



Milk Crate Theatre

THE ARTS & JOB READINESS

**Creative and life skills
learned from arts-based
practice create job ready
candidates.**

A report sharing observations from Milk Crate Theatre's Impact Measurement Framework in conjunction with a review of external data to show how creative engagement can support job readiness, particularly for individuals with complex lived experiences.

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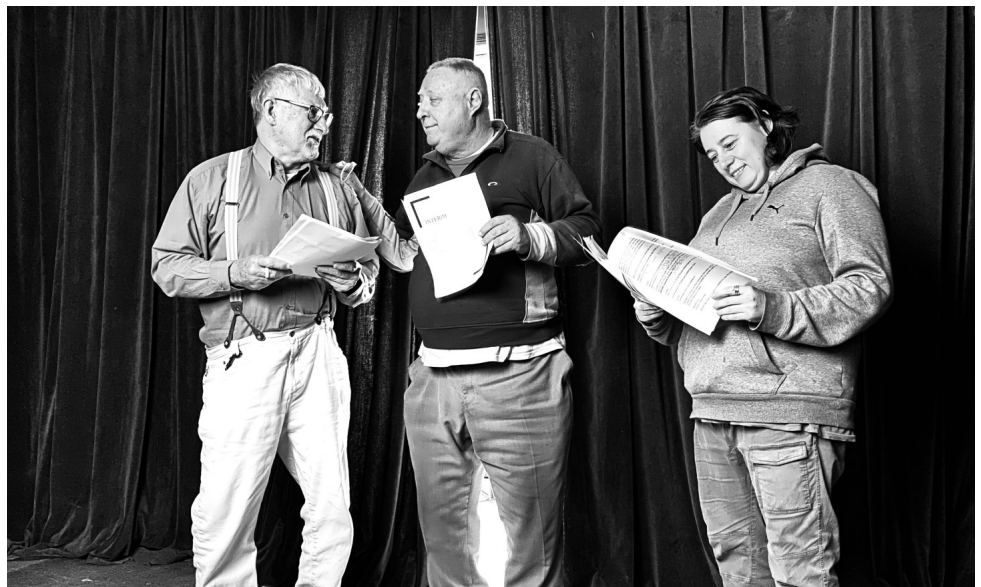
01.Introduction

Creative and life skills learned from arts-based practice create job ready candidates.

01.

Participation in theatre programs has been shown to facilitate and build job readiness in individuals.

Milk Crate Theatre is the leading arts organisation in Australia working in the unique intersection of the arts, homelessness, mental health and disability. We have a rich twenty-four-year history delivering a range of creative workshop programs and live theatrical performances developed for, with and by community members with complex lived experiences including homelessness, disability or mental illness. Our programs whilst based in creative practice also support the development of life and creative skills; build confidence; increase social connections which lead to a more positive outlook on life and improved wellbeing.



Over the last three years, Milk Crate Theatre has strengthened our Theory of Change and built an Impact Measurement Framework looking at twelve domains of impact of our work. This Framework has now been embedded across our programs and we are measuring short-, medium- and long-term impacts on our community of artists and audiences.

This report shares observations from our Impact Measurement Framework in conjunction with a review of external data to show how creative engagement can support job readiness, particularly for individuals with complex lived experiences.

Our community of Collaborative Artists (participants) are generally living with, have experienced or are at risk of homelessness; living with mental health or disability support needs; have experienced domestic violence or come from First Nations and/or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. Many in our community have experienced long-term unemployment (>2 years unemployed) or have never been employed due to the complexity of their lived experiences.

Milk Crate Theatre programs support participants to develop critical soft skills that make them more 'job ready'. The following impacts are linked to our short-term outcomes and are taken directly from our reflective and observational data.

78%

of participants feel ready to take on other opportunities in the community - including employment - following engagement in Milk Crate Theatre Programs.

Confidence:

- A sense of achievement.
- Facing personal challenges such as overcoming a fear (e.g., performing) with great rewards for confidence/wellbeing.

Connection:

- Developing problem solving skills.
- Teamwork/Collaboration.
- Creativity as a tool for healing, specifically with vulnerable or disadvantaged communities.
- Building connections to others, self-expression in appropriate and professional manner, feeling heard and seen by society.

Creative and Life Skills:

- Working to a deadline - for performances & showings and presentation of work.
- Learning and practical application of soft skills such as eye contact, voice projection, empathy, professional interactions.
- Critical thinking - developed from character building, world building, directing a scene and other theatrical endeavours.

All these outcomes better prepare an individual to take on other opportunities in the community and are transferable to other job readiness activities such as volunteering and further education and are particularly crucial to attaining and sustaining employment.

A large proportion of the Milk Crate Theatre participants are long-term unemployed and are involved in job readiness government programs through Workforce Australia. These programs are important to prepare individuals to enter the workforce with the goal of building to long-term employment. However, it is recognised that there are still significant barriers to gaining employment for the long-term unemployed or never employed that these programs are not always able to resolve.

The Milk Crate Theatre Impact Framework shows that creative programming could provide additional value to Workforce Australia in building soft-skills and capacity as a precursor to existing program which could potentially increase the overall success rate for individuals with complex lived experience. This report shows that improvement in confidence, connection to community and support, changes in mindset or perception, the development of life skills, and allowing individuals to feel heard are enormously beneficial in supporting individuals in their search for employment. Furthermore, our results show how creative practice shows strong impacts across all these areas.

Milk Crate Theatre offer deep and meaningful creative engagement that supports individuals who have not have access to traditional educational pathways to build capacity. Whilst our end goal is not to subscribe individuals into the workforce, the increased confidence, skills, and connections as well increases in self-reliance, empowering aspirations and provide a gateway for future social and economic engagement. This report shows the value the arts bring to communities across Australia.



02. Barriers to Employment

02.

122,494 people were estimated to be experiencing homelessness at the time of the 2021 Census, an increase of 6,067 people (5.2%) since 2016¹. This measure includes people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out; people living in supported accommodation for the homeless; people staying temporarily with other households; people living in boarding houses; people in other temporary lodgings and people living in 'severely' crowded dwellings. This measure was taken during COVID restrictions which presented a unique set of circumstances which may have impacted the count.

Employment can be a crucial factor in being able to break free from the cycle of homelessness. However, there is a cyclical relationship between homeless and unemployment with a lack of secure housing making it significantly harder to find and keep secure employment.

48% of working-age (15-64) people with disability are employed, compared with 80% of people without a disability and it is estimated that people with severe and common mental illnesses are between 7 and 3 times more likely to be unemployed. In another cyclical relationship, those who are unemployed are more likely to experience declines in mental health than those who are employed.

People living with disability and/or mental health issues are more likely to live in disadvantage or become homeless. Those living with severe or profound disability, psychosocial disability or mental health issues are overrepresented in the numbers of people who seek support from Homelessness providers. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report, *People with disability in Australia (2020)*² states that, "Some people with disability face challenges routinely and actively participating in everyday life areas (such as employment) and are more likely to experience poor health, discrimination and violence than those without disability." In turn, homelessness amplifies poor mental health which can increase social isolation and negatively impact physical health.



Milk Crate Theatre creative programming engages community members who are generally living with, have experienced or are at risk of homelessness; living with mental health or disability support needs; have experienced domestic violence or come from First Nations and/or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. Many in our community have experienced long-term unemployment or have never been employed due to the complexity of their lived experiences.

The complexities of disability, mental illness, social exclusion and financial hardship mean that many people living in disadvantage face significant barriers to accessing the support, services, and opportunities they need to realise their life potential.

Long-term unemployment further exacerbate the barriers to gaining employment. The National Skills Commission 2021 report³ notes that “people who have been unemployed for a significant length of time face greater difficulty, on average, finding subsequent work, due to skill depreciation, loss of motivation, screening out by employers and marginalisation from the labour market.”

Our community have disclosed the following lived experiences which all can act as great barriers to acquiring work:

63%

are recovering from or have lived experience of mental ill health or are a survivor of trauma.

61%

are living with either or both physical, neurological and/or learning disability.

32%

have lived experience of homelessness or a recovering from addiction.

52%

are dependent on the Australian welfare system as their main source of income.

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I'm more confident at work”.

Emma, Disability Workshop participant

Of the participants who have engaged with Milk Crate Theatre in 2022, only 30% are linked to supports such as psychologists, health care workers or caseworkers. It is evident that many in our community do not have access to, or are not ready to engage with clinical or other supports. As a result, it is worth exploring other ways in which to support community members to engage in the workforce and develop job readiness skills.

Cohort Focus

In 2022, 38% of our community was over the age of 50. The barriers to employment as we age have been well-documented elsewhere and supported by our participants' experiences. Findings in Outpost Consulting report from 2021 titled Research into employment barriers for mature age Australians⁴ suggest: 'Difficulties experienced by employers around recruiting and retaining mature age workers relate to physical capabilities and risk of injury, higher wage costs, lack of up-to-date skills, challenges in finding or attracting them, and the attitudes of mature age workers themselves' (pg. 11). From observational data of our community, many of our community aged over 50 years have the desire to work yet find it extremely difficult to be considered for desirable positions.



3. Milk Crate Theatre Impact

Milk Crate Theatre creative programs provide a gateway to future social and economic engagement.



03.

The arts is known to be a strong vehicle for boosting social capital and improving the wellbeing of participants. There is increasing evidence recognising the positive impact of arts and creativity on wellbeing as well as its ability to address social challenges including trauma, mental health issues, loneliness and unemployment. The arts make our individual lives better and build stronger and more cohesive communities.

We believe that Milk Crate Theatre's programs act as a gateway to job service providers and potential employment. As people enter our workshop programs, they have the opportunity to build up their capacity, resilience and overall wellbeing in a supportive setting through the creative process. This preparation can then lead to a willingness to seek out further opportunities including employment. And finally, when ready, participants then take action to gain employment.

WHAT WE MEASURE

The table below breaks down what outcome areas we are currently measuring, including the indicators which tell us if any real or significant change is occurring. The indicators (see below) aim to reflect the most accurate evidence that we are meeting our outcomes.

Our three short-term outcomes represent an AWARENESS for the individual that they are beginning to conceptualise a shift or change in themselves. Our medium-term outcomes focus on a WILLINGNESS to take action or make change in their lives. Finally, our long-term outcomes reflect an ACTION whereby the individual actively makes positive or significant change in their lives of their own accord.

| TIME FRAME | OUTCOME | INDICATORS |
|------------------|------------------------|--|
| Short-term | Confidence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More confident • Self-expression • Professionalism • Pride in achievements |
| Short-term | Creative & Life Skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning transferable new skills • Able to manage work needs with life needs • Creative thinking • Working to deadlines |
| Short-term | Connection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection to others • Communication skills • Adaptability - team-work |
| Medium term | Agency | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help-seeking • Accepting feedback • Problem-solving |
| Medium/Long-term | Wellbeing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better health • Better self-worth • Coping mechanisms |
| Long-term | Outlook | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life positivity • Self-belief • Having hope for the future • Sense of purpose |

93%

of participants have better self-worth

86%

have better coping mechanisms

92%

are more confident

75%

have gained skills that help them manage personal challenges

Developing Soft Skills

'...arts activities may function as vehicles for the development and exercise of both hard and soft skills.'

University of Chicago, 2018⁵

Soft skills are fundamental to acquiring and sustaining long-term employment. Soft skills can include:

- managing one's emotions.
- adaptability
- active listening
- collaboration
- eye contact & non-verbal communication
- voice projection
- teamwork
- confidence & self-belief
- time management skills

Engaging in theatre-based practice, individuals can both develop and practice these soft skills, necessary for entering the workforce. Soft skills are developed through theatre-based activities, creative writing (independently and collectively), storytelling, movement exercises, vocal and body warm-ups and performance in front of an audience.

One key area that we often observe is improved self-belief, specifically with individuals who have been attending Milk Crate Theatre programs for For our community who have generally experienced significant disadvantage and/or complex lived experiences, feeling deserving of employment and overcoming other social barriers often does not feel possible. In theatre-based practice, specifically in scene work exercises where they step into a role of a manager, job applicant or even simply interacting with colleagues during lunch break, allows them to experience new things in a safe setting, which over time grows their self-belief.

In addition, we have found in our observational data that there is a great improvement in the regulation of emotions in many individuals. Mind Australia⁶, a community services organisation for mental health, echoes this sentiment: "The part of the brain that processes emotional regulations is activated when processing art or sensory material, so creative practice can help you feel calm. Art can have an important contribution in helping people to regulate emotions when there is a history of trauma". Having a space, once a week, to practice these soft skills contributes greatly to overall wellbeing and can better prepare those for employment.

CASE STUDY A

Kamini - A Collaborative Artist

Kamini first engaged with Milk Crate Theatre in 2017. She connected with Milk Crate Theatre through her housing provider Link Housing who engaged Milk Crate to create a forum theatre piece with their tenants. The purpose was to provide a platform for tenants to voice their housing concerns through a creative and engaging medium. Kamini expressed how she was feeling, at the time noting,

“I didn’t have any hope, I’d wake up in the morning and felt like there was ‘open fire’ on me, so I thought no, I’d just stay home, and ‘stay down’, thinking everything is going to knock me down anyway... I had resigned to this being my life. I had anxiety and I would defend before I was attacked. I was hyper-vigilant. Someone’s gonna take a sling at me so I’d sling first”.

Kamini reflected on how the skills she has developed since joining Milk Crate Theatre have made her more open to other experiences,

“Milk Crate Theatre was definitely the start to me re-joining the world. I did volunteer, I have gained employment and I am starting to think about my own artistic endeavours. I’ve learned people skills, to communicate better and not take things so personally... to be a team player, and to be a bit more easy going”.

In 2022, Kamini performed for the very time in Milk Crate Theatre’s production of Dust to over 500 audience members,

“The applause from ‘Dust’, that first feeling when they were clapping... I’ll never forget any of it. I’ll never forget the positive feedback saying that ‘I’m growing’ and ‘I’ve landed”.

Kamini, who is passionate about social justice, full of ambition and drive, continues to dream big, work and study law,

“I used to see myself as a shit kicker, but now I’m a shit kicker with a difference. I’ve learned I can survive. I can survive.”.

Kamini is currently engaged in Milk Crate Theatre’s Headway Program, a 10-week course where she can prepare and envision her own creative work while sustaining part-time employment.

Safe spaces

It is vitally important to provide a safe space for individuals, many of whom have experienced great hardships in life, to explore, fail, achieve and challenge themselves. Providing such a space for vulnerable individuals ensures sustained attendance and engagement in any sector. Whilst we don't categorise our work as art 'therapy', we find it is often a healing space for our community by providing a safe space for self-expression and fun.

Extra Support

We offer additional support to our community by providing access to a social worker (by phone or in person) and by bringing together individuals, our community partners and support workers, all in the same room. All facilitators have access to Mental Health First Aid training, as well as utilising a strengths-based and trauma-informed approach to their practice. This extra support can provide comfort to participants experiencing particularly challenging personal or mental health issues.

Changing Perceptions - Society

Our main stage production Dust in 2022, compelled:

95% of our audience to think about social issues that people face.

Dust was created and performed by our community. Dealing with themes of isolation and connection, the play is set in an Australian rural hotel. With a strong focus on creating works with and by our community, we find that when audiences know our organisations purpose, they are prompted to reconsider any bias or prejudice they may hold. Thereby, the performance becomes more than just a show and a chance for provoking audience's world views.

79% agreed that their eyes were opened to issues, ideas or a point of view they hadn't fully considered.

The high rate of people compelled to reconsider some of their own beliefs or thoughts, shows that theatrical productions created and performed by our community contribute towards a more empathic society and by extension more inclusive workplaces.

CASE STUDY B

Waterloo: Feeling seen and heard

Feeling seen and heard is vital for people's self-esteem and is an important factor in leading to improved job readiness and work performance.

Early in 2022, Milk Crate Theatre's 'Waterloo Creative Ensemble' created six short films. This ensemble group meets weekly in the heart of the Waterloo Housing Estate over 10-40 weeks annually and works toward an artistic outcome. One participant John (name changed) amplified his voice via this creative medium. John's film focused on his response to the redevelopment and inevitable relocation and displacement of those living in the Waterloo Housing Estate. John, who has called Waterloo home for 26 years, expressed his fears, his love for Waterloo and ultimately anger at his sense of not being heard by his council and housing provider when he expressed concerns against the redevelopment.

In the film, he expressed this by playing different characters who live in the estate; a tradesman, an advocate, an elderly gentleman - all of whom represent those who will be affected by the relocation. This platform for expression, and ultimate film product, allowed John to feel heard. He stated, 'it met the right need for expression at the right time'. John expressed how this project contributed to his confidence and wellbeing, so much so that he re-engaged in the Waterloo Creative Ensemble in 2022.



People listen to my ideas...and only here. Thank you. I am more confident about my ability to express myself more freely and have learnt to slow my talking down."

Alana, City Creative Workshops

04. Conclusion

The arts bring tremendous value to communities across Australia. It brings communities together and has the power to transform lives. We encourage all sectors to consider how the arts can provide solutions to some of societies greatest challenges.

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Of course, it is not always easy to get involved with new groups or new experiences, but to feel supported and treated with dignity can only improve our community going forward, and creativity is a great way to achieve this.”

A Collaborative Artist, ACON workshops

04.

Milk Crate Theatre’s creative workshop programs support the development of life and creative skills, which can empower individual’s and provide a gateway for future social and economic engagement.

This report shares observations from our Impact Measurement Framework in conjunction with a review of external data that shows how creative engagement can support job readiness, particularly for individuals with complex lived experiences.

We believe that creative engagement, such as the programs provided by Milk Crate Theatre, can provide additional value to existing job readiness and employment programs, supporting the building soft-skills and capacity, which could potentially increase the overall success rate of programs for individuals with complex lived experience.

Milk Crate has extraordinary results in increased job readiness and improved wellbeing that we believe can be attributable to the following factors:

- We provide a space where participants feel safe to explore their creativity. Through this creative process, our community of Collaborative Artists (participants) gain life skills and improve wellbeing, confidence, self-agency and other skills that align with improved job readiness.
- While our work and impact do not focus on developing hard skills (such as IT skills, resume writing or interview practice), our work enables the development of soft skills which are vital to gaining and sustaining long-term employment, such as getting along with others, ability to voice opinions and managing emotions.
- Providing extra support such as support workers and access to social workers, with all our work underpinned by a strengths-based and trauma-informed practice approach which ensures our participants feel safe and supported to thrive.
- Ensuring our community feel heard and seen, can increase their confidence and sense of self-worth.
- By providing platforms for underrepresented voices on main stages and through media, thereby changing society's perceptions of people with lived experiences and vulnerabilities to open up an avenue to a more cohesive and empathetic future.

We believe that the arts provide effective, supportive and healing ways to prepare individuals not only for job readiness but for a life where they are seen and valued as fully contributing members of a compassionate society.



RESOURCES

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