



Employment advice: what works for disadvantaged people: a summary

VRC has reviewed 200 world-wide studies concerning employment advice for disadvantaged people. Their report summarises the evidence and provides detail on skills and organisational approaches that encourage employability, noting some common practices that are ineffective.

The STEP project.

Disadvantage in the labour market is persistent and common across all EU member states. Disadvantaged groups do worse than others during recessions, and remain unemployed more at any time. Current approaches are often ineffective for individuals in need of help. In the STEP project, David Imber and David Booth have reviewed scientific evidence from around the world about the most effective methods for helping disadvantaged people choose and succeed in suitable careers. The project has created an evidence-based curriculum to train counsellors, employment advisors and others, enabling them to apply the methods that research has shown to be effective. The curriculum is undergoing a randomised controlled trial in five countries, and will lead to publication of a Handbook of Career Advice Skills based on the project findings.

The full research paper is freely available from the authors and partners of the Step Project, who are

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Rationale

Higher than average rates of unemployment affect people with disabilities or suffering illness. People in certain social groups (low education, ethnic minorities, migration and others), also suffer higher average unemployment and disability rates. Social and personal disadvantages are weakly predictive of employment, and medical interventions and social support have shown only limited impact on employability. The study examines evidence for what is effective in helping disadvantaged people to compete in the labour market.

Method

We studied over 200 published research and policy papers from around the world. We were concerned to separate effective from ineffective practice: observing that positive impact can only be distinguished from chance in comparative trials we gave priority to high quality randomised control trials, of which we found few. The bulk of documentation does not include RCTs, and is little more than repeating of previous beliefs or policy without scientific justification. Therefore, to add to this scant information, we

turned to interpersonal therapy and guidance, and found considerable relevant RCT research. This joining of results from different fields is not contentious, since the findings are congruent with direct employability-RCT results, but should be supported by further trials. We extracted information on:

- advisors' behaviours that encourage employability
- organisational arrangements that support or do not support employability
- techniques that help advisors learn their trade and help clients learn new employability skills.

Definition

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

This definition is related to employment-finding skills and the labour market; it focuses on an employment goal and avoids the difficulties, revealed in the evidence, that no social or personal disability is a definite predictor of employability, and that there is no definite boundary between employable and unemployable people.

Main findings

These are summaries: the report contains explanatory detail and more precise definitions of skills and activities that support employability.

Clients' desire for and belief in the possibility of work have a causal relationship with effort and success.

Advisor behaviours that incorporate learning from the psychology of belief and behaviour contribute to the effectiveness of employment programmes.

Successful programmes systematically help clients

- choose an occupation
- find work to apply for
- compete against others
- keep a job.

Successful programmes use active learning and encourage discovery of self, of the labour market, and self-management by clients. Methods that encourage clients' competence, self-efficacy and confidence are described in detail.

Advisors' interpersonal communication skills are significant. They are well defined, covering listening, exploration, job choice and decision making, training and preparation for work and for competing for work.

The relationship between advisor and client is a critical success factor, and behaviours that contribute to its quality can be defined. Advisors' work is not routine or procedural: human factors dominate.

Effective advice and organisation has a great deal in common across various groups (disabled, ex-prisoners, migrants, the homeless etc.). Common provision should be linked to specific support (for example, health) to enable clients to use employment programmes. Specialist support must not undermine the activity of employment advisors.



There is no formula for contact time between client and advisors nor for advisor caseloads, except that advisors benefit from discretion in use of their time, and too little is ineffective.

Groupwork with clients can make use of the shared personal resources of group members and can bring a cost saving. The particular communication and interpersonal skills needed for group work are described.

Group work also has some risks. Evidence suggests that high-confidence individuals may have their job-finding results damaged by participation in a low-confidence group.

Psychometric and other tests to match individuals to jobs are neither indicated nor contraindicated. Only those based on statistical evidence and used as intended should be applied, but never to replace the skills of advisors. There are examples in daily use for which the evidence is weak or missing.

The use of profiling techniques to identify clients in need of support is found to be problematic, and we suggest an alternative approach that might be used.

The impact of welfare arrangements on employment is strong.

Direct and personal contact with employers is the most effective way to identify vacancies and to gain the information needed to prepare applicants for jobs.

Organisation and management of services can have an impact on outcomes. There are model programmes (IPS is one example) that can be followed, and any divergence should be carefully justified.

There is no evidence for any difference in quality when services are provided by the private sector, NGO or government.

A brief section on ethics is included.

For information, or to receive your own copy in printable pdf form, please contact the authors or partners of the STEP project . There is no charge for this.

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