

Employers and the New Deal for Disabled People: Qualitative research, Wave 2

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The New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) is the major labour market programme for disabled people and people with health conditions who want to find work. It began as a small pilot programme in 1998, but was extended nationally in June 2001 and now forms a key part of the government's Welfare to Work strategy. The programme operates through a network of Job Brokers who aim to help people with disabilities and health conditions move from economic activity into sustained employment.

In late 2002, the first wave of qualitative research was carried out with employers known to have recruited at least one NDDP customer. In late 2003, the second wave of qualitative research was undertaken. The main results of the Wave 2 research are presented here. They are based on 50 in-depth interviews with employers who had recruited through NDDP.

Key findings

- The depth of knowledge of the DDA varied widely amongst employers. Recruitment of disabled people was mainly to low-level or semi-skilled work and to non-manual or very light manual work. Employers reported that they usually found out about a person's disability or health condition during the application process, and in general felt fairly well informed about any disabilities or health conditions amongst their staff.
- The advantages of employing disabled people were seen in terms of bringing business benefits and operating ethically. Few employers reported disadvantages of

employing disabled people or people with health conditions.

- More than three-quarters of the employers interviewed had made physical adjustments or adaptations to procedures for existing employees and/or those hired through NDDP. The financial consequences of making adjustments, and a perceived high sickness absence were cited by some employers as being constraints to employing disabled people.
- Many Job Brokers concentrated the majority of their efforts on customers alone, and had little or no direct involvement with employers. Employers' awareness of Job Brokers, and the New Deal brand was much higher than their awareness of NDDP specifically.
- Initial contact between Job Brokers and employers was most usually in response to a specific vacancy, although less frequently it was *on spec.* contact regarding a particular customer. Contact between Job Brokers and employers had often been generated through NDDP, although some of the best developed relationships predated it.
- A number of employers reported ongoing contact with a Job Broker, involving a high level of contact and good reported mutual understanding.
- Job Brokers provided an intermediary point of contact for customers and employers. Having a central point of contact within the Job Broker organisation was important for some employers as it built continuity, familiarity and trust.

- Employers particularly valued the recruitment assistance they had received through NDDP. It was often the provision of suitably skilled candidates, rather than the fact that it helped them to recruit people with health conditions or disabilities, which was key.

Summary of research

This summary outlines the key findings of the second wave of qualitative research with employers regarding the New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP). It was part of a comprehensive research and evaluation programme into NDDP, commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions and being carried out by a research consortium, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. This second wave of qualitative research with employers was carried out when NDDP had been operating nationally for two years. It follows on from the first wave, which was carried out 18 months previously, and is based on in-depth interviews with 50 employers, all of whom were known to have taken part in NDDP. These employers were selected on the basis that they were nominated by Job Brokers as examples of good practice. In addition, the research design ensured that the employers covered a range of geographical locations, employer types in terms of size, sector, etc., and types of Job Broker.

The main findings of the research are set out below.

Employers' perspectives and experiences

Most employers had equal opportunities policies or statements, and virtually all employers knew of the Disability Discrimination Act. However, the depth of knowledge varied widely, as did definitions of disability, with employers who were less experienced in recruiting and employing disabled people tending to take a more narrow view of disability. Recruitment of disabled people was mainly concentrated in low level skilled or semi-skilled work, and non-manual or very light manual work, although there were some exceptions to this. Employees with a range of

impairments and conditions of varying severity were reported.

Employers felt fairly well informed about any disabilities or health conditions amongst their staff, although there were differences between visible and hidden disabilities. Employers reported that they would usually learn of a person's disability or health condition during the application process, either through a question on the application form, or as a result of adjustments needed to enable the candidate to attend an interview.

The benefits and constraints of employing disabled people

Perceived advantages were expressed generally in terms of business benefits and ethical practices. Specific benefits included reflecting the diversity of the community, providing a wider range of skills and perspectives, and a wider labour market from which to recruit loyal, hard-working employees.

A good proportion of employers reported no discernible disadvantages to employing disabled people. Where disadvantages were mentioned, these were specific to a particular situation or type of disability and role, rather than being a disadvantage of employing disabled people and people with health conditions as a whole.

Adjustments and sources of support

Financial implications were the most commonly cited constraints to employing people with health conditions and disabilities. These were expressed in terms of the costs of making adjustments, high sickness absence and, less commonly cited, a diminished rate of effectiveness by some staff with health conditions or disabilities.

More than three-quarters of the employers in the sample reported having made adjustments and/or adaptations both for existing employees and for those hired through NDDP. These included physical adaptations, for example to office furniture, specialist computer equipment and

software, and adjustments to procedures, for example changes to job or role, changes to working hours, and changes to the level of supervision or support provided.

Larger organisations reported having access to internal sources of support, most usually human resources and occupational health, which they would approach before seeking advice outside their organisation. However, some employers had consulted external groups for help and advice in dealing with the needs of particular employees. These groups included disability generalists and groups with more specific remits involving, for example, a particular condition.

Employers' awareness of NDDP

There was a low level of conscious involvement in NDDP as a named initiative. Knowledge of, and involvement with, the Job Brokers who delivered it was higher, as was knowledge of the New Deal brand more generally (in line with deliberate policy, NDDP is not always delivered explicitly under its own name, and is sometimes delivered alongside other labour market initiatives, such as WORKSTEP).

Many Job Brokers concentrated the majority of their efforts on customers alone, and had little or no direct involvement with employers. Where employers had heard of NDDP specifically, this was often through existing contacts and networks, or through previous employment, colleagues or friends, rather than as a result of direct contact from a Job Broker.

The relationship between Job Brokers and employers

Contact between Job Brokers and employers had often been generated through NDDP, although some of the best-developed relationships predated it. There was considerable variety in the nature of these relationships, but as reported in Wave 1, initial contact was usually with reference to a specific vacancy; less frequently it was 'on spec.' contact regarding a customer. Job Broker services focused mainly

on filling vacancies and recruitment, and employers were most usually reactive, whether this was regarding vacancies or support, following job entry. A number of employers reported ongoing contact with a Job Broker, which was characterised by a high level of interaction and a good amount of reported mutual understanding. In the closest relationships, other innovative partnership work had taken place, such as open days, tastings, etc.

Job Brokers provided an intermediary point of contact for customers and employers, and were seen as a 'safe' person with whom the customer could discuss concerns or problems. Having a central point of contact with the Job Broker emerged as having been important for some of the employers, for reasons including continuity, familiarity and trust. Major problems were seldom reported. Where any existed, they tended to be seen as areas for improvement rather than as disincentives to future involvement. Extra requirements from employers centred around more general contact, information, additional practical help with adjustments, training and settling in.

Outcomes of involvement in NDDP

Employers reported that recruitment assistance, particularly pre-selection, was an important benefit of involvement. Several employers commented that it was the provision of suitable candidates for the job, rather than the fact that it helped them to recruit people with health conditions and disabilities, that was key. Others wished to promote diversity in their organisation, or were using the programme as an additional route to employing disabled people and people with health conditions.

Several employers had employed just one NDDP recruit, but others had employed ten or more, with recruitment seeming to be potentially ongoing. Compared to the Wave 1 research, people with a wider range of health conditions and disabilities appear to have been employed through the programme. Contact between Job Broker and employer did not always result in an ongoing relationship, particularly when the

number of recruits had been limited. However, several employers reported regular ongoing contact, for the purposes of supporting customers in post, and with a view to future placements.

The Job Broker interventions had clearly had a significant impact at the level of individual customers, particularly in terms of customer confidence and access to post-recruitment support which would otherwise not have been available. Some of the appointments would not have been made without the support of the Job Broker.

The full report of these research findings is published for the Department for Work and Pensions by Corporate Document Services (ISBN 1 84123 7760. Research Report 231. February 2005).

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