



Employment advice

What works for disadvantaged people

Key words

Employment, disadvantage, advice, counselling, career, work, self-efficacy, job search, labour market, employers, exclusion, inclusion.

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Abstract

The research aimed to identify the 'active ingredients' in effective help for disadvantaged people in finding sustainable employment. A survey of over 200 research studies and papers was undertaken giving priority to randomised controlled trials (RCT) and independent studies. Parallel findings from good quality research in the field of psychology, interpersonal counselling and motivation were also introduced. The quality of relationship between advisor and unemployed client was found to be the most significant factor in successful support, and detailed descriptions of relevant advisor skill and behaviours are made. Application of methods that build self-efficacy can enhance job selection, job search, job competition and job-keeping skills among clients. Direct contact between employers, advisors and clients provides useful information on vacancies and job tasks and can help overcome prejudice. Programme design can influence outcomes positively or negatively. The research will be developed as a guide to skills learning by employment advisors.

Introduction

This research review has been carried out by Vocational Rehabilitation Consultants Ltd within the Framework of an ERASMUS+ EU co-funded project. The research looked for good quality evidence from world-wide reports of studies, to identify the active ingredients in employment advice offered to disadvantaged unemployed people.

This research forms a significant part of the work of an EU ERASMUS+ project led by VRC Ltd and including TRIXIMA (Slovakia), Cooperation For a Better Future (Slovakia), M.M.C Management Center (Cyprus), Human Profess Közhasznú (Hungary and National Research Institute for Sustainable Technologies Education Department (Poland). These partners will subject the findings to a randomised control trial of advisor training and e-learning in the second phase of the project.

Theoretical framework

There are many theoretical models of career counselling and employment advice. Few of these have been subjected to rigorous testing, and we find frequent cross-referencing between experts which gives an impression of validity that is not always supported by independent evidence.

Our research has focussed on the ability of the client to identify a desired and good-enough job opportunity in the real labour market, and to make competitive efforts to achieve it. We have given weight to what is shown by evidence to result in more clients getting work, staying in work, and getting more pay. We have not tried to compare the various theories about career counselling. We have identified the behaviours and skills of advisors that they can apply in successful support for clients in the labour market. To do so we have referred to evidence and practice from studies of psychology, therapy and change management. We identify what works for employers, for clients, and how to put it into practice. It is well understood that people in certain social groups are at much higher risk of unemployment than the average. Studies suggest that some tailored provision for identifiable groups may be desirable but at the individual level membership of any group is not in itself a necessary or sufficient cause for unemployment. From this perspective we chose a definition of disadvantage:

'inability for whatever reason, to compete fairly for jobs with the majority of others in a realistically chosen sector of the labour market'.

We think it captures the needs of the individual, and the goal of the advisor. If it means that some individuals who are from privileged backgrounds can be classed as 'disadvantaged', then so be it.

Method

We have carried out a review of literature and research, reviewing via google scholar, google, and personal holdings, documents which included evidence related to counselling, employment, careers advice and guidance, and selected texts referenced within them. In all over 200 documents were reviewed. We gave priority to firm conclusions based on RCT methods or consistent findings of systematic reviews applying high quality studies, with lower priority for limited or conflicting evidence and inconsistent findings in single, or in reviews of multiple, studies. We looked for studies that explicitly define and measure both disadvantage and labour-market competence, and assesses the impact of treatments. We excluded reports of projects, case studies, individual results and methods as being limited by their non-comparative nature and lacking controls or external review.

Few of the papers reviewed reached high standards of validity or quality. Those that did provided broadly consistent findings.

A very small number of good quality studies have shown conflicting results for, and in one case actual harm done by, services. Their own researchers have been cautious about drawing conclusions, citing differences in implementation and context, and unknown standards of service. This leads us to think that good results can only be obtained by well-designed and resourced services with clear goals, strong measurement and skilled staff.

We found little evidence for

- decline in job-seeking effort over individuals' increasing durations of unemployment
- differences in the performance of private, public or NGO service providers
- the effectiveness of some widely applied commercial products, some of which had counter evidence of considerable weight.
- benefits from subsidies and grants for employment for economically excluded people
- benefit of 'professionalisation' of services, which is being pursued in several countries. We have seen only weak links between descriptions of the activities of a 'professional' and descriptions of what works.

Few studies evaluate or test the skills of advisors. A small number of good quality studies do provide this missing detail; but a larger number describe activities in ways that are too general to be used as guides. Deciding which advisor skills are effective is hampered by the practice of evaluating whole programmes, which makes it hard to identify the active ingredients within successful programmes. Thus few studies distinguish inactive from active ingredients in employment advice. We have identified the active ingredients by inference: good quality trials of successful programmes all point in the same direction. While we cannot rule out that this is because they share some common factor (similarity of design for example), by comparing them with well-researched counselling techniques, behaviour modification, skill development and finding no points of difference, we infer with a degree of confidence that they are the active ingredients in programmes. But the logic of these links is ours, and should be tested more thoroughly in high quality trials.

Analysis and Interpretation

Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs)

Most European countries provide 'Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs)' which require benefit recipients, sometimes involving employers, to fulfil obligations to seek and take work as a condition of their benefits. International experience confirms that the impact of ALMPs is often difficult to assess and less than hoped for. The importance of deadweight (costs that arise when the results are no different from what would have happened in the absence of the program) is such that only RCTs can distinguish effective from ineffective programmes, yet few such studies have been reported from large scale ALMPs.

There is also widespread analysis showing that employment subsidies have ambiguous effects and inefficiencies that lead to unearned subsidy to employers and cause existing or alternative employees to be displaced by those eligible for subsidy.

The use of 'outcome payments' has not reduced the relative disadvantage of certain social groups, who are much more likely to be unemployed than others. But we observe that membership of a group does not necessarily confer economic disadvantage on every individual in it, though unemployment may be much more likely for a representative sample of individuals.

The evidence is clear that long term unemployment increases poverty, illness, and the risk of suicide, though the direction of causality is questioned by some commentators. It is much less clear that it leads to a reduction in job-search activity, or in a reduction in skills.

In offering help, we should be sure that what we do is actively helpful. It seems possible, and the evidence does not contradict, that some interventions in ALMPs do not make a positive difference on job seeking or employment over a large sample of clients. Participation in a programme may encourage job-seeking whether or not it contains effective interventions, but this is not studied in the literature. A few well-conducted studies have shown that certain programme designs are more effective than others and more effective than controls in helping people into work and in increasing their earnings. But there are also a few examples of ineffective or and even of harmful programmes.

Personal beliefs and experiences

There is evidence that the desire for a job is a significant factor for successful placement in paid employment, and widespread evidence that beliefs have a very strong influence on desires, effort and action. Studies have found that personal development training:

- improves job seekers' ability to find employment
- improves self-esteem, self-efficacy, coping skills, life-satisfaction and mental health
- resulted in higher earnings and job satisfaction
- increased motivation among those who continued to be unemployed.

Programme design

There is evidence from high quality studies around the world that the interaction between the client and their advisor is a (and possibly the) significant contributor to client's progress. It seems likely that even well resourced programmes can be undermined by a poor-quality relationship.

Within the more successful designs are

- psychological measures and approaches to supporting clients that have a strong evidence base
- direct links from the programme to the jobs market. Three examples of these links are providing training in job search and networking techniques, providing personal support during job entry, and maintaining high quality contacts with local employers.

Knowledge and Tools

We recognise that there are many useful and practical tools that can be used. We have seen little direct evidence of their effectiveness in helping disadvantage people to overcome their disadvantage. But there are risks in using diagnostic tools. Some clients are recorded as feeling inappropriately challenged by use of tools designed to identify basic problems with numeracy and literacy.

Provision of financial support from the state is an important influence on job-search. Advisors need to be aware of welfare support and aid for employers, and of the main aspects of legislation. Where there are specialists with detailed working capacity to advise, employment advisors may need to know only the key facts and where to find more functional resources. Where the advisor is working in isolation from such specialists, they may need specific national, regional or local information in great detail.

Special groups

We have seen nothing to contradict the view that what works for one group of people will work for another. In our view, there is a core of skills and activities that work, which can be enhanced by being used in settings adapted to clients' needs.

The requirements for tailored provision are that it should be

- consistent with the other provision known to be effective
- physically, cognitively, culturally and socially accessible
- understandable, practical, and usable
- able to meet actual need as expressed by and observed in clients
- relevant to labour market conditions and requirements
- delivered by people with the requisite knowledge and skills

and for the advisor or programme to

- be able to carry out a Needs Analysis possibly involving community and employers
- recognise when specialist input is needed and resource accordingly
- adapt their own programme and practice to the needs of the client
- involve clients in review and improvement

Using a model programme

Interaction between skilled staff and clients must be included in any design. Some model programmes such as Individual Placement and Support, JOBSII and Changing Wonky Beliefs include fidelity descriptors that should be applied unless other well-evidenced criteria for effectiveness dictate otherwise.

Advisor contact time and caseloads

There is very little good quality evidence about how much time advisors should spend with clients, nor what their caseloads should be. A wide range of caseloads is recorded in current practice, from 12 clients per advisor to over 100. Generally, an initial discussion is expected to take 30 minutes to 1 hour, but longer periods are reported. Our view is that an expert advisor can make the best use of even a short time, but very short interviews may have reduced effectiveness. Programme design that gives some control over the duration of interventions to the client and to the advisor, is likely to be more effective than that which imposes fixed schedules. Frequent contact is desirable to encourage the working relationship to become effective. Our estimate is that caseloads for intensive support to disadvantaged clients should be under 30, and may be as low as 10 or 15 clients per advisor.

Telephone counselling

There is very little comparative research on the benefits of telephone counselling. One published work on the use of telephone counselling for clients with common health problems noted that telephone techniques are effective for

- assessment and triage, for clinical and health management
- co-ordination of services within a case management framework
- provision of information and advice
- and return to work, but the latter was based mainly on practice exemplars.

Overall our experience and wider impression is that when used by a skilled advisor, the telephone is a very useful addition to their toolkit. We have no reports of the use of skype and social media.

Selection and profiling

Four main approaches may be taken to selecting clients for services: duration, social and personal profiling, self-selection and advisor assessment. All have significant problems, either of deadweight, inaccuracy, unfairness or cost. Another approach can be imagined. There is strong evidence from social

learning theory that confidence for tasks in prospect is a good predictor of effort and success. We suggest that it should be possible to identify people in need of support at an early stage in their unemployment by measuring their self-efficacy for labour market activity and if it is low, then target services to them as a priority. Our proposal should be subject to high quality evaluation.

Information sharing and co-ordination

There is evidence from some programmes that information sharing between local service providers and authorities can be helpful in co-ordinating services to the benefit of clients. Conversely, there are anecdotal reports of practical difficulties when the various services do not co-ordinate well. Such co-ordination is widely seen as an important function for advisors. However, we have no direct evidence of its impact, but must rely instead on the common sense view that it is better to overcome and remove organisational obstacles than to let them remain.

Record keeping

Record keeping is, in our view, mainly an inactive but essential part of employment advice. However, often enough, and rightly, records may be open for clients to see, and they may become part of the 'active ingredients': what is held there can influence clients' decisions and action.

Advisor Skill and activity

We have concluded that skilled interpersonal support and communication is the most important active ingredient in employment advice. But for evidence of skills to be used, we have to turn to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Solution Focussed Brief Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, and the extensive evidence that identifies self-efficacy as a predictor of effort and success in working towards life goals. It is important to our analysis that

- programmes that show success in randomised controlled trials refer to, include, or make use of parts of the counsellor skills that have been studied in connection with these therapies
- we believe that the skills are transferable to employment advice, or indeed to any form of self-development. This belief in the transferability of skills is supported, though not proven, by many exemplars from coaching and mentoring in both employment and non-employment fields.

The application of advisory or counselling skills contributes to the effectiveness of advisors in helping clients reach their own decisions and implement constructive plans for employment. To be effective, the advisor should make use of specific and learnable behaviours. Our full report provides more detail, but here, in brief summary only, we list them as:

Active Listening and Exploring

Active listening is the means for understanding the client and showing them respect and concern for their good. It is a skillful activity in which the advisor adapts to the client, and not a rote or rule-based procedure. Active listening is the skill of

- giving full and close attention, showing attention through non-verbal and verbal means
- setting aside or being silent about the advisor's thoughts, concentrating on the client
- understanding and empathising sympathising with (not necessarily agreeing) the client's view
- showing that understanding by checking and reflecting back what the client has said.

Supporting change

Evidence from reviews of client experiences suggests that when an advisor focuses on feelings, insight, challenges, and change, the client experiences an increase in self-understanding, hopefulness, assumption of responsibility, and attainment of new perspectives.

Feedback

Feedback is a powerful influence on clients' thinking and behaviour. It should focus on work and so help clients evaluate their situations in terms of work, rather less in terms of other personal priorities. Effective feedback enhances confidence and enables clients to change.

Cognitive Rehearsal

'Cognitive Rehearsal' describes discussions in which a client is helped to imagine a situation in advance, thinking about the details and consequences, and then to prepare responses. The preparation helps the client to be mentally resilient to unwanted events.

Problem solving and barriers to work

In the literature attention is paid to 'work barriers', referring to diverse personal and institutional problems that may stand between a person and the possibility of work. Helping clients develop their own skills to identify and resolve personal problems provides them with the capacity to develop plans for their future. This may involve the advisor in appropriate forms of challenging, evaluation of alternatives, and supporting difficult choices.

Action Planning

Advisors work with clients to create plans of action leading to a career, a job, or steps towards one. Action by clients has an effect on their morale, wishes and ambitions, and on their beliefs about the future; it has to be carefully planned, even in circumstances when the whole picture is not yet clear. The advisor should

- base the discussion on thorough exploration of clients' wishes
- help clients bring their own ideas into the plan
- provide information
- capture clients' suggestions during conversation
- prompt clients to make the plans concrete, detailed and sequenced
- review plans regularly

Providing information

When offering information, it must be in a form that is accessible and usable by the client. This will include various aspects including location, media used, language, complexity, pressure of time or understanding.

Career choice

Advisors and clients make choices about their occupation and career, often with imperfect knowledge of the possibilities. Since our concern here is about reducing disadvantage, we feel that career advice that does not include development of labour-market competence falls short and may even risk damaging clients' ability by the influence of disappointed hopes. Advisors may be specialist in career selection, but all advisors should be prepared to help clients consider

- a choice of occupation that links to personal preferences, resources and talents
- what sector to work in
- which employer to work for
- what kind of contract to work at
- what compromises to make for the career: home, location, money, learning...
- what job to go for
- examinations that have to be passed

- professional status and qualifications
- previous experience of work
- other relevant experience
- skills and talents

Advisors may use a range of exploratory conversations, supplemented by work-experience, work-placements and clients' own supported reading, research and exploration to identify careers and steps to them.

Job search skills training

Advisors must be able to develop the job-search skills that clients need. There is good evidence that well-structured practice and training in job-searching is a valuable part of an anti-disadvantage programme. The training offered should be relevant to the chosen sector, job and locality. Training may usefully be done in group-training settings as well as through individual guidance. Training and practical guidance to clients should cover:

- Job search
- Competing for work
- Preparation for setbacks
- Employment options such as self employment, semi-self employment and independent contracting and the formal and informal job options
- Keeping the job
- Use of entry-level jobs that leads to promotion or to general advancement.

Evidence from the field of training and skill development is that skill development should be designed to cover the following:

Learning Modes:

The learning method should be appropriate for the required learning. The method chosen for should be appropriate for the learning being undertaken.

Learning Needs Analysis (LNA)

The Learning Needs Analysis (LNA) should determine what clients need to learn, taking account of the clients prior learning and necessary pre-requisite skills. There is some evidence that providing job-search training to people who are already confident in their own job search skills can damage their confidence, possibly leading to worse outcomes. The LNA can help avoid this risk.

Skills Acquisition

The principles of skill acquisition are:

- Errorless learning: the application of skill practice without mistakes in performance
- Advisors need teaching skills to enable delegates to learn, particularly skilled feedback
- Progressive approximation: the gradual change in behaviour, moving closer and closer to the target behaviour:
 - Developing a picture of the skills to be performed.
 - Practicing the skill or chunks of a skills sequence: micro-skill rehearsal.
 - Final skills practice leading to mastery
 - Consolidation in real-life situations

Blended Learning, E-learning

Different learning styles and technologies can accommodate economic, organisational and geographical differences. Considerations of access, usability and skill development are important in the choice and design of e-learning methods. Practical learning essential to skill

development cannot be entirely replaced by written materials, images and computer interactions.

Number of delegates/ clients

There should be a pre-assessed maximum number of learners, to reflect the programme, the intensity and the need for trainers to be able to monitor progression and give support.

Benefits and risks of mixed groups

There is contradictory evidence on mixed ability groups. Educational diversity has been linked to increases in job-search efficacy, but results have not been shown to be affected by age, gender, and race diversity. An important and unexpected finding from one good quality study is that job-search self-efficacy is raised most for those group members who start from a low point. Those with high self-efficacy at the start do not do well and in some cases they may actually have reduced self-efficacy.

Using a group as a resource

Action learning sets can enable smaller groups to co-operate so that relationships can develop between the group members. This relationship can be very supportive for continued learning and consolidation of learning into the workplace..

Accessibility and Usability

Training must be accessible intellectually, physically and technically, and should be used with comfort and ease by learners. User feedback can provide valuable guidance on access and use.

Sustainable work

For many clients, the goal will be to gain an approximately suitable job as soon as possible. It is an added benefit if the client is enabled to manage their own future work and new career directions.

Each job is unique. Its social and physical environment, its demands of skill and knowledge should be explored in as much detail as possible. Often job descriptions reveal little about how to do a job and what is entailed in day to day work. Advisors should help their clients to assess actual job-content and reach decisions that are sensitive to nuances in work patterns and demands. To do this, advisors need to help clients recognise their talents and strengths, but should not apply psychometric tests or proprietary careers guidance procedures unless they indicated and the advisor has the necessary approval from the accrediting body.

Clients may need to begin their job search by learning new skills through long or short preparatory training. In that case the advisor should check the client's confidence and ability to complete the training.

Employers

The research literature on career and employment advice has very little scientific study of employers' needs. Our understanding of current effective practice is that close involvement of employers provides access to vacancies and can help overcome prejudice. Such involvement provides clients with important knowledge about their chosen field or the local labour market, which employer is recruiting, how they recruit, what jobs are available or likely to become available. In contrast, there is no evidence that statistical sources can identify this information in sufficient detail to be helpful for individuals seeking work.

The commitment of disadvantaged people to work is often cited as a business advantage to be exploited. We have seen little evidence on this, and feel it is best to work on individual's advantages rather than a supposed collective characteristic (for example language skills, or improving community relations) useful though these may be.

Many employers have frequently-occurring vacancies. Advisors can work with the employer to map out the job requirements and prepare clients for the jobs. Interview guarantees can be helpful, and are widely reported in the literature, though we know of no comparative studies.

Employers do not usually know how to coordinate the work of various public agencies and NGOs, and have little desire to spend time on doing so. Advisors should take on this role as far as possible, and should make it easier for employers to navigate the waters.

Employers also sometimes show prejudice against some classes of clients. A close working relationship can ease discussions, and helps the advisor become something of a champion for disadvantaged clients. Advisors should be aware of the legislation on disclosure of personal data and should discuss any disclosure with the client, who will make their own decision. There is no generally accepted guidance on how much and when to disclose but advisors should bear in mind that early disclosure shows openness and may be taken as sign of honesty and trustworthiness, and helps the employer understand and make adjustments.

Self-efficacy

The principles for development of self-efficacy have been used in the design of employment programmes that have been shown to be more effective than controls in randomised controlled trials. . This is an exceptional finding. No other method has, as far as we can tell, been so explicitly tested. Self-efficacy is the extent or strength of one's belief in one's own ability to complete tasks and reach goals, or one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations. It differs from general confidence, self esteem, locus of control and other psychological concepts: it is specific to the goal in question, so is not a generalised self-view.

Self-efficacy is predictive of effort, ability to continue in the face of difficulties, and of performance. It is important in employment advice because:

- by expressing their level of confidence in specific employment-focussed tasks, clients can choose pathways to employment at which they are more likely to succeed
- by applying methods that improve self-efficacy, advisors can help clients to become confident and capable of completing tasks that previously eluded them.

Individuals with higher self-efficacy, self-esteem, and a more internal locus of control will be more motivated and committed to achieving employment goals. Studies have found that personal development training improves job seekers' ability to find employment; and results in higher earnings and job satisfaction. It improves self-esteem, self-efficacy, coping skills, life-satisfaction and mental health and increases motivation among those who continue to be unemployed.

Self-efficacy can be raised by using well-tested approaches. Equally, it can be lowered by unhelpful experiences, resulting in worse performance and lower persistence. There are four main sources for self efficacy. They are, in order of greatest influence:

1. Mastery Experiences

Clients should be supported to do work-focussed activities that they can achieve with confidence. Where there is inevitably a chance of failure for example in job interviews, they should be helped to prepare for the possible failure and react in positive ways if it happens.

2. Social Modelling

Seeing another person or other people successfully completing a task raises self-efficacy, but they have to be 'valued examples'. So people similar to oneself, or esteemed advisors or

mentors, can increase confidence. This may lie behind some of the good results achieved in carefully designed group job-search activities.

3. Social Persuasion

People can also be persuaded to believe they are able to succeed. Getting positive feedback from advisors contributes to their belief, provided the feedback is genuine and prompt and focussed on behaviour.

4. Psychological Responses

Moods, emotions and personal feelings aroused by situations are important in self-efficacy. But it is less the power of the emotion, than the perception of it and its importance to the client that is influential. Some people are driven to succeed by their feelings, others are led to fear of failure. But learning to control emotional responses, as happens for example in preparing for the stress of interviews, improves self-efficacy and performance.

Summary

Our approach has been to look for evidence of what is effective in helping people who are disadvantaged to be better able to compete in the labour market.

We start by noting that disadvantage as normally described by reference to some social or personal quality that is not directly associated with employment, such as disability, migration, ethnicity, that these are weakly connected statistically and causally with labour-market disadvantage. Our definition is directly related to employment, and is

'inability for whatever reason, to compete fairly for jobs with the majority of others in a realistically chosen sector of the labour market'.

We looked for evidence based on high quality randomised controlled trials and found surprisingly few. To add to those we did find, we turned to areas of interpersonal therapy and guidance and found considerable research and solid findings for certain activities and behaviours that are relevant for advisors of disadvantaged people. This joining of study results from different fields is not, we think, contentious, but it should be the focus of further trials. By contrast, the bulk of career theory, interesting and worthwhile as it is, contributed little to the evidence base about disadvantage and employment.

In trying to identify 'active ingredients' for employment advice, we have found it useful to note that positive results need to be distinguished from those that arise by chance, and from those that would have occurred without interventions. Among the less effective practices are those embodied in many of the active labour market programmes of European Governments, which have a weak record of diminishing disadvantage, despite decades of effort.

The impact of welfare arrangements, and the effect of personal beliefs on employability, are strong. The desire to work and the belief in the possibility of work both have a causal relationship with effort to find work and success in doing so. And the direction of causality may work both ways, manifesting itself in complex personal relationships with the labour market. Advisor behaviours that incorporate learning from the psychology of belief and behaviour are shown in good quality studies to add to the effectiveness of employment programmes to which they are added.

Under our definition of disadvantage there are many different groups of people, with many causes for their apparent lack of labour-market capability. We have seen no evidence for or against the assumption that what works for one group will work for another, and the descriptions of what works have a great deal in common across the groups. That said, we are able to recommend that groups should have specific support that enables them to take advantage of a labour market programme.

Social and personal profiling techniques to identify clients in need of support in the labour market are found to incur high costs and to be inaccurate. We suggest an alternative approach that might be used.

Turning to what works, we see that the organisation and management of services can have an impact on outcomes. There are model programmes that can be followed, and any divergence should be carefully justified. Organisation and management need to pay attention to contact time between client and advisors, and to advisor caseloads. The use of specialists to meet particular needs is important, as is ensuring that specialists do not undermine the effective activity of advisors.

The greatest body of evidence concerns the design of employment programmes, and the skills of advisors. Direct and live contact with employers is the most effective way to identify vacancies and to gain the information that helps prepare applicants for jobs. It can usefully be supplemented but not replaced by employment and job databases.

Within successful programmes we see systematic and carefully planned activity that helps clients choose an occupation, find work to apply for, and compete against others in the labour market. These successful programmes treat this as an active learning process, and give great weight to discovery of self, of the labour market, and self-management by clients.

The successful programmes, and the skills of the most helpful advisors, are those that encourage self-efficacy and confidence in clients. Programmes that follow these methods are more likely to meet with success than those that do not. The skills of advisors are probably more important than the detail of programme design. Borrowing research from associated fields, and taking also the advice of designers of well-tested programmes, we see that interpersonal communication skills are a significant factor and should include listening, exploration, job choice and decision making, training and preparation for work and for competing for work. But they are not routine or procedural in nature: the quality of the human relationship is a critical success factor.

Such skills are also applicable to group work with clients. Groupwork has several advantages, the main one being the extra personal resources and influences that are available in the group, but not excluding the cost saving compared with individual guidance. Groupwork should use active learning to enable clients to acquire skills. Group work also has some risks, and care has to be taken to avoid the possibility of doing harm to some high-self-efficacy individuals in a group.

The application of technical, statistical or psychometric tests to match individuals to jobs is neither indicated nor contraindicated by our work. We can see that provided they are well researched and based on solid statistical evidence and used as intended they can be a useful adjunct to – and not a replacement for – the skills of advisors and sound organisation. But their use needs care: there are common examples in daily use for which the evidence is weak or missing.

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