

What employers look for when recruiting the unemployed and inactive: characteristics, skills and qualifications

By Becci Newton, Jennifer Hurstfield, Linda Miller, Rosie Page and Karen Akroyd

Aims of the research

This study aims to examine what employers seek when recruiting, and the extent to which government provision meets their needs. The focus is on unemployed and inactive adults aged between 16 and SPA. A secondary aim is to explore whether there are differences in employers' requirements by age.

The findings are the result of two strands of research: a review of the policy, evaluation and academic literatures, and 22 qualitative interviews with individuals, drawn from 16 organisations which have particularly in-depth knowledge or expertise that qualifies them to comment on relevant issues. These included government departments, regional agencies, and voluntary sector organisations such as the Third Age Network, NIACE and Help the Aged.

Findings from the literature

The evidence demonstrates that employers continue to face recruitment difficulties. One-fifth reported vacancies that could not be filled due to a lack of applicants with the necessary skills (LSC, 2003). However employers may not place an emphasis on developing the skills they need 'in-house'.

Assessments suggest that recruitment opportunities for unemployed and inactive groups are likely to improve only where workforce development and advancement exists, to access lower, or less specifically, skilled vacancies (Hogarth and Wilson, 2003).

Employers' skills requirements vary by region, sector and occupation (LSC, *ibid*; Bunt, 2005). Indeed, the definition and understanding of the term skills can be complex with overlaps between skills, qualifications and characteristics.

Overall, employers are less demanding of technical skills, considering them trainable, if candidates exhibit employability and soft skills, and positive attributes (Winterbotham *et al.*, 2001).

There is then a greater emphasis on soft skills (eg interpersonal and communication skills) but assessing how these are measured precisely is problematic. Often measurement is based on employers' perceptions of their interaction with candidates at interview (Hogarth and Wilson, *ibid*).

Amongst core characteristics employers look for are motivation and flexibility. These include willingness to work and learn, and appearance, behaviour, confidence, and positive gestures and mannerisms (Bunt, *ibid*). However these may be context specific (Taylor, 2005).

Qualifications do not appear to be important for a large number of employers and jobs, consistently ranking beneath characteristics and soft skills in recruitment frameworks (Bunt, *ibid*; Jenkins and Wolf, 2005). They are most often used to inform the screening process.

However, legislative requirements for certification of competence in different occupations and sectors, means that the role of qualifications

varies, and has greater importance for some occupations eg care and security.

The unemployed (and some inactive groups) can be disadvantaged by employers' recruitment methods. Where employers use informal methods of advertising, such as word of mouth, those without contacts in the workplace are unlikely to hear about job opportunities (Hogarth and Wilson, *ibid*). Such strategies also limit the diversity of the workforce (Canny, 2004).

Age stereotypes persist about older and younger workers (and other inactive groups) and while they benefit some groups, they disadvantage others. Older adults may be perceived as being good with customers but also as 'hard to train'. There is little evidence to support such views (Meadows, 2003).

Young people are perceived as lacking maturity – but more receptive to learning. Employers may overlook a lack of qualifications if young adults demonstrate positive attributes (Canny, *ibid*).

Overall, the evidence suggests that a focus on qualifications would appear not to contribute to an individual's employment outcomes, due to low emphasis on these in recruitment. Developing soft and generic skills is likely to be more important.

However, this is a complex picture, and the extent to which, for instance, CV's are used for screening for qualifications and other attributes is unclear. This is an area that is under explored in surveys.

Long duration of worklessness appears to be an important factor with some employers perceiving that such candidates lack any work preparedness – and are more likely to quit at short-notice (Devins and Hogarth, *ibid*).

Expert views about training

The respondents interviewed for this study, emphasised the need for well-developed soft skills in applicants, and identified that soft skills were linked, in employers' minds, with positive characteristics and attributes.

The interviewees noted that the use of qualifications is heavily sector dependant, and often important only where legislation requires competency to be demonstrated through qualifications.

When no legislation drivers exist, employers consider that personal characteristics and soft skills are more important than qualifications.

Work trials were emphasised as a way of developing work and employability skills in unemployed and inactive people, and offering employers an opportunity to test whether the person is appropriate for the job.

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Paul Noakes, Strategic Research and Modelling Division, 4th Floor, The Adelphi, 1-11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT.
E-mail: Paul.Noakes@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

