**Reasonable & Necessary with Dr George -
Series 5, Episode 2 (with Jess Stubbins from Ablelink)**

Q: Hi, listeners and welcome to Reasonable and Necessary, Australia’s premier podcast series on everything you ever wanted to know about the National Disability Insurance Scheme. I’m your host, Dr George Taleporos, and on today’s episode we’re talking about support coordination, what it takes to be a support coordinator, and how to run an effective support coordination business.

I couldn’t think of anyone better than Jess Stubbins, founder and director of Ablelink, to help us to dive deep in to this topic. She set up a support coordination business when the NDIS first started and she’s got a real passion for independent support coordination. Hi, Jess, welcome to the show.

A: Hey, George, thank you very much for having me.

Q: So tell me, what’s Ablelink?

A: What’s Ablelink? So, Ablelink is an NDIS registered provider of support coordination, we are an independent provider in that we only provide support coordination across Victoria.

Q: And how long have you been running this and why did you decide to start a business doing support coordination?

A: Yeah, gosh, so how long have we been running? We’re going in to our third year of running, and how it all came about was I had been working in a bit of the readiness space in the rollout in NEMA in Victoria and I really saw this great need for independent support coordinators and could see that the role of a support coordinator was going to be so integral to success of the scheme. So it all came about, I decided I would sort of go out on my own as a sole trader and do a bit of preplanning and help people get ready for the NDIS with the vision to then develop in to the support coordination space. So, if I think about the vision of running a business as such, at the beginning, it was very much I was a one man show and had thought a little bit about working with a few people. But now running Ablelink, it’s far more, I talk about it, yes, it’s a business, but we now run an organisation, really, we are a team of 21 and 3 of those people are admin based roles and really, the way that the organisation has sort of organically evolved has really been driven by being quite a sort of a flat organisation in that we don’t have a lot of I guess levels within Ablelink and the culture of the organisation has been sort of at the front of everything we’ve done to try and really harness as much energy as we can from people in to their support coordination role and not get caught up in any unnecessary day to day activities that aren’t really focused on valuing the sort of diversity of our team as well as trying to sort of shape what we feel best support coordination is.

Q: And that’s, just listening to that, I’m thinking you’ve gone from not having a business to having this business where you employ 21 people and that’s pretty exciting.

A: It is exciting and it’s been...

Q: Do you ever think, my God, I’ve done this, this is pretty awesome?

A: Regularly, I think there are moments of wow, we’ve done this and also moments of holy moly, what have we done, and I think that’s quite key in that we have chosen to employ a number of staff and they are sort of permanent employees, so I think it’s an amazing thing to reflect on the sort of name that has been built around Ablelink based on the incredible team who have worked really hard over the last 3 years. But then also the realisation that it’s a very real thing. As business owners, we are responsible to ensure that people maintain a secure role and are supported in a way that ensures that they can maintain resilience in quite a complex role as well, so yeah, it’s the balance of wow, look what we’ve done as well as it’s been...

Q: You must be in a position now where you kind of set yourself up financially as well.

A: Yeah, I’d say, as I’d mentioned in terms of being quite lean, we’re feeling really quite lucky in terms of how we had chosen to logistically structure Ablelink from the beginning, so we set up as a remote team and everyone was set up to work from home and now in the sort of current landscape of the dreaded Coronavirus and the way that teams and workplaces are needing to adapt, we feel quite lucky that we already had structures in place for people to work remotely, but I think that was also a decision that we wanted to keep our overheads really, really low and have managed to do so to a large extent, but financially...

Q: It’s important isn’t it, to keep the overheads low because there’s not a huge amount when you look at the unit price for support coordination is about $95 an hour or something?

A: $98.06, it’s gone up.

Q: It’s not nothing, but it’s not like what occupational therapists are working with. They’re getting $200 an hour, how do you run a business on that unit price?

A: Yeah, it’s a big question you asked, are we financially stable now and I’d say absolutely we are. Anyone thinking about getting in to running a support coordination business, you’re not necessarily jumping in to make a lot of money by any means. I think it’s really, really important to sort of keep in mind although an organisation can be quite lean, there are still some ongoing running costs and that $98.06, that figure sounds quite a bit, if you consider a general hourly rate for a support coordinator to be paid can range between $32 to $40 on average, that’s a pretty big chunk that you’re keeping every hour, but really, when you start to run the numbers on somebody working say in a fulltime role and what that actually means to be capturing their time as well as the costs that go along with that. We focus quite hard on being quite transparent with our team, because I can imagine if I was a support coordinator and I’m working in a fulltime role, I can do the numbers. If I need to work at an 80% efficiency which is pretty standard across the board for support coordination businesses, 80% means hitting 30 hours of billable within a fulltime week and that’s pretty much what a lot of people have decided is the balance to be viable. But if I’m a support coordinator and I’m adding up my 30 hours at $98.06 and my wage isn’t really matching that, I’m going to have a few questions. But I think that’s where we try to be quite transparent in helping the team to understand all of the running costs that go along with some management of an organisation, the systems that are required in order to be efficient at the role, the equipment that’s required and there’s Work Cover, there portable long service leave, there’s super, I think when you start to put all of those numbers in to place, it is a business that can be sustainable by all means and you can pay people in a way that really values the work that they do, but to be rolling in it from support coordination, no, not so much.

Q: And I think that point you make is one that I totally agree with that you need to be transparent with your staff in terms of making it clear that yes, you might be paid only 50% less of the hourly rate, but these are all the things that you get for that difference, I guess, and being open and honest, I can’t do it all, hey, if they don’t like it, they can go off and set themselves up if that’s they want to do.

A: That’s right and I think that’s the big consideration for people who would be thinking about starting a business as potentially a sole trader, there is certainly, you’ve got this opportunity to scale, but then your running costs will be significantly less if you’re going to be a one man band as well, so your margins could be greater.

Q: Yeah, I can see that. I want to understand the typical day of a support coordinator and rather than it’s a kind of role where there is no typical day, is it based on what the person needs, but just maybe is it possible to talk me through what a day might look like?

A: Yes, certainly and as you said, there is no typical day, but a day may entail meeting with people out and about to have a catch-up and look at what’s, if you’re setting up someone’s plan when you first engage with them to understand exactly what an NDIS plan means to them. I think that’s a really key thing to begin with when you’re building the foundations is your NDIS goals are pretty general, but can we feel certain that as a support coordinator, we actually understand what those goals mean to somebody in the real world? So your day might be spent meeting with people in person, there’s a lot of time spent helping people to budget their funds and make sure that the services that they’re connecting with that are NDIS funded can be accounted for. One thing that we’re seeing now as we move in to that, people who have got their second and their third plans is you’re no longer necessarily meeting with someone in person or over a video meeting to help people to feel calm about what’s happening and the changes, but we really are now focusing on what are the skills that people are wanting to build in terms of managing their own supports or the nice creative stuff and I think that sort of work is now happening with support coordinators, now that we’ve moved through that sort of really rocky transition phase for a lot of people.

Another thing that’s really key I think to note for a support coordinator is your day might be spent doing quite a bit of reading and I think it’s really important to note within this role that things are obviously ever changing in the NDIS space. But also I think a key responsibility to being a support coordinator is knowing that you have a responsibility to have an incredibly deep understanding of the NDIS above and beyond what the tests that all their supports may be expected to have and you sort of play that consultancy role, so yeah, the reading and trying to sort of digest and interpret changes is a really key part of a day as well.

Q: Yeah, I like that aspect, I think that one thing that I like about being in policy is that you get to learn every day when sometimes in other jobs you might just come in and do the job, but no, no, in roles like support coordination, you need to constantly upskill yourself – notice my reference to UpSkill - and that’s something that can be really enjoyable and fulfilling.

A: Absolutely and if I think of the people on our team, the real NDIS nerds are the ones who sort of thoroughly enjoy challenging and interpretation of some legislation and it’s enriching to them and again…

Q: (inaudible) Section 34 of the NDIS Act, that’s what I like to do, reasonable and necessary.

A: Yeah, our team works quite a bit in the SDA space, understanding the SDA legislation, yep, and I think that it’s really empowering to a support coordinator as well. We have worked with not a lot of clarity around framework as to what support coordination is and isn’t and my personal opinion on that is there’s some greatness that has come from that because, especially with our team, we’ve been able to shape some of the tools and the approaches that we use because it has not been super prescriptive from the agency as to what support coordination is and isn’t and we constantly dance the dance between being what is a support coordinator and what is a case manager and an advocate and knowing that it’s quite a delicate dance across some of the functions of an advocate and a case manager and how that does sort of spill a little bit in to the support coordination role. But I think when a support coordinator is able to really take the reins on information and interpret those changes, it’s incredibly empowering to know that you’re in a role that can help to disperse that information and then we’re moving in to that capacity building, helping people to think in a different way about utilising supports or connecting with community.

Q: Yeah, that’s very important that you use all those skills and when you’re interviewing someone for a role as a support coordinator, what do you look for?

A: Yeah, what do we look for? So, I think it is key that someone is able to communicate in a calm manner and someone who … I’ve always within our interviews thrown sort of total curve ball questions to see how somebody may respond to that and if they can respond with a bit of humour, brilliant. So flexible thinkers as well, so someone who is able to communicate well, they’re flexible in their thinking. A big plus for anyone who does come along and is an NDIS nerd and I guess another key area that we would try to gauge during recruitment would be someone’s ability to really understand the importance of boundaries within a role like this. There are a number of interviews that we’ve had with people who are all incredibly well meaning, but their need to help people comes through really, really strongly as opposed to work alongside somebody, so I think it’s really key when gauging somebody’s maturity and approach to such a role is their ability to be able to define what those boundaries look like because another very, very important part of being a support coordinator is the ability to have some resilience in the role and those 2 things go hand in hand.

Q: I like that, and I also think that that raises the important point around that you’re there not to do, you said to support a person, not to do everything for them, but it’s also around building their capacity to hopefully not need you at some point, they get to a point where they learnt what they need to know, got the skills that they need to implement their plan and that through having the coaching, the support, the coaching support as a support coordinator, they can then do things more themselves because ultimately, that’s the aim isn’t it?

A: Yeah, one hundred percent. And I think we’re working with such a diverse range of people and their support networks that that capacity building work needs to, looks so different across the many people who we’re working with and I think the point that we’re moving now past transition is really key as support coordinators and our networks across the country have sort of understood a little bit more about how we can be assisting people with capacity building. We’re feeling more comfortable with that, but also I think the majority of people who we’ve been working with are far more willing to work on building capacity that is now not as scary as it may have been in their first or second plan. I think obviously, building a confidence in people takes time, one of the key things I think is really important is being able to lead by example and it comes back to that dance of no, I’m a support coordinator, I don’t do that, and that dance of being delicate around case managing and support coordination and I think if you’re able to identify early on for somebody what it actually means to be in control of their supports, that’s quite integral in to creating an action plan as to how you will help someone over the life of a plan. But then being able to know how far to push someone’s involvement as well as knowing how not to set up dependencies on yourself and I think being able to lead by example. A really simple example would be support coordinators don’t do rostering, but if it means that the support coordinator helps to really intensely work with someone to look at what a roster could be and then there’s the involvement in helping people to understand what a roster costs and the ins and outs of different organisational positions and policy and shift times and cancellations, it may mean that you for the first sort of 6 months potentially, you’re quite heavily involved in that rostering because you’ve then invested the time in to helping people to feel comfortable to do it themselves as opposed to really being quite arm’s length with that role and it taking a much longer time for somebody.

So I think without babbling too much, I think it’s quite obvious that it’s a very individual approach to what capacity building means for a particular person, but again, we’re being able to do a lot more of that now that services are settling and people are far more set up with their plans moving in to their second and third plan.

Q: And that’s a really important thing to understand that it might not, the dos and don’ts are complicated, right? It might not be that you’re doing it, but you might be teaching someone how to do it and in doing that, you do it.

A: Exactly right, and I think something that we’re getting better at within our team now is helping people to develop resources, so whether that resource may be they’ve now tried out 5 different providers and they’ve found a provider that they like for now for their personal supports in the home, every time that we’ve gone through the process of connecting with the new supports, they’ve had to retell components of their story and their life, whether it be manual handling instructions or particular intricacies of the way that someone likes to run their home. Being able to get together those types of individual resources for people is just so, so important because then they feel potentially empowered then when you’re no longer around to engage with a new provider and go, well, these are my rules, but it’s just the simple act of being able to capture those things which sounds quite simple, but it’s quite a challenging thing to do and it takes time to build rapport and understand somebody in order to help them to capture that type of information.

Q: Yes, that’s absolutely true, and when you talk about capacity, you said that it’s very different for different people, but I’d imagine that sometimes it’s about the family as well as not necessarily just the person with a disability, is that right?

A: That’s absolutely right. I’d say there’s a good 50% of the people who we’re working with that it is, they’re certainly at the centre of the work that we’re doing, but the interactions that you’re having are a majority with their supports around them and their families and that can be a big challenge too sometimes. Trying to challenge the way that things have always been done within households where we don’t want to be the expert on what should or should not be done, but we can see that things potentially could be done a different way to really enhance somebody’s life and challenge the norm, so again, it’s that delicate balance between boundaries, but also pushing the boundaries.

Q; I think you need a lot of emotional intelligence when working with families and you need to know how far you can push your thoughts and opinions and at the same time be respectful of family values and the history that the families have.

A: That’s right, and it doesn’t necessarily take just one plan for support coordinators to build that type of relationship and rapport where families trust you. You may be the 40th person who’s come in to their lives and asked them to do a particular task or suggested that we do things a particular way and it takes, for people who have had service systems in their lives for many, many years, there’s walls that you need to slowly chip away at, for very good reasons.

Q: And the NDIA, the support coordinator works across systems, so you might be implementing someone’s NDIS plan, but that also means that you need to interact with health or I don’t know, criminal justice or different types of systems, education and that sort of thing, employment, I don’t know, how do you work across systems and not get overwhelmed?

A: It’s a great question and I think it’s a great challenge because we’ve got a role to work with funded support systems as well as connect people with others and ensure that things can run as smoothly as they possibly can, but I think where there are a number of systems that do not work cohesively together, it can be a really, really frustrating component of our work. Just recently, we’ve been working across health and the justice system with a particular person and it has been so challenging from a support coordinator’s perspective to try and get people to talk to ensure that this person is well supported, but it seems as though quite often when we’re dealing with a number of support systems, you’re having really siloed discussions and that’s where if a support coordinator is skilled enough to facilitate care team type functions around somebody, you’re going to see the best outcomes. But I think there’s a lot of blood, sweat and tears that needs to go in to that work and again, that someone may have never had a support coordinator and never had anything to do with the justice system, so understanding things like how a court functions or what court orders mean, may be a really big part of just enhancing your understanding of those support systems because we can certainly and try and harness experts within our team. And I think that’s something that we’ve tried to do within our organisation, as you know there are some people who understand the aged care system really well and we’ve got some guys who come from justice systems, so trying to harness some specialities within your team is a really key sort of way to not need everybody to be an expert in everything because you can’t possibly be an expert in everything.

Q: And I think for people with disabilities as well, you want to know if we have particular challenges like health system challenges and justice system challenges that there are support coordinators out there who have level of specialisation or the knowledge in those areas, I think that’s very useful.

A: Yeah, and I think there’s no secret, DSC have done it really well, over the last 3 years, they’ve really encouraged people working within the NDIA, sorry, the support coordination space to think about what that speciality is within your service or your organisation, so being able to really hone in on a particular area of specialities is key to, I think, being a support coordinator who continues to flourish. As transition has occurred and we move in to the next 5 years, if you have a particular speciality, you’re well positioned to continue to capture referrals, I suppose.

Q: Absolutely. I want to just end with just a few bits of advice for people, so I want to look back on what you remember from the last 5 years, what have you learnt? What are some of the main key things that you’ve learnt that you wish you knew from day one?

A: Yeah, well, so I think by nature, I’m a bit of a people pleaser, so personally for me, being able to really, had I developed an ability to not create dependencies on myself early on. It’s really, really challenging to do. I think the majority of people who are in this space are support coordinators, that is by nature will not be helpers, but knowing that creating dependencies early on then makes putting boundaries in place very, very challenging. What else? The importance of documenting information early, so something that we have done is we’ve focused a lot on putting systems in place that mean that we’re not repeating a lot of information and how that sort of developed over the last few years had, if anyone is thinking about setting up a business, how the information that they’re capturing can be repeated, whether it’s your notes or your reporting is really important.

Q: Yeah, because it can be a repetitive role by having to do a review of a plan you’re going in to, you want to have a template ready to fill in rather than do it from scratch every time.

A: That’s right and so something that we do now is once we’ve set someone up in our system, we’re able to then, throughout the year when we’re speaking and meeting with people, we’re able to continually note progress or barriers and outcomes on particular goals so that at the end of the year, when we’re developing our end of year planner review report, we’re not starting from scratch, it’s all of those tiny little things that have happened throughout the year that we haven’t now forgotten because it’s been captured.

Q: It’s very important. What about the whole daunting aspect of the audits? Have you learnt anything about audits and how to deal with the auditing?

A: Yeah, well, audits were so scary when we went through our first audit, my goodness, we’ve got people coming to spy through all of our information, but really, they were just on board to help us consider some things that we hadn’t and there was very much that opportunity to talk through with the auditor why we were or weren’t doing things and then we had the opportunity to put them in place. So, audits aren’t scary, that’s been a big learning. Audits might be expensive, but they’re not scary, and I think we’ve got our audit under quality and safeguards coming up in the next 2 months and for us again, it’s a really good opportunity to make sure that files are clean and we’re up to scratch with things that we like to set a certain stable standard and having the opportunity to do an internal audit prior to somebody coming is really valuable.

Q: And what do you think is the future of support coordination? Do you think that it’s something that will eventually dry up? It sounds like you don’t think that.

A: No, I don’t think that. I do know, I’m quite certain once we’ve moved completely through rollout that the numbers of people getting support coordination will decrease most certainly because there are so many people who just needed a hand to transition in, understand the fundamentals of the NDIS and then they are good to go. They may then throughout their life have a big change, whether it be moving or whatever it may be within a different life stage, they may then re-engage support coordination, but there will always be the group of people with incredibly complex needs that will need support coordination ongoing. There will always be people entering a scheme and I do believe that what was intended for the LAC function to help with implementation can work really well, but support coordination for a group of people who really require more of a complex support will need to be funded through support coordination, so I do believe that support coordination will be ongoing. The numbers will be less, but I do, I think there will always be a need for it in some type of form, whether or not we need to evolve the way that we do work which would be great, yeah.

Q: Jess, it’s been a really useful discussion, anything else you’d like to say?

A: No, I think that’s it. I think running a business and running an organisation in a space that is so incredibly new and evolving is really exciting and I’ve always said to our team, we’ll look back in history and go, we were a bloody great part of that and can feel really confident that we have sort of put a lot of time and effort and energy and real passion in to kind of being an integral part of scheme success. So anyone who’s really thinking about getting in to this space and thinking about potentially starting up a little business, I would say go for it, it’s not going to be all roses, but go for it, I think it’s a really empowering opportunity to do something with some real meat.

Q: Absolutely, do your homework and find out what you need to know and talk to others about what they’ve done and there a lot of Facebook groups out there that have some really helpful information that you can ask questions and share.

A: And George, over the last few years, those networks nationally have strengthened so much in our space and those Facebook groups are really, really useful to connect with people, especially if you’re not working with a team. So George, thank you, thank you, thank you for having a chat.

Q: Yeah, and I wish you well with Ablelink.

A: Thank you so much, it’s been a pleasure.

Q: Bye.

A: Bye. That’s all we have time for on today’s episode of Reasonable and Necessary, brought to you by the Summer Foundation.

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Until next time, stay well and reasonable.

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