



SKILLS AND LEARNING

ACTION PROJECTS: LESSONS LEARNED

The main lesson learned by the SWOOP Skills and Learning projects was the continuing need for information, advice and guidance (IAG). This was critical in supporting older people back into the labour market, or in enabling them to enhance their prospects. The project highlighted the multiple barriers faced by many older people who have become disengaged from the labour market. They often face poor preparedness for jobsearch, age discrimination, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, mental and physical health difficulties, lack of qualifications, out-of-date skills, poor self-awareness, and ignorance of transferable skills.

Typically the “quick-fix off-the shelf solutions” without preliminary needs analysis are inadequate for these clients. Often our clients’ confidence would be at rock-bottom, and until this was addressed there would be little chance of progression into the job market. There was little evidence that conventional transactions with statutory agencies had done more than drive confidence down.

Client Needs

Our clients benefited from the **intensive one-to-one personal support**, advice and guidance that they were given on the project. On average clients received more than 12 hours of support. One important aspect of such support is its signalling of the worth of clients. Clients who have been away from the labour market or made redundant will often feel devalued. An important benefit of the IAG projects was that by investing significant time with clients they began to regain some sense of self-worth.

“When they were with us in our one to one sessions we made them feel that they were the most important person in the world.”

(Action project provider)

Contrary to received wisdom SWOOP found that *early intervention* with practical support is important for older people who lose their jobs; when they have reached the six month threshold many will have entered the spiral of descent into despair and disengagement from the labour market. Those who have worked for most of their lives who perhaps find themselves redundant will have suffered a massive blow to their confidence and self-esteem. Often prompt

reassurance and practical help with job search will springboard them back into work. Many may never have applied for jobs in any formal way, and are at a loss as to where to begin.

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The perception amongst older job seekers, with some justification, is that younger advisers cannot appreciate the richness of their life experience, the challenges that they have faced, the demands that have been placed on them, the skills, knowledge and capabilities that they have accumulated. It is commonplace for their lack of qualifications to be confused with a lack of skills. This can be particularly galling for a generation who were often required to acquire on-the-job a range of sophisticated skills which disappeared with the demise of manufacturing and the arrival of our disposable society.

Older people not unreasonably expect there to be some value placed on their accumulated strengths. They believe that mature advisers are better equipped to empathise with them. "What a relief it is to talk to somebody of our own age. The youngsters at the job centre just don't understand..."

The Skills and Learning project focused on supply side solutions. The Employers project

within SWOOP addressed some aspects of the demand side – theoretically increasing demand by raising age awareness and promoting a positive view of age. However, in practice the supply and demand problem remained. If there had been an immediate increase in demand for older workers in response to age discrimination legislation, a different supply problem would have emerged.

The project raised clients' expectations which could not be satisfied locally, where traditionally high numbers of vacancies are in the low skill, low paid sectors, often seasonal. Encouraging older people who have "served their time" to recognise the strengths they might bring to the labour market justifiably tended to generate a reluctance to accept any job. (In contrast the clients who were seeking volunteer placements might have previously worked in high-skilled demanding occupations, perhaps managerial or professional, would often be seeking undemanding volunteer placements.) If the main benefits of the project were around enhanced skills and employability, these benefits are wrecked on the shoals of low-paid unskilled jobs.

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In a similar vein the current arbitrary entitlement threshold of “qualified below level two” that is applied to free IAG and training is a serious impediment to the upskilling of an older workforce. SWOOP did not impose this as an eligibility threshold in its projects. Forty percent of SWOOP beneficiaries were qualified at Level 3 and above. Nonetheless these clients were in need of the kind of support that is currently barred to them on national programmes because they are deemed to be over-qualified.

In consequence large numbers of qualified older workers who are keen to engage in the labour market are lost to it because they are unaware of how to access it.

Workwise

Workwise found that some skilled and experienced older workers are prevented from joining the workplace because of changes in entry requirements. Many jobs now demand qualifications that older people have never achieved. The use of qualifications as a crude proxy for skills discriminates against older people who are often culturally alienated from acquiring qualifications.

Many left school at a time when qualifications were not relevant to them, and where high levels of skill in many areas were acquired on the job. The current qualifications framework is, therefore, unknown territory.

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Many older people have a perception that achieving qualifications now will either be beyond them, or that they will not lead to employment because other barriers will impede them. There is a real need for simple and effective accreditation of prior experience and learning, coupled with a high profile marketing campaign to convince older people that they can achieve qualifications and that these will lead to enhanced employability and acquisition of or retention of employment.

Exeter CVS

It was particularly evident that many SWOOP clients at Exeter CVS faced multiple barriers to employment. The voluntary sector is a major contributor to the region’s economy, and for some clients who face these barriers it must be recognised that their volunteering, aided by support of the kind offered by SWOOP, will be the only economic activity in which they can engage. Any prescriptive Welfare to Work solutions must take account of this.

Exeter CVS’s experience demonstrated that through the provision of SWOOP-type support to volunteers, not only can volunteer recruitment be increased, but the capabilities of volunteers is enhanced. The organisation identified that the IAG provided to potential

volunteers, as part of the project, added real value to the service provided by CVS to member organisations.

It was apparent that Volunteer Organisations are missing a trick by failing to recruit the skills and experience of the highly qualified people who may contribute to the Region's economy by volunteering. Whilst some of our beneficiaries with high level qualifications and professional experience were not interested in using these in a volunteer capacity, many were keen to use their skills thus. The project found that few Volunteer Organisations were advertising for volunteering positions of this nature, despite the fact that their capacity building potential was considerable.

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SEESAM

The very clear lesson of the project is that there is a need for pre-entry self-employment workshops to enable people to make informed decisions about suitability of self-employment as a route to investigate. This should precede any engagement on a programme that involves test trading. Business Links are often perceived as too formal and intimidating for the kind of client that might benefit from this kind of workshop.

Often the kind of work in which they might wish to engage is small-scale lifestyle businesses.

Women often perceive self-employment differently from men, and use different language to characterise their perceptions, talking about "working from home" or "working for myself", when men talk about "starting a business". Recognition of these differences in the promotion of any business start-up programmes is likely to improve their chances of success in engaging women entrepreneurs.

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It's About You

The very clear lesson from this programme is the need for an IAG service that is independent of employers, and available freely or at low cost to all adults. The benefits that are likely to accrue from this are to be realised in retention by employers, and retention in the labour market, in contrast to the large scale early retirement of the 45+ that is the current trend.

The project sought to investigate the willingness of participants to pay for provision similar to that of the project. Most participants chose not to participate in the survey. Of those that did, forty-two percent

would be willing to pay from £50-£100, sixteen percent would pay from £100-£150, and three percent would pay over £150. The common assumption was that these fees would be paid provided the individual was waged.

Action for Blind People

Two main findings emerged. It was clear that, after recovering from initial anxieties and depression associated with acquired visual impairment, 45+ beneficiaries were better able to engage with the job market than the 45+ beneficiary with inherited visual impairment. This is because the predominant educational culture for clients in our target age group was in specialist and sheltered environments.

As policy changes and budgetary restrictions remove sheltered employment opportunities those disabled clients who have only known such settings often have significant difficulties adjusting. For those with acquired impairment, unsheltered working environments are familiar places and they seek ways to adapt and function in them. Indeed, they will often expect to do so. This is also the case for younger beneficiaries with inherited visual impairment who are used to being educated in normal schools as a result of inclusion policies.

It was clear that Action for Blind might improve its provision for those with acquired condition by working with them much earlier.

Therefore the charity will start to work more closely with hospitals in order to engage with clients before their sight has deteriorated.

Programme design

The projects were characterised as Skills and Learning projects. In fact they were IAG projects. The need for skilled and/or qualified IAG practitioners was not fully appreciated by all projects at programme design stage. This was compounded by the loss of our key IAG partner 'nextstep' at the start of the implementation phase.

The need for extensive administrative support to back-up programme marketing and subsequent client support was not fully appreciated. SEESAM, It's About You, and Action for Blind People suffered to greater or lesser degrees as a result of the administrative burden imposed by the project.

The programmes might have been more effectively promoted in early stages had there been a wider appreciation of the scale of the problem that was being addressed.

SEESAM, IAY and Exeter CVS encountered difficulties in different ways – the former because there had been no real current market intelligence on the target recruitment groups, or their needs; the latter because the multiple barriers suffered by clients overwhelmed the available support both

within Exeter CVS and then in placement organisations.

There were gaps in the geographic spread of the project because it did not include partners from all parts of the region. Notably absent were partners representing Plymouth and Bristol.

Implementation

There was the inevitable discontinuity between Action One Planning and Action Two Implementation. This extended to a discontinuity of personnel insofar as the people charged with or recruited for the delivery of the project were different from the people who had planned it. The Central Team did not appreciate sufficiently early that staff within the delivery partners' organisations had little awareness of what the project as a whole was trying to do. Instead the DP was plunged immediately into delivery matters, when in fact there was a need for much more detailed operational planning.

Not only was this the case at the Partnership level, but in some cases it was replicated on a smaller scale at individual partner level. More thoroughgoing involvement of individuals charged with delivery in the planning process during both Action One and Action Two would have removed some of the difficulties encountered by individual partners.

In common with all partnership projects, conflicting agendas and priorities took their toll. This is best addressed by the kind of engagement described above.

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NB. Edited Extract from full evaluation report on Skills and Learning projects from SWOOP.

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