

More and Better Jobs for Older Workers

“ Jobcentre Plus Practical Experience”

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Overview

Two recent key UK reports, “Ageing and Employment Policies” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and “Tackling the Barriers to the Employment of People” (UK National Audit Office) highly commend the initiatives that the UK Government has introduced through the Department of Work and Pensions including Jobcentre Plus. However in line with European demographic trends, these successful initiatives need to be built on to help alleviate future skills shortages and potential slowdown of economic growth. This summary report of “Jobcentre Plus Practical Experience” reflects on what has worked well and what more needs to be done in terms of the individual counselling, placement and activation of the unemployed.

Individual Counselling

The Customer’s perspective: We have learnt that without intervention the labour market does not work well for the over 50’s. Nine out of ten people who start job-hunting over the age of 50 give up within 12 months, whilst eight out of 10 people over 50 made redundant never work again. Around 75% of customers between the age of 50 and 65 are on Incapacity Benefit. Older people have identified a number of forms of support they require to help them overcome the barriers to employment and learning which include: ▶ Skills assessments ▶ Accessible, personally relevant, up-to-date and sufficiently detailed information ▶ Advisers who are prepared to listen and motivate ▶ Adviser continuity and feedback ▶ Help towards personal presentation, writing CV’s, interview techniques, jobs and self-advocacy ▶ Training opportunities ▶ Work trials, work sampling and work experience ▶ Peer group support ▶ In-work support. Many suffer from de-motivation and rejection, viewing that society and former employers reckon they are of no value. This attitude can be personally destructive. Many feel it would be all too easy to assume that society is right and that they should resign themselves to the employment scrap heap. A lot of older jobseekers want to start a second career rather than think solely of a future of stacking shelves in supermarkets or issuing car park tickets, (which can be an immense waste of the many transferable skills they are not always aware of). Older people should have the opportunity for choice, some require a downshift of responsibility, and others not.

The Staff perspective Jobcentre Plus is the single greatest provider of information and guidance in the UK. However that is not a widely acknowledged role. In line with all countries, client centeredness is balanced against government need to get people off the unemployment register in the most economically viable and appropriate way. Staff may face a mixed agenda and have sometimes been confronted by the priority need to achieve targets rather than meet customers’ career objectives. The staff agenda (which includes many other priority groups such as single parents, ethnic minorities,

people with disabilities) may sometimes clash with the older customer demanding help with a whole range of issues; older customers may demand a lot of time to talk and staff will not always be in a position to give the necessary time. However, a National Employer Panel has been established that will result in closer working between the Learning and Skills Councils, Jobcentre Plus and the Department of Education and Skills; which will make provision for a harmonisation of guidance, learning and employment provision and procedures. Personal Advisers are typically dedicated, committed and enthusiastic about helping older people in to work, although specialist New Deal 50+ advisers are gradually being replaced by multi-skilled advisers in many areas.

Placement/Activation

Jobcentre Plus provides and is developing, more initiatives to assist older workers than the vast majority of helping agencies, especially so for those with limited or no qualifications. (A full summary of current programmes and pilot initiatives will feature in the main report).

Some of the initiatives have worked well?

- New Deal 50+ is an active labour market programme, unique amongst OECD countries. Since its inception in 2001 it has helped encourage 120,000 people in to work, 80% of which are still in work two years later. It is a voluntary programme available to individuals who have been claiming for a minimum of six months. Formerly it offered a direct incentive payment of £60 per week issued as a cheque; (latterly it has been revised so that the payment is less visible and it appears this may have adversely affected popularity because it is now paid as a tax incentive in the pay package). In addition a “in work” training grant is available to assist self-development in the workplace up to the value of £1500.
- Progress to Work - Many older people view incapacity as a pre-retirement route towards a life on pensions. This initiative seeks to remedy that by offering a Personal Adviser case loading approach to remove barriers with some financial incentives.
- Work based learning for adults – This programme is available for customers aged 50+ and offers a work focussed placement within “in house” provider training to increase employability with enhanced state benefit payments.
- Experience Works in the East Midlands of England has been a hugely successful project providing a mature, discreet, flexible and support-working environment for the over 50's with the benefit of peer support. It has been based in colleges and community centres.
- Target Training in York has been equally successful was founded by unemployed redundant people ages over 50. This project recognises that not everyone wants to come to an organisation full of old people. Target has some courses for young people, employed as well as unemployed and this all reduces the stigmatisation that the 50+ unemployed face.

What initiatives could be improved?

- New Deal 50+ training grant – currently underused but closer working with the Learning and Skills Council's policy of self development within the workplace will positively impact on the take up of this positive opportunity in the work place.

- Work trials – offers an up to three-week work placement on a trial basis with expenses paid, no wage but with no effect on benefit entitlement.
- Rolling out an EmployAbility strategy (See in North Yorkshire reference).

Changing Attitudes

At the end of the day we have to change attitudes. Age is an arbitrary and often socially- constructed concept, it says to the individual “This is what and where you are expected to be, at this time in your life”. If society slaps a badge or a label on someone then they soon come to accept that badge or label.

In North Yorkshire: We have been part of the vanguard of campaign to eradicate age discrimination. We have tackled the issues wholesale through our EmployAbility initiative: this is reputedly the most successful current illustration of involving local employers in age diversity issues in the UK. We considered how:

- Potential employers view the customer
- How Jobcentre Plus views the customer
- How society views the customer
- How the customer views themselves

By working in partnership we have created a microclimate where age is not a factor to employment and development and offers much to the benefit of the individual and local economy. (A comprehensive list of references will be made available in the extended version of this report).