



Department
for Work &
Pensions



Small employer recruitment practices

Qualitative research into how small and medium-sized enterprises select candidates for employment

July 2014

Research Report No 855

A report of research carried out by TNS BMRB on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

© Crown copyright 2014.

You may re-use this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence.

To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/> or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This document/publication is also available on our website at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-work-pensions/about/research#research-publications>

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please email:
Socialresearch@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

First published 2014.

ISBN 978 1 909532 91 5

Views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the Department for Work and Pensions or any other Government Department.

Summary

TNS BMRB were commissioned to conduct qualitative research exploring how small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) employers approach recruitment of new employees for semi-skilled or unskilled roles. The project identified the processes employers use to develop, advertise and make decisions about staff vacancies; the factors affecting decision making – including candidate skills, background, interpersonal factors and other variables; and perceptions of Jobcentre Plus – in terms of the quality candidates provided and ‘fit’ of Jobcentre Plus’ offering with employers’ own recruitment processes. Via focus groups and in-depth case studies with a range of SME owners, the research: 1) explored the largely informal recruitment methods undertaken by this business type; 2) identified ‘windows of opportunity’ and barriers to employment within this process; and 3) provided recommendations for the Department for Work and Pensions in terms of preparing Jobcentre Plus candidates to secure employment in SMEs. Key findings included the importance of interpersonal factors in SMEs’ hiring decision (e.g. general communication skill, perception of ‘work readiness’) as opposed to factors such as current employment status or previous experience. Research suggests that with appropriate support the SME group may be a fruitful source of employment even for unemployed or low-skilled jobseekers.

Contents

Acknowledgements	6
The Authors	7
Executive summary	8
1 Introduction.....	12
1.1 Setting the context	12
1.2 Research aims	13
1.3 Research approach and sample	13
1.3.1 Focus groups	14
1.3.2 Case studies	14
1.3.3 Data collection and reporting	15
1.4 Report outline	16
2 The recruitment process.....	17
2.1 To recruit or not to recruit?	17
2.2 Specifying the job and the person	18
2.3 Sourcing candidates.....	19
2.4 Employers' approach to recruitment.....	22
2.4.1 Sift, interview, work trial	22
2.4.2 Curriculum vitae	24
2.4.3 References.....	25
2.4.4 Implications for Jobcentre Plus.....	26
3 The hiring decision	27
3.1 What employers look for.....	27
3.1.1 Personal and interpersonal factors	27
3.1.2 Practical factors	30
3.1.3 Implications for Jobcentre Plus.....	31
3.2 What employers seem to care less about	31
3.2.1 Qualifications	32
3.2.2 Job-specific experience and CVs.....	32

Small employer recruitment practices

3.2.3	Employment status and history	33
3.2.4	Implications for Jobcentre Plus	33
3.3	What employers do not ask about.....	33
3.4	What employers are concerned about	35
3.4.1	Lack of enthusiasm, motivation or engagement	35
3.4.2	Mismatch between candidate behaviour or presentation and job requirements	36
3.4.3	Overqualification	37
3.4.4	Overselling of qualifications or skills	37
3.4.5	Inconsistent employment history or unexplained gaps	37
3.4.6	Implications for Jobcentre Plus	37
3.5	Equalities issues and discriminatory practices	38
3.5.1	Family status.....	39
3.5.2	Gender	39
3.5.3	Age.....	40
3.5.4	Ethnicity and country of origin.....	40
3.5.5	Socio-economic status.....	41
3.5.6	Implications for Jobcentre Plus	41
4	Employer experiences of recruiting through Jobcentre Plus	42
4.1	Perceptions of Jobcentre Plus processes	42
4.2	Views about candidates submitted by Jobcentre Plus	43
5	Conclusions and implications	45
5.1	What is the opportunity?.....	45
5.2	How could Jobcentre Plus better prepare candidates?.....	46
5.3	How could Jobcentre Plus engage SME employers?	48
Appendix A	Case studies	50
Appendix B	Lessons from the research.....	70
Appendix C	Topic guides	72
References	88

Acknowledgements

This research was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions.

The authors would like to thank:

- all the employers that took part in this research for the time they gave us and the frank and open way in which they discussed their recruitment processes;
- Simon Matty and Lewis Childs (Department for Work and Pensions) for their continued advice and guidance throughout the research; and
- Matthew Williams for his assistance with conducting and analysing the group discussions and case studies.

The Authors

Caitlin Connors is a Senior Associate Director at TNS BMRB. She has a BA in Psychology and an MSc in Sociology. Caitlin has a particular interest in issues related to health and wellness, children and families.

Andrew Thomas is a Director of TNS BMRB. He has a social science and statistics (Psychology) DPhil and is particularly interested in the interaction between the individual and the state, especially, the system of state benefits, employment and housing.

Executive summary

Background and methods

TNS BMRB was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to explore how employers approach the recruitment and hiring process for unskilled and semi-skilled workers. This included the factors that influence recruitment decisions and how hiring decisions are made in practice, in order to support Jobcentre Plus customers who are seeking work and further inform the Department's employer engagement practices.

This report presents the findings from a qualitative research study carried out between May and July 2013, and based on:

- **six focus groups with small employers** reflecting a range of industry sectors to explore the range of stated recruitment practices, and
- **three employer case studies**, providing the opportunity to observe any differences in how employers describe their recruitment process and what they do in practice.

The employee recruitment process

Employers' staffing requirements varied considerably, depending on the business size, sector and the nature of job contracts. Reasons for recruiting were:

- **rebuilding** the business following downsizing during the recession of the last few years;
- **expanding** the business following business growth or movement into new markets;
- **replacing** staff that leave as part of the natural process of staff turnover;
- **high turnover** businesses that continually recruit as their sector tends to see a regular flow of employees, particularly in the transport and caring sectors;
- **seasonal** recruitment, especially in the hospitality, catering and retail sectors.

Employers in this study did not generally have a formal approach to specifying the job skills and person criteria for staff vacancies, particularly when looking for unskilled or semi-skilled staff, with neither detailed job specifications nor person specifications being available. The exceptions were where employers required more skilled employees, such as a chef or Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) driver, or for roles where there was an element of risk (such as with a youth worker).

The most frequent recruitment channels used by employers in this study included: word of mouth, unsolicited applications and local advertising – including local papers and shops; employers had some, but very limited experience of using social media, specialist trade publications, recruitment agencies and Jobcentre Plus to recruit employees. While the recruitment practices described by employers were wide ranging, they generally incorporated a three stage process of sifting, an interview and often a work trial.

The sift process was often very informal and could be based on: how a potential employee left a voicemail message and whether the person sounded interested and enthusiastic; how they dropped off unsolicited applications and whether they had dressed appropriately and taken into account the business's busy periods; and informal chats prior to interview.

Interviews were not usually scripted, with no set questions, and with each interview covering different topics. Interviews could be by telephone or face-to-face, with a face-to-face interview always being required before hiring.

Trial periods were common, ranging from one day to a number of weeks; sometimes the trial period was a rolling process until the employer was either satisfied with the employee or they were asked to leave.

Curricula Vitae (CVs) were usually offered by potential employees although not all employers used them. Whilst employers may use them to examine a person's work history, others saw it as a conversational prompt to be used during the interview or as a platform to discuss skills and abilities. Employers were generally suspicious of 'production line' CVs that all looked the same as well as CVs that had unexplained gaps or appeared to oversell qualifications and skills.

References were not always requested and were rarely taken up, primarily because of the view that a previous employer cannot give a bad reference. They were most useful where a candidate's truthfulness was suspected; personal character references were often sufficient where a person had little or no prior employment history.

The hiring decision

In assessing and making the decision to employ, employers have a number of features they look for. There are some behaviours and features that they are concerned about and there are issues that they either do not look for or are not generally concerned about:

- **What employers look for:**

- personal and interpersonal factors – such as motivation and enthusiasm, 'work-readiness', level of engagement with the employer, and overall presentation; and
- practical factors such as employee flexibility and fit with the hours of the job, length of travel to work, or the holding of appropriate certifications (mostly for semi-skilled work).

- **What employers are concerned about:**

- lack of enthusiasm, motivation and engagement with the employer;
- a mismatch between candidate behaviour or presentation and job requirements;
- perceived overqualification;
- overselling of qualifications or skills; and
- inconsistent employment history or unexplained gaps.

- **What employer tend not to look for in an unskilled or semi-skilled candidate:**

- qualifications;
- job-specific work experience or skills, unless a specific skill is required in order to carry out the work in hand;
- current employment status, with unemployment being unimportant if the reasons are deemed acceptable;
- work history, providing gaps are suitable explained.

Small employer recruitment practices

- **What employers do not generally ask about:**
 - candidates' criminal records or criminal history;
 - history of substance or alcohol abuse; and
 - health and mental health issues.

Across the research, there were some employers who spoke quite openly about including some prospective employee characteristics such as age, gender, family status, race and perceived socio-economic status as part of their employee assessment process. While they were aware that this might contravene equalities legislation, at the same time they expressed a fierce need to protect the business that they had built, and indicated that they were not willing to take risks with their livelihood and felt that they 'had to' ask candidates about any issue that might impact on their ability to complete the job at hand or to fit in with the workforce.

Employers' experiences of recruiting through Jobcentre Plus

Experience of Jobcentre Plus was limited, and respondents' perceptions of the Jobcentre Plus offering tended to be based on experiences from some time ago or from the reported experiences of friends and colleagues. Perceptions were fairly mixed overall. On the positive side, Jobcentre Plus was praised for its tenacity in finding candidates for interview and offering space in the jobcentre to carry out the recruitment process. However, the Jobcentre Plus approach was considered by some of the employers in the research to be at odds with their less formal approach to recruitment, giving them a feeling of being out of control of the process in terms of the number and types of people being referred.

While the limited experiences that employers had of recruiting through Jobcentre Plus were mixed, there was a strongly held view that a large proportion of candidates submitted for interview were not appropriate. This was because candidates appeared to: lack motivation to engage with the employer and to discuss previous work or educational experiences; display a lack of knowledge about and interest in the job; dress or behave inappropriately; or seem inappropriate for the job. Employers also thought that too many candidates relied too heavily on the CVs to tell their story.

Conclusions and implications

The research suggests that **small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are often very open to employing Jobcentre Plus candidates, and are not necessarily concerned about issues such as unemployment, lack of qualifications, or lack of specific skills.** If prospective employees can provide reasonable explanations for any gaps or inconsistencies in their skill or employment histories – and can genuinely communicate that they are willing and motivated to work now – SME employers may be very willing to engage them for semi-skilled and unskilled work.

However, despite this general openness the research also identified a range of potential challenges for engagement:

- Jobcentre Plus' offering does not fit with employers' current informal recruitment practice – alongside a general resistance to engaging with more 'formal' recruitment channels;
- Jobcentre Plus candidates do not match the assessment criteria that employers valued; and
- Jobcentre Plus candidates are not prepared for interview using the 'right' criteria.

In order to overcome these challenges, Jobcentre Plus can enhance a candidate's prospects by preparing candidates and engaging with employers in a way that takes into account their specific context, recruitment processes and values. These include:

- candidates need to be prepared for **informal recruitment practices** and understand that **every contact with an employer counts**, including initial voicemail messages and informal telephone or face-to-face chats;
- care needs to be taken with a candidate's **presentation** and understanding of the importance employers place on motivation, enthusiasm, and the ability to communicate willingness to work. Candidates also need to recognise that they have to engage the employer in conversation and demonstrate that they can see themselves in the job role working alongside the employer and other employees. Appropriate dress and behaviour are also essential;
- candidates need to **do their homework** and take a little time to learn about the industry, the nature of the business, and/or the job role. A quick website search can go a long way towards showing an employer that a candidate is interested in more than a pay-cheque;
- candidates must **understand the role that CVs and applications play** and that both provide an opportunity for a candidate to tell the employer about themselves, their experience, and their interest in the job rather than being the basis on which an employer makes their decision. Candidates should be able to explain any gaps or inconsistencies in their employment history. While a good CV will not necessarily get a candidate very far towards getting the job, a bad one can significantly reduce their chances;
- candidates should be **prepared to answer questions about practicalities around work hours, flexibility and travel to work**.

Employers are generally willing to consider Jobcentre Plus applicants but want to ensure that their limited recruitment time is spent considering high quality applicants, and that engagement with Jobcentre Plus is as straightforward and simple as possible. If Jobcentre Plus can help to ensure applicants are as strong as possible and smooth the engagement experience, positive recommendations are likely to circulate via word of mouth.

Potential considerations include:

- providing a more tailored experience, including more sifting of potential candidates that takes into account employer priorities and preferences. It may also be useful for Jobcentre Plus to assess employer preferences in terms of employee presentation and approach to interview which could help avoid inappropriate candidate presentation;
- providing limited applicant numbers in line with employer needs and preferences with a clear and easy option for employers to 'close' applications once they have as many as they need; and
- simplifying the vacancy-taking process so that employers do not need to draw up a 'formal' job specification, or are helped by Jobcentre Plus to put them together.

1 Introduction

There is a body of research which suggests that the stated recruitment practices of employers are not always the same as those in practice. For example, McNair (2005) has indicated that while the policy may be determined by a human resources department and ratified at board level, the practice and decisions are more likely to be operationalised at middle management level. For small employers, where there is no discrete human resources function, there may not be any formal policies, yet there remains a potential disparity between how employers describe their recruitment process and what they do in practice.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) wished to explore how employers approach the recruitment and hiring process, what influences recruitment decisions, and to understand how hiring decisions are made in practice in order to support better its customers who are seeking work, and further inform the Department's employer engagement practices. TNS BMRB was commissioned by the DWP to explore how employers approach the recruitment of unskilled and semi-skilled employees. This report presents the findings from a qualitative research study carried out between May and July 2013, including:

- six focus groups with small employers reflecting a range of industry sectors to explore the range of stated recruitment practices; and
- three employer case studies, providing the opportunity to observe any differences in how employers describe their recruitment process and what they do in practice¹.

1.1 Setting the context

Employers operate in a range of ways in relation to employment policies and practices. Some will have a formal policy that is made available in written or electronic form for employees. Others will not have any formal policies at all. Recent research by Jordan *et al.* (2013) suggests that larger employers and medium-sized businesses with a mainly professional workforce tend to have formal, often written, policies which guide the recruitment process. Small and micro employers are less likely to have formal policies, operating an ad hoc, informal approach to recruitment.

Of course, policy, stated practices and actual practice are not always the same; the presence of a formal policy on recruitment, or otherwise, does not necessarily mean this is followed in practice. In previous work on the Default Retirement Age by Thomas and Pascall-Calitz (2009) for example, it became clear that some firms with formal policies did not necessarily operate according to these in practice; others had no formal policy but had used very flexible approaches to retirement.

Indeed, McNair (2005) has indicated that while the recruitment policies tend to be determined by a human resources department and ratified at board level, in practice recruitment and hiring decisions are more likely to be operationalised at middle management level. For small employers, where there is no discrete human resources function, there may not be any formal policies, yet there remains a potential disparity between how employers describe their recruitment process and what they do in practice.

¹ See Section 1.3 for full methodological details.

When discussing recruitment practices, previous research indicates that employers are primarily concerned with finding the best candidate who has the required educational qualifications, work experience and skill level (McNair *et al.*, 2005; Jordan *et al.*, 2013). While they may, or may not have formal policies or approaches to recruitment, existing research suggests that employers are generally looking to recruit the 'best person for the job'.

1.2 Research aims

DWP wished to explore how employers approach the recruitment and hiring process, what influences recruitment decisions, and to understand how hiring decisions are made in practice.

With this key objective, research was designed to consider how DWP might: 1) support its customers who are seeking work; and 2) further inform the Department's employer engagement practices.

Within this overarching aim there were four key objectives:

- to explore **how employers approach the recruitment process**, including:
 - the sources they draw on to identify potential candidates;
 - the recruitment processes and practices they use;
 - the candidate features that influence an employer's decision about whether to employ; and
 - the rationality of the recruitment process and the circumstances in which employers change their practices, either explicitly or implicitly;
- the **effect of labour market and sector requirements** on the recruitment process;
- **experiences and views about Jobcentre Plus and third party agencies** as recruitment organisations; and
- the **impact of government initiatives** on recruitment decision-making.

1.3 Research approach and sample

DWP, through Jobcentre Plus, often has a dedicated account manager with large employers' human resources and recruitment functions and have considerable knowledge of employers' recruitment requirements. By contrast, while SMEs make up the vast majority of businesses and are expected to be at the heart of economic growth, it is much more difficult for Jobcentre Plus to build up long-term relationships with them yet at the same time there is need for Jobcentre Plus to secure jobs with smaller employers for their claimants. Consequently, the research was focused on smaller employers (five to 49 employees) and in industry sectors that are a key focus for Jobcentre Plus – cleaning, hospitality, transport, manufacturing, catering, retail and care and employing primarily unskilled and semi-skilled personnel.

As this was a qualitative study the rationale for the design was not to recruit a statistically representative sample of all employers but to ensure diversity of coverage across certain key variables, particularly: employer size, industry sector and local labour market conditions using a purposive sampling approach.

Addressing the wide range of research questions required different techniques and as a consequence, a two-stage design was used.

Small employer recruitment practices

1.3.1 Focus groups

The first stage, comprising six focus groups, explored the different processes that SME employers use when undertaking staff recruitment, and the key factors taken into account in interview and hiring decisions.

The two-hour focus groups each comprised six employers – 36 employers in total – and were split across areas of high unemployment (two in East London, one in South East London and one in Tyne and Wear), low unemployment (one in Hertfordshire) and a rural location (one in the rural area surrounding Bristol).

Employers were recruited ‘free-find’ and using commercially available databases as a sampling frame. Eligibility for participating in the research was determined using a short screening questionnaire and quotas were set in order to prescribe the distribution of the sample selected.

Employers were given a ‘thank you’ of £75 for participating in the focus groups.

1.3.2 Case studies

The second stage comprised three case studies² with SME employers, in which recruitment processes and decisions were discussed through a range of interviews, and the actual recruitment process was observed during site visits.

While the initial intention of the cases studies was to explore differences between stated and actual recruitment practices, employers participating in the focus groups were very candid, open and frank – sometimes describing practices that were discriminatory or not ‘best practice’. Given that employers were very open and willing to talk about what they ‘really do’ in the recruitment process, the case studies were refocused and used to confirm the findings from the focus groups and to explore the impact of interpersonal factors on the recruitment process, as this proved to be a key issue in the initial focus group discussions.

Overall, the case studies were selected to reflect a broad range of employers that were recruiting at the time unskilled or semi-skilled staff and identified either by ‘snowballing’³ from the employers participating in the focus groups or using free-find recruitment techniques.

Each case study comprised three contacts:

- 1 an initial scoping interview, conducted by telephone, which explored the employer’s recruitment practices and the type of person that they were looking to employ. The interview also sketched out their recruitment timetable, into which were dovetailed the remaining research contacts;

² Four employers initially consented to involvement in the case study research; one of these participated in a telephone interview only before subsequently deciding to offer additional hours to an existing employee rather than recruit new staff. This employer did not respond to later follow-up requests for a telephone debrief. Whilst we have included data from this initial telephone interview, a full case study has, therefore, not been provided for this individual.

³ Snowballing is a recruitment technique whereby respondents are identified through friends, acquaintances, or business associates, etc.

- 2 observation of candidate interviews, together with a debrief session with the employer. The debrief session enabled us to explore the employer's views about the candidates interviewed, how the candidate matched up with the employer's requirements and any mismatch between the employer's stated recruitment processes and that which was observed;
- 3 a follow-up debrief visit or telephone interview (depending on employer preference) with the employer to discuss who had been employed and the reasons for their decision.

All the interviews with employers were audio recorded using self-encrypting digital recorders. Candidate interviews and employer debriefs conducted during site visits were video recorded as well, encrypted at the point of recording.

All participants in the research (employers and candidates) were fully informed about the nature of the research and for whom it was being undertaken. Candidates were given the option of opting out of the research and were reassured that non-participation in the research would not prejudice their application. Full, verbal and written, consent was obtained from every participant; none of those initially agreeing to participate in the research subsequently refused to participate or withdrew their consent to be audio or video recorded.

While discriminatory practices may have been observed during the research, researchers are bound by the Data Protection Act and the Market Research Society confidentiality rules not to disclose the identity of any of the participants in the research.

Across the three case study employers, eight candidate interviews were observed; three of the four employers went on to hire new staff, with one deciding to give an existing employee additional hours as they were concerned about the sustainability of the job role in the longer term.

1.3.3 Data collection and reporting

To ensure consistency of coverage across the focus groups and case study interviews and observations, facilitators followed a detailed topic guide that outlined the topics that were to be addressed. Although topic guides help to ensure systematic coverage of key issues across interviews, they are used flexibly, to allow issues of relevance for individual respondents to be covered through follow-up questioning. Copies of the topic guides may be found in Appendix C.

All the material collected from the focus groups and case studies was subject to a thematic content analysis which provides both rigour and transparency without losing the benefits of intuition and creative thinking.

Full details of each case study can be found in Appendix A.

The qualitative findings reported have been illustrated with the use of pen portraits, quotations, and examples, and are drawn from across the sample of employers. The purposive nature of the sample, however, means that the study cannot provide any statistical data relating to the prevalence of these views and experiences.

1.4 Report outline

Following this introductory section, the report is divided into four sections:

- **Chapter 2** discusses the reasons for employing new staff, how employers decide whether to employ new staff or give existing staff additional hours, the way in which employers find potential candidates and the recruitment processes they use;
- **Chapter 3** explores the hiring decision and discusses what employers look for in a candidate, what they tend not to look for, the questions that employers do not ask candidates and the issues that employers are concerned about;
- **Chapter 4** focuses on employers' experiences of recruiting through Jobcentre Plus, together with their limited experiences of agency recruitment;
- **Chapter 5** draws the findings together and considers the implications of the research for Jobcentre Plus in terms of supporting its customers who are seeking work, and further informing the Department's employer engagement practices.

2 The recruitment process

This chapter considers how employers tackle the recruitment process, including:

- the decision to recruit staff or give existing employees additional hours;
- specifying the job role and the person they require;
- the recruitment sources and channels used to identify candidates; and
- employers' overall approach to employee assessment during the recruitment process, including the role played by curricula vitae (CVs) and references.

2.1 To recruit or not to recruit?

Reasons for recruiting additional staff were five-fold, including the following key triggers:

- **rebuilding** the business following downsizing during the recession of the last few years;
- **expanding** the business following business growth or movement into new markets;
- **replacing** staff that leave as part of the natural process of staff turnover;
- **high turnover** businesses that continually recruit as their sector tends to see a regular flow of employees, particularly in the transport and caring sectors;
- **seasonal** recruitment, especially in the hospitality, catering and retail sectors.

Employers' staffing requirements varied considerably, depending on the business size, sector and the nature of job contracts. Consequently, there were some employers that indicated they sought permanent staff to replace employees who had left, or to expand the staff force as part of a re-building or expansion process. Others were looking for part-time staff only, typically either because:

- the job only required part-time hours (such as cleaning and catering);
- employers wanted to employ staff for short periods of time in order to meet specific contracts that they had won; or
- employers preferred to avoid paying National Insurance (NI) contributions, and contracted staff below the payment thresholds.

In considering whether to recruit additional staff, employers would often consider whether to instead offer additional hours to existing staff. This had its benefits in terms of working with a proven workforce, no recruitment cost, and minimal time involved compared to external recruitment. However, this was not always possible. For example, an office cleaning company that operated in the early hours of the morning could not offer extra shifts to staff as they would not be able to cover the additional work required in the time available. Employees too did not always want extra hours, particularly where part-time work was required in order to fit around family and childcare arrangements.

Small employer recruitment practices

However, the key reason why some employers did not offer extra hours was that it would take the employee's earnings over the NI threshold⁴ which would involve the employer incurring extra costs⁵. By way of example, an office cleaning company paid all of its 20 part-time staff an hourly rate that kept them below the NI threshold so that the employer did not incur NI costs.

Employers noted that the decision to recruit had a variety of advantages and disadvantages attached. The recruitment decision could be fluid and sometimes uncertain, depending on employers' evolving needs and decision-making; there was evidence of some employers beginning the recruitment process only to end it shortly after⁶ because either they realised that there was insufficient work for a new employee (full- or part-time) or they became unsure as to whether the role was financially sustainable in the longer term. One group discussion summarised the difficulty of the decision as follows:

'You wouldn't want to recruit someone specifically if you have got somebody already in position who can do the extra work or the extra hours that are required, if they are willing to do it, that is more important than you wanting them to do it, if they are willing to do it ...

... I wouldn't always offer it [extra hours] because of the National Insurance and part-time people. You don't pay the National Insurance and that is quite a lot of money nowadays ...

... But if you have got a really good person and you want them to do four more hours it is probably better than getting someone, and you don't know who the hell they are... it is less complicated.'

(Employer group, London)

2.2 Specifying the job and the person

Overall, employers in this study did not have a formal approach to specifying the job skills and person criteria for staff vacancies, particularly when looking for unskilled or semi-skilled staff. For these roles, none of the employers in the study would draw up a detailed job specification – '*cleaner required*' would be all that was specified about an office cleaning role. Neither would employers draw up a formal person specification. Employers reasoned that given the nature of unskilled and semi-skilled work there was no need for a specification because a minimum of skill was required and virtually '*anybody could do the job*'. This seemed to be largely due to the fact that employers saw unskilled and semi-skilled positions as 'low investment' and requiring little or no training. Employers' approach to employing unskilled and semi-skilled roles was of the form – '*I need a person to do the job now*'.

⁴ For the tax year 2013/14 the NI threshold is £109 per week.

⁵ NI is a complex area. However, as an example, if an employee is paid above the Secondary Threshold of £148 per week an employer could be paying between 10.4 per cent and 13.8 per cent of salary in NI contributions.

⁶ A fourth case study was begun with one employer, a café in South London, who began the recruitment process for a part-time staff member but changed her mind before actually interviewing any candidates. She noted that she had in the end decided to offer the extra hours to an existing staff member to save herself the trouble of finding and training a new reliable person.

'Obviously if you're semi-skilled, you're not going to get the exact person for the exact job, are you? You're going to have to adapt.'

(Employer group, Newcastle)

'I'm employing a bar tender and that process has to be relatively quick, otherwise you spend your whole life doing it.'

(Employer group, Newcastle)

In many cases, the 'ideal candidate' is often in the head of the employer – rather than outlined via a detailed and objective description on paper. As will be shown in the sections to follow, this lack of formal criteria resulted in enhanced reliance on employer judgement and 'gut feeling' about a candidate; in the absence of formal assessment criteria, employers relied on their instincts and experience to determine whether candidates would be suitable for the role at hand.

Although it was rare in the research, there was some evidence that where employers were requiring more skilled employees, such as a chef or Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) driver, or for roles where there was an element of risk (such as with a youth worker), then a more formal process would apply. In these cases the approach was somewhat different and typically more formal – *'I need the right person for the job'*. Job specifications tended to be more defined, sometimes including specific candidate requirements, such as an HGV licence, catering qualifications, or a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check.

Employers' typical approach to sourcing and assessing candidates are discussed in the sections to follow.

2.3 Sourcing candidates

Employers' overall aim when recruiting unskilled or semi-skilled staff was to 'fill the position' with a minimum investment of time and effort. As a consequence there was a general reluctance to use formal recruitment channels and a focus on those that were quick, easy and cheap.

While employers mentioned eight channels through which they sourced candidates recently or in the past, the most commonly used sources were those that were informal, based on word of mouth, local advertising, or via unsolicited applications or CVs.

'We find word of mouth very good and it is always nice to be able to ask around in similar businesses, "has anyone been looking for a job?".'

(Employer group, Bristol)

The range of recruitment channels that had been used are discussed here:

- **Word of mouth** – Word of mouth was a common source of candidates amongst the employers in the research study. In some cases employers sought new staff from their immediate or extended family, whilst others sourced potential employees by talking to other businesses, either 'the shop next door' or through business networking events. Word of mouth recruitment was seen as being free and also low risk, with any candidates being put forward seen as being 'vouched for' by their sponsor.

Small employer recruitment practices

'A lot of it is word of mouth in Newcastle. Obviously in this industry word of mouth is great for any kind of leisure job or whatever of that nature.'

(Case study, Newcastle)

'[Word of mouth] is most important to me because I deal a lot in cash and obviously my stock is quite accessible to people, what I have got on the shelves, so it is important, word of mouth is great for that side ... that core round the bar area who deal with the money and the stock, we are quite selective.'

(Employer group, Bristol)

- **Unsolicited applications** – Businesses that had walk-by traffic, such as shops and cafés, commented on the high level of unsolicited applications that they received. This might be a candidate dropping in for a chat or handing in an application form or a CV. Employers commented on how they liked this approach because it was free; they also thought that it showed initiative and motivation on the part of the candidate.

'You get enough people knocking on the door just looking for work and you take your pick from them to be honest.'

(Employer group, Bristol)

- **Employee bank** – While there were employers that quickly disposed of unsolicited applications or applications of previously unsuccessful candidates most retained them for a while as an 'employee bank'. Employers would therefore build up a supply of previous applicants and unsolicited applications, as well as details of previous employees that may be looking for work again. Employers commented that in some sectors, such as hospitality, transport and care work, it was common for staff to be employed on a seasonal basis or that employees often moved around different jobs seeking variety, sometimes returning to previous roles where vacancies arose.

'It is surprising the number of people who come banging on the door looking for part-time work, and I take telephone numbers and keep a record of them, so if I do need them I can always give them a ring.'

(Employer group, Bristol)

'I've got a massive database of CVs and people coming in dropping them off, and you put them on file. You know? Bar staff, really.'

(Employer group, Newcastle)

- **Local advertising** – Local advertising was used by a wide range of employers, of all sizes and across all sectors. Micro employers tended to use free, or cheaper, forms of local advertising, such as advertising cards in shop windows and supermarket advertising boards; larger employers or those seeking higher skilled or higher risk staff were more likely to use paid-for advertising in local papers. As with word of mouth and unsolicited applications, local advertising tended to appeal to candidates that lived locally, a feature that employers particularly favoured as this was more likely to mean that their employees would have less travel difficulty and would not be late for work.

'We put adverts in our shop window and we get people coming in, you know, and word of mouth is quite a good one isn't it?'

(Employer group, Bristol)

- **Online channels and social media** – These recruitment sources were rarely used overall by the employers in the study, although a couple of micro employers had used their own social media accounts to advertise vacancies. While the appeal in advertising through social media was that it was cheap, easy and quick to set up themselves, the downsides were reported to be limited take-up and that it attracted candidates who appeared to know little about the business to which they were making an application.

'I used my Facebook account, because lots of people know me locally ... I got a few replies, not many ... I didn't think much of those who contacted me. They just seemed to want a job, not my job.'

(Employer group, London)

- **Specialist trade publications** – Overall, employers rarely used specialist trade media to advertise unskilled or semi-skilled positions. Where they had done so, this was usually in conjunction with advertising specialist or skilled roles. As trade magazine advertising was said to be expensive it was a route that was only used if they could not find relevant staff by any other means.
- **Recruitment agencies** – There was little experience of employing staff through recruitment agencies, primarily because of the costs involved. Where this route had been taken it was for more skilled roles; recruitment agencies were generally seen as being an expensive channel for recruiting unskilled or semi-skilled employees. However, employers thought that there were agencies that might be useful for recruiting large volumes of unskilled labour, such as fruit pickers or after-event litter pickers, although none had any experience of this recruitment approach. Given that most had been able to recruit appropriate staff via free or inexpensive channels, engagement with formal recruitment agencies was generally not considered worth the effort or cost.

'I'd used an agency in the past couple of years, but the calibre of candidates has been no higher than I've got just through word of mouth and networking and social media. There are enough people coming through on word of mouth.'

(Employer group, Hertfordshire)

'[Employment agencies are] far too expensive. A lot of my guys work on the basic rate and you know, agency staff, they want sometimes three, four, five pounds more than the basic rate just for unskilled guys to do a bit of driving or something.'

(Employer group, Bristol)

- **Jobcentre Plus** – While some employers had used Jobcentre Plus to recruit employees both recently and in the past, experience overall was low. Employers' perception was that Jobcentre Plus was well positioned for recruiting for high turnover, unskilled and semi-skilled roles, but many had hesitated to use the offering. Experiences and perceptions of working with Jobcentre Plus were mixed, however; these are discussed in more depth in Chapter 4.
- **Specialist recruitment schemes** – One employer, an owner of a catering company, had engaged with an apprenticeship scheme aimed at helping young people with no work experience to break into the job force. This was due, in part, to the employers' knowledge that young people often found it difficult to find work in the current economy, and a personal desire to 'make a difference' to young people by offering opportunities within the company. The respondent noted that although there was a level of training involved in

Small employer recruitment practices

working with the young people, and that he had needed to take a fairly formal approach (e.g. involving formal job specification, formal interviewing, etc.) which took time, the experience had overall been a positive one.

Overall, employers' reliance on more informal recruitment channels was judged to be working well. These were considered cheap and easy, and overall successful in terms of finding suitable candidates for staff vacancies. As discussed in Section 5.3, there may be implications for Jobcentre Plus in terms of marketing its advantages over other recruitment channels – a free service that offers pre-sifting of quality candidates.

2.4 Employers' approach to recruitment

Overall, employers' recruitment processes were highly informal – often consisting of brief contacts and unstructured conversations rather than structured interviews involving strict assessment criteria.

Within this context of informality, there was strong evidence that every contact counts; applicants were judged at every single point of contact with the employer, regardless of whether this was identified to candidates as a 'formal' assessment point or not. Snap judgements and 'gut instinct' were often critical to the hiring decision.

The typical stages involved in the recruitment process and the methods by which employers assessed candidates are discussed as follows. Specific criteria for assessment are discussed further in Chapter 3.

2.4.1 Sift, interview, work trial

The recruitment processes described by employers were wide ranging, but were generally of a highly informal nature when recruiting unskilled and semi-skilled employees. Although a range of informal processes were used, recruitment usually comprised a three-stage process:

Sifting

The sift process was highly variable from employer to employer, but was typically fairly informal. For example, the sift process often did not require application forms or CVs⁷ – although there was some evidence of use amongst employers of all sizes, as discussed in detail in Section 2.4.2.

'I would sift people out from the initial [telephone] interview, I would either want them to obviously send in a CV before they come and a lot of cases I have people just turn up on the day with their CV and we go through the CV there and then.'

(Case study, Newcastle)

Instead, employers would often decide whether to take an application forward on the basis of a voicemail message left by a candidate, an initial 'sift' telephone call, or a brief chat during an application drop-off.

Although employers did not formally advertise these informal contact points as part of the

⁷ Whereas employers would screen out unskilled and semi-skilled candidates as part of a verbal hiring process, skilled candidates were more likely to be screened out through a paper-based application form or CV sift.

official recruitment process, there was clear evidence that the nature of the candidates' manner at these moments of contact could make or break the employment opportunity. Tone of voice, enthusiasm, being engaged, knowledge of the job advertised, speech clarity, and questions asked were all taken into account by employers. This fed into their 'gut instinct' about a candidate, and their judgement of whether or not they would be worth interviewing or taking on.

For example, in two of the case studies employers mentioned that they often chose to bring, or not bring, applicants in for interview based on a brief telephone message alone; one employer noted that a 'lacklustre' telephone message strongly disadvantaged a candidate as it would decrease the likelihood of him offering a face-to-face interview. Conversely, potential employees who spoke clearly, followed directions when given (e.g., to leave a name, number, and details of how they found the job advertisement) and seemed reasonably enthusiastic were more likely to be followed up.

'What I tend to do to be honest is that I leave a mobile number, I leave a message on that mobile number for them to contact and when they ring in they leave their names, addresses, phone numbers, etc., etc. so I am sifting 50 per cent of them out just by the phone call and what I hear on the phone.'

(Case study, Bristol)

'At the end of the day I talk to them on the phone, if they sound okay on the phone I'll ask them for an interview.'

(Case study, Newcastle)

Where a candidate dropped off a CV, or made an informal approach directly to the employer, employers would observe the candidates' behaviour, manner, and appearance. In particular, employers mentioned that they would be unlikely to offer an interview to someone who displayed a lack of awareness of appropriate work manner, or of the demands of the job at hand. For example, a café owner indicated that anyone who dropped off their CV at lunch time – the busiest period – lacked understanding of their business and their application would be discarded.

Interviews

The very small employers would not generally shortlist candidates for interview; this was more usual with the larger employers in the study. Small employers tended instead to interview candidates as they came along, rather than having set dates for interview.

The informality of the recruitment process overall was evident at interview stage; employers' interview assessment may initially be by either telephone or face-to-face, and were often described by the employer as 'informal chats' rather than 'interviews'. Many employers engaged in an initial telephone conversation as a first step to get a sense of the candidate, and if this was 'successful', then invited candidates in for a face-to-face interview.

'I try and have a chat on the phone and if they sell themselves to me on the phone, have them in for a chat with me. If I like them then I will sort of invite them back in to meet everyone else who's in the office for a semi informal chat, go through what we actually do and then go for a general thumbs up.'

(Employer group, Watford)

Small employer recruitment practices

The interview itself was usually unscripted, with no set questions. Candidate interviews were, therefore, very variable, often covered different topics, with questions being asked as the employer saw fit. However, they were an extremely important part of the recruitment process, and again, first impressions were often critical.

'That sort of first two, three, four seconds, it almost decides it.'

(Employer group, Watford)

Where employers used a telephone interview sift followed by a face-to-face interview, the latter often covered similar ground. It was used to check a person's 'story' as well as obtaining a feel for whether the person would fit in with other members of staff.

'I would say the second interview, without sounding disrespectful, is basically going over what we have discussed in the first [telephone] one and basically find out if there's any different story to the first interview ... if they don't get the job it is because I've felt uneasy that I have not been told the truth in the first place.'

(Case study, Newcastle)

Employing a candidate

For unskilled and semi-skilled positions, employers often used a trial period before making the contract permanent. Trial periods could be as short as a day or as long as two months; in many cases the trial period may be rolling on a daily or weekly basis, until the employer was satisfied that the new employee could do the job properly and efficiently and that they fitted in well with other employees.

'A lot of times people lose the job just from that first [telephone] conversation, but if they seem eager I have them come in ... watch how they interact with customers and my staff ... ask them a few questions. If they're reasonable, work hard, are presentable – then they can come try during a quiet day and go from there.'

(Case study, London)

'I always say a trial day just to see how they got on with everybody else, how, you know, if they fitted in, how easy they were to train, you know just to show them something simple.'

(Employer group, Watford)

2.4.2 Curriculum vitae

While most employees provided a CV, employers' use of CVs in the recruitment process was mixed – ranging from employers that discarded them outright to those that required CVs of all applicants as a first step in the recruitment process. Overall, it is important for candidates seeking work in this segment of the market to have a CV on hand in order to engage with those employers that do require them.

However, overall there was little evidence that employers used CVs as an assessment criterion in their own right. Whilst some employers did examine CVs and expected to see a detailed work history, others simply used them as: a means of retaining contact details; prompts during an interview; or as a platform for discussion to clarify the candidates' skills and abilities. They were, therefore, used less as a record of ones' previous experience – to

be judged and sifted accordingly – but as a foundation for later interpersonal assessment during conversation or interview with the employer.

Employers sometimes reported that CVs could be deceptive and less trustworthy than their own judgement of the candidate during a telephone or face-to-face contact. There was some concern, overall, about ‘perfect’, or ‘production line’ CVs that had the same format and looked the same as all the others that the employer had looked at.

‘When you get CVs in, it’s wonderful when they tell you they can do this, this and this, and then when you have the conversation with them, you know, they might tell you that they speak English and they don’t!’

(Employer group, Newcastle)

Employers varied in the type of information they wanted to see on a CV. For example, there were employers that wanted a detailed work history, while others looked for creativity and information about the candidate’s character, motivation and enthusiasm.

‘I think you can look at how many jobs – that’s where I look, I just look at what jobs they’ve done, how long they’ve lasted in each job and their level of responsibility. That’s what I look at in a CV.’

(Employer group, Watford)

However, where employers used CVs, the quality of the CV was important; providing a proof-read and accurate CV was considered to be a minimum standard for many. Errors on CVs, such as spelling mistakes, could be used to sift candidates out of the recruitment process; errors were at times considered to display a lack of motivation for work and for presenting oneself well.

‘What I have done in the past, with the last few, is I’ve sifted through all the CVs, sifted through them, and ruled out some because of spelling mistakes or, you know, whatever, even literally, okay, I don’t like the colour of your ink. You know, on a gut feeling.’

(Case study, Hertfordshire)

‘I would look at someone’s CV and how it’s laid out, because you do get these horrific CVs with spelling mistakes – I mean, you’re just reading it and you know what you’re going to get in front of you.’

(Employer group, Newcastle)

Where a CV enabled a candidate to stand out and appear different to others it was where time and care had been taken to personalise the CV in terms of its format and the way in which the person described themselves.

2.4.3 References

References were not always requested, and where asked for they were rarely taken up. Employers noted that they sometimes asked for references just to assess whether the candidate felt that they had someone that would vouch for them, rather than as a way to gain feedback about the candidate from other employers. This perceived limited utility was in part due to the fact that referees generally only gave basic demographic information, job role and employment dates, providing little personal information that would give insight into the character, skills or motivation of the candidate.

Small employer recruitment practices

'A previous employer cannot give a bad reference. That's why we don't do it.'

(Employer group, Watford)

Personal character references were typically considered sufficient in cases where candidates did not have work references available – for example, those with little or no prior employment history.

Employers also noted that references could become more important when they doubted a candidate's truthfulness – for example, in cases where they were uncertain as to whether a candidate had been honest about their previous work history or reasons for leaving a job. This was noted in one of the case study interviews; a candidate noted that they had previously worked as a kitchen porter but did not use the appropriate terminology which would suggest experience in this area. The employer took up the employees' reference not to determine the employee's skill level per se, but to ascertain whether the individual was truthful and trustworthy (see Case study 1).

2.4.4 Implications for Jobcentre Plus

The highly informal assessment processes detailed above could result in some employer reluctance to engage with more formal recruitment channels, as these were seen as requiring more formal approaches – such as written personal specifications, formal assessment criteria, or structured candidate sift exercises. Combined with the fact that current approaches felt fit for purpose, these factors suggest there may be some reluctance within this sector to engage with more 'formal' recruitment channels such as Jobcentre Plus; this reluctance may need to be countered in order to successfully engage with this group.

Furthermore, it was evident that some employers could use discriminatory practices. These may be because the employer consciously discriminates or they may be discriminating because of their reliance on 'gut feeling' and the 'fit' of the individual. This will be fully discussed in Chapter 3, and is demonstrated in Case study 3 (see Appendix B).

Factors influencing potential employee assessment and employer hiring decisions within this context are discussed in Chapter 3.

3 The hiring decision

This chapter explores the factors that influence employee assessment during the recruitment process and informing employer decisions to hire or not hire any given candidate. The assessment and decision-making process is discussed from four related perspectives:

- what employers look for in a candidate – what factors or behaviours can help ensure candidates are offered an interview, or indeed a job;
- what employers do not look for or the factors that are overall less important to employers in terms of finding suitable candidates;
- what employers do not ask about – the issues that tend not to be asked about and do not strongly influence interview and hiring decisions; and
- what employers are concerned about – the behaviours and factors which can raise warning signs or disadvantage a candidate.

The chapter then closes with a discussion of equalities issues and candidate factors such as ethnicity, age or sex which evidently influenced hiring decisions in some cases.

3.1 What employers look for

The candidate factors that tended to be foremost in employers' minds when discussing what makes an ideal candidate often had little to do with potential employee experience or work history. Instead, employers tended to place great importance on their ability to assess candidates via 'gut instinct', often making snap judgements and instant decisions about whether a given candidate would prove to be a good employee. Within this context, the key features that employers considered advantaging work candidates included:

- personal and interpersonal factors such as motivation and enthusiasm, 'work-readiness', level of engagement with the employer, and overall presentation; and
- practical factors such as employee flexibility and fit with the hours of the job, length of travel to work, or the holding of appropriate certifications (mostly for semi-skilled work).

Each of these is discussed in more detail as follows.

3.1.1 Personal and interpersonal factors

Motivation and enthusiasm

When employers were asked what kinds of factors underpinned their perceptions of a 'good' or 'bad' candidate, potential employee motivation and enthusiasm often emerged as key assessment factors. Employers noted that if they did not perceive a candidate to be enthusiastic at the point of interview or pre-job contact, they had little faith that candidates would bring the needed energy and motivation to the job itself. Ideally, employers wanted to see that candidates were motivated by the specific job and business at hand; at minimum, they wanted reassurance that candidates were motivated to engage in work more generally.

In practice, assessments of 'motivation' levels were largely based on intangibles such as tone of voice and demeanour; employers felt that they could 'spot' a potential employee who was motivated and enthusiastic about the work at hand, as opposed to someone who

Small employer recruitment practices

was not necessarily interested and engaged. Considerable importance was placed on a candidate's overall level of effort and energy during interview assessments and at other informal contact points.

However, employers also spoke at length about practical, more tangible ways in which candidates could demonstrate their interest in work, such as having undertaken some research about the industry, business or job role prior to interview – or asking questions which clearly displayed an interest in how the business was run and how their role would fit within this. This was discussed as a clear way for candidates to make a good impression, showing the employer that they were proactively imagining themselves in the job role – and helping employers to imagine them in it as well.

'Your experience tells you in those few minutes whether they have got what I call 'a bit of oomph', got a bit of something about them. If they have got that and a willingness to learn, then depending what level they are coming into the business but yes you can take a bit of a punt with them when they have got that about them ...'

(Employer group, Bristol)

'Work-readiness' and reliability

Related to the above factor, employers also discussed the importance of 'work-readiness' and employee reliability. This did not necessarily require industry-specific or job-specific experience per se; instead, employers sought some reassurance that candidates knew why they wanted to work, understood what work entails (including, ideally, the requirements of the specific job at hand), and were capable of doing a job well day after day.

Work-readiness and reliability tended to be assessed largely via candidate discussions about their understanding of the demands of the job, and evidence that they had considered whether they would be able to meet these successfully. Employers might also consider overall work history – whether candidates had job experience and could provide some evidence that they had filled roles successfully before. However, for candidates who had less experience overall – or even no work history – employers noted that they could be swayed to offer work to a candidate who convincingly and persuasively communicated that they were ready, willing and able to work.

Reliability was often assessed by questioning the candidate about their travel plans. For example, one employer would ask an employee how they would get to work in order to see if they had thought about their travel plans, and what would happen, for example, if a train or bus was cancelled and how they would get to work. Equally, some employers would ask about family commitments and what the candidate would do if a child was sick, using their replies in an overall assessment of reliability.

Engagement with the employer and perceived 'fit' with the employer and staff

Tied to perceptions of motivation and enthusiasm, employers reported that they were more likely to consider candidates who they perceived as 'making an effort' to engage with them during the interview process. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) noted that they were usually very engaged in their businesses and interacted with staff on a daily basis, and it was important to them that their working environment was positive. The ability to get on well with employees, and for employees to get along well with each other, played a key role in hiring decisions.

In practice, 'willingness to engage' tended to be assessed by simple but important factors such as a candidate's ability to engage in conversation, offer a little about themselves in interviews or informal conversations, and attempting to be (reasonably and appropriately) personable and friendly. This did not necessarily require outstanding confidence, and employers accepted that candidates might be nervous. However, they did not want interviews to be a one-way process; they wanted candidates who were capable of engaging in back and forth conversation with them – giving them a sense of who they were and how they might interact with the employer and others on a day-to-day basis.

For those candidates who made the effort to engage, there was some evidence of employers' prioritising candidates who they felt would 'fit' with the employer themselves, and with existing staff. Employers often found it difficult to identify exactly how they determined 'fit', relying heavily on nebulous factors such as the impression that candidates left them with, and whether they felt the candidate would be easy to work with and engage with day after day. As discussed in Section 2. 4. 1, employers at times had potential candidates take a tour of the business to meet existing staff in order to gauge the overall chemistry before offering work; other employees' reports could form an important part of the overall assessment process. However, as a first hurdle, employers often wanted to feel that they themselves would be willing to have the employee as a colleague.

'The main criteria is do I get on with them – if I can get on with them and communicate with them and there's that little bit of something that we've got in common, than that makes my life a lot easier.'

(Case study, Bristol)

In Case study 2, an employer running a small design and manufacturing company interviewed two potential employees – one of whom was more experienced and had a stronger work history, but who was quite reserved during interview, and did not make an attempt to be particularly friendly or engaging. The other candidate had much less experience, but chatted with the employer and gave the employer a much stronger sense of 'who she was' giving the impression that she would be reasonably pleasant to work with and would make an effort to work well with the other employees. In this case, the employer's perception of the candidate was also strengthened by a sense of personality 'match' and a feeling that they would 'get on' day-to-day.

In this particular example there was also some evidence of informal discrimination based on gender; as discussed in Case study 2, the employer indicated that she would generally expect that a female employee would find it easier to fit in with her and her (female) staff. There is, therefore, some overlap in terms of employee efforts to engage with employers, and demographic-based factors which implicitly or explicitly affect employer assessments of fit; employers may find it easier to engage with employees who are 'more like me'. This highlights the potential for discriminatory practice within the overall context of informal and highly subjective assessment processes.

However, personality match was not always required. More important was meeting the minimum standard criterion of being a reasonably pleasant person to work with overall; many employers noted that they had engaged staff with a wide range of demeanours and personalities. Showing that you were willing to make the effort to work hard was considered much more important overall than being 'like me'.

Small employer recruitment practices

Presentation

Employers also highlighted a range of practical issues around employee presentation that could make a positive impression and raise the chances of being offered an interview or job. They noted that a 'good' candidate would show interest in the job by being punctual (or even early), dressing appropriately and being generally clean and presentable, and behaving appropriately and professionally throughout the assessment process. All of these factors were considered to show respect for the employer, general maturity, and work-readiness; employers wanted to see candidates 'put their best foot forward', particularly so for positions that were customer-facing.

'For an interview they need to be well dressed – not wearing flip flops or leggings, and looking clean and tidy. First impressions are very important; they need to show they made an effort.'

(Case study, Watford)

'I made up my mind within the first minute. It was because she'd made an effort. She was made up, she had a dress on, she spoke well.'

(Case study, Newcastle)

This consideration meant that candidates must straddle an important boundary between the need to engage with employers – displaying reasonable friendliness and giving employers a sense of their personality – and the need to show a work-appropriate manner. Employers cautioned that candidates must be mindful of professional and personal boundaries; it was noted that candidates who 'over shared' or engaged in unprofessional conversations (e.g. about their nights out, getting drunk, or sensitive relationship topics) could disadvantage themselves.

3.1.2 Practical factors

Employers also referenced a range of practical factors which they felt represented critical criteria in terms of candidate assessment and hiring. These are discussed as follows.

Distance to work and travel availability

Employers frequently reported that candidates' distance of travel to work was a key consideration for them; they noted that they would often explicitly ask candidates where they worked in relation to the business location and how they would be travelling to work day-to-day. There was a preference overall for local candidates and those who had relatively short or straightforward commutes and reliable transport.

Employers stated that this helped provide reassurance regarding likely reliability over time, as local employees were less likely to be late or miss work due to transport issues – or to be less motivated for work due to time and financial burden posed by extensive travel. Longer journeys (e.g. 45 minutes or more) could conversely be more concerning for employers, as could unreliable transport.

Candidates' ability to provide a convincing description of their travel to work plans also provided an opportunity for them to show that they had done some forward thinking about the job and their ability to meet the job demands; again, helping show that they were actively imagining themselves in the role, and helping employers do the same.

Flexibility and fit with hours offered

Given the high rates of part-time and flexible working noted within the sample, as discussed in Section 2.1, employee flexibility was noted as a key assessment criterion for many employers. Many noted that they could not offer reliable or stable work schedules; the ability of employees to fit realistically within the job offer was a key consideration.

'The key to working here is to be as flexible as possible – there's no set pattern.'

(Case study, Watford)

Certification

Finally, employers engaging higher-skilled or higher-risk staff indicated that for some jobs certain certifications were a minimum standard for hire, and something they looked for from candidates. For example, this could include an Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) licence for a driving company or an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check for those working with vulnerable populations.

3.1.3 Implications for Jobcentre Plus

Within the context of unskilled and semi-skilled recruitment for SME employers, the above criteria were of prime importance in the assessment and hiring process. If candidates were motivated, work-ready, and able to create a good impression through appropriate engagement and presentation, they stood a good chance of being offered an interview or offered a job.

Findings suggest that in order to succeed within this sector of the employment market, candidates must be prepared to speak about who they are, their history, and why they are interested in the job at hand; ideally should undertake some (minimal) research about the job industry or specific role; and be prepared to discuss practical issues such as hours flexibility and travel arrangements.

As discussed in the section to follow, candidates who displayed these characteristics were also likely to be considered by an employer **even if they were unemployed or had no specifically related work experience and training**. These factors were considered less important overall than the key interpersonal and practical factors discussed above.

3.2 What employers seem to care less about

As part of group discussions and case studies, employers were asked to speak about how they assessed candidates based on key criteria such as qualifications, job-specific expertise, and employment status.

Overall, the more 'tangible' factors of qualifications, employment status and job-specific expertise were less important for the recruitment of unskilled and semi-skilled candidates. Employers were willing to train 'the right candidate' (according to the criteria above), and willing to take a chance on 'the person for the job right now' rather than seek out someone who had proven experience and training.

This is an encouraging finding overall in terms of entry into the SME market for those without specific skills and training or those who are currently unemployed; SME employers may be willing to give individuals an opportunity to work provided they are able to display appropriate motivation and enthusiasm to work.

Small employer recruitment practices

Employers' judgements of these factors are discussed in more detail as follows.

3.2.1 Qualifications

Employers tended not to discuss qualifications. Semi-skilled and unskilled job roles were typically considered to be entry-level, with candidate motivation, willingness to work, and good presentation being much more important for job success than school success or achievement of qualifications.

'If you want someone to answer the phones in your office you want them to have a nice voice, be pleasant sounding, speak well and are able to take down notes properly... That doesn't require a qualification; that requires someone to be enthusiastic for their job, want to turn up each day and do a good job. That's more important to me than any qualification.'

(Employer group, Watford)

Some employers even noted that candidate qualifications could raise a red flag for them or make them less likely to consider or hire a candidate overall. There was some sense that those with academic qualifications might not have *'staying power'* in a job as they would be looking for *'bigger and better things'* – or that those with more education might want to *'tell the employer how to run things'*. This was particularly likely to be the case when employers themselves had lower education levels. For example, the owner of a transport company preferred not to hire graduates because they might *'think they know better'*, which the employer found uncomfortable.

3.2.2 Job-specific experience and CVs

Job-specific experience was considered less important than general work-readiness; employers tended to be less worried about whether candidates had specific prior employment or training in the industry and/or specific job role.

'It's a bit of a chicken and egg, isn't it? If somebody says – "I haven't got any experience but I am willing" – then how can you gain experience if somebody is not prepared to give you an opportunity to gain that?'

(Case study, Newcastle)

This meant that employers did not seek out or prioritise *'impressive'* CVs as part of their recruitment processes; nor did they necessarily expect candidates to be able to *'sell'* their experience and expertise in interviews. CVs were used much more as *'jumping off points'* for interpersonal assessment – as a prompt for discussion and a way for employees to talk about their history and their reasons for seeking employment. This is an encouraging finding for candidates who feel that they must try to fill out a CV before finding work, or believe that a *'poor'* CV will keep them from achieving interviews or work in this sector.

Employers did however indicate that they could find the lack of any work history concerning – as in the case of young workers just entering the employment market. This was less about lack of work experience per se as it was a reflection of employer concern about general maturity and motivation for work. This issue is discussed further in Section 3.5.

Where candidates did have job-specific experience, it was, naturally, considered to be of general benefit, minimising overall training time and providing some reassurance that the candidates understood the demands of the job at hand. Experience was also more important for employers seeking semi-skilled staff; for example, employers noted that for chef positions, or some specialist driving roles, they would seek out experienced individuals

– with their previous work history taking a greater role in the assessment process.

3.2.3 Employment status and history

For the majority of employers in the sample, employment status was not considered to be a significant barrier to hiring them, nor would unemployment be a disadvantaging factor in candidate assessment – provided that candidates had a good reason for being unemployed and seemed motivated to work. Employers were typically sympathetic to the current economic downturn, and many noted that they had friends, families and acquaintances who had struggled to find work.

When asked if they would consider individuals who were longer-term unemployed, employers again tended to report that in theory unemployment history would not be an issue. For example, respondents noted that they would be perfectly willing to consider mothers who had been out of the workforce due to care responsibilities, or even individuals who for other reasons had not been ready or able to work. As discussed elsewhere, the key assessment criteria for these individuals was reported to be whether they were willing and able to work now – and the candidates' ability to communicate this to the employer.

Employers were, therefore, very open to receiving candidates fitting the Jobcentre Plus client profile. However, there were some issues around candidates' perceived motivation to work which could reduce willingness to engage with Jobcentre Plus (discussed in Chapter 4).

3.2.4 Implications for Jobcentre Plus

The relative lack of importance placed by employers on factors such as previous job-specific experience, unemployment status or history, and employee qualifications suggests that this job sector may be fruitful ground for employment opportunities for Jobcentre Plus candidates.

Candidates should be prepared to understand that lack of experience – or a detailed curriculum vitae (CV) to show it – need not disadvantage them in interviews with SMEs recruiting unskilled and semi-skilled staff. Most important will be candidates' ability to discuss and explain any gaps in employment and qualification – and to perform well across the key assessment factors that employers do prioritise, as discussed above in Section 3.1.

The section to follow discusses additional factors which employers tended not to raise in the research sessions as factors of interest – factors which they were less likely to ask about in a job interview as compared to those discussed in the previous sections.

3.3 What employers do not ask about

There were a number of factors which did not emerge spontaneously as issues of interest for SMEs – factors which were not foremost in their minds in terms of factors to include in candidate assessments. These included:

- candidates' criminal records or criminal history;
- history of substance or alcohol abuse; and
- health and mental health issues.

Employers in this research did not report asking candidates about these issues, either within application forms or within interviews and other assessments. This was in part because

Small employer recruitment practices

employers did not think the discussion of these issues was legally 'allowed', although employers were uncertain about whether this was in fact true, and in part because they thought there could be a penalty for questioning candidates about these issues if they were taken to court.

When asked if they had employed candidates who presented with historical or current issues across these factors, many employers simply stated they were unsure; they noted that unless a candidate proactively offered information they would not know if, for example, they had a health issue or a history of substance abuse.

'You wouldn't know if someone has health issues ... I mean, somebody might come in who's actually dying for an interview, and you wouldn't know without actually asking them. You know?'

(Employer group, Newcastle)

There were also some instances in which employers had knowingly employed staff with potentially disadvantaging histories such as criminal records or a history of substance misuse. For example, one London employer noted that many young people from the local area had some criminal history, including several former staff members. This employer considered that as long as they were convinced that a candidate was ready and able to work, and that any misbehaviour was behind them, he would be more than willing to give them a chance.

Similarly, some employers reported positive experiences of having employed staff with known physical issues, such as arthritis or incontinence, or mental health issues such as depression, or learning disabilities. In all cases, health issues were considered irrelevant unless they endangered an employee's ability to meet the demands of the job.

Depending on the employer, there was also a willingness to make certain accommodations as necessary to help an employee meet the demands of their work. As for criminal records and substance misuse issues above, this willingness seemed largely due to the individual personality and circumstances of the individual employer. For example, an employer that ran a cleaning company said they would go out of their way to help someone with mental or physical health issues succeed in her company, as they had experienced depression themselves and had sympathy for those struggling with health issues. Among other examples, this employer had arranged with cleaning clients to allow a woman with incontinence to complete her contract over a longer working window; her condition meant that she had to take frequent breaks, but as long as she had the time to do this she performed to the expected standard.

Those without direct experience of (knowingly) employing individuals with physical and mental health issues reported mixed response to how they might respond to this issue in practice. Some felt strongly that this would not disadvantage a candidate, provided they could do a job well. However, others considered it might be difficult for a small business to make accommodations, and admitted that they might think twice before employing a candidate with any serious health issues or disabilities. This was, however, in part due to the fact that physical health issues were foremost in their minds; employers tended to think about more visible disabilities like deafness or wheelchair use, which could lead to concerns about needing to provide physical workplace adaptations.

Less visible issues such as mental health issues and mood disorders were not foremost in employers' minds and not considered in depth by them in the research. However, given the frequency of mental health problems in the general population it is likely that employers had

employed individuals with mental health issues. Equally, they may have rejected employees, misinterpreting depression, for example, with a lack of enthusiasm and interest.

Implications for Jobcentre Plus

Overall, provided that candidates are ready and able to fill a job role, issues such as criminal records history, prior substance abuse or alcohol issues, and health issues were not likely to disadvantage candidates applying for jobs within this sector. This was largely due to the fact that employers were not currently asking questions about these issues at present.

However, it should be noted that given the importance of employee personality and engagement, people with mental health issues or a history of substance abuse may experience de facto discrimination through having difficulty engaging in social situations – although employers themselves may not be aware of this.

Section 3.4 discusses candidate factors and behaviours which could disadvantage candidates, providing important guidance in terms of advising candidates what not to do when applying for unskilled or semi-skilled work.

3.4 What employers are concerned about

Warning signs raised by employers in this research tended to be behaviours or attitudes that showed the absence of key interpersonal and practical factors as discussed in section 3.1. The range of issues which employers stated could disadvantage a candidate and make them less likely to be hired included:

- lack of enthusiasm, motivation and engagement with the employer;
- mismatch between candidate behaviour or presentation and job requirements;
- perceived overqualification;
- overselling of qualifications or skills; and
- inconsistent employment history or unexplained gaps.

These issues are discussed as follows.

3.4.1 Lack of enthusiasm, motivation or engagement

Given the heavy reliance on employer 'gut instinct' stemming from interpersonal assessment factors during contact with candidates, employers reported that lack of engagement and enthusiasm could significantly disadvantage a candidate. When asked what characterised a 'bad' candidate, unresponsiveness, flat affect, and perceived disinterest in the employer, company and job were key considerations.

As discussed in Section 2.4, employers assessed candidates at every contact throughout a largely informal assessment process. Employers often spoke of candidates as leaving a poor impression which might result in not taking a candidate to interview at a very early stage in the process, such as when leaving a telephone message, or during a brief informal 'chat' prior to face-to-face interviewing. For example, in one of the case studies an employer noted that a candidate had sounded 'bored' on the telephone rather than interested and engaged.

'You can have all the experience in the world, but if you are not motivated to go get out of bed and do a good job and want to do a good job and have a good attitude – you are

Small employer recruitment practices

a waste of space as far as I'm concerned.'

(Case study, Newcastle)

Employers also noted that they found it frustrating when candidates 'fronted with demands' – for example, beginning conversations (or even telephone messages) with questions about pay and hours. This was felt to display a lack of motivation and enthusiasm for work, and instead to suggest a 'what's in it for me' attitude.

Likewise, employers often found it frustrating when candidates did not make any effort to show interest in the company and the position, for example, by asking questions about the demands of the work, or ideally by doing prior research to understand something about the business. Employers noted that information was typically available online – extensive research was not required, but they appreciated it when candidates made the effort to look at their website and get a rough sense of the business and its work.

'It's if they take an interest in your business, isn't it? So many of them just don't show any enthusiasm or interest, you just don't get the feedback do you?

I mean holding a conversation, that's not difficult for most human beings, you know, some of them, sorry ...

... I said "what do we do?" and he said "I don't know" so he is four clicks away from finding our website and he has a very, very basic knowledge. The name of our company tells you it is exhibition and displays, it tells you what we do, but you have all the technology there a few clicks away, but no, not interested.'

(Employer group, London)

3.4.2 Mismatch between candidate behaviour or presentation and job requirements

As discussed in Section 3.1, employers noted that they preferred candidates to present a clean and professional appearance. Employers reported that unhygienic and sloppy presentation could significantly disadvantage a candidate – as could presentation or behaviour which displayed a lack of understanding of the business and job requirements.

For example, restaurateurs and caterers noted that they would be unlikely to offer an interview or job to an individual that arrived for interviews or work trials in high heels, as this displayed a basic lack of awareness of the physical demands of an on-your-feet waitressing or kitchen position. Similarly, there were some indications that employers could find it off-putting if candidates arrived overdressed; for example, a lorry driver candidate arriving for interview in a suit and tie. Overall, employers wanted to easily imagine the candidate in the job advertised; inappropriate presentation disrupted this and tarnished employers' gut instinct about candidate suitability. However, employers in the same industry did not have uniform views about this; some employers preferred a smart, 'collar and tie' approach for unskilled job roles, whereas others did not. It is, therefore, important for candidates to try to assess how an employer would like them to present themselves; there is clearly a role for Jobcentre Plus employer engagement staff to explore these issues with employers and to pass them back to Jobcentre Plus advisers.

As noted previously, inappropriate and unprofessional behaviour or discussion also raised significant warning signs for employers, particularly for public-facing positions (see Section 3.1). Employers wanted to be able to trust employees to know how to engage with others in a friendly but reasonably professional manner. Some employees in particular mentioned

that they had discounted candidates who professed racist or otherwise discriminatory views during the interview process or job trial, noting that they did not want their own business or client satisfaction to be put at risk due to employees' own personal prejudices.

3.4.3 Overqualification

Whilst overqualification was not generally considered to be a major issue, as discussed in Section 3.2, some employers were concerned about this. This was generally more likely to be in issue in cases where there was significant mismatch between employers' own level of education and that of a candidate; some employers did not want to be 'told what to do' and expected that candidates with degrees or other qualifications may try to manage their business rather than simply fill their entry-level role.

3.4.4 Overselling of qualifications or skills

In line with the relative lack of importance given to extensive experience and job-specific skills within this industry, employers reported that they found it very off-putting when they perceived that candidates were 'overselling' their experience – particularly if they felt candidates were not being open and honest. A belief that a candidate claimed to have skills that they did not have was much more damaging overall than an actual lack of experience. For example, in one of the case studies an employer noted that a potential candidate seemed not to use the terminology that a candidate with their experience in the catering industry would use. This resulted in the employer calling up the candidate's references, noting that this left a bad impression of the candidate.

3.4.5 Inconsistent employment history or unexplained gaps

As discussed in Section 3.2, employers were typically willing to consider candidates with little work experience, those who were currently out of work, or those who had previous gaps in employment history. This was not considered a disadvantaging issue per se, and there were considered to be many reasonable explanations for gaps in work history overall.

However, employers noted that it could raise warning signs if prospective employees were unable to provide an explanation for any gaps or inconsistency in their employment history, or if they felt that employees were not discussing the issue in a genuine fashion. For example, in Case study 1 the employer was frustrated by the candidate's inability to speak about the limited work experience they had described in their application or to explain their reasons for absence from the workforce. While this employer indicated that being out of the workforce due to caring activities was quite acceptable, they expected the candidate to be able to discuss and explain their history; the candidate's failure to do this was in part responsible for a decision not to progress the recruitment process.

Overall, findings also suggest that in order to avoid raising warning signs around unemployment or employment gaps, candidates must be prepared to discuss the reasons for these in an open and honest way – and to be able to communicate to the employer that they are **ready to work now**.

3.4.6 Implications for Jobcentre Plus

As discussed in Section 3.1, Jobcentre Plus candidates must be prepared to demonstrate enthusiasm, willingness to work, and make a general effort to engage with employers at **every contact**. They must understand that even informal contacts such as telephone messages, CV drop-offs, or 'quick chats' with employers can close doors for them if they fail to engage and

Small employer recruitment practices

make a good impression. Employers talked about wanting to see a ‘spark’ and get a sense of personality; a ‘closed book’ could raise concerns about the employees’ interest and ability to get on with the employer and staff. For candidates that find interview situations more anxiety-producing, this may require support to be able to speak more confidently.

Ideally, this means preparing candidates to be able to engage in conversation about why they want to work – likely prompted by discussion of a candidate’s CV or general employment history. Candidates generally need not be concerned or nervous about lack of employment history, but should be prepared to speak about their previous work and explain any gaps or inconsistencies in an open and honest way. Overselling their experience or any perceived dishonesty is much more likely to disadvantage a candidate than lack of experience per se.

Candidates also need to ensure that they do not inadvertently end an opportunity by dressing inappropriately or failing to present a clean and hygienic appearance. This was considered a ‘basic’ by employers – and can either present an ‘easy win’ or an ‘easy fail’ for candidates.

Additional factors which could disadvantage candidates – related to equalities and personal characteristics – are discussed as follows. Although these issues arose less frequently overall in the sample than the factors discussed above, there was evidence that within an informal recruitment context based largely on ‘gut instinct’, equalities issues and discriminatory practices did play a role in some employers’ assessment processes.

3.5 Equalities issues and discriminatory practices

As noted in Section 2.4, the largely informal recruitment practices of employers in this sector – in which ‘informal’ contacts and subjective assessment typically take the place of structured and objective interview processes – raise the risk that some employers may behave in a discriminatory fashion, either unwittingly or deliberately.

As much of the employee assessment process happens ‘behind the scenes’ – potentially before a candidate even walks in the door – candidates may not even be aware that they have been discriminated against. Strong evidence of this is contained in Case study 3; some examples are provided as follows.

Across the research, some employers spoke quite openly about the fact that they included some prospective employee characteristics such as age, race and gender as part of their employee assessment process (as discussed below). Employers were typically aware that this might contravene equalities legislation – though they tended to be fairly ‘fuzzy’ regarding the exact rules and consequences of non-compliance. Employers often expressed a fierce need to protect the business that they had built, and noted that they were not willing to take risks with their livelihood. In this respect, they often felt they ‘had to’ ask candidates about any issue that they felt might impact on their ability to complete the job at hand or to fit in with the workforce. Some employers expressed the view that they could ‘*do what they liked*’, as ‘*they were in charge*’, as it was ‘*their business*’.

‘Sure, maybe I’m not supposed to ask about whether you have children, and I should

give everyone a chance. But at the same time, at the end of the day it's my risk. You don't show up I have to fix that, find people to cover, maybe my client is unhappy.'

(Employer group, London)

Equalities issues and discriminatory practice emerged across the following candidate factors:

- family status;
- gender;
- age;
- ethnicity and country of origin; and
- socio-economic status.

These are discussed in more detail as follows.

3.5.1 Family status

Overall, family status was the most frequently asked question which could influence recruitment decisions. Employers perceived candidates with young children – particularly women with young children – as more likely to experience issues around reliability, with care demands potentially disrupting availability to work. Particularly in smaller businesses, it was felt that there simply was not enough staff capacity to take the place of any individuals who missed work. There was also some evidence of a perception that asking about family status was in line with social norms.

In many cases, employers noted that they explicitly questioned candidates about whether they had young children; for example, in Case study 2 the employer asked all candidates whether they had children as part of the interview process, noting *'I know I'm not supposed to ask you this, but..'* In this case study, the employer was very pleased to find that the preferred candidate had older children who did not pose any care issues.

'I need to know up front what I'm dealing with – I know it's un-PC to ask these things, but you have to do it. One woman said, "I'm thinking about coming back to work; once I'm in a job I'll get a childminder". She's not prepared – I'm not going to take her.'

(Case study, Watford)

This concern surfaced across the research for both male and female employers – despite the fact that female employers themselves reported having been discriminated against in the past, and noted that they did have sympathy for working mothers.

'So many employers discriminate against people with young children ... I remember being asked "Would you take time off if your children were ill?" I said yes obviously.'

(Case study, Watford)

3.5.2 Gender

There was some evidence that employers' informal sense of an 'ideal candidate' for a role might include a feeling that it was better suited for one gender or another – for personal or practical reasons. For example, employers spoke about prioritising male candidates for late evening bar-tending positions where authority and the ability to manage any troublemakers was required; conversely, employers in catering sometimes expressed a preference for female employees who

Small employer recruitment practices

were seen to be more likely to sell more of a product and receive a higher level of tips.

As discussed in Section 3.1, there was also evidence that some employers preferred candidates who were 'like me' – which could fall out on gender lines. In Case study 2, for example, the employer found it difficult to imagine a male employee fitting in with a currently all-female staff, wondering out loud, *'Will he fit in when we're all discussing last night's Corrie? I just don't know.'*

In some instances there was also a preference for employing female staff as some employers thought that in some unskilled roles women were less 'challenging' and more eager to please. In Case study 3, the employer reported almost exclusively hiring female staff for cleaning positions because they were more likely to *'do what they were told'* and easier to *'manipulate'*.

'Can I manipulate them – every employer manipulates their employees so they work around to your way of thinking. What will they be prepared to accept – so that I can get the most of out of her and she will abide by it.'

(Case study, Bristol)

3.5.3 Age

Although most employers in the sample were generally willing to consider candidates of all ages, as discussed in Section 3.4, there were some concerns raised around employing young candidates (especially under 25s) with no work experience. This was generally considered less an issue of skill and experience, and revolved more around a perception of the risk that younger workers might be less mature and reliable overall. Employers noted that they wanted some reassurance that younger workers would turn up for work on time and work as hard and productively as other employees.

However, there were employers in the study that were very sympathetic towards young people and would go out of their way to offer work to younger workers. They noted that they were broadly aware of the difficulties that the younger generation was having in finding employment and felt that they would like to *'make a difference'* when possible and help younger people enter the workforce. One employer had followed up on this intention by engaging with a young persons' apprenticeship scheme, as discussed in Section 2.3.

Less often, employers raised concerns about older workers. This was limited to only a few employers across the study, and was primarily raised in relation to jobs that had a large physical component. For example, in Case study 3 the employer would screen out any individuals aged 50+ on the basis that they might not be able to handle the day-to-day demands of difficult cleaning work.

'I need someone who is fit and able, who is able to climb those eight flights of stairs day in, day out. So I'd immediately cut out the 60 year olds, I would probably cut out the 50 year olds...so you're down to 40, 30, 20.'

(Case study, Bristol)

3.5.4 Ethnicity and country of origin

Whilst occurring infrequently across the research, there was some evidence of discrimination by white employers against ethnic minorities of non-British origin. In Case study 3, the employer noted that the recruitment process was quite intentionally structured to 'weed out'

any non-white applicants. This began during an initial telephone sift process, in which the employer listened to all the messages left by potential applicants and deleted contacts from any callers with an accent or non-British name. This was due to employer perception that non-white individuals were less reliable – as well as to basic prejudice around perceived levels of cleanliness and hygiene of ethnic minority individuals.

'You can tell by the name, the voice, the phone number they leave – there's an English accent maybe you can understand, but they speak numbers differently.'

(Case study, Bristol)

When questioned as to whether the employer was aware of the equalities legislation which prohibited discrimination based on race and cultural issues, the employer said that they were aware but *'had to do what he had to do'*. There was also some shifting of responsibility for the discriminatory practices, suggesting that the decision was in part based on needing to present a professional and appealing face to the clients. As noted above, this largely informal and unmonitored practice meant that the employer could easily sift potential employees based on discriminatory practices.

Employers more often raised the issue that English skills could be problematic for some roles, particularly those that were customer-facing. Whilst these employers said that they would be willing to consider applicants from all countries in theory, they were reluctant to employ any individuals who might have difficulty communicating easily with customers.

3.5.5 Socio-economic status

Socio-economic status could act as a discriminatory factor for a minority of employers in the research. As discussed in Case study 3, the employer preferred not to employ any individuals who were in receipt of benefits; this was seen as an indicator of unreliability. However, in this case this was tied to more general racial and cultural discrimination as noted in Section 3.5.4.

3.5.6 Implications for Jobcentre Plus

Although discriminatory recruitment practices were not widely apparent across the study as a whole, the use of informal recruitment processes is likely to mean that they are unlikely to be 'picked up' given the general lack of documentation and structured assessment procedures. While discrimination on the basis of age and ethnic origin were less apparent, employers felt that discriminating on the basis of family status was easily justified. In order to help prepare candidates with children for interview, Jobcentre Plus may need to discuss childcare arrangements with the candidate and encourage them to be in a position to have childcare in place before the interview and to have thought about what they would do if their child was ill.

4 Employer experiences of recruiting through Jobcentre Plus

This chapter focuses on employer experiences of recruiting through Jobcentre Plus. While there was limited experience of using Jobcentre Plus to recruit staff there was also a general belief that the formal processes used by Jobcentre Plus did not meet the needs of employers in this sector of the market – or fit with their typically less formal recruitment practices.

4.1 Perceptions of Jobcentre Plus processes

Experience of Jobcentre Plus was limited, and respondents' perceptions of the Jobcentre Plus offering were often based on experiences from some time ago or from the reported experiences of friends and colleagues. Perceptions were fairly mixed overall. On the positive side, Jobcentre Plus was praised for its tenacity in finding candidates for interview and offering space in the jobcentre to carry out the recruitment process. As discussed, there was also a general willingness to consider jobcentre candidates and individuals who were currently unemployed.

'I mean there's one thing about the jobcentre, they do actually try their best I think to help people get interviews and they help you actually interview people at the same time. If you need the room and interviewing space they will get people in especially if you are doing them like that. I mean don't forget in the jobcentre, if you are interview seven, eight, nine, ten people a day you will normally find they will turn up which is why I like to have interviews in the jobcentre. Because if it's the jobcentre they feel duty bound to turn up. It is probably a lot to do with the fact like "oh I better turn up because it's at the jobcentre; they might think I am not turning up for interviews".'

(Case study, Newcastle)

However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the employers in this small-scale qualitative research adopted very informal practices when recruiting unskilled and semi-skilled staff. Often the decision to hire is made by an owner/manager who is looking for a motivated and enthusiastic person to fill the role as soon as possible. Their emphasis is to recruit with the minimum of fuss, time and cost. As a consequence there is unlikely to be a formal job and person specification, there may be an informal sift of applicants followed by an informal interview with a trial period for the successful candidate. Overall, the employer is in total control of the process: they can limit the number of candidates they see and accomplish recruitment in the timescale that meets their needs.

By contrast, employers that had used Jobcentre Plus to recruit staff, both recently and in the past, felt that there was a lack of fit, in terms of the formality required by the process. In their experience, the recruitment process felt as if it was less under their control. For example, Jobcentre Plus required a written job description, and in some instances a person specification, both of which the employer was neither used to writing, nor providing. For employers, this meant extra work, which they saw as unnecessary.

Although employers said that they could limit the number of candidates put forward by Jobcentre Plus, their experience was that they were often ‘flooded’ with applicants, which again took up too much of their time, and in some cases had deterred them from using Jobcentre Plus again.

‘With the jobcentre, you are guaranteed to get the numbers. It is a numbers game, as I’ve just said. Normally with the jobcentre you will get bombarded with hundreds of people.’

(Case study, Newcastle)

4.2 Views about candidates submitted by Jobcentre Plus

Employers look for motivated and enthusiastic candidates who have an understanding of what the job requires, behave and dress appropriately and are ready to engage with the employer and talk about their experiences and why they want the job. As discussed in Chapter 3, employers focus on interpersonal factors to a much greater extent than ‘tangibles’ such as work history and a curriculum vitae (CV).

While the limited experiences that employers had of recruiting through Jobcentre Plus were mixed, there was a strongly held view that a large proportion of candidates submitted for interview were not appropriate.

‘I was inundated with applicants but I felt that none of them were motivated for the job, not one was suitable; their test results were very poor even on basic maths questions such as 25 per cent of 100. They lacked common sense and I got the feeling they were there just to tick a box to get their benefits cheque. I won’t use the jobcentre again.’

(Case study, Watford)

This was for five key reasons:

- **Lack of motivation** – a view that many candidates were unmotivated and not ready to engage with an employer. They were unable to discuss previous experiences with employers, commenting that it was often difficult to have a conversation with the candidate. While employers made allowances for shyness, their overwhelming view was that many candidates were not really interested in being interviewed and were only doing so because *‘they have to be’*.

‘We used the jobcentre, it was a good few years ago now, and what you’d find was that for everyone who was interested in the job you would get three or four who were just coming for an interview to keep their Jobseeker’s Allowance going. It became a bit of a pointless exercise, so we shy away from that big time.’

(Employer group, Bristol)

- **Lack of interest in the job** – employers expected candidates to know a little about the industry for which they were being interviewed, as well as some aspects of the job role. However, there was often a marked lack of knowledge about the sector and a sense that the candidate was not really interested in the job itself. This was either because they *‘had been sent by the jobcentre’* or their only interest was in the amount of money they might earn.

Small employer recruitment practices

- **Inappropriate dress/behaviour** – employers had different views about how candidates should dress for a job interview. For example, one café owner thought that someone applying for a job as a waitress should not arrive at interview in formal dress and high heels, whilst another thought that this showed respect. Similarly, wearing a suit to a manual labouring job or for an interview as a car mechanic was seen as inappropriate by some employers but acceptable by others. In this respect, employers thought that Jobcentre Plus had poorly prepared the candidates for interview.
- **An emphasis on CVs** – employers often commented on how candidates would arrive for interview with their CVs, all of which looked virtually identical. In addition, there was a sense that by providing a CV that was all some candidates thought that they had to do in the interview – the CV would do the talking for them. Employers were very mixed in their views about CVs and either ignored them or used them as prompts to stimulate conversation. Assuming that the CV would provide all the information they needed, inaccurate and fictitious CVs were seen in a very negative light and again reflected poorly on perceived Jobcentre Plus preparation.
- **An inability to do the job** – employers expressed concern that despite defining the type of person they needed to do the job, the jobcentre tended to send them inappropriate people.

'I find that I go to the jobcentre, it is my first stop to go there to advertise for someone and put down the criteria of what you are after, but I find the jobcentre and people at the jobcentre difficult to deal with [if you give them a] tighter brief as to the type of person that you want, and yet they are sending people from that wide range.'

(Employer group, Bristol)

'It is quite simple what I require and you know, they [the jobcentre] will send me an Italian or foreign guy looking for a job who doesn't speak English, and I say that's not what I want, it is not that I am against employing someone foreign, but I need them to speak English, and the jobcentre is really bad at that, you say what you want and you never get it.'

(Employer group, Bristol)

5 Conclusions and implications

Overall, the research identified a range of potential challenges and opportunities for Jobcentre Plus in terms of engaging with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the sectors included in this research. These are discussed in the following sections together with a set of targeted recommendations regarding how Jobcentre Plus might help better prepare candidates for success within this sector, and how Jobcentre Plus might better engage SMEs themselves.

5.1 What is the opportunity?

Research suggests that **SME employers are often very open to employing Jobcentre Plus candidates, and are not necessarily concerned about issues such as unemployment, lack of qualifications, or lack of specific skills.** If prospective employees can provide reasonable explanations for any gaps or inconsistencies in their skill or employment histories, and can **genuinely communicate that they are willing and motivated to work now**, SME employers may be very willing to engage them for semi-skilled and unskilled work.

However, despite this general openness the research also identified a range of potential challenges for engagement. Broadly, these included employer perceptions (based on experience or hearsay) that:

- 1 Jobcentre Plus's offering does not fit with employers' current recruitment practice – alongside a general resistance to engaging with more 'formal' recruitment channels.**

Employers tended to feel that their current (informal) recruitment channels and procedures were working well, and did not feel the need to investigate what they perceived as more formal options such as Jobcentre Plus – although this could vary for employers recruiting more staff with a higher level of skill.

They wanted a recruitment process which minimised their time involvement and maximised their flexibility. They raised concerns about potentially committing themselves to a more time-intensive process, or to a full recruitment process and hire. The need to fit within the pace and structure of an external organisation felt quite foreign to many, as compared to the highly unstructured and personally-driven processes they were presently engaged in. Concerns about being 'flooded' with applications also raised anxiety about the required investment in time and effort.

Additionally, some employers raised concerns that involvement with an external agency and (perceived) formal recruitment process might lay bare any currently non-compliant practices. As discussed in Section 3.5, some employers could be quite open about the fact that issues like family status or gender did come into play in their hiring decisions. Others felt that they were probably behaving roughly in line with equalities and hiring legislation, but worried that they might somehow be 'caught out' anyway as not behaving in a fully compliant fashion.

Small employer recruitment practices

2 Jobcentre Plus candidates were not ‘high quality’ according to the assessment criteria that employers valued.

Whilst candidates tended to prioritise employee motivation, attitude, and presentation, they felt that Jobcentre Plus candidates tended not to display enthusiasm about work or the job role specifically. Employers reported that they felt candidates were not ‘sifted’ by Jobcentre Plus, introducing a burden for the employer to determine which candidates were and were not work-ready.

Employers also felt that some Jobcentre Plus candidates did not show basic enthusiasm and interest in obtaining work through taking care with their personal presentation, asking questions about the job, taking the time to do some research about the industry or role, or generally helping the employer imagine them in the advertised role. Where specific skills were required, it was not always felt that candidates met these.

3 Jobcentre Plus candidates are not prepared using the ‘right’ criteria.

Employers felt that Jobcentre Plus’ preparation of candidates tended to focus on features such as curriculum vitae (CV) preparation and skills training – though these factors did not tend to feature overall in their hiring decisions. There was a feeling that ‘standard’ CVs could detract from the ‘gut feeling’ that employers were trying to develop of a candidate, or get in the way of a candidate’s genuine presentation to the employer.

Conversely, employers felt that Jobcentre Plus candidates were sometimes unprepared to be assessed in the ways that really mattered – by being ready to engage with the employer, discuss their experience and motivation for work, and show they were enthusiastic about the job vacancy.

In order to overcome these challenges, Jobcentre Plus needs to prepare candidates and engage with employers in a way that takes into account their specific context, recruitment processes and values.

Potential implications are discussed as follows.

5.2 How could Jobcentre Plus better prepare candidates?

Overall, the research suggests that Jobcentre Plus could better prepare candidates for SME recruitment in a variety of ways. The following presents a general ‘checklist’ for successful preparation and interview within this sector.

- Candidates must be prepared for **informal recruitment practices** and understand that **every contact counts**.

Candidates should understand that SME employers tend not to always engage in formal, standardised recruitment processes, and that they often make quick decisions about potential candidate suitability based on a variety of quick, informal contacts. Given the importance of ‘gut instinct’ and informal assessment, candidates need to be aware that every contact is a chance to make a good (or bad) impression – from CV and application drop-offs, to phone messages, ‘quick telephone chats’ and interviews, and employer meet and greets. Candidates must show sensitivity and respect to the employer and business context in every contact and avoid perceptions of lack of enthusiasm, interest, or inappropriate behaviour.

This may be particularly important for candidates to understand given that employers themselves tended to downplay the ‘assessment’ aspect of the recruitment process; for example, noting to candidates that they preferred to *‘just have a chat rather than an interview’*. This could mislead candidates who fail to understand that this ‘chat’ itself is a key part of the assessment process.

- Care needs to be taken with **presentation and affect**.

Candidates need to understand the importance employers place on motivation, enthusiasm, and the ability to communicate willingness to work. Harnessed, this understanding can provide a key opportunity for Jobcentre Plus candidates, as presenting well interpersonally can negate any potentially concerning issues around lack of experience or work history.

Candidates need to be prepared to engage in conversation with employers and give them a sense of ‘who they are’ – keeping in mind professional boundaries and avoiding oversharing. Whilst nervousness is acceptable and a full ‘sales pitch’ is not expected, basic practice or role-play may be helpful to ensure that anxiety does not result in candidates ‘clamming up’ and potentially missing an employment opportunity.

Similarly, candidates cannot discount the importance of basic hygiene and appropriate dress. While putting one’s ‘best foot forward’ will not guarantee success, poor personal presentation can easily close the door of an employment opportunity. In this respect Jobcentre Plus employer engagement staff have a role to play in understanding employers’ expectations and feeding these back to advisers.

- Candidates need to **do their homework**.

Employers are eager for tangible proof of employee motivation and interest in the job role, and candidates can easily impress by taking a bit of time to learn about the industry, the nature of the business, and/or the job role. A quick website search can go a long way towards showing an employer that a candidate is interested in more than a pay-cheque. Candidates also need to arrive at interviews (or phone chats) with questions in hand that show they can imagine themselves in the role and are interested in what it entails. Suggested questions may focus on:

- the range of activities that the company engages in, or the range of products that it sells, making it clear that the candidate has undertaken some background research but is trying to expand their knowledge of the business;
- whether the business has other offices/outlets and where they are located (or commenting on these if available from the business’ website, where appropriate);
- whether the business is focused only on the UK or whether it exports too;
- where the business sees itself in the next five years; whether the business is intending to expand and how;
- the range of jobs that the company employs people for;
- further exploration of the job role and its responsibilities, but clearly understanding the basic requirements of the job role;
- who they would be working with and whether they might meet them;
- whether there are prospects for promotion (if relevant).

Small employer recruitment practices

- Candidates must **understand the role CVs and applications play**.

CVs tended not to be used as stand-alone assessment criteria in and of themselves within this research rather as a conversational prompt and an opportunity for a candidate to tell the employer about themselves, their experience, and interest in the job in question. Interviews are not ‘tests of experience’ but rather an opportunity to engage.

Candidates must, therefore, know what is on their CV and be prepared to discuss it, and to explain any gaps or inconsistencies in their employment history. They must also be prepared to do this in an honest and open, yet professional, way; dishonest and oversell were seen as pitfalls in the context of ‘gut feeling’ assessment. While a good CV will not necessarily get a candidate very far towards getting the job, a bad one can significantly reduce their chances.

- Candidates should be **prepared to answer questions about practicalities around work hours, flexibility and travel to work**.

These issues are deceptively simple and straightforward issues – yet of critical importance to many employers. Candidates should take the time to honestly assess how long their work journey would take and how they will conduct it, and be prepared to discuss this with employers. They need to know whether they could meet the demands of part-time hours or variable schedules if required. They should also be prepared to discuss any potential ‘problems’ regarding work availability and flexibility (including childcare issues where relevant) and have a plan for how they would overcome these.

The research also indicates a range of potential ways in which Jobcentre Plus could better engage with SME employers themselves. These are discussed as follows.

5.3 How could Jobcentre Plus engage SME employers?

Overall, research findings indicate a range of ways in which Jobcentre Plus could help to overcome the employer barriers detailed in Section 5. 1, to help make SME employers more willing to engage with the Jobcentre Plus process. Employers are willing to consider Jobcentre Plus applicants in theory – but also want to ensure that their limited recruitment time is spent considering high quality applicants, and that engagement with Jobcentre Plus is as straightforward and simple as possible.

If Jobcentre Plus can help to ensure applicants are as strong as possible (via the preparation exercises outlined above), and smooth the engagement experience, positive recommendations are likely to circulate via word of mouth.

Potential considerations include:

- Providing a **more tailored experience**, including more employee **sifting** that takes into account employer priorities and preferences. All employers want employees who are work-ready and motivated, but beyond this minimum consideration they also want their needs and preferences taken into account as appropriate. For more skilled roles, they do not want to waste time considering or communicating with candidates who do not meet minimum entry criteria (e.g. specific skills or certifications). Some may not consider employees outside of a specified distance from the business given concerns about travel arrangements and reliability. SME employees do not want to have to make these 'sifts' themselves; they want Jobcentre Plus to send them only candidates who might be eligible for work according to their specific priorities. However, the Jobcentre Plus default approach is to ask people to look for and apply for jobs, rather than being 'sent' by them. Consequently, there is not currently a point in the process at which Jobcentre Plus could intervene and suggest that a candidate is either not currently suitable for the position they are interested in, or that they may need additional coaching in order to increase their employment opportunities. It may also be useful for Jobcentre Plus to assess employer preferences in terms of employee presentation and approach to interview; for example, whether they prefer that employees to present in formal work attire or (clean) more casual clothing. This could help avoid inappropriate candidate presentation – such as candidates presenting for manual labour jobs in full suit – that might disadvantage them, a role that employer engagement staff could assist with.
- Providing **limited applicant numbers** in line with employer needs and preferences. Employers want assurances that involvement with Jobcentre Plus will not result in being inundated with dozens of candidates, when they might typically only interview three or four individuals through their standard processes. If it was technically possible within the Jobcentre Plus systems, employers could provide clear definitions regarding how many total candidates are desired – with a clear and easy option for employers to 'close' applications once they have as many as they need.
- Taking **verbal job descriptions and feedback comments** and making it clear that this is offered to avoid a sense that employers need to draw up a 'formal' job specification that they might not otherwise provide. Help from Jobcentre Plus with putting together job descriptions and person specifications would be welcomed by some employers. This may help overcome concerns that involvement with Jobcentre Plus necessitates a shift to more formal approaches to recruitment than they typically prefer.

Jobcentre Plus advisers and employer engagement staff are highly skilled professionals who work all the time with unemployed people and employers respectively. They will have developed a range of strategies to liaise with employers and guide and advise prospective candidates as they are seeking work. In Appendix B we present a synopsis of the findings from this report which may provide additional information that enhances the ability of Jobcentre Plus staff to maximise the employment opportunities of unemployed people seeking work through the jobcentre.

Appendix A

Case studies

Case study 1 – facilities management – Newcastle

Company profile

Type of company: Facilities management – providing cleaners, kitchen porters and other staff to other businesses/customers.

Location: Newcastle

No. of employees: 32 – 75 per cent unskilled, 25 per cent semi-skilled.

Recruiting: Cleaners and kitchen porters.

Who was seen?

Interviews observed: Five.

Candidate 1: Cleaning job, female, 30s, some experience, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), non-UK national – second interview arranged but cancelled by candidate for personal reasons, in process of rearranging.

Candidate 2: Cleaning job, female, 30s, no experience/women returner, white – kept on file.

Candidate 3: Cleaning job, female, 40s, no experience/women returner, white – unsuccessful.

Candidate 4: Cleaning job, female, around 20, no experience, white – unsuccessful.

Candidate 5: Kitchen porter job, male, 40s, some experience, BME, non-UK national – second interview undertaken.

Main findings demonstrated by the case study

The recruitment process: This employer was on the more 'formal' end of the scale in terms of his recruitment process, and used Jobcentre Plus to gain access to a large pool of applicants (high turnover). This seemed to be due to the fact that he was recruiting for other employers rather than only for his own small business.

The hiring decision: The importance of personal and interpersonal skills including motivation, willingness to engage with the employer, work-readiness. Also demonstrated the importance of 'every contact counting', i.e. telephone as well as face-to-face. In addition, the importance of practicalities such as transport and distance from work, and flexibility. The lack of importance of CVs as an assessment tool in and of itself, as well as the relative lack of importance of references, and qualifications.

Implications for Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre Plus:

Jobcentre Plus could better prepare candidates in a number of ways such as presentation, preparation and the understanding the practicalities of the role. Given that each contact point has an influencing effect, inspiring confidence with employers from the start, even on a brief telephone call, is vital.

The recruitment process

Sourcing candidates and sifting

The employer used Jobcentre Plus for cleaner and kitchen porter vacancies – he had used Jobcentre Plus for a couple of years and one advantage was that he gets a big pool of applicants through using them. Candidates sent a curriculum vitae (CV), either direct or after phoning the employer. The employer then sifted through and shortlisted on the basis of the CV, and possibly on any initial telephone conversation. Importantly, however, the CV was more of a platform for establishing further contact with individuals; it was not a means to judge the candidate on their specific experience.

Assessing candidates by interview

The first interview was described as ‘an informal chat’, and consisted mainly of going through the candidate’s CV and using this as a conversational prompt. The employer typically asked about previous experience, and noted that he primarily assessed candidates regarding flexibility, work-readiness and motivation. Successful candidates were then invited to a second interview, which went into the specifics of the job more, after which candidates were (or were not) offered a work trial.

To note, this process was more formal than most of those reported by employers during the groups stage of the research. This was likely due to the reputational risk the employer had to manage; his new recruits were immediately exposed to, and working for, the employer’s business clients.

Views on the recruitment process

The employer felt his process worked well – he received lots of applicants through Jobcentre Plus and so did not feel the need to use social media. He was not keen on the idea of automated systems because it *‘loses that element of gut feeling’*.

Decision-making factors for cleaners – personal and interpersonal factors

Flexibility

In particular, **flexibility** was the most important factor for cleaning staff; he wanted staff who would be able to work early morning, late evening, weekends, and be reliable. Childcare responsibilities also needed to be taken into account; he noted some reluctance to take on women with small children.

Flexibility was a ‘need to have’ rather than a ‘nice to have’ – if the candidate was not flexible then the employer would not consider any other aspects such as motivation or work-readiness/experience.

Small employer recruitment practices

Candidate 1

During the interview the candidate had already said she could work early/late, and the employer asked if she had children:

'The reason why I specifically asked that question is because we actually have taken people on in the past who have actually said "yes yes it's not a problem" and then it turns out two or three weeks into the job they don't turn up, they don't turn up, they are on the phone, "cannot make it in today because I've got childcare issues" so it is very very important from our point of view if you are taking somebody on, if they say they are flexible and they don't have problems with childcare, is they don't have problems with childcare ... So rather than waste their time and waste our time it is best just to cover those bases.'

Candidate 2

The employer knew the candidate had children from an earlier phone conversation but she sounded enthusiastic, so he offered her an interview. However, it was apparent she wouldn't be able to be flexible because of childcare, she didn't have grandparents around and was very particular about who she would leave her children with. However, the employer was very impressed with her general attitude – very positive, and willing to learn and pick things up – and said that he would keep her on file.

'She was very enthusiastic, she come across as if she wanted to work, you know very much so. She seemed quite confident, you know and she really did impress me with that general attitude to be honest with you, you know she had a very very good attitude ... she would have been asked back for a second interview if she did not have the problems she's got, I mean she admitted that herself, she has got problems with childcare, so you know it is pointless me offering a second interview and offering a job because all that's going to happen is two or three weeks down the line those problems would manifest and she probably wouldn't turn up for work ... But if she actually had that kind of extended help, of childcare and then extra family on top of that then she certainly would have been high up the list for a second interview without a shadow of a doubt.'

Motivation and willingness to engage

For candidates who were flexible, the employer would consider **motivation** and **work-readiness**/experience as the most important factors on which to select for second interview, with **motivation** being more important than experience because the employer could always train motivated people, but it was difficult to give experienced people motivation if they lacked it. The employer was very frustrated with one applicant who gave monosyllabic responses and appeared not to be motivated to engage and impress during the interview.

'You can have all the experience in the world but if you are not motivated to get out of bed and go and do a good job and want to do a good job and ... have a good attitude about what you do then you are a waste of space as far as I am concerned.'

Work-readiness

Work-readiness was very important to the employer and required more job-specific experience overall than some other employers (again, in part because he would not be providing on-job training himself, but instead would be 'handing off' candidates to other employers).

The employer asked about **work history**, **general work experience** and probed on whether the candidate had received any training in health and safety, lifting and handling, etc. to get some idea of their work-readiness. The word 'chemicals' seemed to be a key word that would indicate whether the candidate had experience/training in commercial cleaning as opposed to going round with a mop and duster – one candidate spontaneously mentioned 'chemicals' when being asked about previous training which appeared to impress the employer.

Practicalities

The employer asked all of the candidates how they had **travelled to the interview**, which again was used to determine flexibility in terms of if they had their own transport, or used public transport and if so how familiar they seemed to be with bus routes, etc. (All of the candidates used public transport or walked.) The employer knew their addresses from their CV but it was helpful to see how comfortable the candidates seemed with bus routes and so on, and also the question helped to break the ice.

Preparation and presentation

How prepared candidates were for the interview seemed to be an indicator of their motivation – Candidate 1 arrived half an hour early and was '**exceptionally well dressed**' which the employer took as very positive signs; Candidate 3 gave lots of 'can't remember' answers and had forgotten to put a job down on her CV. The employer said the candidate came across as one of the worst he had interviewed in a few years because of this.

Decision-making factors for kitchen porters – personal and interpersonal factors

Work-readiness

For kitchen porters, **work experience** or work-readiness was a very important factor, joint top with flexibility, as kitchen porters need to work unsocial hours; motivation was also important and came after these two.

Similarly to 'chemicals' for cleaners, 'colour-coded chopping boards' was the key phrase to indicate that someone had worked in a proper kitchen before, and had the basic skills to work around a kitchen without getting reprimanded by the chef.

Small employer recruitment practices

Candidate 5

Did not convince the employer with his responses about work experience/readiness – his CV gave the impression that he had worked in a restaurant kitchen for the last two years when the job had only lasted four months, and the responses about chopping boards did not reassure, but the employer admitted that English not being the candidate's first language might also have been a factor. However, the candidate was very flexible and very motivated, and on that basis the employer left it in the hands of the candidate to come up with a referee from his previous kitchen porter job (which the candidate subsequently did).

Secondary decision-making factors

References

References were always taken up as part of due diligence, but this was generally after a second interview or work trial unless there were some doubts about the veracity of the candidate's responses, in the kitchen porter example (Candidate 1). Again, this employer felt that he needed to be more careful to 'check all the boxes' given that he was providing staff for others rather than only for his own business.

'We will in every instance check a reference. It is pointless asking for references, it is pointless people saying you can have two references if they are not checked. You know at the end of the day it just gives you a little bit of comfort that somebody else has went "yeah, they are quite good at what they do". You know would you employ them again? Yes. Would you employ them again? No. Why not?'

References were more important for kitchen porter work than cleaning, but were still taken up for cleaners, particularly if they were working in premises with money lying around – they might be working in premises with hundreds or thousands of pounds in the tills. For work in customers' houses a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check would also be undertaken.

CVs

CVs were the standard method used by the employer for sifting candidates for an interview, although he reported he took the information presented with a small pinch of salt – *'To be totally honest with you I don't think I've ever seen a CV yet which has been 100 per cent truthful'*.

However, one thing the employer found offputting was when lots of CVs looked very similar in style, with just the personal details and work history changed:

'One of the most offputting things is with CV, and I blame the jobcentre for this because I think they do actually have courses where you can actually do a CV course, I am led to believe this is the case just by talking to various people. You can get a CV in and sometimes you can get 100 which are just about exactly the same but the details have changed, the personal details have changed, the format is the same. And it's a bit off-putting because you know the jobcentre have trained these people parrot fashion ... there's no individuality there and you think well you know, if you change that slightly and change that slightly you know it would just make it slightly different to like the other 100 people who are doing exactly the same thing ... I blame the jobcentre for that because I think they are trying to show people parrot fashion. Yeah great parrot fashion but at least have several different versions of it.'

Presentation

Presentation was not that important a consideration as long as the person was neat and tidy and had good personal hygiene. However, if their presentation was very poor it would put the employer off:

'You think to yourself you know can that person really take pride in doing their job and cleaning and stuff like that when they can't even take pride in their own appearance.'

Age

Age was not important to the employer – *'if you are 17 or 60, if you can do the job and you are capable of doing the job age doesn't really matter to me'*. However, he did ask Candidate 1 her age, and when challenged on this he said it was just to get a rough idea because it was not on her CV and he found it difficult to gauge from her appearance.

Qualifications

Qualifications were not deemed important for such cleaning or kitchen porter roles.

Employment status and history

A long period of time out of work would not have necessarily deterred the employer from pursuing a candidate, and Candidates 2 and 3 were both women returners with very patchy previous employment records – *'it's a bit of a chicken and egg isn't it. If somebody says "I haven't got any experience but I am willing" then how can you gain experience unless somebody is prepared to give you an opportunity to gain some experience'*. It looked better on a CV if someone had shown motivation to do something, for example charity work which Candidate 4 had done while unemployed.

Disability

The employer reported that candidates with a disability would have been considered if they were physically able to do the job. The employer had recently worked with a charity and taken on an employee who was recovering from being in a coma following serious accident which caused head injuries and resulted in some degree of mental impairment; the charity works with them to try to rehabilitate them to lead an independent life again. The employer also mentioned that hearing impairments or diabetes would not be a problem, but people with physical impairments would most likely not be able to do cleaning or kitchen porter work because of the physical nature of the jobs.

Migrants and eligibility to work in the UK

The employer always checked that the candidate was eligible to work in the UK. He was aware that premises have been searched in the recent past and businesses penalised for employing people who were not eligible to work. But as long as the candidate was eligible to work then nationality was not an issue; spoken English is also not particularly important for cleaners or kitchen porters as they are not customer-facing. The situation with Candidates 1 and 5 was that he was awaiting documents from them proving that they can work in the UK before progressing to work trials and potential job offers.

Small employer recruitment practices

Criminal records

The situation with candidates with a criminal record very much depended upon the nature of the offence; the employer would not have taken on anyone with convictions for theft or sexual offences, but he reported that he had employed in the past someone who had been in prison for a violent offence.

Implications for DWP/Jobcentre Plus

It was suggested that Jobcentre Plus might be able to provide more rigorous interview training for unemployed jobseekers. In particular, equipping candidates with the skills and recognition that they need to present themselves with enthusiasm and confidence, understand what the work involves and talk realistically about how they would fill the role, were deemed key factors for decision-making:

[Jobcentre Plus] could do a lot more with the training of some people who are long term unemployed because as I've seen people coming through the door who have, you know not been in work for a while or having children and going back to work, honestly they have not got a clue what it is to actually walk through the door and have an interview. you know they are racked by fear ... They might have had an interview at the jobcentre with a local jobcentre worker, they would be better off actually having role play, you know be nervous turning up to role playing but at least it will help them overcome their nerves ... You know having somebody just walking through the door and sitting down and clamping up is no good for me and it's no good for them ... making sure somebody is prepared or able to function in an interview, because if they are not they have not got a chance of getting a job.'

Case study 2 – cleaning services – London

Company profile

Type of company: A cleaning services company that provided industrial cleaning services for one-off cleans (e.g. post-construction), and regular office cleaning services on a contract basis. The case study observation was in relation to office cleaning contracts.

Location: Bristol.

Turnover: The business turnover was approximately £500,000.

No. of employees: He employed 20 staff, 16 of whom worked part-time. His staff were female and white British. Most had been with him over a long period – one for 16 years.

Other issues: The business had shrunk – five years ago he employed up to 100 people, with frequent ‘one-off’ large-scale jobs. He reduced the work on these contracts and now primarily employs staff on a long-term basis for contract work in residential and office blocks, where the individual employee works on the same job with similar hours each week. He found this work to be more stable and less strenuous for him. There is no shortage of business, and the economic downturn has increased the number of candidates for every job he advertises. He now feels he can ‘pick and choose’ new staff.

Recruiting: Cleaners, paid £6.85 an hour, with no exceptions. The work was unskilled, with no qualifications required. He recruited for every new job he gets, to ensure current staff maintain their hours below the National Insurance (NI) threshold, to maximise the earnings available at the lowest cost to the company.

Who was seen?

Interviews observed: One.

Candidate: Female, white, raised in the area but lived seven miles away, aged around 50s.

Main findings demonstrated by the case study

This employer displayed some clearly discriminatory practices based on racial, cultural, gender and age prejudices.

The recruitment process: Although some use of Jobcentre Plus in the past, primarily recruits via local adverts and word of mouth. Overall a highly informal recruitment process consisting of initial telephone sifts based on candidate messages, ‘informal chat’ interviews (often in public locations/by telephone/etc) and job trials.

The hiring decision: Explicit ‘screening out’ of non-white applicants and immigrants. Beyond this, the importance of personal and interpersonal skills, in particular motivation, trustworthiness and reliability. Attempt to engage and fit with the employer were vital – with some evidence of seeking ‘malleable’ personalities. Practicalities such as travel further indicated their suitability for the job. Qualifications were not important but job specific experience was, to some extent – this was established through conversations rather than CVs.

Implications for DWP and Jobcentre Plus: Importance of ensuring applicants are well prepared with the details of the job, what is required, show enthusiasm to work in this sector and within the conditions.

The recruitment process

Sourcing candidates and sifting

The vast majority of staff were recruited through adverts placed in post offices, supermarkets, and corner shops local to the site of the job being advertised. This aimed to target prospective candidates who lived locally and excluded those who did not. He sought local staff because he believed that employee commuting time and costs were a factor in their retention: that the shorter the commute, the more likely they would be able to 'stick at it'.

For the sifting process, the employer used their name, voice and address to get a sense of their ethnicity, nationality and wealth. He excluded (e.g., did not call back) those who were 'foreign' – which, it appeared, included Muslim within this classification. The employer estimated that when using Jobcentre Plus in the past he often received approximately 70 phone responses; this sift process would take him to 20 'potential' white British candidates.

'Number 1 is they've got to come through on the phone, I'd speak to them or they would leave a message. First thing is you can tell by the name, the voice, the phone number they leave – there's an English accent that you can understand, but they speak numbers differently for a start....stage 2 is me sifting out who I go and see and that's when the address comes in. You can tell a lot by the address as to where they live and what sort of block they live in.'

Assessing candidates by interviews

The interview observed was an informal ten-minute conversation which took place in his car, in the car park of the premises that the candidate would be employed to clean. The questions used included contact details, personal questions such as where the candidate grew up, whether she was married and had children, and any other family obligations.

Then the employer moved onto work experience and current work status, and previous jobs. He asked about driving capabilities, disability status, and UK citizenship. Then, he explained the contract.

Views on the recruitment process

The employer felt his process worked well, and liked having the personal flexibility to conduct the process as he saw fit. He had used the Jobcentre Plus service but had rarely successfully recruited through it. He believed it was too inflexible, as he could not specify the criteria he wants to, so candidates he considered inappropriate to apply were not screened out.

'They [Jobcentre Plus] would not ask me about the sort of person I was looking for – employee presentation, understanding of the language, the sort of person I was looking for. As soon as the job gets placed with JCP I may be getting up to 60 replies, of which 50 per cent don't have a clue what the job is for. I wouldn't understand a word they were saying to me, they wouldn't be suitable, they wouldn't be able to ask questions – rule that person out.'

'These jobs have got to be put into these neighbourhoods where the jobs are. I've had far more success where people have found them by going into the post office, going into the supermarket and saying, "oh there's a job I could do".'

Decision-making factors – personal and interpersonal factors

Attempt to engage with employer

The most important factor for him was ‘can I get along with them?’ ‘Personality’ was described as the critical element to gaining the job. This was taken to mean somebody who he liked, which he said depended on being ‘pleasant’ and well-presented. For him, this also involved speaking with a fluency in English that allowed them to ‘hold a conversation’.

A good interview, for him, was:

‘Someone who is prepared to listen, to speak out, to ask questions, who is prepared to make conversation and to communicate, and someone with a pleasing personality.’

He described the cleaners’ job as 40 per cent about the way they treat the client, and 60 per cent about their performance in the cleaning tasks. The cleaner was considered responsible for holding the relationship with the client. They interact with them, establish and maintain a relationship, and are accountable to the client for the quality of the work. He felt his business was ‘client-led’, however, how he gets along with the candidate, and what he thinks of their suitability, is used as a proxy for how he expects the client to rate them too.

Work-readiness

For this employer it was desirable to have experience of office cleaning specifically. He was looking for proof of capability to do the job and specifically within offices, and in ‘bills’ – the one-off jobs. However, the employer felt that overall work-readiness could be more important in some cases if he felt an employee would be motivated to do a good job.

Importantly, he sought people he deemed reliable and trustworthy, so they would attend work consistently. Trustworthiness was shown by not appearing to lie during the interview or show any signs of dishonesty. He grouped cleaners into different ‘breeds’: where office cleaners are typically more honest than domestic cleaners. Due to the high rate of thefts in domestic cleaning jobs, he avoided domestic business altogether.

Motivation and enthusiasm

His next consideration was ‘do they really want the job, and are they suited to it?’

The employer commented on a bad interview being *‘Somebody who hadn’t got a clue where the job was or had heard of the job location, someone who was just interested in the money not the job at all – it would come over as being a genuine interest ... e.g. a building 8 storeys high – they should be asking questions about it.’*

Practicalities

The candidate’s circumstances and responsibilities had to be compatible with the role.

They had to live fairly close – or the costs of travel take too great a proportion of earnings, and they are expected to lose motivation to work, ‘get frustrated’ at the pay versus the effort, and are likely to give up.

They had to be seeking small bits of part-time work only – a clear limit on the amount of work they are interested in doing, to ensure he stays below the NI threshold.

Small employer recruitment practices

Those doing other jobs he would exclude, as that could raise their total earnings above the NI threshold. He also sought to avoid employees with any other commitments that could interfere with their completion of the work.

They had to want permanent work, as he sought people to fill jobs/contracts that he may hold for several years. He does not want someone looking for temporary work for this job. He was looking for signs that they would work some time: he looked at age, health, and prospects – he was not interested in people who were likely to ‘move on’ into other types of work or to seek jobs elsewhere. He wanted people who had ‘no career prospects’ because he wants them to stay in this work.

Age

This employer was not keen to take a candidate above a certain age. He was uninterested in people who will retire soon.

‘Someone who will take public transport, who is fit and able, who is able to climb those eight flights of stairs day in, day out. So I’d immediately cut out the 60 year olds, I would probably cut out the 50 year olds – so down to 40, 30, 20.’

‘If I employ a lady who is 60 years old ... you can bet your life she won’t be working after two years.’

Candidate

Various aspects of this candidate were pleasing to the employer:

- she spoke good English, was white and raised in the area: he saw being white as essential, and being raised in the area as desirable (because it would help her relationship with the client – they had ‘something in common’);
- she was able to make conversation, and was prepared to ‘share a nervous laugh’ and ‘was smiley’: he was looking to see if he got along with her, and whether she was prepared ‘to try’ to establish a rapport. He was glad to see that she was ‘pleasant’ to talk to, conversational and articulate: he was surprised at these skills and rated them highly;
- she described previous cleaning work experience, and her preference for ‘one-off’ deep cleaning jobs. He felt this showed she took an interest in the activity and content of the work, rather than the money alone.

‘I made up my mind within the first minute. It was because she’d made an effort. She was made up, she had a dress on, she spoke well, she was physically OK.’

The candidate had two shortcomings: Her **age** was discouraging to him – he was looking for someone who would be likely to keep the job for as long as possible, and he expected her to retire within five years. This was a serious barrier to employing her. To note, he didn’t ask any follow-up questions to determine how long she said she wanted to work for – he made a guess based on her age. She did not add anything to reassure him of how long she planned to work for.

Continued

The **distance to travel** between her home and the work premises was also a serious concern to him. He calculated she would need to drive 14 miles a day to and from work, which took £28 from her wages of £60 a week. This, combined with the emergency tax she would be required to pay for an unknown period of time, was considered a strong disincentive for her, which could result in her quitting after a short period.

'When it comes down to the nitty gritty and look at the age and how far away she lives – she'd lose 25 quid immediately – what was a neat part-time job is different because she won't take away all that money.'

'It's £68 a week so if we take her petrol into consideration that takes her pay down to £40, so you've then got emergency tax after that – I don't know, maybe around about £40, so she will start asking her own questions about whether she wants to take the job. If I get desperate, I'd take her and try to manipulate her around to my way of thinking. Up the pay rate – that's the legal way – or give her money towards the petrol – you can broker something out of it.'

Exclusion basis

Ethnicity/religion

The employer first described his clients as not accepting people who were not white; but later described his own views on why non-white people are not suitable. In short, he did not consider individuals who were 'coloured'. He described this as a problem due to 'smell' and the inability to have a fluent conversation in English.

The employer was also not keen to recruit anyone that wore a burka due to perceived impact on forming client relationships:

'If a girl turns up in a burka or something like that – to put it bluntly, I'm not going to employ her.'

He no longer wanted to recruit Somalis based on their praying requirements:

'An example: the company employed us to do the full clean ... we fell back an hour or two behind which wasn't a problem. When the directors came round, on that particular dayat a particular time of day, lunchtime, they all had to pray, they all got together and stopped working and prayed, and faced east. That was at the time the Directors came around, they had paid a massive amount of money, and did not accept it was the be-all and end-all for these Somalis to stop working – they felt it was useless value – not acceptable within the English society ... I haven't employed Somalis again.'

In relation to equalities legislation and racial discrimination, he defended his behaviour while acknowledging that it was illegal.

'In the practicality of things when I do my own interview then it's an individual viewpoint that has to be taken. Whether that's within legislative thinking – probably not, because I'm saying things to you – skin's too dark, she wouldn't be acceptable – or oh no, Somalis have to pray at lunchtime – I don't know if that's in the law or not – you do bend it, no doubt. I've never been in a position where I've had to check it.'

Small employer recruitment practices

Disability

In discussing discrimination around disabilities, he explained why he feels it is important to know about disabilities and not employ someone if they have any.

'I employed a deaf and dumb person ... it worked fine for a month, then there was a problem on site, the problem wasn't done particularly well and to communicate that was difficult.'

'If I spoke to someone with a limp who would need to climb stairs, I would say, do you feel physically able to do the job? And fine, if they said they were. If I choose to give them the job is another matter.'

'There's nothing wrong in asking if someone has a physical disability ... here's another case. I took on an epileptic about five years ago and they didn't say they were, then they had a fit on site and I hadn't known anything about it before ... that was the end of her. She couldn't do it and she shouldn't have accepted the job in the first place. That's partly what prompted me to start asking. So I don't think there's anything wrong with asking about physical disability, such as walking with a limp.'

Benefits

Those on benefits would be excluded; the problem for him with respect to benefits is people are only allowed to earn a certain amount, therefore it was not deemed worth accepting the job if it means they would go over the amount and lose their job.

Caring duties

The employer was not keen to take on those with children who have not left home, or other dependants. He is unwilling to employ somebody who cared for dependants, who could fall sick or have other needs that prevented the employee attending work punctually and consistently.

Secondary factors affecting decision-making

Number of hours requested

He balances their interest in getting more work with the need to keep a threshold – a cap – on the total earnings.

'Men would want more hours. They wouldn't be willing to keep the one job. I would quote for it based on the fact I was paying National Insurance as well. a lot of companies employ part-time cleaners. If you're going to go above NI ...'

CVs

CVs were not too important to him, as in cleaning there 'is no career structure'; it was simple part-time work that should be treated accordingly.

References

These were requested from the candidate (employers over the past five years). The value of these was in establishing that the candidate did not have contacts to attest to her record.

However, these contacts would not be called upon unless the candidate was accepted. At this stage, it was a test of her confidence in her past record gauged by her willingness to give over names. He also described this as a test of her ‘trustworthiness’: her reputation with previous employers; and a check that she has worked for the companies that she described.

Bank account

Having a bank account was one way of assessing whether a candidate was ‘above board’.

Implications for Jobcentre Plus

The employer felt Jobcentre Plus should be more open to recognising the employer’s criteria for candidates e.g. geographically those who are locally based but willing to travel to many sites (the Jobcentre Plus advert requires one, rather than multiple, postcodes. He also felt a high standard of English was vital and Jobcentre Plus should do more to enable this. Awareness of the details of the job, what is required, and enthusiastic to work in this sector and with under the conditions specified were also deemed areas Jobcentre Plus could influence.

Case study 3 – personalised and branded items – Watford

Company profile

Type of company: This employer ran a personalised and branded items company that arranges the production of business gifts and items such as pens, key rings, note pads and so on. Overall on the semi-skilled side of the employee range.

Location: Watford.

Turnover: Unknown, but the company was established five years ago and did well until the recession which was a difficult period. Now they are growing again, the office is busy, and it was becoming difficult without more support.

No. of employees: Two. Both women, both with young children. Both have been with her for a couple of years. Her existing employees have been offered more hours per week but are not keen to do this; they prefer the work-life balance and wish to maintain their job share as it is.

Recruiting

For someone to support on the administrative and day-to-day running of the business. Varied role that would require a range of tasks. These included considerable liaising with clients by telephone, administrative support, filing, sourcing of products, checking production, working out prices, checking deliveries, and generally being a ‘team player’. She was looking to take on one person for three or four days a week, or to take on two people for two days a week.

Continued

Small employer recruitment practices

Who was seen?

Interviews observed: 2

Candidate 1: Female, middle aged, background as medical PA

Candidate 2: Male, middle aged, ex chauffeur with 10 years previous consultancy experience

Main findings demonstrated by the case study

The recruitment process: Use of word of mouth, networking, local means to recruit, e.g. PTA meetings and social media. Dislike of agencies and Jobcentre Plus, primarily due to a perception of being 'flooded' with applicants. CVs as an initial sift process, with higher expectations around this given many other employers in the study – likely because of the semi-skilled office work involved.

The hiring decision: 'Fit with the team' and with her was the key factor for this lady, as well as flexibility, basic common sense and some office skills. Gender and age seemed to play an important role also, with some potential for influence of looking for 'someone like me' as a proxy for 'fit with the employer'. Engagement during the interview was also key. Some concerns evident around overqualification.

Implications for DWP and Jobcentre Plus: Not to flood employers with applicants but to listen to their specific requirements more carefully. Providing 'unmotivated' applicants also likely to disengage. However, it is recognised this is difficult when much of the recruitment process is based on 'personality' and 'fit'.

The recruitment process

Sourcing

She recruited through word of mouth and networking, at business conferences, through social media (LinkedIn, her Facebook page, MumsNet), PTA meetings in school, and had specifically used a Jewish agency in the past. When she used MumsNet she was inundated with requests; this time she had had fewer, she thought because she posted just before the summer holidays.

She did not like agencies at all, as she had found in the past that the calibre of candidate was no higher, despite a £1,500 fee. The Jewish agency she used, which was free, produced people of poor quality.

She particularly disliked the jobcentre as last time she was inundated with applicants, but felt that none of them were motivated.

[Re. Jobcentre Plus] *'I was inundated with applicants but I felt that none of them were motivated for the job, not one was suitable, their test results were very poor even on basic maths questions such as 25 per cent of 100. They lacked common sense and I got the feeling they were there just to tick a box to get their benefits cheque. I won't use the jobcentre again.'*

Sifting

She sifted candidates first by CV. In terms of CV, she expected them to be short and concise without any spelling and grammatical mistakes. She ruled out candidates based on spelling/grammar, experience, basic fit.

Candidates then went through a telephone interview – this was of critical importance to her; she assesses the candidates' ability to speak confidently and coherently.

Assessing candidates by interview

A verbal interview was conducted on site, followed by a brief 'common sense test'. For successful candidates, she would expect to do a second interview with her other employees (a meet and greet). She didn't typically have job trials but does do a probation period.

Questions during interview were unstructured and conversational, and were intended just to 'get a feeling' of the candidate.

Common sense test

Her common sense test had 14 questions and included: spelling test, visual accuracy, work comprehension from a passage, mathematics questions. She felt this tested basic intelligence, as well as visual acuity which was important for the artwork, and 'handwriting'.

Decision-making factors – personal and interpersonal factors

Attempt to engage with employer and fit with the team

Her first priority was – do I like them? And will they fit with the team? 'Gut feeling' and 'liking someone' were aspects she returned to a lot. It seemed that gut feeling for her was largely around confidence and presentation.

'For a small organisation, that gut feeling is really important.'

Her second priority was – do they show common sense? This was linked in to how they present themselves during interview – whether they seemed smart, engaged and 'switched on'. This was also something she assessed through the test.

Flexibility

Flexibility was vital to her. She saw this as the main challenge to the role and it was important to her that candidates could manage competing priorities, particularly with childcare. Employees had to be able to cover each other on holidays/days off.

'The key to working here is to be flexible as there is no set pattern.'

Presentation

The effort someone took in their appearance was important to her, and part of how she worked out whether she 'liked' someone. She liked someone to 'sell themselves' to her.

'For an interview they need to be well dressed, not wearing flip flops or leggings, look clean and tidy. First impressions are very important; they need to show they made an effort.'

Small employer recruitment practices

Work-readiness

In terms of necessary skills and background experience, she was looking for the ability to communicate well by telephone with individuals at all levels of work (clients and suppliers), and basic computer skills.

Computer skills required included being comfortable with:

- Word and touch typing/relatively fast typing;
- Excel;
- emails.

Ideally, she was looking for someone with a background in marketing, advertising or promotion, as there is an artistic aspect to their work, so she values her employees having a visual/creative side. She is flexible on this though.

Candidate 1

She had brought this candidate in because she had a 'good telephone voice', as well as administrative experience. However, in interview our recruiter felt she was not confident and not up to the role. She made a poor impression on our respondent from the start:

'Face-to-face I got the idea she wasn't the brightest. Wishy washy, not switched on enough.'

'I knew from the start she wasn't right.'

Interestingly, the questions for this candidate differed from Candidate 2 – presumably due to the snap judgement the recruiter made. She did not ask challenging questions around motivation or enthusiasm for the role, as she did the other candidate.

As a result of the impression the candidate made, she did not seem even to ask basic questions such as why they would like the job, etc., just asked about skills/availability/logistics with very yes/no answers.

The respondent had then performed poorly on the test so was written off in the employer's mind. Polite end to the interview but she did not choose to recruit her.

Candidate 2

The employer liked the fact that this man was well presented and she thought he seemed 'switched on' (especially compared to the other candidate). She thought he showed good motivation by saying *'I've had a look at your website, I know what you do'*.

However, she felt his roles had been too senior in the past, e.g. business development, raising the profile of the company. She felt he would be more suited to a sales role, not an administrative role that grows the back office support. She considered sales to be his strength because he said *'Would there be opportunities to visit clients?'* and asked about career progression. She clearly had some concerns about whether he would be happy taking instructions/training from girls.

She considered a trial period, but was not sure he would fit well with the team. On discussion with family/her other employees she decided against this candidate

'I'm not sure how he will fit in; how will he work in an all female office where we're discussing last night's Corrie?'

'I think he might try and take over.'

Secondary decision-making factors

Motivation

Motivation was necessary but not sufficient. She thought that a good interview was *'someone who is keen on the job'*; this was shown in the fact that they have done some research on the job and the business. But for her, the confidence, likeability and ability to do that specific job seemed to be more important. When motivation is absent this is a clear indication the person was not right for the role, e.g. jobcentre candidates who she did not feel were motivated and were generally not even considered.

Language/nationality

Accent was clearly an issue for her, and she said she would not recruit someone with a thick accent, mentioning, in particular, Eastern European and Scottish accents. This is due to the level of communication by telephone; she thought it would be difficult for her clients otherwise.

'They have to be able to speak well and have clear English.'

Gender

She imagined she would take on a woman. She said she was happy to have a male, but seemed hesitant about this. Strong impression was that she would have preferred a woman.

'We've had a male before; it's a different type of banter.'

'I'm not sure he'd enjoy talking about last night's Corrie.'

Small employer recruitment practices

Age

She was not inclined to take a younger person for a number of reasons: she felt they might be bored without the 'social aspect' of working in an organisation, she was not sure they would get on well with the team, and she did not think they would stay long in the role – meaning then they'd have to train someone else. Ideal age is 40-55.

'I can't offer the career progression, all the training, all the things you need to give a young person.'

'They want a social life from a workplace – working with a 40 year old and two 50 plus women – a young person isn't going to enjoy that!'

Childcare duties

Whether a candidate had children, and how old they were, was clearly important to her – and linked in to her ideas around flexibility. Ideally she was looking for mothers with older children. She stated she wanted to help mothers going back to work after having children, as she had experienced this herself. However, she recognised having young children as a difficulty, and in her interviews she clearly expressed her enthusiasm for the candidate not having young children:

'I'm not supposed to ask, "do you have family commitments or children?" (Answer is children in their 20s). "Great. So school holidays and term time is not a problem".'

However, she said she was happy to take a candidate with younger children as long as they were completely open and honest as to their childcare duties and needs, and prepared in this way.

'So many employers discriminate against people with young children. I went back to work when my child was four months. I remember being asked "would you take time off if your children were ill?" I said yes obviously. That man told me if I'd said I wouldn't take time off then he wouldn't have hired me. Because it's kind of a test! If you're not prepared to be honest This man said to me, "somebody with children who you're giving this chance to, because they can't be there all the time, they'll work so much harder in those hours they're in work – they'll repay you in their work".'

'I need to know upfront what I'm dealing with. I know it's un-PC to ask these things [about children], but you have to do it.'

'Another woman said "I'm thinking about coming back to work, once I'm in a job I'll get a childminder". She's not prepared, I'm not going to take her.'

She was frank about the fact that having older children was helpful as they didn't need so much care.

Disabilities

She thought it would be very difficult to take someone with a disability because of the nature of the organisation and the workplace.

'I'm more than happy to have someone with some kind of disability working here. However, this is a small organisation, there are steps up to our front door, the toilets are upstairs, the building isn't great for wheelchairs. So if someone was in a wheelchair, they would have a problem.'

Factors of little importance

Qualifications

In terms of experience, she did not require a degree, but some office experience.

Importantly, she was not looking for someone who was overqualified, as she felt they would be overly ambitious, frustrated doing things such as filing, and not happy to take instruction from 'girls' who would previously have been junior to them.

References

References were taken up after someone starts or not at all. She felt that they were not worth much – *'you can't say anything bad in a references anyway'*.

Criminal record

She had never checked for a criminal record.

Implications for Jobcentre Plus

Employers find it very difficult being flooded with applicants. This lady stated it would be far better if Jobcentre Plus could be more selective and actually listen to exactly what she was looking for.

Appendix B

Lessons from the research

In this appendix we present a synopsis of the findings from the research which may add to the repertoire of Jobcentre Plus staff's strategies for maximising the employment opportunities of unskilled and semi-skilled candidates seeking work.

- How to look for work – in addition to the jobcentre there are a variety of ways:
 - by word of mouth; through friends and relatives who are already in work;
 - by dropping in an application, CV, or application letter, unsolicited, to local employers that they consider may be employing people and for which they have the skills and interest in working;
 - local adverts in the newspapers, free-sheets, shop windows, etc.;
 - social media, such as Facebook;
 - specialist trade journals (mainly for more skilled roles);
 - recruitment agencies.
- Employers' approach to recruiting people:
 - employers vary considerably in their approach to recruiting and potential candidates need to be aware of this and prepared to deal with different recruitment processes;
 - in most cases, every point of contact with an employer is a potential selection point, including initial telephone calls, informal chats, or when an application or CV is dropped in to an employer unsolicited, which candidates need to be aware of.
- Being prepared:
 - a** employers generally like a potential candidate to know something about the business before the interview and to ask questions that are relevant to the business;
 - b** potential candidates should undertake a little research before the interview, looking at the employer's website or talking to people who may know about the business.
- What employers look for:
 - motivation and enthusiasm: often communicated by tone and voice, questions asked during an interview or informal chat, some knowledge of the business, and actively engaging the employer in conversation;
 - engagement: a genuine interest in the business and the role they would play within the business. Questions about pay and conditions are acceptable but not as a first set of questions;
 - reliability: often gauged by an employer through travel to work plans and childcare plans. Both should be formulated before the interview and reliant on getting the job;
 - flexibility: especially for part-time or split shift work, can the potential candidate provide the flexibility the employer requires and have they thought about what this might mean for travel and childcare plans?;

Small employer recruitment practices

- presentation: dress that is formal, clean and tidy or appropriate to the job. Jobcentre Plus staff can play an important part in helping a potential candidate decide how to present themselves through feedback from the employer. For example, for a driving job would the employer prefer an interviewee to wear a suit or to dress appropriate to the job?;
- certification: some types of work require specific certificates (e.g. HGV, Food hygiene, CRB checks, etc.). If these are specified by an employer, only those potential candidates with appropriate certificates should be sent to interview.
- Reassurance that not all employers are concerned about:
 - qualifications;
 - job specific experience (but this should be discussed by Jobcentre Plus staff prior to sending potential candidates);
 - CVs;
 - employment status/history: providing potential candidates have a good reason for gaps in their work history, some employers are not concerned about this, but this should be checked with the employer first.
- Employers do not generally like:
 - employers vary in their views about potential candidates who are overqualified as they think they are likely to leave the job quickly or try to re-organise the employer. This should be discussed with Jobcentre Plus staff beforehand;
 - overselling of/fictitious experience or qualifications listed on a CV or application;
 - inappropriate behaviour or conversation (such as discussing personal issues or talking about drunkenness, for example);
 - CVs that appear to have come off a production line. Employers prefer honest CVs that reflect the individual;
 - too many potential candidates being sent to them, especially if they do not match the criteria specified for the job, or candidates that are clearly uninterested or unmotivated.

Appendix C

Topic guides

Topic guide – group discussions

Research aim

- The overall aim of the research is to provide insight into who and what are the influences on employers when recruiting unskilled and/or semi-skilled employees.
- Research focuses on overall needs and less on the process by which employers recruit and more on how employers decide who to recruit.

1. Introduction

- Thank participants for attending
- Introduce yourself and TNS-BMRB and explain your role
- Explain that the research is for DWP and exploring how employers manage their staff recruitment practices
- The research will help DWP and employers enable more effective recruitment of candidates to job roles
- Explain confidentiality and anonymity

2. About the business and the business environment

- Nature of their business
- Number of employees; full-time; part-time; contract staff
- Nature of workforce; balance between semi-/un-skilled and skilled/professional
- How has business fared over the past five years; impact of recent economic events on business and staffing?
- Are they currently (or recently) recruiting; what sort of staff are they looking for; reasons for recruiting (replacement; expansion)?

3. Recruiting staff

I would like you now to think about recruiting staff and I am particularly interested in your approach to recruiting unskilled and semi-skilled staff...

About the labour market

- How easy/difficult is it to recruit the type of staff they need?
- Are there particular skills shortages?
 - What are they?
 - Is this recent, or ongoing?
 - Why do they think there are skills shortages in these areas?

Designing the job role

- How do they decide what the job role will look like (especially for new roles)?
 - Who is involved?
- What would they take into account?
- Would they take into account Tax Credit rules; why/why not?
- Would they take into account a candidate with a disability?
 - Could they accommodate? Could they make reasonable adjustments?

Who they recruit

Researcher note – THIS IS A PRIORITY AREA FOR EXPLORATION, please ensure full coverage of questions in this section.

- Do they look for a specific type of person?
 - What are their characteristics? Why these?
 - Are there specific types of people they target?
 - Who?
 - Reasons
- Over the past few years, have you recruited:
 - Probe reasons why/why not***
 - Young people (under 21s)
 - Older people (50+)
 - Unemployed people (less than six months)
 - Unemployed people (longer term – 6 months to 2 years; 2+ years)
 - Candidates who are 'overqualified' in terms of qualifications and/or experience
 - People with a disability
 - Migrants

Small employer recruitment practices

- Is there anything that would make it easier for you to recruit individuals who are currently unemployed?
 - In terms of access to suitable candidates?
 - In terms of creating employment opportunities for these individuals?
- What are the most important recruitment criteria (for unskilled/semi-skilled jobs?)
- **SPONTANEOUS, THEN PROBE AND RANK ORDER PRIMARY AND SECONDARY REQUIREMENTS**
 - Qualifications (generally)
 - Qualifications (job specific)
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Time unemployed
 - Work-ready
 - Anything else?
- Have these requirements changed over time?
 - In what way? Reasons
- Do they have to be 'work-ready'?
 - Would they recruit and train? Under what circumstances?
 - What does a 'work-ready' person look like?
 - Is 'work-readiness' different for different job roles/types of people (e.g. age)?
- Role of qualifications/work experience (*Note to researcher – this has been explored in other DWP work so please touch on this lightly only*)
 - How important are qualifications?
 - What types of qualifications do they look for?
 - How important is work experience?
 - What do they look for?

Employing candidates with a disability

- Are you aware of the requirements of employing people with a disability? (Probe by asking for examples of where they have or have not taken on a candidate who had a disability)
- Has your organisation been awarded the disability symbol (two ticks)?
- What barriers do you feel you face to make recruiting disabled people easier?
- Do you have the support you need to make any reasonable adjustments that may be needed? (Probe – are they aware of the financial support available through Access to Work?)

- Have you built processes into your recruitment activity to support people with hidden impairments such as learning difficulties, autism, dyslexia, etc.? (Probe – seek examples of how they have adjusted processes (or not) to accommodate an individual's needs)
- Is there anything that would disadvantage a candidate?
- **SPONTANEOUS and then PROBE**
 - Length of unemployment (if not already covered)
 - Disability
 - Drug/alcohol abuse
 - Criminal record
 - Anything else

How they recruit

Researcher note – although recruitment processes are of interest, please ensure that you have good data across the WHO employers recruit section above – this section is of lower priority and can be covered in less detail as necessary.

Please however ensure coverage of underlined questions which further help us understand how employers decide who is the 'right' candidate during the recruitment process.

- Overall process – cover briefly:
 - How do they decide whether to recruit new staff or offer existing staff more hours?
 - Is this something they do? When?
 - Who is involved? Does it vary?
 - What are the factors they take into account?
 - Do they have recruitment policies?
 - Written; formal; informal
 - How these came about
 - What do they take into account?
- Equality legislation?
- Disability legislation?
- How do they adhere to the legislation?
 - Who is involved in making the decision to recruit replacement/new staff?
 - Is this always the case or does it vary; when and how does it vary?
 - What is the process for recruiting staff?

Small employer recruitment practices

Spontaneous, then prompt

(MAP OUT PROCESS, FILLING OUT THE DETAIL WITH THE FOLLOWING PROMPTS – after they define the job/person (covered above) explore process of advertising; sifting; interviewing; decision-making; etc.)

- How do they find staff?
 - Media advertising; social media; Jobcentre Plus; recruitment agency; word of mouth; other
- What do candidates have to provide?
 - CV; application form; etc.
 - Why these? What is the value of these?
- Shortlisting
 - How does this work?
 - Who is involved?
 - How useful is the information provided by the candidate?
 - Does the candidate match up with the information they have provided; reasons why this may not be the case
 - Perceived value of CVs/application forms/references
 - What do they look for in order to shortlist a candidate?
 - Do they match the candidate's information to the job/person specification?
 - Do they use social media to check on candidates? How useful? Has it ever stopped them recruiting someone?
 - How many candidates would they normally shortlist? Reasons
- Interviews
 - How many interviews for each candidate?
 - Who is involved in the interviews? Different people if multiple interviews?
 - How are interviews managed? What do they do in the interview? Set questions that are used for every candidate or vary? Reasons
 - How do they decide whether to pursue a candidate after an interview? Record all answers; general 'feel'?
- Is the process different for replacement or new staff?
- Has the recruitment process changed over time? (Perhaps in relation to changes in the labour market?)
 - How? Reasons
- To what extent does the recruited person match the person/job description? (Do they always get the right person for the job?)
 - Reasons
- What would help to make the match between their requirements and the candidates closer?

4. Most effective way to recruit

Researcher note: This section takes lower priority over above sections – please cover more briefly as time allows, focusing on any areas not covered already in discussion.

We talked earlier about the methods you use to recruit. Thinking about recruiting unskilled/semiskilled candidates ...

- What are the best methods of recruiting, in their experience?
- What are the pros and cons of each?
- How do they decide which approach to use?
 - **PROBE each and reasons why**
 - Media advertising
 - Social media
 - Jobcentre Plus
 - Recruitment agency
 - Specialist Welfare to Work Providers
 - Word of mouth
 - Other
- Have they used automated system to filter/shortlist candidates?
 - Experiences
 - Would they use again?
 - Pros and cons

IF NOT USED SOME OF THE METHODS ABOVE ...

- Would they consider using them in the future?
- Views about using social media to recruit
- Views about using automated systems to filter/shortlist candidates

5. Government initiatives (briefly)

For each of the following:

- Youth Contract
- Work Experience
- Sector Based Work Academies
- Wage Incentive
- Apprenticeships
- Work Programme
- Work Choice (for people with disabilities)

Small employer recruitment practices

- Access to Work (for people with disabilities)
- Disability Symbol (Two Ticks) including the Guaranteed Interview Scheme (for people with disabilities)
- Universal Job Match
- EXPLORE
 - Awareness
 - Experience
 - Views
 - Perceived value (if used)

Close

- If they were the government what would be the ONE change they would make that would make recruiting unskilled/semi-skilled candidates more effective?

Thank and Close

Topic guide – case studies

Research aim

- The overall aim of the research is to provide insight into who and what are the influences on employers when recruiting unskilled and/or semi-skilled employees.
- Research focuses on overall needs and less on the process by which employers recruit and more on how employers **decide who to recruit**.
- Phase 1 group discussion findings that suggest recruitment practices tend to be highly informal for SMEs employing semi-skilled and unskilled staff – often relying heavily on interpersonal factors for candidate assessment rather than formal evaluations or CV-driven approaches.
- Phase 2 case studies aim to:
 - Observe candidate recruitment and assessment in action to further explore the influences and factors affecting ‘gut instinct’ assessment.
 - Provide evidence about what employers **actually do** during recruitment versus **what they say they do**.
 - Provide an opportunity to validate any observed influences via follow-up conversations with employers – and potentially challenge employers’ self report regarding practices and recruitment influences – using data collected via visit observations.

RESEARCHER NOTE: How and when information in each section is explored will need to be flexibly adapted for each conversation/research visit. Tailoring will be needed for each case study depending on the recruitment process used by the employer and the structure of site visits.

Please see full research approach in appendix.

Permissions for video recording (video and/or audio) to be gained informally via telephone at point of recruitment and formally at first face-to-face meeting – disclosure form must be signed by any individuals appearing on video. The video aspect of the study will have been broadly explained at point of recruitment and in more depth, tailored to recruitment approach, at the end of contact 1.

Contact 1

1 Introductions

- Thank participants for agreeing to participate
- Review planned structure of conversations/visits
- Reminders that:
 - The research is for DWP and exploring how employers manage their staff recruitment practices
 - The research will help DWP and employers enable more effective recruitment of candidates to job roles
 - TNS-BMRB is independent of DWP
- Explain confidentiality and anonymity – as generally applies in study and as specifically applies to video usage
- Explain video release forms

2 About the business and the business environment

- Nature of their business
- Number of employees; full-time; part-time; contract staff
- Nature of workforce; balance between semi-/un-skilled and skilled/professional
- How has business fared over the past five years; impact of recent economic events on business and staffing?

3 Decision to recruit

- Why are they currently recruiting?
- How was the decision made to recruit more staff versus offer existing staff more hours?
- Who made the decision to recruit?
- How frequently do they tend to recruit for roles like these?
 - What drives this? (staff turnover? Expansion?)

4 Role and person specification

- **What is the role that they are recruiting for?**
 - Key aspects of job and day-to-day responsibilities
 - Key challenges
 - Hours of work

Small employer recruitment practices

- Contract/off contract and length of employment agreement
- Who they will be reporting to
- Who they will be interacting with (in terms of other staff? customers? general public?)
- What are the challenges of recruiting for a role like this?
 - Is it easy to find appropriate people? Why/why not?
 - Skills shortages?
 - Other issues?
- **What kind of person do they have in mind for the role?**

Researcher note: EXPLORE THIS SECTION BRIEFLY – ‘who’ employers recruit and why will be explored in depth at the first site visit. For this initial conversation aim to gather a general understanding of to what extent employers have an idea of the ‘ideal’ employee and roughly what this looks like.

- Do they look for a specific type of person?
- Specific skills/background/experience?
- Qualifications/certifications?
- Other?
- Do you have a picture in your mind of the **‘right person for the job’**?
 - What does this look like? What are their characteristics?
 - *(do not prompt but listen for the following and probe appropriately to understand ideal characteristics from employer perspective: training/background; qualifications/skills; demographic characteristics e.g. age/sex/family status etc; personality and behaviour; location; appearance; ‘motivation’ and ‘enthusiasm’.)*
- Do you have a picture in your mind of **‘the wrong person for the job’**?
 - What does this look like? What are their characteristics? Why?
 - *(do not prompt but listen for the following and prompt appropriately to understand ideal characteristics from employer perspective: training/background; demographic characteristics e.g. age/sex/family status etc; personality and behaviour; location; appearance; ‘motivation’ and ‘enthusiasm’.)*

5. Recruitment process

Researcher note: All employers in this group have indicated that they use more informal recruitment policies. Please double check process against the steps below but adjust questioning accordingly.

- Where are they in the recruitment process?
- How long have they been recruiting/how long do they expect the recruitment process to be?
 - What determines the expected length of recruitment time?
 - How long does it typically take to recruit employees for this kind of role?

- What is their expected process for recruiting for this vacancy? *Spontaneous, then prompt and map the process:*
 - How do they find staff?
 - word of mouth; window advertisements; trade-specific websites or publications; media advertising; social media; Jobcentre Plus; recruitment agency;
 - What (if anything?) do candidates have to provide?
 - CV; application form; proof of qualifications; proof of certifications; references, etc.
 - Why these? What is the value of these?
 - How are candidates assessed?
 - Telephone chat?
 - In person meeting?
 - Formal interview/informal interview?
 - References?
 - Social media checks?
 - Shortlisting (*adapt as appropriate – many employers in this group do not engage in formal shortlisting*)
 - How does this work?
 - Formal shortlist versus rolling recruitment?
 - Who is involved?
 - How many candidates would they usually short list? Reasons.
 - How does assessment take place?
 - Telephone chat?
 - Interview?
 - Formal or informal?
 - On the job trial?
 - Why is this assessment process used?
 - Is this process typical for their business?
 - Why/why not?
 - How would things change for recruitment for other roles?
 - *Spontaneous, then probe: depending on training need?*

CONFIRM PLAN FOR SITE VISITS/CONTACTS 2 AND 3 – DATES, TIMES, LOCATIONS, LENGTH OF VISIT, AND APPROACH FOR OBSERVATION/DISCUSSION. REMIND EMPLOYER THAT VISITS WILL INVOLVE SOME VIDEO PARTICIPATION AND THAT YOU WILL GAIN FORMAL WRITTEN CONSENT AT FIRST VISIT.

THANK AND CLOSE

Contact 2

Researcher note: This site visit provides an opportunity to observe candidate assessment. This could involve formal in-person interviewing, but may also simply involve telephone interviews or informal conversations with the potential employee. In some cases candidate assessment may take the form of an 'on the job trial'.

These sessions are critical in understanding how employers assess candidates in practice, what affects 'gut instinct' around potential employees, as well as the factors that drive employers' informal assessment of 'fit'.

If permission has been granted, this will be gained from direct observation of interviews/employee sifting/employee first day. If not, this may take place for example, via 'after interview debriefs' with the employer. Tailor questioning flexibly and ensure key discussion areas are covered over the course of the visit.

Contact 3

- 1 **A second site visit** after candidates have been taken on, in order to discuss potential influences on the recruitment process as observed in site visit 1 – in order to question and challenge regarding what constitutes 'gut instinct' and understanding of employee 'fit.' As appropriate, in cases in which staff had already been taken on, we would also query around whether this initial instinct was correct and the success of more informal approaches in finding appropriate candidates.
 - How useful is the information provided by the candidate?
 - Does the candidate match up with the information they have provided; reasons why this may not be the case
 - Perceived value of CVs/application forms/references
 - What do they look for in order to shortlist a candidate?
 - Do they match the candidate's information to the job/person specification?
 - Interviews
 - How many interviews for each candidate?
 - Who is involved in the interviews? Different people if multiple interviews?
 - How are interviews managed? What do they do in the interview? Set questions that are used for every candidate or vary? Reasons
 - How do they decide whether to pursue a candidate after an interview? Record all answers; general 'feel'?
 - Is the process different for replacement or new staff?
 - Has the recruitment process changed over time? (Perhaps in relation to changes in the labour market?)
 - How? Reasons
 - To what extent does the recruited person match the person/job description? (Do they always get the right person for the job?)
 - Reasons
 - What would help to make the match between their requirements and the candidates closer?

2 Recruiting staff

I would like you now to think about recruiting staff and I am particularly interested in your approach to recruiting un-skilled and semi-skilled staff ...

Who they recruit

Researcher note – THIS IS A PRIORITY AREA FOR EXPLORATION, please ensure full coverage of questions in this section.

- Over the past few years, have you recruited:

Probe reasons why/why not

- Young people (under 21s)
 - Older people (50+)
 - Unemployed people (less than six months)
 - Unemployed people (longer term – 6 months to 2 years; 2+ years)
 - Candidates who are ‘overqualified’ in terms of qualifications and/or experience
 - People with a disability
 - Migrants
- Is there anything that would make it easier for you to recruit individuals who are currently unemployed?
 - In terms of access to suitable candidates?
 - In terms of creating employment opportunities for these individuals?
 - What are the most important recruitment criteria (for unskilled/semi-skilled jobs?)
 - ***SPONTANEOUS, THEN PROBE AND RANK ORDER PRIMARY AND SECONDARY REQUIREMENTS***
 - Qualifications (generally)
 - Qualifications (job specific)
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Time unemployed
 - Work-ready
 - Anything else?
 - Have these requirements changed over time?
 - In what way? Reasons
 - Do they have to be ‘work-ready’?
 - Would they recruit and train? Under what circumstances?
 - What does a ‘work-ready’ person look like?
 - Is ‘work-readiness’ different for different job roles/types of people (e.g. age)

Small employer recruitment practices

- Role of qualifications/work experience (*Note to researcher – this has been explored in other DWP work so please touch on this lightly only*)
 - How important are qualifications?
 - What types of qualifications do they look for?
 - How important is work experience?
 - What do they look for?

Employing candidates with a disability

- Are you aware of the requirements of employing people with a disability? (Probe by asking for examples of where they have or have not taken on a candidate who had a disability)
- Has your organisation been awarded the disability symbol (two ticks)?
- What barriers do you feel you face to make recruiting disabled people easier?
- Do you have the support you need to make any reasonable adjustments that may be needed? (Probe – are they aware of the financial support available through Access to Work?)
- Have you built processes into your recruitment activity to support people with hidden impairments such as learning difficulties, autism, dyslexia etc? (Probe – seek examples of how they have adjusted processes (or not) to accommodate an individual's needs)
- Is there anything that would disadvantage a candidate?
- **SPONTANEOUS and then PROBE**
 - Length of unemployment (if not already covered)
 - Disability
 - Drug/alcohol abuse
 - Criminal record
 - Anything else

How they recruit

*Researcher note – although recruitment processes are of interest, please ensure that you have good data across the WHO employers recruit section above – **this section is of lower priority and can be covered in less detail as necessary.***

***Please however ensure coverage of underlined questions** which further help us understand how employers decide who is the 'right' candidate during the recruitment process.*

- Overall process – cover briefly:
 - How do they decide whether to recruit new staff or offer existing staff more hours?
 - Is this something they do? When?
 - Who is involved? Does it vary?
 - What are the factors they take into account?

- Do they have recruitment policies?
 - Written; formal; informal
 - How these came about
 - What do they take into account?
- Equality legislation?
- Disability legislation?
- How they adhere to the legislation?
 - Who is involved in making the decision to recruit replacement/new staff?
 - Is this always the case or does it vary; when and how does it vary?
 - What is the process for recruiting staff?

Spontaneous, then prompt

(MAP OUT PROCESS, FILLING OUT THE DETAIL WITH THE FOLLOWING PROMPTS
– after they define the job/person (covered above) explore process of advertising; sifting; interviewing; decision-making; etc.)

- How do they find staff?
 - Media advertising; social media; Jobcentre Plus; recruitment agency; word of mouth; other
- What do candidates have to provide?
 - CV; application form; etc.
 - Why these? What is the value of these?
- Shortlisting
 - How does this work?
 - Who is involved?
 - How useful is the information provided by the candidate?
 - Does the candidate match up with the information they have provided; reasons why this may not be the case
 - Perceived value of CVs/application forms/references
 - What do they look for in order to shortlist a candidate?
 - Do they match the candidate's information to the job/person specification?
 - Do they use social media to check on candidates? How useful? Has it ever stopped them recruiting someone?
 - How many candidates would they normally shortlist? Reasons
- Interviews
 - How many interviews for each candidate?
 - Who is involved in the interviews? Different people if multiple interviews?

Small employer recruitment practices

- How are interviews managed? What do they do in the interview? Set questions that are used for every candidate or vary? Reasons
- How do they decide whether to pursue a candidate after an interview? Record all answers; general 'feel'?
- Is the process different for replacement or new staff?
- Has the recruitment process changed over time? (Perhaps in relation to changes in the labour market?)
 - How? Reasons
- To what extent does the recruited person match the person/job description? (Do they always get the right person for the job?)
 - Reasons
- What would help to make the match between their requirements and the candidates closer?

3 Most effective way to recruit

Researcher note: This section takes lower priority over above sections – please cover more briefly as time allows, focusing on any areas not covered already in discussion.

We talked earlier about the methods you use to recruit. Thinking about recruiting unskilled/semiskilled candidates...

- What are the best methods of recruiting, in their experience?
- What are the pros and cons of each?
- How do they decide which approach to use?
 - ***PROBE each and reasons why***
 - Media advertising
 - Social media
 - Jobcentre Plus
 - Recruitment agency
 - Specialist Welfare to Work providers
 - Word of mouth
 - Other
- Have they used automated system to filter/shortlist candidates?
 - Experiences
 - Would they use again?
 - Pros and cons

IF NOT USED SOME OF THE METHODS ABOVE...

- Would they consider using them in the future?
- Views about using social media to recruit
- Views about using automated systems to filter/shortlist candidates

4 Government initiatives (briefly)

For each of the following:

- Youth Contract
- Work Experience
- Sector Based Work Academies
- Wage Incentive
- Apprenticeships
- Work Programme
- Work Choice (for people with disabilities)
- Access to Work (for people with disabilities)
- Disability Symbol (Two Ticks) including the Guaranteed Interview Scheme (for people with disabilities)
- Universal Job Match
- ***EXPLORE***
 - Awareness
 - Experience
 - Views
 - Perceived value (if used)

5 Close

- If they were the government what would be the ONE change they would make that would make recruiting unskilled/semi-skilled candidates more effective?

Thank and Close

References

Jordan, E. and Thomas, A.P. (2013). Research on the implementation of the youth contract in Jobcentre Plus districts. DWP (To be published)

Jordan, E., Thomas, A.P., Kitching, J.W., Blackburn, R.A. (2013). *Employment regulation: Employer perceptions and the impact of employment regulation*. BIS (To be published)

McNair, S. and Flynn, M. (2005). *The age dimension of employment practices: employer case studies*. <http://www.bis.gov.uk/files/file11436.pdf>

McNair, S., Flynn, M. and Dutton, N. (2007). *Employer responses to an ageing workforce: a qualitative study*, DWP Research Report No. 455. http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/report_abstracts/rr_abstracts/rra_455.asp

Thomas, A.P. and Pascall-Calitz, J. (2009). *Default Retirement Age*. DWP.