

Employer Innovation Lab Annual Report: February 2025

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This annual report provides a summary of evaluation findings based on interviews with participants in Social Ventures Australia's (SVA) Employer Innovation Labs (Labs). The interviews were conducted in 2024 and January 2025 and focused on participants from Labs conducted between 2022 and 2024. In 2022, Rounds One (Day 1 – 27th May, Day 2 – 3rd June, Day 3 – 17th June) and Two (Day 1 – 17th November and Day 2 – 24th November) of the Labs took place in Sydney. In 2023, Rounds Three and Four took place. Round Three occurred in Sydney on the 18th (Day 1) and 25th (Day 2) of May. Round Four took place in Melbourne on the 5th (Day 1) and 12th (Day 2) of October (and a Reconnect session was conducted on the 29th of February 2024). A collective Reconnect session for Rounds One, Two and Three was held on the 24th of November 2023. During 2024, two rounds of the Labs took place. Round Five took place in Sydney on 9th May 2024 (Day 1), 16th May 2024 (Day 2) and 19th November 2024 (Reconnect). Additionally, the Young People with Disability (YPWD) Employer Innovation Lab, designed and delivered in partnership with Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), took place in Melbourne on 8th August 2024 (Day 1), 15th August 2024 (Day 2), and 14th November 2024 (Reconnect 1) (with Reconnect 2 planned for 2025). Subsequently, this report encompasses participants who have completed an initial interview related to the most recent Labs along with participants who have completed final interviews following the Labs conducted in 2022 and 2023. The participants interviewed for this annual report are summarised below (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of employers interviewed

Employer Innovation Labs	Location	When the Lab workshops were held	Reconnect	Number of employers interviewed
Round One	Sydney	May and June 2022	November 2023	5
Round Two	Sydney	November 2022	November 2023	2
Round Three	Sydney	May 2023	November 2023	2
Round Four	Melbourne	October 2023	February 2025	5
Round Five	Sydney	May 2024	November 2024	5
Young People with Disability	Melbourne	August 2024	November 2024	8

A total of 27 employers participated in the semi-structured interviews. Initial interviews focused on participants' experiences and feedback regarding both the Labs and their pilot projects, and they typically lasted for around 30 to 45 minutes. The final interviews were conducted after participants had completed their pilot projects and lasted from 15 to 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in January, February, March, April, May, September, November, December 2024 and January 2025. Additionally, content analysis of Lab materials and participant observations were conducted.

Of the 27 participants interviewed, 11 were considered to have completed their pilot programs. The remaining participants were in varying stages of their pilot programs. The YPWD Lab participants were interviewed very shortly after the two-day workshops so they were all in the early planning/refining stages of their pilots. The Round Four and Five Lab participants interviewed were generally focusing on the implementation stage of their pilots (e.g. hiring process, preparing formal documentation before moving into recruitment). At present, all the participants interviewed from Rounds One, Two, Three

and the two employers from Round Four have hired young people with varying levels of disadvantage as part of their pilot.

Summary of Key Findings

The key findings are summarised below. Notably, the data provided are based on the participating employers' current stages of the program. At this point, 11 employers have completed their final interviews, after completing their pilot projects. Overall:

- Approximately 81 per cent of the employers interviewed explicitly mentioned that they had developed some form of practice change within their organisation. The changes ranged from streamlining and/or simplifying their position descriptions or job advertisements through to more widespread changes involving alterations to team structures to facilitate the implementation of their pilot project.
- Approximately 73 per cent of the 11 employers interviewed who have completed their pilot in Rounds One, Two, Three and Four plan to embed, replicate or build on their learning. Of the three participants who do not have such plans, one was leaving the business and at the time of the interview was unsure what would happen. The other said that it was too early to comment on scaling up their pilot as they were currently focusing on managing "our two candidates and making sure their transition into the workplace is successful". The last employer explained that they did not have any available position for their candidate at the end of the pilot due to low turnover.

- All interviewed participants (100%) from Rounds One, Two, Three, Four, Five and the YPWD Lab reported that they found the tools, resources or examples provided by SVA very useful. More specifically, interviewees referred to the positive connections developed with other participants and the community of practice that emerged, the coaching/check-ins, and the provision of relevant statistics, data and resources by SVA.
- Approximately 96 per cent of the employers interviewed reported that they developed a better understanding of the challenges that young people face in the labour market. In particular, the provision of facts and figures along with the lived experiences shared by the youth consultants helped employers to shift their focus and ways of thinking. One employer felt that the youth consultants were “extreme examples”, and noted that “there are other youth who don’t have lots of... issues attached to them that are still not getting employment”.

Key Benefits associated with the Employer Innovation Labs

All of the participants interviewed spoke extremely positively about their experiences of the Lab process. Participants were able to “focus [their] attention on this singular topic” (Organisation 12) and the regular coaching and check-in sessions provided them with a timeframe to adhere to and kept them committed and accountable. The two-day workshop enabled the participating employers the opportunity to step out of the office and really focus on learning about the experiences and challenges of young people as they navigate the job market but also to think about how their organisations can access this talent pool and address existing workplace challenges. In this sense, participation in the Labs was seen as a catalyst for employers to make changes in their organisations:

It's definitely been... a catalyst for us to make that change. So I think two days of [name] and I sitting in there engrossed in this process and hearing other organisations speak about it... I think it's definitely given us some inspiration in order for us to initiate this pilot – Organisation 24

I think there's an accountability aspect by committing to it and by us realising that we've committed to do something... - Organisation 23

I'm not sure that without the labs that we necessarily would've been able to envision something that we have now. - Organisation 26

By physically being present at the workshops, employers were able to focus on their approach to change, thinking outside the box, and recruiting differently to manage their business needs in the Labs. There was evidence of changes to employers' mindsets, resulting in employers being "more open-minded in [their] approach for recruitment" (Organisation 2). The involvement of young people in the workshops was viewed as a valuable opportunity to have a conversation with the youth consultants, which revealed the unique perspectives and challenges that young people face in moving into employment. This facet of the Labs allowed employers to think about how they could better attract and accommodate young people in their workplaces. The interviewees also emphasised the benefits associated with coaching, the tools and frameworks provided by SVA, and the opportunity to learn from and work with their peers in the development of their pilot project, as outlined below.

Specific experiences associated with SVA expertise and coaching

A number of interviewees valued the regular coaching and check-in sessions provided, noting that they helped them remain accountable and on-track implementing their pilot

projects. The expertise and coaching provided by SVA enabled employers to access bespoke guidance, feedback and support. More importantly, this approach encourages participants to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills as SVA does not tell the participants what they should be doing. Rather, participants must evaluate their organisation's goals and decide what they want to do. This was very succinctly summarised by Organisation 5 when discussing their experience with the Lab:

...we thought we've signed up with the lab. We've attended. They're going to tell us how to implement a program. But they didn't at all. So, it was actually "We're going to support you. What do you want to do?" And it's like, "Oh, I don't know." So, we had to think and create and modify based on that.

Even though SVA did not tell the employers what they should be doing, SVA provided essential support to ensure that employers were engaged and consistently working on their pilot projects:

They haven't been rigid in saying, "This is what we need the pilot to be like." They have understood our business practices and processes and tried to work around that to get a pilot off the ground.... - Organisation 6

Participating employers echoed that SVA has the expertise and experience with young people to provide guidance and feedback to ensure that the pilot project progressed according to the specific organisation's needs, capacity and broader organisational goals:

Advantages would be just someone to call on to troubleshoot and provide guidance for things that you're trying to roll out in your business and maybe experiencing stumbling blocks or challenges in doing that to be able to engage with SVA, who can provide advice on different ways of doing things and maybe some alternative pathways, which has been valuable. - Organisation 6

It's keeping us accountable. Coming up with the Gantt chart for us in terms of timeframes and mapping everything out really helped us stay on track... for us, those regular check-ins and having Susie there, just saying, "Hey, where are you at with this?" or "Anything new happen?" just subconsciously ensures that it's front of mind for us, and I'm sure other businesses can relate, but there's so many things going on in the business, and sometimes it can be the last priority. But just knowing that someone is going to follow up on us about this, it really whipped into shape, for sure. - Organisation 14

The individualised coaching schedule meant that employers were getting tailored advice and support consistent with their stage in the pilot and their organisational context. Scheduled calls with the coaching team ensured that the pilots progressed effectively (as the organisations had a deadline to work towards) whilst retaining the flexibility to accommodate employer needs – it was not just a set and forget schedule of calls or a one size fits all solution with the coaching team but, rather, it was dependent on what would work best for the individual employers:

I've been meeting with Susie and Ronan from SVA quite frequently so we're doing at least monthly check-ins if not more frequently depending on where we are. So I think leading into [our recruitment event] it was probably a little bit more frequent just to make sure we were all prepared and aligned. They did attend our

[recruitment event] as support. Then during times where there's not much going on it's kind of as I said stretched out to about monthly. But it might just be a quick general is everything okay, how's things coming along, is there any support you need from us which is fine but I think they've definitely been quite good at keeping that communication in place. Checking in and getting updates. - Organisation 2

The experience and expertise of the coaching team also meant that they were able to provide relevant materials and resources to employers to help them in the development and implementation of their pilot programs:

I couldn't say it's one thing because every step along the way they've had this amazing toolkit where they go "here you go, why don't you try this, why don't you do that" - Organisation 13

I think particularly for us, Susie and Jo, they've done a really good job in terms of whenever we have had those catchups, they'll pick up on our key challenges and they'll offer resources. So, they sent us this report on managing young people which came from an initiative that we shared with them around coming up or designing a piece of training to manage our frontline leaders on how they can manage our young workers. So, I did read through that report, and it provided some really good information. It wasn't just that particular example; there were multiple situations where that has taken place, but that was something that was front of mind for me. - Organisation 14

Together, the various dimensions of the Lab process enabled employers to approach the recruitment of young people facing disadvantage in ways that they had not previously considered.

Participants also valued learning from and networking with other participants involved the Lab. Additionally, SVA often connected employers with other organisations, including community partners to help progress their pilot projects. Six interviewees explicitly mentioned these connections or contacts provided by SVA, noting that they found them especially useful in the early stages of their pilots. For example, “the referral to the community partner that they gave us... helps take a bit of the weight off of our hands” (*Organisation 7*).

Specific experiences associated with the materials and resources provided

All of the interviewees highlighted the usefulness of the statistics, information, frameworks and toolkits provided to them throughout their journey. In particular, these resources provided a common starting point for the employers who had varying levels of understanding of young people, the labour market, and systems change, and different business needs. Employers used these resources to help them develop and refine their pilots. An additional benefit included the option of sharing this information with other members of their organisation to gain buy-in, or even just explain the importance of why they were doing what they were doing:

They gave us a lot of statistics on where the gaps are, what we could do, what we could look at in terms of our pilot and linking us in with all the other organisations. I felt like that was all very helpful and positive. - Organisation 3

Also recently they've shared just a version of the initial workshop, the information that they've shared for us to be able to share with our team on the reasons why we're doing what we're doing and some of the challenges young people face. We haven't yet shared that with the team but that's something that we would like to incorporate as we continue through this process just to get that buy-in from our other team members. - Organisation 2

I am particularly heartened by the most recent email that I got, which had just working templates for this phase of the project and the project milestones and the timeline. So that for me has saved some mental load, so that I don't need to do that from scratch. So just useful templates and tools and I think the discussions that we've had have been really key as well. - Organisation 20

Notably, the frameworks and toolkits available to the participating employers provided a step-by-step process or guide that they could use to work through their ideas and inform their decision-making:

Definitely the worksheets in the workshop were really useful in trying to understand what we were even trying to achieve with this and the best ways to go forward. - Organisation 11

There's a lot of different things to consider. There's a lot of red tape. There's a lot of stakeholders. There's a lot of interested parties and you usually don't find that out until after the fact. So it was good. The framework was good to sort of work through it. - Organisation 8

Specific experiences associated with shared and peer learning

The Lab workshops' emphasis on collaboration and interaction was clearly well-received by the participating employers. Participants were given the opportunity to share with and learn from each other in a safe and collegial manner. The value of the interactive nature of the Lab process was specifically brought up by Organisation 12:

...one of the benefits of getting everyone in the same space is that you can leverage the community interaction and have people collaborating together and discussing their strengths and weaknesses either in a large group or a small group.

Some participants noted that they felt accompanied on their journey by their peers as they learned how their peers gained buy-in, for example, and navigated other challenges throughout the development and implementation of their pilots:

That was really helpful to see on how other companies would get their team's buy-in. So just I think maybe finding the right approach to get the buy-in from the rest of the team so they can understand why we've got this in place and how beneficial it can be when we're including the youth on floor... it's that shared kind of learnings from other companies was quite helpful... as they continue to hold workshops and more companies are involved in the process, there'll be more learnings and more things to share. - Organisation 2

... we feel like we can share some information in a bit of a safe space with other organisations and know that information is safeguarded by an NDA [Non-Disclosure Agreement]. So that then opened up I think for me and also hopefully for other employers in the second workshop the ability to be a little bit more genuine

and share these are the challenges that we're experiencing in the inner workings and that helped contribute to a more valuable discussion that allowed people to take some interesting things away. - Organisation 8

One of the things that was really interesting for me was positioning [organisation] alongside of the other participants in the Lab to sort of see that, hey, we're not that different... they have this struggle and we don't have that, but we have this as our complex work, or our complex workforce... I don't know how many different professions that we have across our organisation, like that our workforce is a bit different to the other workforces, but for me it was really interesting to hear that they have some of the same struggles, but some differences with some nuance differences, but that we weren't that far behind. - Organisation 20

In particular, Organisation 13 talked about how the inclusion of previous Lab participants in the panel discussions was both inspiring and a useful learning experience:

I think bringing in employers that did the Lab prior and then them giving us their outcomes was really insightful. Because we could see exactly how it was working, what they implemented, their outcomes to know that it is beneficial. And I can't remember exactly who the employer was, but they were quite a large business as well, so it was really good to see that. Also us being quite a large organisation, that other companies can still make the time for it and implement that to try and source, use and retain youth. So it was really good to see the outcome of the program a year later.

Key Challenges associated with the Employer Innovation Lab

When asked about any challenges associated with the Lab, a small number of participants interviewed most commonly highlighted its "time and resource heavy" (Organisation 12) nature, which involved taking time away from their usual work to attend the Lab workshops and to work on the development and implementation of their pilot projects. The key challenge was balancing their day-to-day operational responsibilities and the work involved with the Lab. Realistically, however, "it's a commitment in time that you probably need to balance with the rest of your workload, but that's not a disadvantage of the Lab itself, that's something that you know when you sign up to participate." (Organisation 6). The time commitment required from participants is not uncommon when working on a new policy or practice that will end up contributing to the organisation. Organisation 26 also explained that "there's absolutely challenges along the way. I wouldn't sugarcoat it and say there isn't – there is, but I think the rewards kind of outweigh all those challenges".

Among the other challenges mentioned, some participants highlighted that it would be beneficial to receive as much advance notice of relevant activities as possible and suggested the integration of additional opportunities within the Labs to develop and reflect on their ideas. Other participants flagged that it would be useful to retain copies of their worksheets (completed within the Labs) to enable them to share them with their colleagues and potentially progress their ideas further. Additionally, some participants felt that the Reconnect session overemphasised presenting their pilot projects and they would like more time to interact with their peers.

For one participant, some frustration was noted in relation to the Lab process and how it would benefit their organisation:

A lot of the time was taken to ... do all of that sort of stuff. I can understand it from an SVA perspective, because they definitely want to see how they've contributed, but I feel like... we were kind of relaying the information of everything we've done to SVA, but I didn't really see any reciprocal benefit for us. Not linking in with any youth organisations. I know initially they tried to, but it was, "These are all the things that you can do"... but I think we want to see, "Okay, well, how does that actually help us get young people to apply for our jobs?" - Organisation 3.

Critical Insights from the Research Team

Throughout the sessions included in this report (except the Round Four Reconnect session), at least one member of the research team attended and engaged in observing the activities and outcomes. Such active observation has enabled the team to reflect on the Labs conducted and develop a series of critical insights. Overall, these insights highlight the strengths of the Labs and their ability to produce both pilot project outcomes and more systemic organisational changes directed towards benefitting young people facing disadvantage and the organisations in which they are employed. Moreover, such benefits will undoubtedly spill-over, producing benefits for local communities and society more broadly. We outline these key insights in further detail below.

Firstly, we observed significant positive changes in participants' awareness and understanding of the lived experiences of young people facing disadvantage, including the challenges that they face in securing and maintaining employment. Participants often expressed their lack of awareness of such issues prior to attending the Labs and recognized how their organisations might be contributing to such problems along with the need for change. Information focused on youth un/employment and the presence of young people sharing their experiences was central to challenging and subsequently shifting participants' preconceived ideas and attitudes. It was clear that the Labs induced

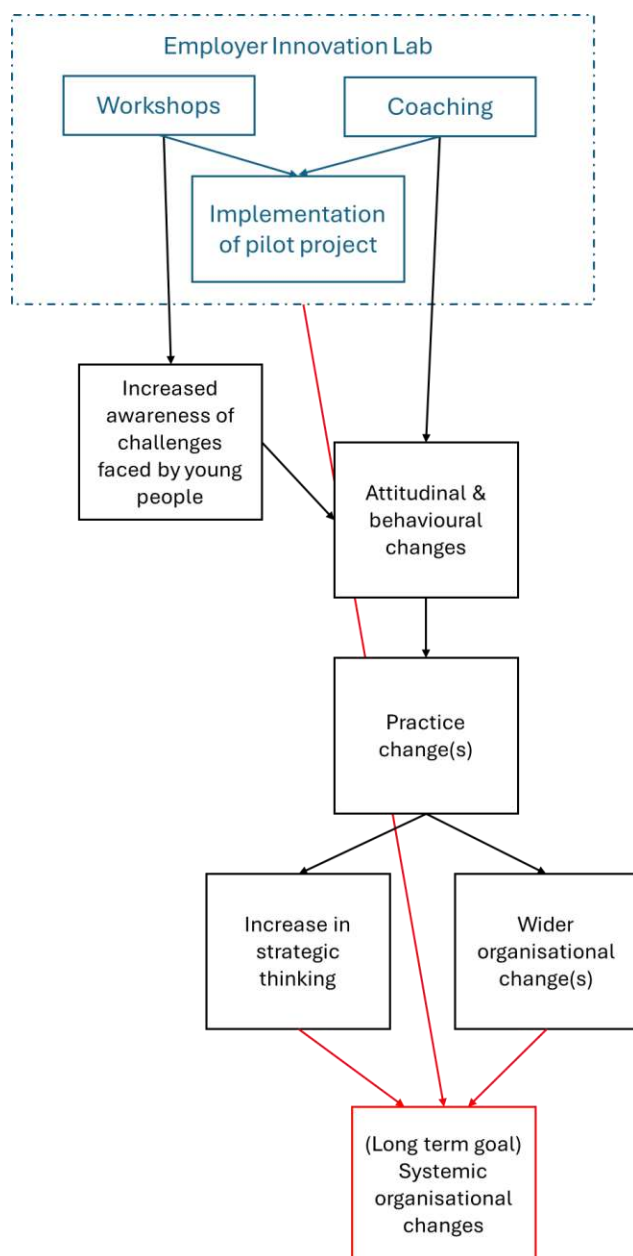
attitudinal changes among the participants involved. We believe that such changes would be unlikely to occur in the absence of the Labs. Participants gained an awareness of wider stakeholders and how these could be leveraged to produce better outcomes for disadvantaged youth, organisations, local communities and society more broadly.

Second, these attitudinal changes facilitated behavioural changes among participants. With a greater understanding of the issues involved in youth un/employment, participants were able to re-think their existing organisational policies and practices and enact change. Illustratively, one participant realised that existing prerequisites for a specific job were prohibiting applications from disadvantaged youth and noted that the prerequisites were inflated and unnecessary, and should be removed. Other participants engaged in similar behavioural changes. Critically, these behavioural changes were central to participants' subsequent successes in employing disadvantaged youth. Without the Lab process that participating organisations go through, there would be a lack of attention and focus placed on attitudinal and behavioural changes in the workplace that allowed for practice changes, supporting the employment of young people facing disadvantage.

Third, and relatedly, the Labs facilitated the development of skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary for achieving and sustaining behavioural changes. For example, participants' critical thinking and problem-solving skills were targeted and enhanced within the Labs, particularly in the coaching sessions. These skills were essential to driving their pilot projects while also providing participants with invaluable generic skills that led them to consider wider organisational changes. In this sense, the Labs produce pilot projects while also precipitating wider organisational changes that lead to long term systemic changes, see Figure One (below).

Fourth, participants were provided with the resources and support necessary to induce change and achieve beneficial outcomes for both disadvantaged youth and the participating organisations. More specifically, the SVA team facilitated the dissemination of information and provided frameworks to help employers get started, which often included establishing timelines and a series of discrete, manageable tasks. Just as importantly, they acted as sources of support for the participants throughout their journey. They were also critical to driving the pilots forward by ensuring momentum and focus were maintained and challenges were resolved. Additionally, valuable connections to partners in the community were provided, including Employment Service Providers. Participants largely reported negative experiences of engaging with providers accessed through the Labs, finding that providers sent candidates to them without fully understanding their needs, or following up with a single point of contact (see Ingold et al, 2023). There was one exception however, with one organisation having mixed experiences: a disappointing experience with one provider but two more recent positive experiences (the development of relationships with providers could be further embedded in the Labs – as outlined in the recommendations provided in the next section).

Figure 1. Summary of the Lab process and benefit



Fifth, we frequently observed participants engaging in more strategic thinking, focusing on their organisation's wider goals and values and how the pilot project would contribute, for example. For some, this process involved big 'blue sky' thinking, which actually informed the organisation's goals, values and culture. Thus, the Labs contributed to wider strategic evaluations and significant changes among some participants.

Finally, the interactive nature of the face-to-face workshops provided opportunities for participants to share their ideas but also learn from their peers in the Lab program and build a community of practice. This network of like-minded participants created a pool of rich resources and opportunities to share and resolve the challenges and barriers faced. More importantly, participants felt that they were part of a broader movement that would continue to grow and reap benefits beyond their involvement in the Labs.

Potential areas of improvement

Based on suggestions provided by participants, we identified several areas for potential improvement within the Lab process:

- i) Recruitment of employer participants – SVA could consider reviewing their current strategy for recruiting employers in order to improve visibility. SVA could consider deploying additional recruitment channels for example explicitly asking Lab alumni to recommend the Labs to their networks, leveraging existing networks including SVA and their partners' networks and advertising to a larger group of employment service providers. To improve participation, SVA could provide further information at the recruitment stage highlighting the benefits of participation and clarifying the commitment involved in the process.

- ii) Representation of participating employers – SVA recommends to participating employers that it is advantageous to involve more than one representative in the Lab. However, this could be made more explicit and SVA could check on this ahead of the Lab commencement. Greater representation would enable shared responsibility for the development and implementation of the pilot and reduce the risk to continuation if one person leaves the organisation.
- iii) Advance circulation of information and placeholders for coaching calls and events – SVA could consider circulating information on coaching and events further in advance to provide participants with more notice. The earlier employers receive information and relevant activities (e.g. coaching calls and Reconnect sessions), the sooner they can ensure they commit to attending and participating.
- iv) Providing additional time for reflection and the development of ideas – participants expressed a desire for more time to reflect and digest the information provided within the workshops. Additionally, there could be more focus placed on idea generation and development within the workshops.
- v) Allowing employers to take away their completed worksheets – at present, the completed worksheets are collected by SVA at the end of the workshops. SVA could consider enabling participants to retain a copy of the material they have worked on during the workshops to enable them to show their supervisors and leaders what they have been working on while they have been away from work and provide the opportunity to progress their ideas with additional input.
- vi) Connecting participants to appropriate community partners – Although SVA recommends partner organisations and community partners to employers, it is not fully embedded in the Lab process. SVA should consider integrating partners more fully in the Lab process. Doing so could facilitate greater connections to

community partners and employment service providers and check-ins, especially in the early stages of the relationship. SVA should review their process for quality assuring the organisations who they refer to employers.

- vii) Focusing on interaction and collaboration in Reconnect sessions – the Reconnect sessions are an opportunity for employers to share their progress and ‘wins’ with others. However, some employers felt that the emphasis on delivering a presentation overshadowed the opportunity to interact and learn from their peers by sharing ideas and feedback.

References

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