PEARLS OF WISDOM

The right person for the job: creative ways to stretch your budget

Narissa Wilson lives in a small town on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. She has been directing her own supports, with a Host Provider, for over five years.

The vision I have for my life is one where I am happy, healthy, valued for my individuality and for the decisions I make. In an ideal world I would have adequate financial resources to not only meet the requirements of my basic supports but also to enable me to achieve all my goals and my overall vision. I know that this is never likely to be the case so, over the past five years of self-directing, I have found distinctive ways to be creative about aligning my budget, vision and goals.

One important thing I realised early on was that I needed to think differently about how to organise support; to see the support I needed separately from my disability. This was a mind shift for me – a move away from always thinking that employing a support worker from a disability service was the only way to get my needs met.

I realised that self-direction offers the flexibility of contracting people to perform specific roles. So, I thought about the support I needed and how I could think differently about it. I have used this way of thinking a number of times so far. When a situation arises I:

- clarify the support needed,
- analsye the skills required to provide the support,
- identify the role best suited to those skills,
- decide the best way to engage the right person for the job.

My first attempt at this was to contract a professional house cleaner on a fortnightly basis. House cleaning is an identified skill set. I worked out that it can be more economically viable to contract out this work to someone with the skills and interest to do the job well rather than absorbing the work into a support worker's role.

The following examples show how I used this same thinking to organise support in other areas of my life – coordinating the business of my self-direction and addressing an essential health need.

The juggling act of a double agent

When I first started directing my own supports, I tried very hard to juggle everything on my own. I was setting the budget, rostering and managing staff, conducting team meetings, updating the care plan, as well as trying to, live my life and work full time. Essentially I was a double agent starring in my support operations and my life. Being a double agent I needed to be creative and strategic about how my supports actually happened.

Two years into this journey, something had to give. My disability and associated illness' eventually caught up with me and I ended up in hospital, unable to coordinate my support operations.

For someone who was so in control of everything, it was quite scary to have my deck of cards out on the table, and to feel so vulnerable. Even though my family and my host provider kept the wheels turning, I realised that I had missed one important factor in all my 'planning' of my self-directed supports. I had created risk management plans for the situation where my parents, sister and other key people in my life were unable or no longer able to assist in my self-direction but I had no plan for when I could no longer do the juggling act of directing my own supports myself. This experience made me realise that I needed a risk management plan that included the situation where my capacity for self-directing my supports was reduced but my vision still remained at the forefront of my self-direction.

My framework for thinking about organising support helped me identify that what I needed was someone who could assist me with the operational side of my self-direction. I was clear about the skills needed for such a role and the scope of what the role would include.

I eventually found the right person and decided that this would be a position paid on a contractual basis. This individual is not a support worker or a friend, she shares similar values, is willing to invest in my vision and she sees me as me, not as my disability. She has a unique role in my system of self-directed supports as she builds respectful relationships between me, my family and my team of workers.

Engaging a person in this role was the first step towards building a more resilient self-direction. I can now be unwell at times and still be in control of my supports. This is a creative way in which I have chosen to spend a percentage of my funding budget.

The benefits of a professional service

Massage is a therapy that I have used throughout my life to assist me to maintain good health and to improve my circulation. It is something I require on a regular basis.

When I first started employing my own staff, massage was included as part of the general support worker's role. This worked reasonably well at the beginning with the information and skills being passed on from person to person. However there is a particular vulnerability about this situation. Support workers come and go for various reasons but each worker holds a piece of my puzzle. Sometimes these pieces are not passed on or a worker never manages to learn the necessary skills. As time went on I found myself in the situation of not receiving adequate massage therapy and this began to have a direct impact on my health. I realised that I needed to avoid the break down in knowledge transfer between workers.

I analysed the situation using the same thinking that led me to employ a professional house cleaner. It was clear that massage is certainly a distinctive skill set. I had been asking my support workers to play that role amongst everything else they had to do. With the freedom and flexibility that self-direction offers I realised that I could actually engage a professional massage therapist to do this important work rather than expecting a support worker to meet my specific medical needs. I found a local therapist who, at first, came to my home once a week to provide this service. After a while, I had built a trusting relationship with her that was on a business level and I felt comfortable to see her at her shop in town.

So, each week, I now go into town independently, have my massage and engage with people from my community along the way. This small creative way in which I have chosen to spend a percentage of my funding budget has been important to my health but has also had a positive a ripple effect on my social life.