Individual Governance – A personal perspective

Bill Garsden considers some important personal issues about self-managing his own support arrangements. Bill acquired his disability twenty-seven years ago and has lived at home with support for twenty-four years. He hopes his life experiences are of assistance.

I have been directing my own support arrangements for about fifteen years. Well, in truth, it has very much been a joint effort with my wife, Lee. This article will centre on our combined experiences. Initially, for about seven years, I used a service provider. Experience gleaned during those seven years gave us the confidence to direct our own support arrangements.

After fifteen years, I can confidently say that the advantages of managing our own support service definitely outweigh the disadvantages. Initially, the reason for changing was financial. The service provider’s costs had increased considerably, mostly incurred by management procedures.

It definitely takes more effort to direct my own support service. I find, by sharing the work load with Lee, it does work out much better for us both. I recommend you be strategic about how you run your own service; for example, do not overemphasise particular aspects of your life, such as the medical needs or overburden yourself with administrative detail – it is essential that you maintain the appropriate level of focus on various aspects of your support. Always remember that the most important aspect of the service is to ensure that you are supported to live as full a life as you can.

Determine what your worst fears are and try to have procedures in place to deal with them. For example, what do you do if nobody turns up for work, or you can not find staff? Is it worth having an emergency arrangement with a local service provider to fill in gaps? We do not have an emergency arrangement, but we have often considered one.

It is important to be clear about your expectations of staff and to give them clear instruction and feedback. Be clear about your privacy, so that your personal details are not disclosed to others. Work out ways to manage your security, both personal and financial. Determine secure ways for staff to enter and leave your home and, if possible, never disclose your private financial details (especially bank PIN numbers).

My needs are known and well-defined and therefore can be managed so that they minimise the impact on my dearest. But there will always be some impact. It is crucial for us to recognise this and to negotiate these matters to maximise the independence of each of us.

I find the most stressful time is when hiring and training a new worker. If new staff workers are quick learners, self starters and reliable, the arrangement is beneficial for everyone. However, this does not always happen; some workers are there for the long term, while others are there until something better comes along!
It is important to know and fulfil your obligations as an employer and deal with situations as they arise with clear communication. However, it is important to acknowledge that sometimes it will not be possible to maintain the typical professional boundaries usually associated with being an employer or employee and this can be difficult for all concerned. Our maxim has always been to treat all workers with respect and to hope that this will be returned: it usually is. With staff regularly at our home (and bedroom), it is critical that privacy, dignity, personal space, time-out and balance be maintained for me, Lee and my staff. We all have needs. Recognise your needs and direct support arrangements to suit them. It is also critical to adequately support staff and to recognise their needs. Some are universal needs, others are personal needs.

Determine where you think you have skills and where you don’t. In the ‘don’t’ column, assess where you need support or training to allow you to undertake your desired tasks and when to pass tasks on to others. Two examples: You may be inexperienced in interview techniques. A solution could be to ask someone with those skills to help and train you until you feel confident. Lee and I do all interviews together and play different roles. Book-keeping: Is it worth your efforts to do your own books of accounts, or should you employ a bookkeeper? Many people opt for the latter. Lee does ours.

One important aspect is of taking on the role of an employer and to understand the responsibilities that this entails. In my experience, the most time is taken up in these three areas of responsibility;

- **Recruitment** – Advertisements used by others can be modified for your purposes; answering phones (potentially very time-consuming) can be managed by using an answering machine; we do interviews together and schedule them to suit our needs.

- **Training** – Lee does initial training, then does buddy shifts to quickly get new staff up to speed; I then do the more detailed, long-term personal training.

- **Administration** (timesheets, staff records, wages, banking) – we use a simple ruled exercise book for a time book; ensure you get copies of genuine ID such as a drivers licence, blue cards, police reports (if you require one), training certificates, plus contact details and next of kin and other records such as first aid certificates, vaccination records etc. Lee calculates wages, related staff payments and taxation records and we use MYOB accounting software, direct deposits and Internet banking.
The main issue to us is reliability. I want to know that I have a reliable staff platform from which I can plan my life. My day goes downhill if nobody turns up for work. Lee and I work on procedures to cover that. I try to have enough staff to have someone to cover any such gaps. Consequently, I do not like having any one worker doing the majority of shifts. I also try to keep ex-staff on an emergency list. I am fortunate that in a real emergency, Lee can usually fill in.

The list for directing your own support arrangements may appear long and daunting, but we have found that, with team work, planning and a dash of reality, we managed the transition from a service provider to managing our own service arrangements. The rewards are many: control over our own lives, control over staff selection, more reliable staff, less staff turnover, better staff relations, staff loyalty, better work practices, less personal stress, less marital and family stress, more predictability and a better life. We have tried both approaches and directing our own support arrangements is highly recommended – it is cheaper and has better outcomes. Everyone should have this option.