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Employment counselling: what works for disadvantaged people

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Introduction

This research review has been carried out by Vocational Rehabilitation Consultants Ltd within the Framework of an ERASMUS+ EU co-funded project. The research looked for good quality evidence from world-wide reports of studies, to identify the active ingredients in employment advice offered to disadvantaged unemployed people. This research forms a significant part of the work of an EU ERASMUS+ project: **Skills Training for Effective Practice** (STEP Project number: 2014-1-SK01-KA200-000489) led by VRC Ltd (Great Britain) and TREXIMA (Slovakia), Cooperation For a Better Future (Slovakia), M.M.C Management Center (Cyprus), Human Profess Közhasznú (Hungary) and Institute for Sustainable Technologies – National Research Institute (Poland). These partners have carried out comparative trials of training based on these findings for advisors.

Theoretical framework

There are many models of career counselling and employment advice. Few have been subjected to rigorous testing, and we found frequent cross-referencing, giving an impression of validity that is not always supported by independent evidence.

We focussed on the ability of clients to identify desired and good-enough job opportunities, and to make competitive efforts towards work. We gave weight to evidence from controlled trials showing more clients getting work, staying in work, and getting more pay¹. We did not compare the career counselling theories. We identified the behaviours and skills of advisors can be applied in support of clients in the labour market. To do so we include evidence from studies of psychology, therapy and change management.

People in certain 'disadvantaged' groups are at high risk of unemployment, but membership of any group is not a sole cause for an individual's unemployment. We prefer a definition of disadvantage that relates to labour market capacity and captures the needs of the individual, and the goal of the advisor:

'inability for whatever reason, to compete fairly for jobs with the majority of others in a realistically chosen sector of the labour market'.

Method

We reviewed over 200 literature and research publications on counselling, employment, careers advice and guidance, and texts referenced within them. We gave priority to conclusions based on RCT methods, consistent findings of systematic reviews of high quality studies, and lower priority for limited or inconsistent evidence in single, or in reviews of multiple, studies. We looked evidence concerning disadvantage, labour-market competence and the impact of treatments. Few of the papers reviewed reached high standards of validity or quality. Those that did provided broadly consistent findings.

A small number of good quality studies have shown conflicting results for, and in one case actual harm done by, services. Their own researchers have been cautious about drawing conclusions, citing differences in implementation and context. This leads us to think that good results can only be obtained by well-designed and resourced services with clear goals, strong measurement and skilled staff.

We found little evidence for

- decline in job-seeking effort over increasing durations of unemployment
- differences between private, public or NGO service providers²
- the effectiveness of some widely applied commercial products and psychometric tests

¹ for example Proudfoot, J., Guest, D., Carson, J., Dunn, G. and Gray, J. (1997). Effect of cognitive-behavioural training on job-finding among long-term unemployed people. *The Lancet*. 350, 9071 (1997), 96-100.

² for example Van Stolk, C., Rubin, J., Grant, J. (2006). Benchmarking of the Use of Personal Advisers in Jobcentre Plus. Rand Europe TR-374-NAO.

- benefits from subsidies and grants for employment for economically excluded people
- benefit of ‘professionalisation’ of services, which is being pursued in several countries.

A small number of good quality studies describe the skills of advisors but deciding which advisor skills are effective is hampered by the practice of evaluating whole programmes, which makes it hard to identify their active ingredients. Few studies distinguish inactive from active ingredients in employment advice. We identified that good quality trials of successful programmes all point in the same direction as well-researched techniques used in counselling, behaviour modification and skill development. We cannot rule out that this is because they share some common factor (similarity of design for example), but we infer with some confidence that they are the active ingredients in programmes.

Analysis and Interpretation

Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs)

Most European countries provide ‘Active Labour Market Programmes’ (ALMPs) which require benefit recipients to seek work as a condition of their benefits. International experience is that the impact of ALMPs is difficult to assess and less than hoped for. There is also widespread analysis showing that employment subsidies have inefficiencies that lead to unearned subsidy to employers and cause displacement and substitution effects.

In offering help, we should be sure that what we do is actively helpful. It seems possible, and the evidence does not contradict, that some ALMPs do not make a positive difference over a large sample of clients. The impact of participation alone, separate from the quality of the programme, on job-seeking is not revealed by the literature. Among the well-conducted studies, certain programme designs are more effective than controls, but there are also a examples of ineffective or harmful programmes³.

Personal beliefs and experiences

There is evidence that the desire for a job is a significant factor for successful placement in paid employment, and widespread evidence that beliefs have a very strong influence on desires, effort and action. Studies have found that heightened self-efficacy and personal development training:

³ see Nicaise, I. (ed) Best Practice in the Evaluation of Labour Market Programmes for Vulnerable Groups (2005) EC DG employment & Social Affairs.

- improves job seekers' ability to find employment
- improves self-esteem, self-efficacy, coping skills, life-satisfaction and mental health
- results in higher earnings and job satisfaction
- increases motivation among those who continued to be unemployed.

Programme design

There is evidence that the interaction between the client and their advisor is a (and possibly the) significant contributor to client's progress⁴. Within the more successful designs are

- psychological measures and approaches to supporting clients
- direct links from the programme to the jobs market
- training in job search techniques, providing support during job entry, and high quality contacts with employers
- advisors who are aware of welfare support services, aid for employers, and the main aspects of legislation. Employment advisors may only need to know the key facts and where to find more information and resources.

Knowledge and Tools

We recognise that there are many practical tools that can be used by advisors. We have seen little evidence of their effectiveness in helping disadvantage people. There are risks in using diagnostic tools: some clients feel inappropriately challenged by tools that identify problems with numeracy and literacy.

Special groups

We have seen nothing to contradict the view that what works for one group of people will work for another. In our view, the effective skills can be enhanced by use in settings adapted to clients' needs. Tailored provision should be consistent with effective provision, accessible, usable, able to meet clients' actual needs and relevant to labour market conditions

Using a model programme

Interaction between skilled staff and clients must be included in any design. Some model programmes such as Individual Placement and Support, JOBS II and Changing Wonky Beliefs include fidelity descriptors that can be used⁵.

⁴ Williams, N. and Birkin, R. (2011). Communication style: help or hindrance in facilitating return to work? *Occupational medicine*. 61, 6 (2011), 380-382.

⁵ for example Price, R., Vinokur A., D. (1994). The JOBS Program. SAMHSA Model Programs.

Advisor contact time and caseloads

There is very little evidence about how much time advisors should spend with clients, nor what their caseloads should be. Current practice ranges from 12 clients per advisor to over 100. An initial discussion is expected to take 30 minutes to 1 hour, but longer periods are reported. Our view is that giving some control over interventions to client and advisor is likely to be more effective than insisting on fixed schedules. Frequent contact facilitates the working relationship, and our own estimate is that caseloads for intensive support should be under 30, and may be as low as 10 or 15 clients per advisor.

Telephone counselling

There is little comparative research on telephone counselling for employment. One work on telephone counselling with clients with health problems noted that telephone techniques are effective for

- assessment and triage in health management
- co-ordination of services
- provision of information and advice
- and return to work, but the latter was based mainly on practice exemplars.

Our impression is that the telephone is a very useful addition to an advisor's toolkit. We have no reports of the use of skype and social media.

Selection and profiling

The main approaches to selecting clients for services are by duration, social and personal profiling, self-selection or by advisor assessment. All have significant problems of deadweight, inaccuracy, unfairness or cost. Another approach can be imagined: there is strong evidence from social learning theory that confidence for tasks in prospect is a good predictor of effort and success⁶. We suggest that it should be possible to identify people in need of employment support by measuring their self-efficacy for labour market activity and to target services accordingly.

Information sharing and co-ordination

There is evidence from some programmes that information sharing between local service providers and authorities can be helpful in co-ordinating services to the benefit of clients. Conversely, there are anecdotal reports of practical difficulties when the various services do not co-ordinate well. However, we have no direct evidence of the impact of co-ordination, and must rely on the common sense view that it is better to remove organisational obstacles than to let them remain.

⁶ Bandura, A. (2012). *Self-efficacy. The Exercise of Control*. W.H. Freeman & Co, New York.

Advisor Skill and activity

Skilled interpersonal support and communication is the most important active ingredient in employment advice. For evidence of skills to be used, we have to turn to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Solution Focussed Brief Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, and the extensive evidence that identifies self-efficacy as a predictor of effort and success in working towards life goals. It is important to our analysis that

- programmes that show success in randomised controlled trials refer to or make use of counselling skills that have been studied in connection with these therapies
- we believe that the skills are transferable to employment advice. This belief is supported, though not proven, by exemplars from coaching and mentoring in both employment and non-employment fields^{7, 8}.

To be effective, the advisor should make use of specific and learnable behaviours. Our full report provides more detail, but here, in brief summary only, we list them as:

- Active Listening and Exploring
- Supporting change
- Feedback
- Cognitive Rehearsal
- Problem solving and barriers to work
- Action Planning
- Providing information

Career choice, Job search skills and Sustainable work

Advisors and clients make choices about their occupation and career, often with imperfect knowledge of the possibilities. We feel that career advice should include development of labour-market competence. Advisors may be specialist in career selection, but all advisors should be prepared to help clients consider their choice of occupation, employer and what compromises to make for the career, among other things. Advisors should help clients to assess actual job-content and reach decisions that are sensitive to nuances in work patterns and demands. Advisors use a exploratory conversations, work-experience, work-placements and clients' own research and exploration to identify careers.

⁷ Blonk, R.W., Brenninkmeijer, V., Lagerveld, S.E. and Houtman, I.L. (2006). Return to work: A comparison of two cognitive behavioural interventions in cases of work-related psychological complaints among the self-employed. *Work & Stress*. 20, 2 (2006), 129-144.

⁸ Eden, D. and Aviram, A. (1993). Self-efficacy training to speed reemployment: Helping people to help themselves. *Journal of applied Psychology*. 78, 3 (1993), 352.

Well-structured practice and training in job-search is a valuable part of an anti-disadvantage programme. The training should be relevant to the chosen sector, job and locality. Evidence from training and skill development is that the following should be included:

- Learning Needs Analysis (LNA) should determine what clients need to learn
- The learning method should be appropriate for the required learning
- learning needs skill practice without mistakes in performance, gradual change in behaviour, moving closer and closer to the target behaviour, and advisors with teaching skills
- considerations of access, usability and skill development are important in the choice and design of e-learning methods. Practical learning of skills cannot be entirely replaced by computer interactions.
- there should be a pre-assessed maximum number of learners, to reflect the programme, the intensity and the need for trainers to be able to monitor progression and give support
- there is contradictory evidence on mixed ability groups. Some results show diversity linked to increases in job-search efficacy, but unaffected by age, gender, and race diversity. One good quality study showed that self-efficacy is raised most for those who start from a low point. Those with high self-efficacy at the start do not do well and in some cases they may actually have reduced self-efficacy
- action learning sets can enable relationships to be supportive for learning
- training must be intellectually, physically and technically accessible⁹.

Employers

There is little scientific study of employers' needs. Our understanding is that close involvement with employers provides access to vacancies and can help overcome prejudice. It provides clients with important knowledge about the local labour market, which employer is recruiting, what jobs are available. Advisors can work with employers to map out job requirements and prepare clients. Interview guarantees can be helpful, and are widely reported in the literature. There is no evidence that statistical sources can identify this information in sufficient detail to be helpful.

Advisors should be able to coordinate the work of various public agencies and NGOs on behalf of employers.

⁹ Booth, D., Birkin R., O'Malley, J. (2009). *Trainer Training Research Principles and Design Guide*. Department for Work and Pensions/TRAVORS.

Employers sometimes show prejudice against some clients. A good relationship between advisor and employer can ease discussions. Advisors should be aware of the legislation on personal data and should discuss any disclosure with the client, who will make their own decision.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the extent or strength of one's belief in one's own ability to complete tasks and reach goals, in specific situations. The principles for development of self efficacy have been used in employment programmes that have been shown to be more effective than controls in randomised controlled trials¹⁰. No other method has, as far as we can tell, been so explicitly tested.

Self-efficacy is predictive of effort, ability to continue in the face of difficulties, and of performance. It is important in employment advice because by expressing their level of confidence for specific tasks, clients can choose pathways to employment that are likely to succeed, and by applying methods that improve self-efficacy, advisors can help clients to become confident and capable of completing tasks.

Studies have found that personal development training improves job seekers' ability to find employment; and results in higher earnings and job satisfaction. It improves self-efficacy, coping skills, life-satisfaction and mental health, and increases motivation among those who remain unemployed.

Self-efficacy can be raised by using well-tested approaches. There are four main sources for self efficacy. They are, in order of greatest influence: mastery experiences, social modelling, social persuasion, and psychological responses moods, emotions and personal feelings.

Conclusions

Disadvantage is normally described by reference to some social or personal quality such as disability, migration, ethnicity. These are only weakly connected statistically and causally with labour-market disadvantage. Social and personal profiling techniques to identify clients in need of support incur high costs and tend to be inaccurate. Descriptions of what works have a great deal in common across various groups; we recommend that groups should have both general 'what works' support and also personalised support.

¹⁰ for example Larson, A.B. (2008). The development of work self-efficacy in people with disabilities. Department Of Special Education, Rehabilitation, And School Psychology, University of Arizona.

Evidence based on high quality randomised controlled trials is rare. Evidence in the field of interpersonal therapy and guidance provides solid findings for behaviours that are relevant for advisors and consistent with the good quality studies of employment advice.

We note that positive results from employment advice need to be distinguished from what would occur without any intervention. Many ALMPs have a weak record of diminishing disadvantage, and may include substantial dead-weight effects.

The motivating effect of belief in the possibility of work, and the feedback from the labour market to belief creates complex relationships between job-seeker and the labour market. Advisor behaviours using the psychology of belief and behaviour add to the effectiveness of employment programmes.

The organisation and management of services can have an impact on outcomes. There are model programmes that can be followed, and any divergence should be carefully justified.

The body of evidence shows that more successful programmes

- apply interpersonal and labour-market skills of advisors; the quality of the client-advisor relationship is critical to success.
- use live contact with employers to identify vacancies and to gain labour market information
- include systematic activity that helps clients choose work, find work, and compete against others for work
- apply active learning processes, and encourage self-management and discovery of the labour market by clients
- encourage self-efficacy and confidence in clients.

Group work with unemployed clients has advantages: extra resources are available in the group with a cost saving compared with individual guidance. Group work also has risks, and care has to be taken to avoid the possibility of doing harm to some individuals.

The application of technical, statistical or psychometric tests to match individuals to jobs is neither indicated nor contraindicated by our work. If they are based on good evidence and used as intended they can be helpful but not a replacement for the skills of advisors.

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Summary

The research aimed at identifying the ‘active ingredients’ in effective help for disadvantaged people in finding sustainable employment. A survey of over 200 research studies and papers was undertaken, giving priority to the randomised controlled trials (RCT) and independent studies. Parallel findings from good quality research in the field of psychology, interpersonal counselling and motivation were introduced. The quality of relationship between counsellor and unemployed client was found to be the most significant factor in successful support, and detailed descriptions of relevant counselling skills and behaviours are available. Methods that build self-efficacy enhance job selection, search, competition and job-keeping skills among clients. Direct contact with employers provides useful information on vacancies and job tasks and can help overcome prejudice. Programme design can influence outcomes positively or negatively. The research has been developed as a curriculum for skills of employment counsellors.

Doradztwo zawodowe dla osób długotrwale bezrobotnych

Streszczenie

Podjęte badania w projekcie Skills Training for Effective Practice miały na celu określenie „aktywnych form” skutecznej pomocy osobom długotrwale bezrobotnym w poszukiwaniu zatrudnienia. Przeanalizowano ponad 200 badań i opracowań badaw-

czych, które miały pierwszeństwo przed randomizowanymi badaniami kontrolowanymi (RCT) i badaniami niezależnymi. Wzięto także pod uwagę wnioski z badań w dziedzinie psychologii, doradztwa interpersonalnego i motywacji. Najważniejszym czynnikiem pomyślnego wsparcia okazała się jakość relacji między doradcą a bezrobotnym, a także szczegółowe opisy odpowiednich umiejętności i zachowań doradcy. Metody budowania własnej skuteczności zwiększają wybór stanowiska, wyszukiwania, konkurencji i umiejętności utrzymywania stanowiska wśród klientów. Bezpośredni kontakt z pracodawcami dostarcza użytecznych informacji na temat istniejących wakatów i zadań związanych z pracą oraz może pomóc w przezwyciężeniu uprzedzeń. Schemat programu może wpływać pozytywnie lub negatywnie na wyniki. Badania zostały opracowane jako program nauczania umiejętności doradców ds. zatrudnienia.