

Getting People Back into Work: The Experience of Jobcentre Plus

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This article is a contribution by a Jobcentre practitioner. The focus is first upon the context for government policies. The policies themselves are next outlined, and some problematic issues are then considered. The author's two case studies are based upon personal experience, and point up the importance of local initiatives within the national framework. Other key aspects include assessing and meeting individuals' needs, whether among the younger or older out-of-work; encouraging older persons to change expectations about themselves; and a measure of age diversity in training provision.

Introduction

Governments, as policy-makers, as employers and as facilitators of employment, have key roles to play in extending the working lives of older people, i.e. those aged 50 and above. Most research considering the role of governments has focused on the first of these: governments as policy-makers. The articles in this themed section are a case in point, although they also address aspects of public sector employment (see for example, Loretto and White, and Vickerstaff). This article explores the role of governments in facilitating employment for those older workers who are currently unemployed. It draws heavily on the first-hand experiences of a Jobcentre practitioner in the UK. The article is in four parts: the overall context in which government policies and the agencies have operated; the role and experiences of the author as a Jobcentre Plus (JCP) employee; the author's outline of certain recent key developments in JCP provisions; and an account of two case studies at local level. The overall objective is to consider the role of government as a key stakeholder in determining what older workers want, in providing a link between the out-of-work and employment.

The overall context

As is made clear in other articles in this issue (e.g. Loretto and White), UK government policy towards older workers has undergone various modifications over the past 30 years or so, reflecting changes both in attitudes towards, and the situations of, those older workers. Against a backdrop of major changes to the sectoral composition of UK industry – shifts out of manufacturing and into services – older workers were pushed out, or quit largely of their own volition, prior to their State pension ages of 65 (men) or 60 (women) (Beatty and Fothergill, 2004).

These developments were given legitimacy by successive governments' measures to encourage the replacement of older workers by (younger) job seekers. The Labour government's Job Release Scheme (JRS) helped to subsidise this process (Organisation

for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 1995: 26) from 1978, whilst the Conservatives continued that Scheme between 1979 until 1988.

Sectoral shifts and public policy contributed towards a declining employment rate among older workers: 37 per cent of men were still working at age 64 in 2000, compared to 57 per cent in 1979 (Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU), 2000: 13). Moreover, most of those men who were not working had become permanently detached from the labour force (PIU, 2000: 15; Beatty and Fothergill, 2004). The situation of older women was more complex: their employment rate increased slightly, but they did not share the substantial growth in employment rates among women as a whole (PIU, 2000: 15–16).

The abandonment of the JRS in the late '80s reflected a growing concern about the situation of older workers (Duncan *et al.*, 2000; Employers Forum on Age (EFA), 2000; Thorne, 2000; EFA, 2002). These concerns included the loss of skills and expertise; the costs to the community, and the public purse, through economic exclusion and payments of welfare benefits – either Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) or Incapacity Benefit (IB); and a widespread unease that much unemployment amongst older persons reflected prejudice and discrimination against them.

Accordingly, the Conservative government set up the Advisory Forum on Older Workers in 1992 (Duncan *et al.*, 2000: 220), whilst the incoming New Labour government sought further to tackle age discrimination, initially through a process of persuasion (Department for Employment and Education (DfEE), 1998), and latterly by statutory means (Whiting, 2005).

Another development in public policy has focused on the 'supply-side' – easing the route of older persons into employment. Labour has developed this policy in several ways, most notably through New Deal 50plus (ND 50plus), and Pathways to Work. ND 50plus has provided three main elements since its inception in 2000 (Atkinson *et al.*, 2003). First, access to a personal adviser within Jobcentre Plus (JCP), to help find employment; second, a tax-free employment credit, for one year, in part to cushion claimants in shifting from a benefit to an earnings regime; and, third, a training grant, so that the unemployed could buy employment-related training on the open market. The first and third elements were buttressed by JCP's developing links with employment and training providers.

Against a backdrop of 2.7 million recipients of IB, of whom three-quarters of a million would like to work, and of whom in turn a substantial proportion were aged over 50 (National Audit Office (NAO), 2004: 4), another major supply-side measure has taken the form of the 'Pathways to Work' programme (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 2002).

Pathways to work pilots are part of the government's strategy that stop IB becoming a one-way street to retirement. The OECD report acknowledged this: 'It is . . . important to restrict further use of the disability-related benefits as a pathway to early withdrawal from the labour market. The government's current strategy stresses that having a health condition does not necessarily mean a person is incapable of doing any work, and that the focus must be upon a person's remaining capabilities, not their incapacity' (OECD, 2004: 13).

New Labour has sought to provide greater advisory support to the unemployed. In addition, given that IB claimants had been forced to cease work, or cease looking for it, because of sickness or disability, the programme also offered health support, in order to ease at least some IB recipients back into work. The 2002 initiative took the form of 'pilots' in various unemployment black spots in Britain, but, four years later, New Labour

was sufficiently pleased with the progress made to extend the programme nation-wide; also now to seek to improve workplace health, and forestall the slide into IB status (DWP, 2006). Moreover, by 2008, the aim was to re-title Incapacity Benefit (in appearing to connote inability to work) as 'Employment and Support Allowance'.

These developments are in line with the OECD's recommendation of 'unbundling disability from benefit receipt, which would shift the character of disability policy away from a passive approach towards a stronger emphasis on activation measures' (2004: 13).

The following sections highlight both the author's own experiences, and those of others with whom he shared the age agenda. We now shift from government policy to the practice: to examine what is happening at grassroots level.

Government policies in practice: some problematic issues

There are three problematic issues to highlight. First, there have been expenditure restrictions. Alongside the supply-side developments, the government has also reined in expenditure on JCP, largely in the form of staff cuts. In contrast to the self-congratulatory tone of government pronouncements (DWP, 2006: 2–12), another view has been extremely critical of the impact of these cuts, as they were brought to bear during 2004–2005. According to a report by a House of Commons Standing Committee (H of C, 2006), the closure of JCP offices required people already lacking resources to travel considerable distances to attend interviews with advisers. Furthermore, the report stated that there was a 'near-complete breakdown' of effective engagement between JCP and employment and training providers . . . and that the front-line JCP staff were found not to have been adequately trained to help vulnerable people. The Committee 'welcomed' the government's assurance that there was no intention, *at present*, to take overseas such DWP business as telephony work; and the Committee noted with concern the low morale among JCP staff.

The expenditure restrictions are likely to have an adverse effect on helping older workers back to work: research (Wright, 2003; Loretto and White, 2004), and official reports (NAO, 2004), have shown the key role that can be played by JCP advisers. For example, Loretto and White studied the situation of IB and JSA recipients, which showed that the bulk of experiences in their dealings with JCP offices were negative. A service under the strain described by the Commons Committee is unlikely to satisfactorily assist the out-of-work. Three criticisms came to the fore in the work by Loretto and White. First, claimants complained that they were 'fobbed off' with the offer of 'poor' jobs. Second, advisers were claimed to have ageist attitudes. A female IB recipient was advised by the Jobcentre that she was 'too old at 56'; her State pension was a mere four years away. Third, advisers pursued a policy of 'one-size-fits-all', rather than trying to tailor advice to individual needs. In short, for JCP to encourage return to work, the service requires more resources in terms of commitment and training.

The second issue with government policies is the potentially malign effect of targets. JCP has targets for placing people in work. Each office has an overall points target, and scores towards it reflect the priority Ministers attach to helping different client groups into work. The structure is intended to ensure that everyone receives help irrespective of their barriers to work, by recognising and rewarding the extra effort involved in helping clients requiring more support to find work. This includes additional points for clients in specified local authority areas identified as being at most disadvantage. However, pressure to meet

job entry targets may mean that staff focus effort on those most ready for work (NAO, 2004). For example, whilst placing lone parents in employment yields the maximum of 12 points, the employment of a ND50plus claimant would yield eight points.

Third, there is a contradiction between government rhetoric and the reality. The author was asked to organise a local snapshot survey of customers in receipt of incapacity benefits. The incapacity section was eager to assist in a positive initiative that may benefit their customers. However his survey came hard on the heels of the 'permitted work campaign'. This positive idea allowed people on incapacity benefit an option of working and earning up to £66 per week without its affecting their benefit entitlement. However, the campaign leaflet was distributed to every individual person on benefit (including those unable to work), and was headed 'Tell us about the work you want to do'. The incapacity team were concerned that a snapshot survey could further add to the high level of complaints the campaign leaflet had generated. The author issued a personal letter of assurance with the survey, based on the government's 'work for those who can, security for those who cannot' vision. He had many telephone calls from benefit recipients appreciating this positive approach, one not dissimilar from that likely to be highlighted in the recent Green Paper on Welfare Reform (DWP, 2006).

This discrepancy between rhetoric and reality suggests that, despite ministerial affirmations to the contrary, certain parts of the governmental machine would rather apply a harsh regime for claimants. The case also shows the importance of leaving individual Jobcentres to gauge their 'local' situations.

Some recent key developments in policy

It is important to note that Jobcentre Plus continually evolves its services and programmes to meet the changing agenda exerted by both the government and its customers. Significantly the latest move is away from a system purely based on Job Entry targets (JET), towards one based on Job Outcome targets (JOT).

The JOT was introduced in April 2006. The aim is to encourage those customers who are able to do so, to use the JCP website, telephone and job points. This then leaves staff more time to concentrate on customers who need help in getting back to work.

One of the key benefits is being able to direct customers to the self-help channels without worrying that performance will be lost – under JOT the job outcomes will be captured in various ways, including the Labour Market System, which keeps detailed records of job outcomes and other key measures. Benefit and Inland Revenue systems will capture other data. The net result should be more provision for staff to assist individuals who fall into Priority Groups, including 50-plus customers.

JOT combines with the National Employer Panel that has been established to encourage closer working between the Learning and Skills Councils, JCP and the Department for Education and Skills; the overall aim is to make provision for a harmonisation of guidance, learning and employment provision and procedures. Additionally, in line with other departments of the Civil Service, JCP is evolving into an organisation where customers will receive the same range of choices and level of service regardless of where they live.

We now turn to two case studies drawing upon the author's local experience, seeking to throw light on the importance of choice for JCP customers. In addition, we would argue

that we must constantly bear in mind that there are clear parallels between the stress levels associated with moving home, and those associated with changing career, facing redundancy or returning to the labour market due to life-changing circumstances.

The case studies

Case study 1: Target training (York)

Based in York, the name Target stands for Third Age Recruitment Guidance and Employment Training. Target was founded in 1995 and in the last four years has moved over 4,500 mature people into employment. The Director (Jim) had been approached by a director of a construction company who said, 'Jim, I've just made six people redundant – I must do something to help them!' The six sat around a table and said, 'We haven't got anything to sell.' They gave Jim verbal CVs, to which he responded, 'You can sell yourselves. There are enough skills and talent sat around this table to set up your own company.' The niche they seized upon related to the many people with previous experience, who had missed out on the computer age; as Jim points out, without IT skills these days 'you are dead in the water'. Target training had been headhunted, by a range of initiatives, such as Learn Direct, invested in computers, and developed a range of training products and bespoke courses.

Jim attributed this success to atmosphere in the organisation, and reckoned that:

it is something you cannot bottle. We are blind to the badges people wear and we home in on the individual. We take age out of the equation, not everyone wants to go to an organisation full of old people. It can stigmatise people. At Target we have some courses for young people and this cross section of age helps inspire the individual. Similarly we have employed people working alongside the unemployed and this further reduces stigmatisation. We've got street cleaners, executive directors, mother superiors and bishops.

One programme named Next Steps resulted from the European Social Fund, co-funding with JCP. Although eligibility for this particular programme is for the over-fifties, the trainees represent a great crosscut of the world as it is. Central to its success at placing trainees into employment was making people believe in themselves again, by improving their self-esteem. Jim concluded that, in his opinion, older people were viewed as always 'someone else and never us'.

We would argue that this case has highlighted several principles: the role of targeted training; the merit of age diversity in the context of training; the importance of assessing *individual* needs; the value of experience; and the significance of changing older workers' perceptions about themselves. Whilst the circumstances and locale were somewhat different, the next case threw up similar principles.

Case study 2: EmployAbility initiative

The North Yorkshire district has been part of the vanguard of a campaign to eradicate age discrimination. We have tackled the issues wholesale through our EmployAbility

initiative: reputedly the most successful illustration of involving local employers in age diversity issues in the UK. We considered how:

- potential employers view the customer
- Jobcentre Plus views the customer
- society views the customer
- customers view themselves

By working in partnership we have created a microclimate where age is not a barrier to employment and self-development, offering much benefit to the individual and local economy. During 2001/2002, York and North Yorkshire Jobcentre Plus ran a series of age diversity events that attracted a significant level of positive interest, both within JCP and with external organisations. These included local and regional employers, voluntary organisations, trade unions, many local, regional and national agencies and a whole spectrum of media coverage. Many members of the public welcomed the initiative, a significant percentage of which have been, and continue to be, helped into employment.

EmployAbility was the campaign name to encourage employers to recruit on the basis of skills and ability, not age. Many employers who came on board in accepting decisions should be ability based then went on to recruit from other 'disadvantaged groups', such as women returners, lone parents and people with disabilities. Overwhelmingly positive feedback was received from the spectrum of stakeholders, including JCP managers, local employers and HR managers, newspapers, and (older) job seekers. The merits of the concept of EmployAbility were affirmed from the perspective of businesses and job seekers alike. One HR consultant was so impressed with the initiative that they pledged to switch their recruitment from employment agencies to JCP. There was also a call to roll out the concept across other regions of the UK.

Conclusions

'What do older workers want?' questions their environmental parameters and appreciates them for what they are. The author's personal experience is based on creating a microclimate where all the advocates are age positive champions in their own right, in an atmosphere where age diversity is mainstreamed and seamless in its delivery. The advisers were made fully aware of third age issues (such as a change of career in later working life), and management commitment obtained to secure and resource this. Licence was granted to promote partnership working and collaboration on the age agenda, resulting in intermediaries to reach those parts otherwise not reached, and coupled to a local circuit of prepared and committed age positive employers.

The cases have also emphasised the need for committed JCP advisers, who are keen to take the initiative in their dealings with claimants. Whilst the cases confirm the heterogeneity of older workers, there might be some merit in downplaying 'age' as focus. Perhaps the focus should not be on older workers as 'special cases'; instead, all of those who are out of work should be treated as 'special'.

Acknowledgement

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Note

1 During 2003, the payment began to be made in the form of a Working Tax Credit: this change seemed to have the effect of reducing claimants' participation in New Deal 50plus (NAO, 2004: 9). The transparency of a giro cheque incentive was replaced by adjustments to tax paid, and it became a much less marketable proposition, according to JCP advisers.

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