

Individual stories

This evaluation engages all key stakeholders—including participants—to identify, measure, and evaluate the outcomes of PBO3 in terms of what each stakeholder group identifies as important. Six PBO3 participants met with researchers for face-to-face interviews about what working at a PSE has meant to them. Their stories are presented here in their own words and voices. All participants reviewed their stories and provided approval for them to appear in this report in their current format. *

- Participants' stories are compelling. They bring to life participants' unique personalities, characters and histories, whilst highlighting much-shared experience of:
 - The ineffectiveness of employment service providers, and that it was 'luck' that opened the door to employment in a social enterprise;
 - The important role of People Support Officers within the social enterprise workplace in helping participants progress in life and celebrate the wins;
 - How supported employment can reduce the barriers to employment that people previously experienced and sometimes considered as insurmountable, including barriers arising from disability;
 - The low-quality work and exploitation in prior positions of 'open' employment;
 - How positions of employment give people experiencing significant barriers to employment a platform for contributing to organisational and even systems change; and
 - The diversity of participants' goals (e.g. regarding future employment).
- These themes should inform understandings of not only the holistic outcomes of PBO3 but also the limitations of some PBO3 design elements as they are applied to a cohort of unique participants (e.g. standardised employment

** Participants are aware that while they have been given pseudonyms, their colleagues and social networks may still be able to identify who they are.*

Lia

This is Lia's story. At 22-years of age, Lia is a PBO3 participant at yourtown who was previously unemployed for five years. After finishing school, Lia moved interstate to find work. But with little work experience, insufficient income, a breakdown in friendships, and ineffective employment services, Lia found it hard to get a job and maintain a positive outlook on life. Lia 'jumped at the opportunity' to work at yourtown, which they describe as interesting, varied, motivating and supportive. The job has helped them 'step up' in life, and be generous, understanding, caring, and wanting to be there for people once again.

I'm from South Australia and all my family is in South Australia. I come from a small country town where there's no real jobs. I moved to Queensland in 2019 to look for work. I looked for work all through 2020 and 2021 to no avail. I was just scraping by on Centrelink pay. Mentally, it was exhausting: How am I going to get through? How am I going to stretch it out to pay my rent, my bills, food and clothes?

I had a bad falling out with my friendship group so I didn't have a support network through COVID. I was confined to the home 'cause you need a car or bus to go anywhere and it all takes money. I was desperate for any work that would take me.

When I applied for jobs, I'd get knocked back and I was being ghosted which is actually worse 'cause you don't know what happened. That was the worst part about having to apply for so many jobs. No one would get back to you and so I didn't know how to improve. I couldn't even get work experience 'cause no one was taking me.

I was unemployed for about five years.

I jumped at the opportunity to make cardboard pallets of all things originally. I got the role through Wise Employment. It was really cool stuff and I enjoyed it. I've also worked on electronic e-waste recycling and refurbishing old stuff. I just have a weird passion for keeping trash out of where it doesn't need to be.

After 5 months I moved to the visual marketing traineeship. My friend who also works at yourtown recommended me for the position. My work is now really varied. We're

learning how to do stuff: basic software, Adobe, Photoshop and proper illustration to make assets for company logos. We're learning about search engine optimisation stuff for websites and learning how to do social media. We're given the training for it. I'm on a paid training course, for Cert I in Business Skills. We're doing that alongside the training for digital marketing stuff.

Because I've worked multiple roles with yourtown, I've learnt what's best suited for me. I've learned that part-time is better for me than full-time 'cause it gives me the time in the week to do stuff myself. I've learnt that a more hands-on role really keeps me going and gives me a sense I'm actually making something.

The overall negative I'm facing at work is equipment shortages. We got new mice the other week and they are the size smaller than my palm so that's caused some over-extension. It can also be very hard to get IT to do stuff which I'm sure it is in many places. My manager has been on their case about it. Even his manager has emailed them to say this needs to be done.

But the downsides of yourtown don't compare to my first real job which was as a kitchen hand. I was in charge of cleaning dishes, getting prep done, keeping the stock organised, taking rubbish out. They put me in all different roles without giving me the proper training or support. The management was not very good. It was very unsafe. There were instances of them daisy-chaining power boards across a sink for a dryer.

I was let go from the kitchen hand job during my final year of schooling 'cause both school

and my disability were too much to be able to work. I have some musculoskeletal issues very much like arthritis. My condition affects the cartilage of my joints. All the stresses from Year 12 and having a mostly full-time job built up and I just couldn't do it. There was no one there to help me. Smokers would do a smoke but non-smokers like myself couldn't just go out the back and sit down. That all led to a mental breakdown by the end of the year.

On the mental side of things, yourtown have been very helpful not only 'cause having money makes you feel great but also supporting you with stuff that happens at home. My job mentor at yourtown isn't a youth worker but she's always there to talk and de-stress. She often advises us to talk to youth workers or Kids' Helpline because she doesn't want us to go through mental anguish and stuff. So having those resources available has been really helpful.

Yourtown understands that everyone has lives outside of work and that you can't keep people in for as long as you want. Sometimes obligations outside work come out of nowhere. A couple of weeks ago, I had a fall down the stairs. My ankle had a really severe sprain. Yourtown was understanding. As soon as it happened I came in to see how far I could go until I was like "no, I can't go in". Yourtown straight away told me not to come in for the rest of the week.

Yourtown has been a very social environment for me. I've become friends with a great group of guys. One friend has introduced me to his friends and the community he's part of and that's helped me come out of my shell, and come to realisations about myself and how my life is.

Working has given me motivation to get up early every morning and just get out of the house every day. Even when I'm going through a lot of stuff mentally I'm also of the mentality of I can either be depressed at home or I can be depressed on the clock and I go for the clock. It doesn't feel like I'm confined to the same space anymore. I come here and get my work done. Just through being here every day it's given me a social life with my peers.

I just am really glad that it was yourtown that put out their hand for it 'cause I was very closed off and quite honestly quite rude 'cause I was like what's the point? I was very pessimistic but with the support yourtown has given me it's really helped me change back to the person I used to be.

Yourtown were really the first people to give me a branch and just help me step up in my life. I'm now extremely generous, understanding, caring, wanting to be there for people whereas before I was none of those things.

Ethan

Currently a Junior Data Analyst at Australian Spatial Analytics (ASA), Ethan describes himself as loud, boisterous and energetic. He joined ASA as a trainee and has since completed his Certificate III in IT. Ethan says that ASA is really big on learning, enabling employees to develop skills and knowledge of the IT industry. Ethan is excited to someday move into a leadership position so that he can earn more be in a high-paying role whilst also helping other people stand up and be themselves. In the past, he has faced barriers to career progression. He has worked in hospitality, retail and construction, where he faced discrimination because of his autism. Ethan enjoys being himself at ASA, developing new skills and qualifications, and being part of the social workplace.

Diagnosed with autism at the age of five. Moved interstate to see Australia's autism specialist at the age of six. Went to a special school that had facilities for autistic and neurodivergent individuals, but only to Year 6. Moved interstate again. Did high school until Year 11. Got a Certificate in IT in Year 11. Kicked out of home at the age of 16 and have been Aussie battlering it since then.

Because I was diagnosed at five, it has literally been my whole life. This is just the way I am. Telling people has always been difficult. If I don't tell you that I've got autism, you're going to talk to me like I'm neurotypical. But if I come up to you and say, "Hello, my name is Ethan. I've got autism." You're going to be like, "Ah, it's one of them."

I've been fired for letting the boss know that I have autism. It's illegal. But they've done it. In my first week at a café, when they can fire you for whatever reason, the boss was like, "Why are you doing it like that? It's obviously meant to be like this." I went, "Oh, sorry boss, I probably do that because I've got autism." He's gone, "What? You've got autism? Get out." Just like that. A lot of us have this self-defence mechanism where you're not allowed to know things about us. And if you work things out about us, don't tell anyone.

But here at ASA we applaud those things. We hold them up like banners. We want people to be able to come out of the shell and say, "Oh yeah, I've got ADD, ADHD, OCD, ASD." It makes it easier for us to help you. I can't go in to bat for you unless I know the whole story. At ASA I'm allowed to be me. I'm loud. I'm

boisterous. I'm energetic. I do strange voices sometimes. That's who I am. I'm allowed to be that at ASA. People aren't going to be like, "Why is he doing a weird baby voice?" It's cool. It's great. We all get each other. Having this environment where you can mask off in the workplace is amazing.

My first job was at KFC at the age of 15. A lot of my other work has been in retail. I've also done some jobs that were, let's say, tax-free. Just like construction. Here's a bag of rocks, go put the bag of rocks over there.

If I died on the job at KFC, the boss would go, "Oh, that's a lot of paperwork." If I got injured on the job at landscaping, they'd be like, "How much is this going to cost me?" At ASA, people would be going, "Oh shit, Ethan is injured." That's what they'd be caring about. Not the paperwork and money. You're not a machine here. You are an individual.

When I joined ASA, I had been unemployed for 20 months. I'd been unemployed before: from 2008 until 2010 and 2014 to 2016. But being unemployed during COVID was completely different. It does not compare. I went stir-crazy during COVID, lost my job, and forgot how to talk. Getting people out of that muck is going to be really difficult unless you're super-duper specialized like ASA.

My first role at ASA was a trainee. As a trainee I had time to work on my Certificate III in IT. So, while working here I have been making money to keep myself in a house, get food, all the important stuff, and also given the opportunity to learn. And I'm very, very grateful to ASA for giving me that opportunity.

It's all well and good to be, like, "I worked at a social enterprise for two years" on your résumé, but my résumé now says Certificate III in IT. Certificate III is university equivalent, but more basic than a Bachelor's. As someone who's never been to a university or college, having a Cert III is pretty amazing.

You can get certain traineeships through DES but they're never going to be specific. So if I went to them and said, "Oh, I want to get into the IT industry. What have you got going?" They'd be like, "We've got nothing going for that at the moment. But in the next six months, we've got a horticulture thing going on. Do you want to do that?" It's, like, why would I want to do horticulture?

I had to be with DES to receive Centrelink payments. My job plan with DES had me apply for 50 jobs a week. I just want to touch on that for a second. It's really, really difficult for neurodiverse people to apply. It's even difficult for neurotypical people to apply for 50 jobs in a week. Imagine if you had that many interviews. You would never sit down.

So, that ridiculousness aside, my contact at the DES knew someone at ASA. There was a little bit of luck involved. I was successfully hired by ASA under a traineeship.

Now I'm no longer a trainee. I'm a Junior Data Analyst. My day-to-day is looking at data, translating it and then making it legible on a screen for other people to read. I've just recently applied internally for a full-on Data Analyst position, which means I'd have a lot more responsibilities and I'm very, very excited to see whether or not I'll get that.

At ASA, we have a People Success Officer. They're great. You get to sit down with them and literally tell them what you're struggling with and what you'd love. Any support that specialises in neurodiversity needs to be flexible and personal. It needs to be one-on-one. You need to understand the person to work it out. I was having difficulties with a colleague. It was a lack of communication skills on both our halves and the PSO got it to the point where we didn't have to sit next to each other. We don't have to interact with

each other unless we want to. And that makes it so much easier to work here.

ASA helps people make friends. We've got rock-climbing every Thursday after work. We are starting a running club on Wednesdays after work. We have after-work drinks on Fridays. We had a massive lunch when one of our team leaders left to work for our client.

A lot of the people here have gained a certain level of independence. One of the new starters came up to me and said, "It's so much fun being able to walk down the shops and buy your own lunch with your own money." I'm like, "Yes, bro. That's exactly what it is." None of us are going out there and buying houses. But a lot of the more daring of us are in shared accommodation, renting with flatmates. We've got stuff like that going on.

As for employment goals, if you'd asked me five weeks ago, I would have said to finish my Cert III. But now I want to move more into a leadership position. I want to be a manager or a team lead. I want to help other people stand up and be themselves. That's my goal right now. The only reason I would leave ASA is for pay. And that's not saying that ASA doesn't pay me very much. That's saying that the skills that I have now allow me to get into some really high-paying jobs. I could pick up a data systems admin job. They're like \$3K a week. But they're big jobs. They're effectively keeping an entire environment alive yourself.

ASA is really big on learning. We want everyone who works here to come out the other side or stay here and just have more skills, more knowledge in the industry. ASA's motivation is to keep us educated and keep us employed to continue that journey. And that's great. I love that. The main reason I tell my neurodiverse friends to come and work here is because they're going to get skills. They're going to be better employees.

Aisha

This is Aisha's story. Aisha is a 31-year old woman who while using Employment Service Providers, spent years completing training courses and volunteering at Vinnies for retail work experience. As an epileptic person, Aisha was often sick and not confident to travel on her own. Now part of the Green Collect team, Aisha talks about how her health condition has improved, how much she enjoys upskilling at work, and of her ambition to become a team leader.

I'm an epileptic person. Before getting this job I used to get really sick. I used to be in hospital often. I used to be scared to take the train and go to the city. My dad was always there to pick me up and drop me off.

I went to so many job providers. They always said, "You need some work experience." So I volunteered at Vinnies for 6 years. I also did admin work in the city but I felt left out. My employers would speak in their language and never made me feel comfortable. I told them I can't work till five. I did not get called back in.

Job providers were also forcing me to do courses when I'd already done courses. My resume was showing only courses, different courses—childcare, hairdressing, retail. When people looked at my resume, they didn't know what I wanted to do. And then as soon as they saw my medical condition they said, "We can't take you, sorry."

Then MatchWorks told me about Green Collect. I thought 'oh it's just the same old thing'. MatchWorks helped me—before working here they told me to come here by train and bus to build my confidence.

I came for induction and then I got a call: "Would you like to do an interview?" Then I got the job. I never felt I would actually be working in a warehouse. I was very excited. Finally! I got a job!

I was very nervous, thinking it's going to be hard. Then they started showing me how to do it. As the weeks went by, I got the hang of it.

I worked on the media and folders for six months. I used a punching machine to remove metal, and then remove the covers and then the cardboard. Now I've moved to IT. I'm learning how to test and tag IT monitors.

I'm also now doing stationery. It's very interesting for me.

The biggest challenge was learning how to use the pallet jack. They were like, "Don't you drive a car?" and I'm like, "No, I don't drive, I can't drive", and then they were like, "Okay, so it will be hard." But then I got the hang of using the pallet jack. That was very exciting. That was the biggest challenge.

The people here are so caring. They understand what your mental health is. If you're not too good just for that moment, they'll put you on another job. They'll even bring you a chair. I felt really welcomed.

Working here has actually improved my health condition. I never expected that I would be working so many hours; so many days. I thought two days would be great, and now I'm on to three days and I don't feel tired. I never expected to get up very early. I actually get up at six o'clock in the morning, get my train, get the bus and then walk. I'm confident. I never used to take public transport.

Since joining Green Collect, I have made a lot of friends and I get to share what I'm going through. At first I was very quiet because I don't talk much to new people. But now I actually just go forward and just talk.

I always tell them I don't want to leave. I want to grow in this company. I'm a person who loves to learn new things and explore stuff. When we talk about goals, I always say my goal is to be a team leader. I always dreamt about being a leader

Ben

Ben is a 45-year old Architectural Technician who was born with hearing loss. After years of professional albeit insecure employment, Ben joined the new Inclusive Design Service team at Ability Works. PBO3 funding enabled the creation of his position which then attracted contracts with infrastructure projects such as the Level Crossing Removal Project in Victoria and usability testing for the Telstra accessibility website. Ben is passionate about creating a more inclusive world through design and hopes to work on digital design in the future.

During COVID, I had some problems with my health. I have a smartphone that controls my hearing aid, but there is no app for the smartwatch. So I emailed the company, “why is there not an app for the watch?” They said, “We’ll figure it out.” But it never happened.

I asked a friend who works in the digital space about why there is no app. He was telling me about user interface research in digital technology. I became interested in that area and did a short online course on UX/UI Design. While I was studying, my case manager attended an online employment network event about inclusive design. She introduced me to one of the speakers and now I’m working for her at Ability Works.

I’m learning new things every day. I have been working alongside people with disabilities and am learning how to recognize potential challenges for different users and develop solutions. It is an incredibly rewarding experience. I get to meet people and I am learning from them. Coming out of my shell to communicate with people is not normally what I’d do in my workplace.

I previously worked in architectural firms and have a degree in architecture. I worked on hospital projects as a documenter, working for interior designers and architects. I was employed on contracts in different companies for ten years. It was always a challenge to find new jobs when my contract finished. I used disability employment services and also mainstream avenues—looking on websites for positions. I just tried to find whatever I could.

Outstanding architectural firms are hard to find; it's like finding a needle in a haystack. Some architectural firms were great places to work, but I didn't feel myself climb the ladder.

I felt like I was in the same spot. I felt like a contractor with limited experience. Other firms were dinosaurs. In those firms, most people with disabled needs would not be respected and not get opportunities. It takes longer to find a job. Maybe there were barriers because they expect you to pick up a phone ... but that’s something I avoid because of my hearing. Maybe they think it will cost them extra money to employ me. In a digital, technology world, everyone is equal.

Ability Works has a fantastic culture. Everyone feels included and respected. It’s very exciting to work on inclusive design. I work with a lot of people who might not be at the same level. I try and make sure everyone’s actually included because I also come across challenges. We’re always working on “how can we find a better way – better solutions?” Maybe words – maybe more visual.

I’ve just finished part-time study on Front-End Web Development and Web Accessibility. Sometimes I want to be more independent. Of course, others do too. Before technology, we didn’t have access. I had to get my sister to make a phone call for me, or my counsellor or my parents. It can be awkward. I want to be independent. The help of assistive technology has shaped me into who I am today. This is why I'm passionate about accessibility and inclusion, as I use assistive technology for my accessibility needs. I am learning from my experience with a disability to help shape a more inclusive world.

I recently set up the Inclusive Design Service at Ability Works. I've never met a designer that doesn't want to design for people with disabilities. But what designers tell me is they don't know where to find those people. We can make it easy for them. At Ability Works, we have about 130-140 people that we can select to provide input into projects.

Ben brings expertise that I rely upon, in terms of understanding the user experience side of things. A lot of our employees here, they're not designers, and they don't necessarily understand what the designer wants to hear. They're just providing their lived experience – "this works," or, "this doesn't work for me." But Ben is able to really meet the designers and understand what it is that they want to hear, because of his previous experience.

Ben also has a desire to advocate. He has a real desire to make workplaces better from a disability inclusion perspective. I really respect his opinion and thoughts around what might work. Whilst we have a very inclusive culture here, it's really quite challenging. The more diverse groups of people that we work with, the more challenging it is. Everyone has different needs and perspectives.

I'm very optimistic about Ben's future employment and becoming a leader in Inclusive Design. I have no doubt that he will be working in a digital organisation because there is such demand.

- **Ben's manager, Ability Works**

Jamie

This is Jamie's story. Jamie is a 23-year-old who wants to make the world a better place. After leaving school, Jamie cycled through employment services providers that were not able to meet his needs. Jamie had a negative experience in 'open employment' in which his physical health condition was not accommodated. Jamie felt 'love at first sight' for Green Collect, where he now feels a strong sense of community. Jamie is looking forward to increasing his work hours soon.

After I left school, I did five years of TAFE trying to find my place in the world. I did courses on mental health first aid, IT, and early education. I decided that ultimately, I wanted to make the world a better place. When I got word of Green Collect, I dare say, it was love at first sight.

The spirit here is unlike anything else. What kind of place do people show up to work half an hour early every day? I can comment on how everyone burns coffee and love them all the same. I've always moved around a lot. But when I came here, within the first two months I immediately was texting with four or five different co-workers. I'm like: we're friends now, there's no escaping it. It's important to me to be at that point in my life.

Before getting this job, I went through I think it was five different employment services providers. When I entered the system we didn't have disability employment providers, it was such a new system. Centrelink was still sending you to places that didn't have disability facilitation. At times it was traumatic. It was a cookie-cutter system of: you must apply for a certain amount of jobs per week or we kick you out.

With my first two employment services providers, when it was flagged that I was disability employment they spat me back to Centrelink and said, "Not our capacity, can't do it", and so I was back in the system in limbo. And so it was just okay, onto the next one in the area. Disability employment providers are different because they're a lot gentler, accommodating. There's an understanding that people have different needs and need help with networking, getting into a job, and maintaining that job.

When I first went into MatchWorks they weren't yet disability employment but they were working on it – it was like a limbo period. But in that time the support worker helped me with my resume and work-ready skills which at that age I did not have whatsoever. The school system had absolutely failed me.

I moved around three different MatchWorks sites. I got one job that lasted all of one month that was absolute garbage. The employer wanted to pay me under the table in the end—to underpay me. That boss was ready to crack the whip at any moment. There was a lot of power-tripping going on there. It was not a great environment. On top of the fact that he did not want to accommodate my health. He did definitely want the disability employment money though.

A lot of the work there was physically intense. At that point in time I had messed up knees, I didn't quite know how or why but I knew that something was very wrong. I've since had a partial resolution, and I had a reconstruction on one of my knees. That still causes some issues, which still means that I have issues with the cold, and it still means that I'm not allowed to drive so I rely on public transport.

A year later, I'm here!

At Green Collect, if I need to sit down, then I can flag it and I can sit down. It's communicate and accommodate. If I'm at my limit, it's like I have the opportunity to stretch up against a wall and find something else to do.

As long as I'm communicating with the person above me then the team can act accordingly. Whereas the other environment was basically three people running a shop and that was it. If

you stopped, things stopped, and the world was ready to set itself on fire.

The flexibility here is incredible. There's been days where I can do a lot and there's been days when something's come up. I've had to call in sick on 30 minutes' notice. Sometimes it just happens. That's something that is accommodated here. If I'd tried that at my last job I would have been fired on the spot.

One thing that's an uphill battle here is just utilities. PPE is something that we're always on top of because it's PPE, but there's not enough cages and crates that we use to get the salvage done. A lot of it comes down to how busy we are.

The community here is definitely what links everything together. I come here and progressively over time, I've grown a sense of people. In the coming two months my hours will go up. I'm looking forward to it.

David & Mabel

This is David and Mabel's story. David got Mabel, his service dog, in 2019 after experiencing a very tough period of life. David describes how, although he had Mabel, he couldn't access services to help him get back on his feet—ESPs were aggressive and full of false promises, his NDIS funding was insufficient to get Mabel's accreditation, and he couldn't access psychiatric services due to wait lists. David talks about his persistence in getting a role at ASA, where he now works full-time. With the support of ASA's People Support Officer (PSO), he and Mabel have been able to progress. David hopes to transition out of ASA when he's ready, and knows the ongoing support from his PSO and the option of returning to ASA if needed, will be crucial.

I've worked in labouring most of my life. I also did cold calling for a Telco. I worked in a sausage-making factory. I've done demolition. I've done pick packing. I've worked in multiple caravan places, building caravans. I worked on insurance and warranty of caravans. They say it's non-skilled work, but you still have to be skilled in what you do. They just pay you as if it's non-skilled. A lot of the jobs and workplaces that I've worked in have been places where people scream at you when things go wrong.

I was also a personal trainer. I worked for a few different places and slowly worked my way up to opening my own studio. As a small business owner I had to wear many hats. I was a PT, I was a counsellor, I did the marketing and administration. I worked with newbies, nerds, dorks, geeks, people transitioning gender—basically, people that didn't feel comfortable at a regular gym. We did private training and small group training. It was really good for people with anxiety.

But then COVID hit and just killed the industry. I lived upstairs at the gym. So when the gym closed during COVID, I had nowhere to go. I also had a big break-up. I felt like I was not going to survive.

That's when I got my service dog, Mabel. I hired a car and drove interstate to get her off a Gumtree ad. She was three months old. Mabel then lived in the kennels for three weeks while I was in a psychiatric hospital. The CATT team put me there because they thought it was the best thing for me. I was a voluntary admission so I was allowed to leave every day to visit Mabel.

I was then unemployed for about two years.

I didn't have to look for work, but Centrelink was not enough to live on. It was \$740 a fortnight. I'd buy food for Mabel, pay rent, and then try to survive off what was left. NDIS paid for a support worker that helped me go to the shops. But NDIS wouldn't pay for psychiatrist appointments because "you can just use the public service for that." But it's a two-year wait. I started looking for work because the NDIS said they wouldn't pay for Mabel's training. I basically said, "Well, bugger you."

So I went to the ESP and I was like, "Hey, I want to work. I want to get back out there." And they were extremely unhelpful. I wanted to work somewhere that Mabel was going to be allowed to come with me. I got palmed around to a few different ESPs. The one I was with originally was extremely aggressive about cancelling my payments when I didn't show up for appointments, even though I had no car and I couldn't travel without my dog. They just didn't understand, didn't care. They cancelled my Centrelink payments a couple of times. And I was like, "If you're cancelling my Centrelink payments, how am I supposed to afford a myki or an Uber to get to appointments?"

I said that I wanted to get into art or design. They were like, "Oh yeah, cool. Here's a storeman position". Or, "do you want to deliver pizzas?" That was the extent of their help. They don't give you any extra effort to try and find you the job that you want to find. When I said that I'd want to maybe study, we got approved for a coding and data entry course. Two sessions in, they called me up

and said, “Oh, we didn't realise it wasn't free. We're not paying for it.” I was livid.

Then I mentioned in passing that I'm fighting to get my autism diagnosis and the ESP was like, “Oh, well, hang on. I've heard of this place, ASA. They deal with a lot of people with autism.” He said, “I'll be able to take you down there and we could walk you through”, and that never happened. It was all these false promises.

Eventually, I got a hold of the boss at ASA and I was like, “Hey, I've got my dog and she isn't officially trained, but we're trying.” I explained the situation. And he was like, “If she's going to make you more comfortable, she's more than welcome to come with you to the interview,” so she did. Then he tried to call me and my phone was broken. The day that I got the job offer, I had to walk six blocks in the rain to a payphone to call him back. So me and Mabel are standing out there in the rain at a payphone. I could barely hear. And ASA said “Hey, I'm offering you a job and Mabel is 100% allowed to come.”

I said to ASA, “Give me whatever you've got and I will do it.” I am aware that ASA has given me an opportunity and I don't want to waste that. I started as a casual, three days a week. I was like, “Hey, have you got any more work?” Now I'm full-time.

I'm doing a bunch of different things because I don't want to do the same thing all the time. What I'm doing most is NBN as-built. So, someone wants internet, someone else will design a route for the internet cables and ducts to get them connected and then the civils go out and do the work. Sometimes there are problems and so the civils change the design and do a red-line markup to record what they've done. Then it comes to me, and then I go through what was supposed to have been done and what they claimed was done, cross-reference it, and update the systems. Most of the stuff that I get now is the really bad, messy jobs, because I've gotten quite good at them. I've also done site layout work for the North East Link project. I use AutoCAD, which I'd never used before. I'm also going to

use Revit, an architectural 3D program, which I spent a week learning.

I don't see myself as disabled, but I do see myself as needing extra support. My official autism diagnosis got through in February. It cost me two grand, which I was able to pay for thanks to working. The autism diagnosis makes sense. I've learnt to manoeuvre around it by moving in circles that have been fine for that kind of thing. I listened to metal music, which is very community-based and niche. I play Magic of the Gathering, which has a lot of neurodiverse people. I play video games and Twitch stream which attracts a lot of people who are neurodiverse. I'm usually not so bad at interacting with people. But if I don't like someone, then I'm generally not too good at hiding it. I'm like, no, I don't like that person, so I'm not going to try to interact with them. But at work sometimes you have to.

I meet with the support worker at ASA every two weeks. The meetings have been unique because she has to deal with me the way I am. We do planning, mindfulness, goal setting, and navigating the workforce. She's also good for resume writing, skill building, and helping you set goals. Since starting here, I've moved house and Mabel's got her vest—both things that we wanted to do. My PSO has been helping in her own way and things have progressed.

If my PSO got taken away, there'd be a vacuum and I'd notice that she wasn't there. But it's also hard to quantify. She shows excitement more than I do. I'm generally very quiet. So when I got a new house, the entire office knew about it because she was cheering. I think just having that extra person in your corner is helpful. She wants you to succeed which again, in a lot of places that I worked in the past, is the opposite of what they want. They want you to be a pawn and just work. She's like a workplace counsellor that does things for work-related things rather than just specific counselling.

My goal is to make as much money as I can. That's why my PSO is helping me upskill—so that I can go, “Hey, I'm ready to move on to another place to try and make as much

money as I can.” The way that it's been explained to me is that if Mabel and I go somewhere and it's not the right fit, we're always welcome to come back to ASA and then try it again. Because as much as I want to try and make as much money as I can, if it means sacrificing my mental health again, it's not worth it.

It's hard for me to see the future and to be positive about it with everything that's happened in my life. I try to just keep my head down, keep making steps, and keep putting things in place to help me. Hopefully, if a transition does happen, it goes well. But if ties get cut with my PSO when Mabel and I move forward into a new position, it would be difficult.