



Workforce Foundations:

A How-To Guide for Linkers, Navigators, & Connectors.

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which this resource was developed. We also pay respect to the wisdom of our Elders past and present.

Thanks to our funders

Brave Foundation's Social Economic Empowerment Department and the Navigator Network are indebted to the RM Ansett Trust, managed by Equity Trustees for their financial support, and for seeing the potential to connect the professionals in these roles as they work to break cycles of intergenerational poverty and disadvantage in Australia.

Thanks to the Navigators Network

We want to acknowledge and thank all who contributed their insights and experiences to help shape both The Navigator Network and this important work. Your input has guided our approach and ensured its relevance and appropriateness.



Thanks to the Co-Design Team

We would not have this resource without the generosity and commitment of the Co-Design Team. We owe you an enormous gratitude for sharing your experiences so openly. To everyone involved, thank you.

Senior Leaders

Alison Cook, Clinical Lead
ForWhen, Canberra (ACT)

Catherine Cooney, Head of Program
Brave Foundation, Melbourne (Victoria)

Jean Villacorta, Early Years Strategy Lead
The Hive, Mount Druitt, Western Sydney (NSW)

Lee Bratel, NSW Community Programs Manager,
Karitane, Carramar, Southwest Sydney (NSW)

Vidya Surajbali, Northern Team Leader
Brave Foundation, Brisbane (QLD)

Linkers, Navigators and Connectors

Belinda Lloyd, Care Navigator
ForWhen, Carramar, Southwest Sydney (NSW)

Deb Benson, Mentor
Brave Foundation, Cairns (QLD)

Lacey Kelley, Child Health Linker
The Hive, Mount Druitt, Western Sydney (NSW)

Laura Coleman, Care Navigator
ForWhen, Melbourne (Victoria)

Mog Jones, Nurse Navigator
Navigate Your Health Program, Cairns, (QLD)

Sophie Faulkenhagen, Virtual Mentor
Brave Foundation, Brisbane (QLD)

Foreword



From Lisa McGhee, Community Manager

I'm honoured to introduce this resource which aims to provide practical support to people in Linker, Navigator and Connector roles, as well as managers and leaders setting up the role.

The guide was created across May and June 2024 by a group of Linkers, Navigators and Connectors and their Senior Leaders from organisations working with disadvantaged children, young people and their families around Australia.

All were members of The Navigator Network - a pilot program to lift the capability and capacity of the Social Support Sector's expanding Linker, Navigator and Connector workforce through knowledge exchange and shared professional development programs and events. The network brought together field-facing staff from 15 organisations over two years (August 2022 - August 2024) and was managed by Brave Foundation.

I encourage you to engage with this resource with a willingness to explore and expand your own practice. It will help you understand some of the prevalent challenges of the role and provides practical ideas that can be put into action.

We hope you find it useful and that you will share it with others.



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Section 1

Roles

Defining various types of Linker, Navigator and Connector roles.



Language is a complicating factor. In this Guide, we refer to 'Linkers, Navigators and Connectors' to represent the diversity of the group, and use 'Navigators' where we need something shorter. There are many job titles at play. It's not always obvious at first glance!

The role: what do we know?

A new type of social care professional has emerged in health, disability and social service ecosystems in Australia and around the world. Known variously as Linkers, Navigators or Connectors, these highly skilled professionals help individuals and families to navigate the complexities of the service system to get the vital support that they need.

These roles take on different forms and responsibilities in different settings; however, always at the core of the role is enabling people to connect with a diversity of resources and services to meet their needs.

Reading Corner: Understanding Linkers, new role to help navigate social services

The short paper [Understanding 'Linkers': new role to help navigate social services](#) was published by the Paul Ramsay Foundation and dandolopartners in 2022. This paper inspired the creation of The Navigator Network.

The use of Linkers by not-for-profit organisations is an emerging strategy for addressing the limitations of the service system...They help people access the services and support they need through individualised, relationship-based practices.

This paper highlights several key points, including that 'Linker' is a distinct role with a consistent way of working. However, the limited visibility of what Linkers do, how they work and what is needed to effectively manage this workforce impacts how Linkers, Navigators and Connectors see themselves, how Linkers' roles and teams are designed, how Linkers are recruited and how this workforce is grown and developed.

This paper also asks some deeper questions; are Linkers effective? What insights do Linkers provide for systems change? What do we need to know and do to sustain this workforce?

The original paper was followed by a helpful follow-up [Understanding Linkers: Challenges and potential](#)

What is the role?

🌸 Developed by The Navigator Network, informed by [Understanding Linkers](#)

Linkers, Navigator and Connector roles provide a way to operationalise the kind of relational, client-centred and flexible support which evidence shows is more effective. The [Understanding Linkers](#) paper identifies four common characteristics that are useful to define the role.



Navigators build community knowledge and relationships.

Navigators proactively seek to know their community, what services are available, and how to get in.

They use their relationship skills to forge a strong and broad network with local services.

They actively maintain their network – cultivating relationships, providing reciprocal support.

They leverage networks to get participants access to the support they need.



Navigators build relationships & trust.

Navigators build trust and connection quickly.

They explicitly and intentionally project warmth, respect and genuineness.

They listen and observe carefully and are responsive to body language.

They work at the pace people are comfortable with – and take the time that's needed.

They seek opportunities to make connection.



Navigators support the development of goals and aspirations.

Navigators draw out goals and aspirations of participants and focus on what matters.

They elicit participant aspirations and prioritise them. Break goals down into achievable steps.

They are flexible about what and how – working with small or big goals and what matters for each individual.

They foster a sense of agency and hope.



Navigators flexibly support navigation.

Navigators illuminate the path and walk with participants to access support and achieve goals.

They develop plans to realise aspirations.

They tailor the support to needs.

They provide 'wrap-around' support to participants as they connect to services.

They build personal confidence, capability and independence.

They creatively problem-solve challenges.

What makes the job different?

☀ Quotes from members of The Navigator Network

“As a service, we’re engaging families when they need it and then wanting it. And it’s lovely to hear that they’re wanting to make change for themselves but also for their families. It’s such a privileged position to be in to sort of hold their hands along their journey.”



“I really love the personal relationships that you get to have with participants... it gives you time to go on the journey.”



“It’s not case management. It’s very much about getting to know the family and then finding the right supports for them. It’s walking alongside - not holding. It’s a fine line. You need to get to know the families; you get to know what they’re [really] wanting and needing.”



Describing the role to clients

☀️ Quotes from members of The Navigator Network

“I don’t use the word navigate. Sometimes it can be a little bit clinical. I just say my job is to support them to access services... I use very simple wording. I’ll say I’m going to stay with you until you’re connected with those services and I’m going to support you while you’re waiting for services.”



“I see myself as someone who stands beside a young person and supports them in whatever they need to become strong young humans that have a purpose and feel stable, caring for themselves and their children.”



“I tend to describe myself as their cheerleader. I get to come along for the ride and cheer them on. I remove service navigation language. I would use different language around that e.g. help you make sense of what supports are available to you and which ones might work and fit for you and feel safe.”



Describing the role to other professionals

☀ Quotes from members of The Navigators Network

“The word navigate certainly needs explaining, because a Navigator is not a well-known profession, particularly within the health industry or any industry around Australia. Once people understand it, they’re excited by it.”



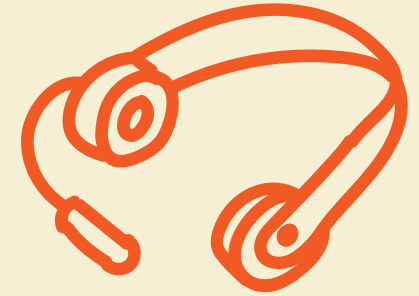
“I say that I work in a role supporting young parents. That role predominantly is to connect them to their local community and to build empowerment within themselves. Whilst it may look like formal referrals out to other support services, I also like to go back down the line... and ask what connects them to their people, their culture and their local communities. It’s a lot about empowerment. What skills do they already have? How can I support them to build these skills for themselves?”



“I had a GP approach me yesterday. I was able to explain that as a Mentor, my role is to work alongside young parents to navigate their communities; to explore systems and to navigate those systems, to find the support services that are most appropriate for them and to walk alongside them to make sure that they are.”



Variations in the role



Delivery model

The Navigator Network Co-Design Group noted that there are many different models of Linker, Navigator and Connector roles emerging across Australia.

The forms the role takes is influenced by the needs of people being supported, funding, and the regulatory environment.

Common variations	Examples
Job Titles	Linker, Navigator, Connector, Community Navigator, Mentor, Advocate, Facilitator, Support Worker
Delivery Models	In-person, phone, digital, hybrid
Duration	Single session, a year, two years, as long as required

Within The Navigator Network, we have encountered a range of delivery models. These include in-person, phone based and digital delivery. Each presents its own set of challenges.



In-person

Most Linkers, Navigators and Connectors are found in place-based environments and operate with a local lens. This approach likely has its origins in the collective impact initiatives spread across the country; other examples abound.

One of the challenges that place-based Linkers, Navigators and Connectors face is staying informed of who's who and what services are operating (or have ceased to operate) in the local area. This is a key task and must not be taken for granted.

"Allow time to build trust and relationships with your local service providers. It's the only way to truly make a difference."

Phone

Network member ForWhen supports clients and service users exclusively over the phone, through a national helpline. This new way of working has brought several unique challenges to the Care Navigator role.

"We have no eye contact or body language prompts to assist. I've become good at tuning in to changes in tone of voice and pauses in the conversation. Listening for what is not said as much as what is. It's a real skill."

Digital

In 2021 Network member Brave piloted a digital delivery of its Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens program, which is usually delivered in-person. The evaluation found that whilst relationships were slower to develop online digital delivery can provide services where in-person services are unavailable and where geography, disability or other circumstance inhibit face-to-face participation.

(Source: Deane, K., Wilson, S., & Williams, N. (2024). An evaluation of the digital delivery pilot of Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens. Brave Foundation.)

The length of connections

Within The Navigator Network, we have realised that we support clients and service users for different periods of time. Some offer help across a single session. Others offer support for up to 12 months, up to 24 months or, in some cases, for as long as required.

While every organisation has its reasons for the length of time support is offered, we know from the Networks' members and the Understanding Linkers report that a key design feature of most Linker, Navigator and Connector programs is the:

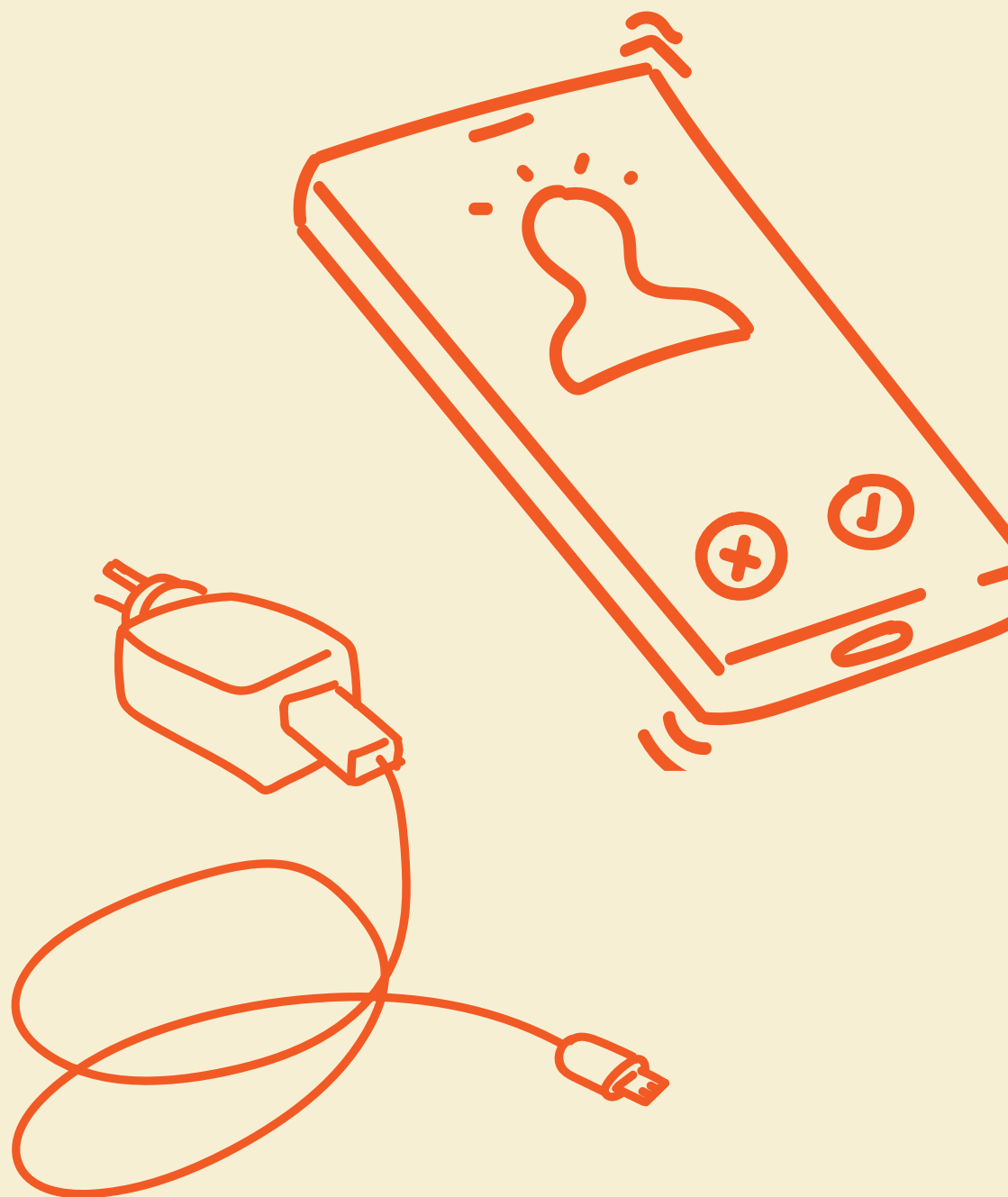
Capacity to work with individuals and families over time, including remaining engaged with individuals and families for 12 months or more if necessary.

Similarly, when asked 'If you could change one thing, what would it be? Linkers, Navigators and Connectors say more time:

"That we could support people for a longer period of time that there was a slight change in how the model could look; to know that there is someone to fall back on or reach out to and say 'hey, I was part of that program' if (when) things change."

"More time (a year is not enough) - yes at the end of the program, we're going to go part-time, to transition you. No-one ever wants to close. A bit more planning in the role would be good."

"To have more time to spend with the client. Sometimes it's a month or longer in between meetings. Being able to give each family the same quality of support."



Section 2

Capabilities

The attributes and capabilities of Linkers, Navigators and Connectors.



Core Capabilities Framework

The members of the Navigator Network belong to a highly trained and highly skilled workforce. And yet, in our collective experience, we are discovering that there is currently no clearly defined pathway for career progression and there is confusion around the value of the role. In the absence of an Australian Capability or Competency Framework to help inform staff professional development and learning, we have developed our own.

On the following pages, we describe what we believe to be the essential domains, skills, knowledge and attributes (qualities) needed to do this job well. We hope that this will guide future recruitment activities, and inform future investment in staff learning and development. We also hope that it will empower you as a Linker, Navigator or Connector to consider your own professional practice, as well as your own learning and professional development needs and aspirations.

Reading Corner: Fulfilling Lives - What makes an effective multiple disadvantage navigator?

The Fulfilling Lives program was launched in 2014 by the UK's National Lottery Community Fund. Fulfilling Lives was part of a package of long-term, strategic funding program to tackle some of society's most entrenched social problems in preventative and innovative ways (source: Looking at the legacy of Fulfilling Lives | The National Lottery Community Fund). One of the many Briefing Papers shared at the end of the Fulfilling Lives program was the Workforce development insight report entitled 'What makes an effective multiple disadvantage navigator?'

- *Excellent interpersonal and communication skills, including the ability to show empathy, are essential for effective navigators. They need to be able to build relationships, not just with beneficiaries, but with professionals too.*
- *Advocacy skills are required in order to ensure the beneficiary's voice is heard. Navigating a complex and often fragmented system requires resilience and a positive attitude to support beneficiaries through challenges and set backs.*
- *In supporting individual needs, navigators need to be flexible, spontaneous and resourceful and may find themselves doing things other support workers would consider unorthodox.*

These synergies give us confidence in the work that we are doing in Australia. It is reassuring to know that as a new workforce, Australia's Linkers, Navigators and Connectors belong to something bigger.



Reading Corner: Fulfilling Lives South East Partnership - Core Competency Framework

In our desk-based research, we came across the Core Competency Framework published and publicly available on the [BHT Sussex website](#), under Resources. We are big fans of this Core Competencies Framework. It is comprehensive.

These core competencies were identified in [Fulfilling Lives' South East Core Competency Framework](#) by client-facing Specialist Workers, the clients themselves and the staff and volunteers with lived experience of multiple and complex needs.

This work builds beautifully on that already done to better understand what is needed to lift the capability of the social support sector's growing Linker, Navigator and Connector workforce. We agree wholeheartedly with these core competency areas, with one important exception. This framework does not contain references to the specific capabilities required to work with and in allyship with First Nations people, and those of CALD backgrounds in the Australian context. Nor does it refer to the autonomous working capabilities often required in Linker, Navigator and Connector roles.

Applying this to the Australian Context

Over the next two pages we share frameworks for the attributes and capabilities that hold the greatest value for those receiving the support of a Linker, Navigator and Connector in Australia.

Attributes for Navigators

✻ Adapted from [Understanding Linkers](#)

Community Connector

To build community knowledge and relationships linkers/navigators/connectors need to be:

- Curious
- Creative
- Bold and persistent
- Organised and systematic

Trust Builder

To build trust and connectors linkers/navigators/connectors need to be:

- Empathic and respectful
- Strategic
- Attentive
- Flexible



Advocate

To draw out goals and aspirations from participants linker/navigators/connectors need to be:

- Strengths based
- Master

Pathfinder

To illuminate the path to access and achieve goals linkers/navigators/connectors need to be:

- Knowledgeable
- Relentless and creative problems solvers
- Adaptable
- Capacity builders
- Outcome-focused

Capabilities for Navigators

Developed by The Navigators Network, adapted from [Fulfilling Lives Framework](#)



Person-Centred Practice

Navigators tailor support to meet the unique needs, preferences, and goals of each individual, ensuring that they are active participants in their journey.



Strengths-Based Practice

Navigators identify and leverage individuals' strengths and resources, supporting people to build on their abilities.



Trauma-Informed Practice

Navigators understand the impact of trauma and prioritise safety, trust, and collaboration - aiming to avoid re-traumatisation and support healing.



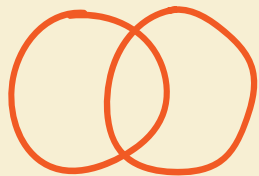
Cultural Competency & allyship.

Navigators recognise, respect and value First Nations and CALD cultural backgrounds and practices. And actively challenge discrimination by systems.



Autonomous Working

Navigators take initiative and responsibility for their workload, tasks and decisions while maintaining accountability and adherence to organisational standards.



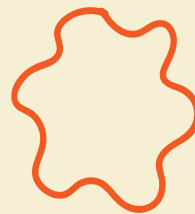
Working Together & Empowering

Navigators supporting individuals to take control of their lives and decisions, fostering independence and self-determination.



Advocacy & Joined-Up Working

Navigators champion the rights and needs of individuals to services, and coordinating efforts across services.



Emotional & Psychological Awareness

Navigators recognise, understand and effectively respond to the emotional states and mental health needs of themselves and others.



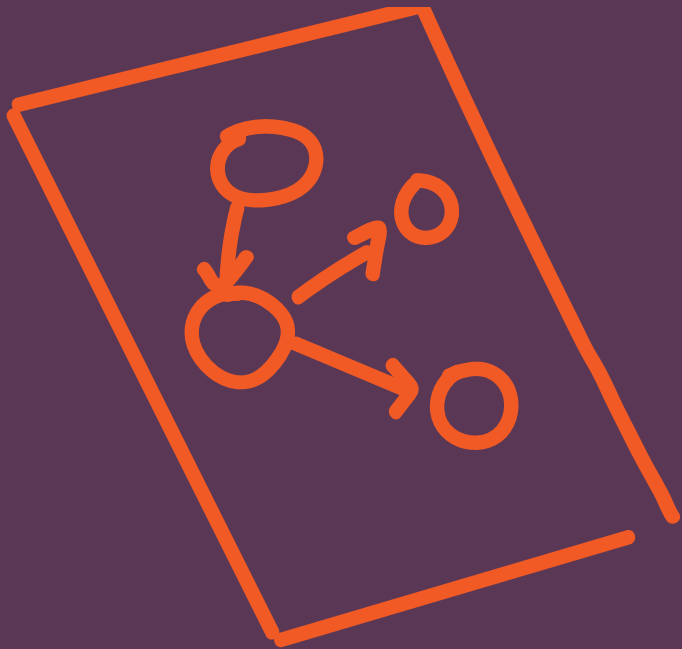
Reflective Practice & Self-Care

Navigators continuously improve their practice through critical reflection on their experience, whilst also looking after their own wellbeing.

Section 3

Activation

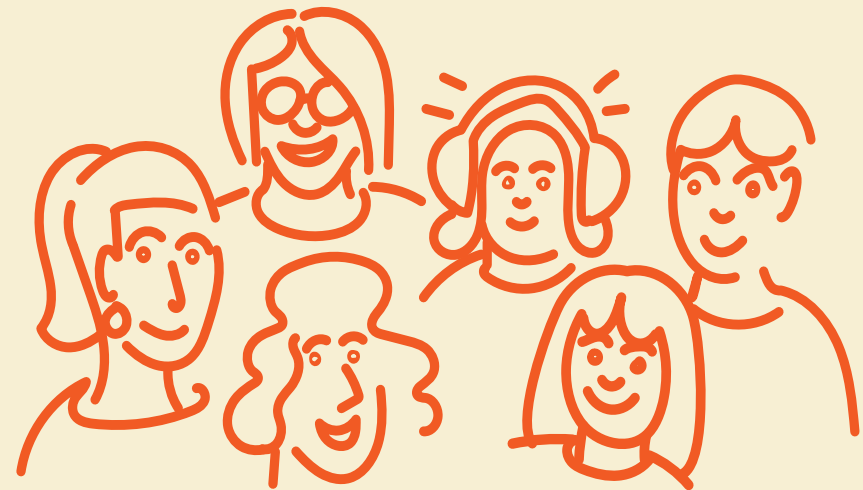
Strategies for onboarding Linkers, Navigators and Connectors.



Onboarding Navigators

When we started to meet as a Network, we learnt that everyone involved was in their first official Linker, Navigator or Connector role. We were on common ground, experiencing the challenges of the job for the first time. We were also doing largely on our own, working things out for ourselves, and in some isolation from colleagues.

On the following pages we share our top tips for making new staff feel welcome in the role.



Onboarding tips for Senior Leaders

 Developed by The Navigators Network, informed by experience

- ✓ Ensure that the Team Leader or nominated Manager(s) has a sound understanding of the Linker, Navigator and Connector role and is able to offer the right supports, especially to autonomous workers. Autonomous working is a core capability of the role, and few managers have experiences of the management practices that actively support it.
- ✓ Make time and space for the training and development activities that Linker, Navigator and Connectors need. The role combines a diversity of capabilities. Given the newness of the role, it's unlikely anyone will enter the role as a fully formed Linker, Navigator or Connector
- ✓ Be prepared for the 'flywheel effect'. Once Linker, Navigator and Connector roles are established and known, demand can quickly exceed capacity. Having a plan in place in advance of this happening will enable you to respond in a way that is kind to the people seeking support from you and your team.
- ✓ Shape on-boarding and training to the medium - e.g. how to work in person-centred, trauma-informed and culturally competent ways face to face, in a single phone call or via text message.
- ✓ Ensure that roles are designed with time to continually reconnect with service providers and individuals that are new in post. Service systems are always changing, and there is often a high turnover of staff in these systems - making it hard to know who to link to.
- ✓ Consider introducing processes to review who is connected into and stays in the service e.g. case reviews, clinical supervision, referral criteria, an intake panel. Having in place processes to ensure that Linkers are not holding onto people for whom there is no service.
- ✓ Put in place routines for supervision that support Linkers to maintain their wellbeing through how they plan their work, organise their time and conceptualise their role. Autonomous roles are particularly susceptible to burnout.
- ✓ Show an understanding of why this role exists in your organisation and how this will help to meet the need(s) of the community. Why have you chosen to design the role as a Linker, Navigator or Connector?
- ✓ Introduce a buddy system, especially in national teams where colleagues are working across the country without the support of colleagues.
- ✓ Be clear on role expectations - how will we know when someone is doing well? How is performance measured?
- ✓ Engage in the community relationships that are being built by Linkers, Navigators and Connectors, to ensure a smooth transition and the maintaining of trust and relationships when staff move on.
- ✓ What's the handover process when staff move on? This is a process of ensuring that the trust built over time with the community partners is maintained and not lost. When someone leaves, they rarely hand over the relationships that have made their job possible - this is important, for continuity of service as much as continuity of relationships.

Onboarding tips for Navigators

🌸 Developed by The Navigators Network, informed by experience

- ✓ The time to start building trust and relationships with referral agencies is right at the start. It's a constant, but the more you do in the beginning, the sooner you'll start to see results.
- ✓ Arrange regular, informal check-ins with colleagues.
- ✓ Ask your buddy for their advice (if you don't have one, ask for one)
- ✓ When you are starting out, check in every 3 months or so with the services that you have started to refer to. Are you getting the referral process right? Do you need to do something differently? What else do they need/can you send?
- ✓ Try to use the right language for the sector that you're in. For example, you may find yourself working in e.g. a medical ecosystem, although your service has a slightly different focus. What words do you need to use to get through? Being able to adapt in this way is important. Ask your buddy what they notice. How should I frame my language and approaches in different contexts and situations (with different service providers)?

"The on-boarding of new staff is a really important part of the process. A lot of services in the Network didn't have that. It can make it really difficult for consistency amongst teams, particularly those national teams that aren't working together every day."



Reflective practice is fundamental

☀️ Developed by The Navigators Network, informed by experience

Reflective practice is fundamental for Linkers, Navigators and Connectors.

There are many ways to offer opportunities for reflective practice, some are formal, others informal. Either way, time away from client-facing responsibilities to engage in reflective practice is essential. For continuous improvement and learning. And to avoid burnout.

Resilience is important to the success of navigators. They constantly face complex situations that can impact on emotional wellbeing. Several partnerships highlight the value of regular reflective practice as a way to help build resilience amongst navigators. Reflective practice provides an opportunity for navigators to share concerns relating to the role and importantly to resolve issues and move on.

(Taken from the Fulfilling Lives' Partnership Briefing 'What makes an effective multiple disadvantage navigator?')

- ✓ Seek out collaborative spaces to share. Networks and Communities of Practice are great sources of information and learning. They can also be rich in opportunities for reflective practice. We have experienced this with The Navigator Network. Most of the Network's members attend other external forums and engage in local networks. Every space offers something different.
- ✓ Seek out different types of supervision. As members of the Navigator Network, we have found that individual supervision, group supervision and external supervision all have a role to play. Picking the right supervisor is important - it comes back to relevant training. A supervisor who is familiar with the type of work that you do (perinatal infant mental health) plus service navigation (how we work; why we do what we're doing). A lot of the themes are systems issues, like having a Manager that understands
- ✓ Seek out a buddy. A buddy is not just for induction!
- ✓ Seek out coaching - especially where this links back to practice frameworks.
- ✓ Other ideas to support reflective practice include team meetings, inviting in guest speakers and attending external conferences.

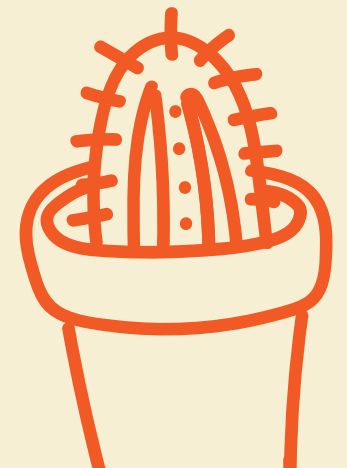


Training is important

Linkers, Navigators and Connectors work between systems; they negotiate within and beyond their own service and are persistently person-centered in their approach. Members of the Navigator Network came from a broad range of professions - nursing, primary and allied health, human services, social work, youth work - the list goes on. This can make the identification of relevant Linker, Navigator and Connector training challenging.

The Linkers, Navigators and Connectors in the Network have an impressive collection of qualifications, skills, attributes and past work experiences to celebrate. All demonstrate capacity to engage at a high level. We need to do more to support the continuous development of this highly skilled workforce.

The Understanding Linkers research paper and the Navigator Network Co-design Team both identified the lack of go-to, relevant training for Linkers, Navigators and Connectors. The co-design team shared examples of third-party training that they were drawing on to build the capabilities listed in the Capbilty Framework. As there is no training specific to Linker, Navigator and Connector roles people's approach was to take training that was 'sort of right' and then shaping it for their context.



Section 4

Future

Emerging developments in Linker, Navigator and Connector roles.



The growing need for linking

Belonging to The Navigator Network has shown us that we belong to an ever-expanding group of highly skilled and highly motivated professionals loosely called Linkers, Navigators and Connectors. We should hold our heads high as we describe what we do. Our work is changing lives, and highlighting what is broken in many of the different systems and processes that we find ourselves and our clients caught up in. Our work matters!

As members of The Navigator Network, we are unanimous in our view that there is a growing need for Linkers, Navigators and Connectors in the Social Support Sector. In our conversations we identified four reasons there will be an ongoing need for Linkers.

1. The silos that exist between Government Departments and across the Federation mean that the pace of change is slow. This is unlikely to change in our lifetimes. There will always be a need to work around the gaps and limitations of the current support systems that are in place.
2. The right help and support, where it exists, is not readily available. Services, if they exist, usually have long waitlists. In contrast, individuals and families looking for help can usually talk to a Linker, Navigator or Connector almost immediately.
3. Individuals and families that are vulnerable and overwhelmed have decreased capacity to navigate the complex service system by themselves. Linkers, Navigators and Connectors operate through a culturally aware, trauma informed and strengths-based lens. They stretch systems, waitlists and closed books to get someone the help and support that they need. They are relentlessly creative in their approach to problem solving.
4. Change is constant. We operate in an ever-changing landscape. Linkers, Navigators and Connectors know which services have been refunded and which ones have not. As systems change and evolve, we believe that the role of Linker, Navigator and Connector is likely to become more valuable, not less over time. Especially for those that are vulnerable.

Service and System Navigators

The 2-year Navigator Network pilot brought together professionals working predominantly in field-facing roles; enabling disadvantaged children, young people and families to get access to the support that they need from the systems that have become too onerous for them to understand and access on their own. We refer broadly to these roles as Service Navigator roles.

In the second year of the Network's existence, we came to realise that a slightly different type of Navigator is emerging, that of System Navigator. Here are two examples.

Example Systems Navigator:

Systems Navigator, Karitane



A key feature of the System Navigator role at Karitane is bringing services together to mobilise individuals and groups around a shared vision and strategy for the future through community leadership and collaboration. As a System Navigator and Program Lead you hold the space; you hold the relationships with those involved and try to get those that aren't yet involved to the conversation table.

Shared measurement is a key component, as is advocating together for social and systems change. Village Connect in Southwest Sydney is Karitane's leading example of Service Navigation in action. You can find out more [here](#).

Example Systems Navigator:

Nurse Navigator Program, Queensland Health



There are 400 Nurse Navigators working across the Queensland health system and one of them was part of the Navigator Network. Among the 400 there is a very wide spectrum of expertise and specialisation, the Nurse Navigator who joined our network was part of the Navigate Your Health Program:

The Navigate Your Health pilot program commenced operations in January 2018 as a Brisbane-based pilot, developed through a partnership between Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service (CHQ HHS), the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women (DCSYW) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service - Brisbane (ATSICHS Brisbane). The program seeks to improve the health outcomes of children and young people in statutory care.

A key feature of the Nurse Navigator role in the Navigate Your Health Program is facilitating a safe and efficient patient journey across the continuum of care to support children and young people from both Child Safety and Youth Justice pathways.

The Navigate Your Health program is an example of inter-agency collaboration and investment to address the needs of vulnerable and at-risk populations across our communities, harnessing shared vision, partnership and ongoing collaboration to innovate services so they respond to children and young people's needs. This work is underpinned by the Nurse Navigator principles of a) coordinating patient centred care b) creating partnerships c) improving patient outcomes and d) facilitating systems improvement.



The Navigator Network

Led by SEED

