Guide to Workforce Planning for Early Childhood Education and Care services

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Workforce Planning
for Early Childhood Education and Care Services

The purpose of Workforce Planning is not only to decide what an organisation will do in the future, it is also about determining what the organisation can do now to be best prepared for the future. Having a service specific plan, tailored by the team – for the team, provides insights and strategies to mitigate future stresses that can come about due to staff changes.

The workforce plan acts as a guide for service leaders so that they are informed and equipped to respond to planned and unplanned changes in the early childhood education environment.

Investing in embedding a workforce plan can assist your organisation to have the right people, at the right time and place, with the skills and knowledge to implement appropriate practices to achieve the organisation's goals.

Workforce planning also pays tribute to the 'people' at the heart of the early childhood service, delivering quality early childhood education and care for children, families and the community it serves.

Engaging your workforce in tailoring the plan to recognise and invest in each person's strengths, development and ambitions, supports their sense of value and purpose. This, in turn impacts positively on staff wellbeing, increased engagement and long-term retention. It can also help to improve relationships and the reputation of the service as an employer of choice, while also reducing absenteeism and risk of burnout.

Similar to business planning, localised workforce planning is a continuous process of identifying the skills and passions within the existing team, the potential future workforce, the desired future skills, workforce gaps, and the strategies and actions to close them.

The Department of Education in partnership with Mercer Consulting have developed a suite of materials to assist the early childhood sector in effective workforce planning. This includes this Guide to Workforce Planning, a Workforce Plan template and online Workforce planning training.

The online training allows for a more in-depth overview of workforce planning. Topics include: aligning your service's vision and defining the future of your workforce, determining gaps and designing solutions, and driving performance. This Guide to Workforce Planning is a snapshot of the online training content. It is designed to assist services who have completed the online training or are more advanced in their workforce planning capabilities. The template is not mandatory; it is an optional tool that can help a service document its workforce plan.

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Introduction to workforce planning

Workforce planning is the process of forecasting the supply and demand of staff, assessing future gaps and risks, and designing targeted interventions to ensure you have the right staff, with the right qualifications, at the right time.

The purpose of workforce planning is to build a stable, responsive and capable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce tailored to a service, that meets the provisions of all relevant legislation and awards as well as the needs of the local community and families. Workforce planning culminates in the development of a workforce plan that includes strategies to address current and future workforce gaps and risks. Having a workforce plan allows you to take a proactive approach to managing staff in your service, thereby reducing stress that results from staffing challenges.

There are a number of reasons to undertake workforce planning:

1. Labour/staffing –

    i. proactive and responsible people management

    ii. sector challenges and shortages

    iii. day-to-day staffing challenges

2. Changing workforce demographics

3. Governance and legislative requirements

4. Financial viability and economics.

Workforce planning ultimately helps you develop strategies and actions to effectively manage your workforce as well as address any workforce gaps that may arise in the future**.** These strategies and actions can include, but may not be limited to:
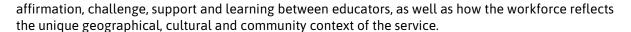
- investing in a visible workforce philosophy and culture

- training and professional development

- recruitment

- reflecting on remuneration and conditions to attract and retain relevant staff.

You will already be doing elements of workforce planning but may not have these documented or formalised in a workforce plan. For example, workforce planning includes training your existing staff with new skills to meet the service's needs and to comply with all aspects of the National Quality Framework (NQF), including the National Quality Standard.

The National Quality Standard (NQS), under Quality Area 4, Standard 4.2 Professionalism promotes *Developing a culture of professional collaboration, recognition and continuous improvement.* Exceeding themes in the Guide to the NQF pose questions around the level of collaboration,

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affirmation, challenge, support and learning between educators, as well as how the workforce reflects the unique geographical, cultural and community context of the service.

Daily staffing activities are different to workforce planning and are very operationally focussed. Your day-to-day staffing activities are likely to focus on short-term operations and individual staff, such as routine rostering and supervising. Workforce planning focusses on the bigger picture or 'whole of service', and plans for your future workforce needs. Though it has a long-term focus, workforce planning will also contribute to making day-to-day workforce management easier by proactively planning for anticipated and unanticipated workforce challenges. Workforce planning can help your service meet key legislation and staffing requirements aligned to service and provider needs, and deliver better outcomes for the workforce, families and children.

Based on your experience and context, you may already be aware of the unique challenges associated with managing the ECEC workforce. That said, there is value in stepping through a process to document your workforce issues, recurring or emerging. Facilitating discussion and exploration of each challenge's origins, including a range of perspectives, will help you develop a plan that is better targeted to your context.

There are three key phases to create a detailed workforce plan:

1. Align vision and define futures

2. Determine gaps and identify solutions

3. Drive performance

Reflection questions

- What could you achieve by thinking about your future workforce vision and the skills you need?

- How could this improve your day-to-day operations?

- What are the current organisation's goals, mission statement and philosophy?

- Who will be developing the workforce plan?

- What workforce information do you already have?

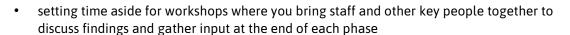- What is the best way to communicate to the workforce and stakeholders?

Getting started

As you begin the process, some form of project planning is recommended, particularly if there are multiple staff involved in workforce planning for the service. Key project planning considerations include:

- agreeing on the objectives of the workforce plan for the service

- bringing together a workforce planning project team to support the process so that it isn't too much for one person

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- setting time aside for workshops where you bring staff and other key people together to discuss findings and gather input at the end of each phase

- agreeing on project team responsibilities

- establishing key project timelines and milestones.

Phase 1: Align vision and define futures

Phase 1 of the process builds the foundation of the workforce plan by clarifying what you want the future of your ECEC service to look like. This includes integrating your service philosophy into the vision for the future, understanding workforce implications for the service under the National Law and funding requirements, and reviewing external sector challenges.

Having clarity around the future vision of the service will help you identify the right staff, qualifications and skills you will need to achieve your goals and make your vision a reality.

Phase 1 is also focussed on creating a clear picture of your current workforce and identifying what your workforce needs to look like in the future based on your goals for the service. This analysis will help you develop targeted strategies to attract, develop and retain the staff (set out in your workforce plan).

Key concepts to consider in this phase include how to:

- define the future vision and goals for your service's workforce

- identify the skills needed (or no longer needed) to achieve your future vision

- identify the external challenges that might impact your future workforce plans

- draw from your staff schedule to create a profile of the current workforce

- identify the retention needs of the current workforce by understanding your staff members' needs and future plans

- create a profile of your future workforce under possible future scenarios.

Much like your **service** philosophy reflects the beliefs and values of your service, the **workforce** vision and strategy for a service reflects the goals and outcomes it intends to achieve for the community, children and families it serves.

It is also important to consider the things happening outside of your service as you plan for the workforce of the future. Though you may intuitively know the factors in your external environment that have an impact on your workforce, this step encourages you to deliberately explore and understand external challenges so you are able to design targeted solutions for your plan.

Getting to know your workforce will help you plan for the future. To analyse your current workforce, look at the staff you already have and identify your 'current workforce profile'.

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This profile will later be compared to a 'future workforce profile' to identify potential gaps and risks. This comparison will provide valuable information to help you through phases 2 and 3.

Information about what your staff members want from their workplace and career planning is also useful when considering your future workforce. It will help you identify staff and educational leaders who are at risk of leaving due to burnout or other factors, and/or have a desire to undertake further study and/or professional development.

To understand future workforce gaps and risks, it is necessary to create a future workforce profile that can be compared to the current workforce profile.

When building a future workforce profile, it is helpful to begin by determining possible scenarios that would impact the number of staff and the types of skills you would need in future, should the scenarios occur.

Reflection questions

Understanding the external environment

- What do you think are the most significant factors in your local environment that affect the service currently?

- How might they impact on your workforce requirements?

Key considerations

- What are industry challenges?

- Are you likely to have future workforce shortages?

- What internal and external factors will or may impact on the future workforce demand?

- What are the legislative requirements?

Analysing your current workforce

- How does the service currently check-in with staff members to understand their plans and needs?

- Are there both informal and formal processes in place?

- How could you utilise technology to better keep a record of informal conversations and make sure you take action?

Key considerations

- What does the current staff structure look like?

- Are there employees with a long tenure?

- Working preferences – would the employees prefer to work full-time, part-time or on a casual basis?

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- Do you have an induction program for new employees?

- Do you have staff who are at higher risk of leaving? What are your risk mitigation strategies?

Identify future workforce needs

- What opportunities exist for formal or informal individual check-ins with your staff?

- What do your staff members want from their workplace and career planning?

- What will you need from your workforce in the future?

Key considerations

- Are staff supported to upskill?

- What interest is there in undertaking further study?

- Are regular conversations held with staff to discuss their performance and succession planning as part of promotional/leadership opportunities?

- What interest is there in taking on greater responsibility or leadership roles?

- How can the service support their professional growth and development?

- Are long-term leaves of absence a possibility or consideration?

- How does the service ensure and plan for succession planning to identify the replacement of employees who may be retiring or phasing their exit, resigning or taking extended leave such as long service leave, practicum placement, parental leave, carer's leave?

- Is there a pool of qualified and skilled staff available that the service can employ when staff need to take extended leave/unplanned leave?

Phase 2: Determine gaps and design solutions

Phase 2 of the workforce planning process is about comparing your current workforce profile (developed in phase 1) to your future workforce requirements, in order to identify possible gaps and risks.
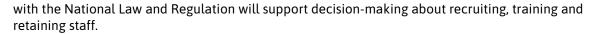
This phase also involves developing strategies to address the future gaps identified. Workforce strategies include the programs, policies, and practices that assist a service to recruit, develop, and retain the critical staff needed to achieve its mission and goals.

Strategies can fall into the broad categories of attraction (recruitment), retention, development, succession planning and wellbeing. Each of these will be explored in detail later in phase 2.

Strategy development is supported by the use of service policies, as well as sound knowledge of the National Law and Regulation, including the National Quality Standards for ECEC services. Familiarity

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with the National Law and Regulation will support decision-making about recruiting, training and retaining staff.

Key concepts to consider in this phase include how to:

- compare your current and future workforce needs

- identify workforce gaps, risks and potential challenges

- identify which strategies are available and assess their relative effectiveness

- determine the feasibility of each strategy.

Gap analysis

A **gap analysis** compares the current workforce profile with the future workforce profile to answer the following questions.

- Does the service currently have, or have access to, the number of staff required to meet the future legislative requirements and funding requirements?

- Does the service have, or have access to, the number of staff needed to fill anticipated future roles?

- Does the service currently have the skills required for the future vision?

- Are there any roles or skills that will no longer be required?

Once you have identified your gaps and associated risks, you may want to also identify any major challenges that will impact on your ability to close the gap, for example, time taken for staff to gain a qualification, or the availability of a certain skillset in your local area. This will help you narrow down the most relevant strategies for your workforce plan in the next part of phase 2.

Examples of risks resulting from gaps include:

- not having enough staff to accommodate staff absences or an increase in children attending, while remaining compliant with legislative requirements

- the implications of choices relating to use of casual staff on budget and employment stability

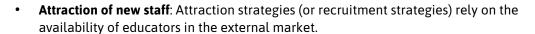- the possible negative impact of unplanned staff turnover on the quality of service provision.

Design solutions

When developing a workforce plan, it is easy and natural to jump straight into determining the actions to be taken. However, taking the time to understanding the different options available, as well as documenting and reviewing the specific workforce issues you face and the factors that drive them, will ensure the best strategies are selected for your context.

In workforce planning, there are a number of broad categories that workforce strategies fall into. These include strategies focussed on the following.

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- **Attraction of new staff**: Attraction strategies (or recruitment strategies) rely on the availability of educators in the external market.

- **Retention of current staff:** Retention strategies focus on keeping staff in the service and rely on the service having a clear understanding of who is staying and who is leaving, as well as clarity on the individual's motivations to stay.

- **Development of current staff**: Development strategies focus on building the required skills and capability in current staff by providing pathways within the service for professional growth.

- **Succession planning and development of leaders:** Succession strategies focus on planning for the replacement of staff who are retiring, resigning or taking extended leave to ensure that current staff have the skills and qualifications required to fill these positions.

- **Wellbeing:** Wellbeing strategies are a type of retention strategy and involve initiatives to support the health and wellbeing of staff, which will in turn contribute to the quality of the educational program as well as the functionality of staff individually and as a team.

The online training can help you identify some potential strategies.

Feasibility

There will likely be multiple strategies that could be implemented to address future gaps and risks in your workforce. However, because investment and resources may be limited, it is important to make sure your workforce plan is achievable. With this in mind, you need to prioritise workforce strategies to have maximum impact and to allocate investment and effort.

To do so, it is beneficial to assess each strategy against some key criteria.

- **Feasibility** assesses whether a strategy is readily available or easy to execute with a reasonable amount of resources, including consideration of costs involved. In other words, 'how much effort will this take to achieve?' Are there major challenges to implementing this strategy that may impact success?

- **Impact** assesses the effect a strategy may have on the gaps and challenges identified.

- **Urgency** assesses how urgent it is to implement a strategy to address the particular challenge or gap.

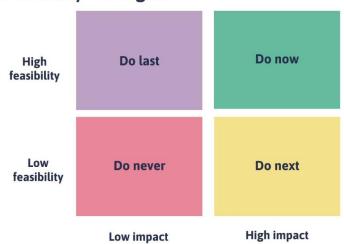Each strategy can be assessed using the following two steps.

Step 1. Feasibility and impact

Rank potential strategies on their feasibility and impact to determine what you should 'do now', 'do next', 'do last' and 'do never'.

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Feasibility 4 box grid

	Low impact	High impact
High feasibility	Do last	Do now
Low feasibility	Do never	Do next

The Feasibility grid demonstrates how strategies can be ordered based on their feasibility and impact. As a general rule, strategies that are:

- high feasibility and high impact should be done now

- low feasibility and high impact should be done next

- high feasibility and low impact should be done last

- low feasibility and low impact should not be done.

 Step 2. Urgency, costs and benefits

If there are multiple solutions that should be 'done now', it is useful to order them in terms of urgency to determine their priority in the final workforce plan.

Another way to assess actions is to consider how easily they can be justified based on the costs and benefits of implementing them. For each strategy, do this by listing:

- costs of implementing a strategy (e.g. financial and non-financial costs)

- workforce benefits you expect to result from a strategy (e.g. lower turnover, increased staff engagement, increased family satisfaction)

- child, family and community benefits you expect to result from a strategy (e.g. increasing quality of the program, educational wellbeing outcomes for children, children staying at the service, parent satisfaction scores, increased community engagement events).

Reflection questions

Identify gaps, risks and potential challenges

- What are some risks of not addressing workforce challenges you might face in the future?

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- What are the benefits of addressing these risks proactively to families and the wider community of your service if you address these risks proactively?

Key considerations

- Does the service currently have, or have access to, the number of staff required to meet future legislative requirements and funding requirements?

- Does the service have, or have access to, the number of staff needed to fill anticipated future roles?

- Does the service currently have the skills required for the future vision?

Identify strategies to close the gaps

- What are you currently doing in your service to attract, develop, retain and build the wellbeing of your staff?

Key considerations

Attraction

- How can you promote and value the early childhood education and care profession within the service and among your network/region/cluster?

- Consider the salary and conditions to attract staff to the service and how these will be advertised.

- How do you promote diversity in the workforce?

- How do you form trusting and respectful relationships with Higher Education Institutions and Registered Training Organisations to support the current staff with their study pathways and attract potential staff for the future?
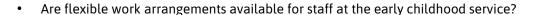
Also consider

- What are other early childhood services offering to attract staff?

- What are the types of benefits you can offer to current and potential employees as a point of difference?

- Are study days offered to staff to support their qualification completion and career progression?

Retention

- Consider what staff have discussed with the employer regarding support to remain employed at the service.

- Consider the salary and conditions to retain staff.

- What does the service do to foster employment stability, continuity and reliability?

- Does the service offer additional study leave to support career pathways for staff?

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- Are flexible work arrangements available for staff at the early childhood service?

- How does the service enable educators to transition into different roles in the service or across the sector, while also supporting career progression and the local early childhood priorities?

- Does the service conduct regular performance and career aspiration reviews for each staff member to examine opportunities and inspire staff (e.g. leadership / higher-level opportunities)?

Capability

- How does the service support educators to upskill and become qualified?

- What are the strengths and development needs of the current workforce? How does the service document and address strengths and areas of need?

- What does the employer need from the workforce, in terms of number of staff, qualifications, skills and capabilities, to deliver outcomes now and over time (e.g. the next one, two, three and four-plus years)?

- How does the service:

- enhance professional development and capability building;

- offer quality on-the-job training experiences; and

- provide contemporary equipment and resources to upskill and promote leadership opportunities?

Wellbeing

Initiatives to retain employees and support their wellbeing do not need to be complicated or expensive, but employees should feel actively supported by senior management and the strategies should be directed to address employee attraction, retention and sustainability.

- How does the employer support the health and wellbeing of staff and provide experiences and resources to optimise their time at work and create work-life balance?

- Does the service have wellbeing policies for staff at the service?

- What is the employer offering the staff to ensure a quality work environment?

- How does the employer celebrate and recognise the accomplishment of team organisational goals and personal achievements of employees?

- Is there a process that the service uses to enable staff to contribute to new ideas and foster innovation in the workplace?

- Is the employer able to offer employee assistance, wellness and health programs for employees?

- Are staff aware of the wellbeing initiatives available at the service?

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Assess and prioritise strategies

- What is urgent? Is the Approved Provider aware of the issue?

- Considering no cost, low cost and fixed cost priorities, what can we afford now and what do we need to budget for in the future?

Phase 3: Drive performance

The final phase of the workforce planning process focusses on documenting a clear, measurable and achievable plan that is supported by a thorough implementation and review process. This will help ensure the hard work you have done in phases 1 and 2 is actioned and regularly reviewed to drive performance.

Simply creating a detailed workforce plan with a number of strategies is not enough to support action. Quality planning should also map out how progress is measured and monitored.

Key concepts in this phase include how to:

- create a workforce plan summarising strategies and actions

- define the review process to ensure the workforce plan is implemented effectively

- create an evaluation process to ensure the workforce plan remains relevant and effective in your unique service context.

As you begin to implement your strategies, monitoring success and tracking the progress of the work are crucial for achieving your workforce goals. Working with staff and other important stakeholders to define the review process will help to identify the best way to track progress.

You may wish to consider the following questions.
- How often is progress reviewed?

- What is the review process?

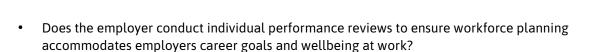- How is the review process documented?

Reflection questions

- What challenges might you have in implementing workforce strategies?

- What might you do to ensure the strategies and actions defined in your workforce plan are implemented and have the desired impact?

Key considerations

- How will the employer implement improvement strategies?

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- Does the employer conduct individual performance reviews to ensure workforce planning accommodates employers career goals and wellbeing at work?

- How often is the workforce plan reviewed?

- What is the review process?

- How is the review process documented?

- How are actions measured?

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