

Identifying claimants' needs: Research into the capability of Jobcentre Plus advisers

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The identification of skills and skills needs is a feature of government employment services and is delivered through Work-Focused Interviews (WFIs) conducted by Jobcentre Plus Personal Advisers (PAs). In addition to helping people to prepare and look for work, PAs can refer claimants for training provision or careers advice if this is deemed necessary to make a return to the labour market.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to undertake research to:

- explore how 'skills need' is defined by Jobcentre Plus PAs;
- examine how claimants' skills needs are identified by advisers at the present time; and
- build an understanding of how the identification of skills can be embedded within the Jobcentre Plus offer.

The Jobcentre Plus offer, introduced from April 2011, aims to allow more flexibility to Jobcentre Plus managers and advisers to judge which interventions will help individual claimants most cost effectively. This research seeks to inform that offer.

This research has been entirely qualitative and is based on observations of 112 WFIs, conducted by 57 advisers, across ten Jobcentre Plus districts. Advisers have been observed carrying out WFIs at Stages 1, 2 and 3 of the Jobseekers Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) followed by short, five-minute interviews with PAs to probe on key issues arising from the WFIs and the reasons for actions taken (or not taken) by advisers in relation to skills. Fieldwork for the study was carried out between September and November 2010.

Findings

Screening for skills

Discussions about skills and the identification of skills needs are intended to be central to and embedded within WFIs. The content of these interviews at all stages of the JRFND process was dominated by a discussion about the work claimants had done in the past and their current job goals, and a range of skills issues were discussed.

Advisers taking part in this research did not explicitly perceive a purpose of the WFI to be an opportunity to identify skills or to screen for skills needs and advisers did not use this type of language to describe their activities, although they were engaged in precisely these activities. PAs were much more likely to describe their role more broadly as 'overcoming the barriers to work' faced by claimants.

Although advisers did not differentiate particular skills groups explicitly, they were observed to be covering a range of skills during WFIs that could be grouped as follows:

- basic skills;
- IT skills;
- job-search skills;
- employability skills; and
- vocational skills.

Advisers also regularly checked for up-to-date licences to practice and certification (for example, Security Industry Authority (SIA) cards for the security industry or Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards for the building trade).

Formal skills screening tools, such as the Fast Track (basic skills) assessment tool and the Customer Assessment Tool (CAT), were rarely observed during the research and advisers reported that they did not use these very often in WFIs. Moreover, some advisers stated that they were not familiar with these tools at all. PAs tended to screen for skills needs using the ‘light-touch’ eyes and ears approach: observing claimants reading forms to check for basic skills needs; discussing qualifications and certificates held; assessing communication and interpersonal skills during the interviews. Skills screening tended to be more perfunctory at Stage 1 of JRFND than at the later stages of the process. It was restricted to very apparent needs as advisers were required to collect a great deal of demographic and administrative information from claimants in the New Jobseeker Interview. Skills screening activity increased over the stages of the Jobseekers Regime, and advisers were more likely to explore and discuss claimant’s barriers to work in more depth over a series of WFIs.

The amount of time spent on skills screening within a WFI was difficult to estimate as it is such an integral part of the interview and was observed to occur over the course of the interview. The amount of time spent on skills screening varied considerably and was very specific to the claimant: advisers were observed spending more or less time on skills issues depending on the claimant’s personal circumstances. In some WFIs, it was estimated that as little as ten per cent of the interview was spent discussing skills issues whilst in others this ranged up to 60–70 per cent of the interview.

Referrals from screening

A direct result of some of the skills screening activities observed during WFIs was a direct referral to an external training provider. Advisers were observed approaching referrals in different ways: some advisers discussed a range of potential training options at the beginning of the WFI prior to the identification of specific skills needs; some advisers used the WFI to identify skills needs and then discussed referral options specific to these needs;

and some advisers identified skills needs during the WFI and then attempted to meet some of these needs themselves, for example by giving detailed advice on writing CVs, going through interview skills etc. as well as referring to other provision as necessary. Advisers generally selected a provider on behalf of the claimant, although in some cases only one provider was offering particular training courses and so no decision was necessary. On occasions, advisers signposted claimants to provision and other sources of help rather than referring them directly.

A few advisers were not aware of the provision available in the local area and some were not aware of the eligibility criteria; for example, fast-tracking jobseekers transferring from Incapacity Benefit or Employment and Support Allowance (IB/ESA) directly to provision if necessary. Some advisers were not aware of the services offered by Next Step and so were unable to signpost or refer claimants who may have benefited from the service.

In the main, the referrals observed during the research were thought to be appropriate (by advisers and researchers) and fitted the claimants’ skills needs that had been identified during the WFIs.

Barriers to screening and onward referral

A number of barriers to skills screening and onward referral were identified in the research. Time and process barriers were noted in relation to the process-driven nature of some of the WFIs, and particularly the Stage 1 New Jobseeker Interview, which advisers thought did not allow sufficient time for the exploration of barriers to work. Advisers were observed following the structure of the Jobseeker’s Agreement (JSAg) in many WFIs and many were guided by the screens associated with the Labour Market System (LMS) rather than through an exploratory interview. Poor keyboard skills amongst advisers also impinged on the time available for discussion and the degree to which they could fully engage with claimants. Some advisers expressed frustration that they could not see the same claimant more than once, which left them unable to follow-up on any skills issues they may have

begun to identify. Claimants' language barriers also impacted on advisers' ability to screen effectively for skills needs. An important barrier to skills screening for some advisers was a (perceived) lack of ability: some advisers reported that they did not know how to screen for skills needs.

Barriers to onward referral following skills screening also occurred when advisers were unaware of the provision available in the local area: some advisers were new to the role and were unfamiliar with provision and some reported that there was so much provision it was difficult to identify what was most appropriate. Conversely, in several offices, advisers reported that some provision had been suspended pending funding decisions which meant that claimants had to wait before taking up training options. Some advisers also reported that provision was unavailable for particular claimant groups, in particular older claimants (over 25 years of age) and jobseekers with professional backgrounds. Importantly, a number of claimants present very complex barriers to work, some of which are unrelated to skills – for example, drug and alcohol dependency, homelessness and mental health problems – and these are difficult to overcome.

Drivers of adviser behaviour

Significant variations were observed among advisers with some displaying more effective interpersonal skills and questioning techniques than others. Best practice in relation to advisory skills, as observed by researchers during the WFIs, included: effective questioning techniques, probing into claimants' work experience and skills to identify gaps; exploring claimants transferable skills; and challenging unrealistic job goals, ensuring claimants' commitment to particular courses of action, etc. More negatively, some advisers failed to question claimants adequately and missed key pieces of information, or made judgements about claimants' skills or job goals with little evidence to substantiate their reasons for doing so. Some advisers were more reliant on the JSAg structure or the LMS screens to guide them through WFIs and less confident about having an exploratory discussion with claimants about barriers to work and skills needs.

There are no simple explanations of positive adviser behaviour in relation to skills and skills screening: some 'good' advisers are experienced Jobcentre Plus advisers; some are new Jobcentre Plus advisers; some worked in Integrated Employment Skills (IES) trial offices; some did not. Advisers who displayed more effective techniques in relation to skills screening seemed self-motivated, but more importantly they approached each WFI with an open mind and had used the techniques associated with best practice to elicit information from claimants about their skills and to identify skills gaps. During the research, it also appeared as though some offices had a better approach than others and these tended to be offices with low staff turnover, which facilitated (in part) the exchange of good practice.

Conclusions and recommendations

The overriding conclusion from this piece of research is that Jobcentre Plus advisers can and do understand skills; and that they can and do screen claimants for skills needs and make appropriate referrals to training and other provision to overcome these needs. Moreover, these activities are embedded in WFIs. What is interesting though is that advisers do not use these words to describe what they are doing in WFIs; instead, they report that they are overcoming 'barriers to work'. Although advisers can and do screen for skills needs, it remains that not all advisers do this as well as they might, nor as systematically as they might. The key recommendations coming from this study are:

- Define (or redefine) skills needs and skills groups simply and clearly so that advisers have a 'checklist' against which their screening activity can be undertaken.
- Make the purpose of, and responsibility for, skills screening more explicit as part of the WFI, using language that advisers can understand. It is important that advisers know (and are able to articulate) why skills screening is critical.

- Ensure that advisers have time to, and do, use the Jobcentre Plus work-targeting structure for interviews effectively (Preparation, Introduction, Goal definition, Evaluation, Exploration and Planning (PIGEEP)): advisory services managers and office managers need to drive performance up by monitoring adherence to this structure.
- Identify and provide 'best practice' examples of how skills screening can be done and encourage advisers within offices (and between offices within districts) to share good practice. Managers should facilitate peer support within and between offices.
- Maintain close working relationships with providers, including Next Step, to ensure that referrals are appropriate and meet the skills needs of individuals and employers.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 982 6. Research Report 748. June 2011).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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