 respondents cited more than one relationship
^b One male did not record if this was a factor in his commencing work in the disability sector

Table 6		
Reasons for commencing support work (n=180^a)		
Reason	Number of respondents	Percentage
Worker wanted to do this sort of work	36	20.0%
Needed a job	34	18.9%
Need for career change	29	16.1%
Interest/Challenge/Enjoyment of work	18	10.0%
Referred to area by a friend/family	18	10.0%
Personal issues related to disability	18	10.0%
Did volunteer work in disability area	15	8.3%
Flowed on from studies	8	4.4%
Approached by employer	2	1.1%
The work hours suited	2	1.1%
Totals	180	100.0%

^a Eight respondents did not reply to this question