

WORKSTEP evaluation case studies – early findings

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WORKSTEP is a Jobcentre Plus employment programme which aims to find, secure and retain jobs for disabled people who face complex barriers to finding and keeping work. WORKSTEP aimed to modernise the previous Supported Employment Programme, which it replaced in April 2001.

Key developments introduced with WORKSTEP included more emphasis on tailored support via individual development planning, the introduction of quality standards, and the introduction of output based funding for Providers. It was hoped these changes would facilitate an increase in the progression of Participants from the Programme to mainstream open employment where appropriate.

As part of the ongoing evaluation of WORKSTEP, Northumbria University Centre for Public Policy have been contracted to carry out a series of Case Studies to examine the design, delivery and performance of the Programme. The aims of the research are to:

- examine the design and delivery of the WORKSTEP programme;
- explore the performance of WORKSTEP at a number of organisational levels;
- assess the effectiveness of the programme at enabling disabled people to achieve successful employment outcomes and wider social objectives;
- develop recommendations to take forward organisational improvements in the WORKSTEP programme.

Research design

Fieldwork is being carried out via a series of 18 case studies based around WORKSTEP Provider organisations. One site has been selected from each of the eleven Jobcentre Plus Regions and six from the large national providers. In addition two of the very small Providers (with less than ten WORKSTEP contract places) will be visited.

Data is being collected via an analysis of management information on the outputs of the current programme, interviews across a range of stakeholders (WORKSTEP Policy team, Regional Quality and Contract Teams, Disability Employment Advisors, Provider Organisations, Employers and Programme Participants) and other documentary review.

The fieldwork for ten case studies was completed in July 2005, covering five regionally contracted Providers (in Scotland, the North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber and the South East), three Remploy sites (two factories and an Interwork Team) and two of the other National Providers.

Early findings

This publication gives an overview of the emerging themes of this ongoing research. Due to the stage of fieldwork and analysis it is too early to draw firm conclusions about the relative merits of the various service delivery models described below. However it is clear that the majority of Participants and employers are positive about the Programme and the types of support received from Provider organisations. Participants also highlight the numerous personal and social benefits of achieving and maintaining employment, in addition to the financial reward they derive from work.

Programme delivery

There are variations in both the type of Provider organisation (Local Authority, Voluntary/Not for Profit Sector, Remploi and Private sector) and also in the form of WORKSTEP delivery (via supported businesses, supported placements with other employers or a combination of these two.)

Initial findings highlight that there are significant differences in the level and type of support delivered to Participants, the rates of progression from the Programme to open employment and costs across organisational types and models of delivery.

Across all models there are a wide range of types of support available to Participants. These include benefits advice, initial skills / vocational profiling, job searching, support throughout the job application process, training, help travelling to work and job coaching. Support to employers is also varied, with financial assistance being the most common.

Many Provider support workers also offer support to Participants of a more pastoral nature and will make themselves available to Participants outside normal working hours. However at the other extreme some Participants on supported placements appear to have little or no discernable contact with their WORKSTEP Provider.

Overall supported businesses are associated with good access to education and training opportunities although this type of provision costs more and has lower levels of progression from the Programme into open employment. However there are a complex range of factors which require further consideration in order to offer a balanced assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of all delivery models.

The key strength of WORKSTEP, most commonly acknowledged by all stakeholders, is the flexibility to meet the needs of individual Participants. There appears to be limited constraint on the nature of the support that can be provided, enabling the provision of a programme which can be specifically tailored to the individual, and offering Providers the opportunity to develop innovative approaches to service delivery.

Personal and social benefits of WORKSTEP

Many Participants on the Programme describe their lives as transformed by being in employment and being given the support they required to sustain this and progress within it. They talk about personal and social benefits such as increased confidence, independence, better health, improved social and communication skills, and greater confidence when meeting new people. Many of these link back to findings from earlier DWP research, Desirable Outcomes of WORKSTEP (Meah and Thornton, 2005).

The success of this aspect of the Programme suggest that it fulfils many of the aspirations of those who are participating in it, although these may only link indirectly to the WORKSTEP aim of progression into open employment. However in order to fully evaluate the value of WORKSTEP it is vital to ensure that such issues are taken into consideration.

Development planning and distance travelled

As there is no standardised format or content for Participant development plans some were found to concentrate purely on the development of work/ task related skills while others take a much broader approach including personal and social development.

WORKSTEP offers long term support with no clear milestones between gaining supported employment and moving to unsupported open employment, a process which may take a number of years. Given the lack of defined targets during this period it is important to incorporate some element of measuring 'distance travelled' within the Programme. Ideally this would form part of the WORKSTEP development planning process.

In this context 'distance travelled' would offer all stakeholders a measure of the distance a Participant has travelled towards open employment and clearly demonstrate their readiness to move from the Programme once targets are reached. For those Participants who may never achieve open employment it also offers clear evidence of their progress and the positive impact of their involvement with the Programme.

Programme design

The Programme's stated aim is to find, secure and retain jobs for DDA defined disabled people who face more complex barriers to finding and keeping work. However guidance also states that individuals referred to and accepted on WORKSTEP should be 'job ready' and placed in a suitable job within eight weeks of completing their initial development plan. Whilst some of those facing complex barriers to work may be 'job ready' many others appear to require additional support before they reach this stage.

This lack of clarity around who the Programme aims to support has led to practical difficulties in differentiating between eligibility for, and support offered by, WORKSTEP and other disability employment programmes. Many of the clients referred to WORKSTEP are not 'job ready' and the expectation they will commence employment in eight weeks is unrealistic.

Management of the Programme

The lag in implementation of new contract management arrangements, following the introduction of WORKSTEP, contributed to a significant delay in the implementation of the developments introduced with the new Programme. It is vital that Jobcentre Plus ensures appropriate resources are in place prior to the planned transfer of responsibility for WORKSTEP contracts to ensure that the ongoing development of provision is adequately supported.

There are around 200 WORKSTEP Providers, and in addition to the variations in the type of Provider organisation and the form of WORKSTEP delivery described above, there are three models for the management of Programme:

- Remploy:
 - Management and Financial Statements which set out a broad framework within which the Company will operate including overall aims, objectives and performance targets.
 - Strategic link via the WORKSTEP Policy Team.
- National contracts:
 - WORKSTEP contracts managed via the WORKSTEP Policy Team.

- Regional Contracts:
 - WORKSTEP contracts managed via Jobcentre Plus Regions.

These models offer widely differing resources to support and scrutinise Programme delivery, with Regional contracting currently offering the most robust approach.

Funding

Annual funding for WORKSTEP in 2002/2003 totalled £180 million. There are significant differences in the funding received by Remploy compared with other WORKSTEP Providers, both in the manner in which payment is structured and in the amount received per Programme Participant, with Remploy being significantly more costly.

Providers, with the exception of Remploy, are paid on the basis of the actual number of filled places and half places up to the maximum specified in their contract. They receive payments at key stages such as production of the development plan or a job start and at a flat monthly rate. The level of grant in aid made available to Remploy each year is agreed with the Secretary of State for the Department of Work and Pensions and is linked to Remploy's business plan proposals.

Overall the payment for 'pre-employment' support carried out by Contracted Providers is often inadequate and payment structures do not offer incentives to Providers to prioritise the progression of WORKSTEP Participants into mainstream open employment.

There is also insufficient monitoring of the way in which Providers utilise their WORKSTEP funding, and there is little evidence of monitoring employers' use of the financial support they receive with the placement of supported employees.

Management information

The central WORKSTEP payments database was designed to hold information on every Participant including details of their WORKSTEP Provider. Payment based programme outputs are recorded on to this system, (e.g. production of a development plan, job starts, progressions) and in this way it was expected that in addition to generating

payments to Providers it would also offer management information on Participants, Providers and Programme performance.

There are, however, significant difficulties associated with the system and the expectation that the WORKSTEP payments database would provide adequate management information has not been realised.

In addition it is not possible to utilise this form of contract payments database for generating management information on the WORKSTEP Programme as a whole as Remploy are funded via an annual grant in aid and do not have a Jobcentre Plus contract for WORKSTEP.

These issues have produced a situation where currently there is no reliable central data source that can provide comprehensive, accurate information on Providers, Participants or Programme performance. This lack of fundamental management information is a significant weakness and must be addressed as a high priority.

The disparity in both the funding and management arrangements between Providers prompted several stakeholders to comment on the '*lack of a level playing field*' within WORKSTEP provision. This lack of consistency relating to such fundamental elements of Programme also presents significant difficulties when attempting any systematic review of WORKSTEP. Direct comparisons of Programme activities or outputs across Providers are limited and the harmonisation of arrangements should be considered for the future.

Quality systems

The contractual requirement for WORKSTEP Providers to carry out annual self-assessment was generally perceived as positive, and the majority of Providers did produce evidence of a Self Assessment Report and related Action Plan, although this was not universal.

There is no consistent approach to self-assessment reporting, and this lack of standardisation is also an issue for other Programme areas such as Participant development planning. A number of Providers indicated they would prefer a template based approach, rather than having to devote time to

develop their own systems. Most Contract Managers also indicated that a more standardised approach would greatly assist in their ability to compare the operation of Providers.

Marketing of WORKSTEP

A common theme raised by many stakeholders was the lack of Jobcentre Plus publicity about the Programme. Many Providers stated that levels of awareness about the availability of the Programme and the type of support it offers were very low with both potential Participants and employers.

Some Providers do a significant amount of their own WORKSTEP marketing, targeted at potential Participants, employers and Disability Employment Advisors. Generally, national Providers produce the most comprehensive range of advertising materials although one of the Regionally contracted Providers also produced an annual WORKSTEP marketing plan in addition to a full range of marketing materials.

Next stage

Fieldwork on the remaining case studies will commence in September 2005 and carry on through to November, when the team will visit a further six Regional Providers in West Midlands, East Midlands, East of England, South West, Wales and London, a further Remploy Interwork team and the 'very small' providers. It is anticipated that the final report will be published in April 2006.

The full report of these research findings is published for the Department for Work and Pensions by Corporate Document Services (ISBN 1 84123 923 2. Available April 2006).

It will be available from Paul Noakes at the address below.

You will also be able to download this report free from: www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/

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