Desirable outcomes of WORKSTEP: User and provider views

By Angela Meah and Patricia Thornton

Background

This study was carried out to find out what disabled people supported through WORKSTEP and WORKSTEP staff believe people want to achieve through supported employment. It also looked at how WORKSTEP can help disabled people to achieve their goals.

Findings are based on 13 group discussions involving 57 disabled people supported through WORKSTEP and nine group discussions with 49 staff from WORKSTEP provider organisations. These took place in 2004 in eight areas in England, Scotland and Wales.

Gains to be made through work and WORKSTEP

Disabled people and staff from provider organisations sometimes did not say the same about what the most important gains are from work and WORKSTEP.

Disabled people supported through WORKSTEP said personal goals such as increased confidence and self-esteem were the most important things gained through having a job. Restoring confidence and a sense of identity was especially important to people whose conditions developed during their lives. Disabled people said it was important to feel like ‘a somebody again’ and ‘more than your disability’.

Disabled people said it was important to set themselves goals and experience achieving them. Achieving things through their jobs, they said, encouraged them to set goals outside work, like learning to travel independently or to drive.

Going to work gave disabled people the chance to meet new people and make friends. This was especially important to people with learning disabilities who complained of feeling bored when ‘stuck at home’. The routine of work was important to people with mental health conditions. They said it offered a distraction from their condition and gave them a sense of an ‘ordinary life’. Disabled people said that having a job was a sign of ‘wellness’ and getting on with life.

Staff said that mixing with other people, choice and independence in what you do, and the increased confidence and social life that follow were especially important to disabled people.

WORKSTEP staff believed that disabled people see earning money as an important part of having a job. Disabled people said that feeling proud and having self-respect were more important than having money, but money enabled them to be more independent. By this, people meant having to rely less on family and carers, having an income of their own, being able to choose how to spend their money, or living on their own. Many people also wanted independence from benefits.

Disabled people said that it was important to feel part of a community free of discrimination that understands their experiences and needs. Being able to go to work helped make them more visible in the community. Although WORKSTEP staff recognised that disabled people would value being included in their communities, they did not anticipate how concerned they were about
discrimination. People with learning disabilities and mental health conditions especially highlighted lack of disability awareness.

Many people supported through WORKSTEP stressed that they valued being able to achieve things through their jobs. Some people with learning disabilities were keen to learn new skills, but were frustrated if they were not given the chance to try new or more stimulating jobs. WORKSTEP staff did not recognise how important having a sense of career was to disabled people. When referring to people who already had jobs when they joined the programme, they did not talk about how they helped these people develop in their careers.

Support to help disabled people find and stay in work

People supported through WORKSTEP said they valued help that would ease the pressure while they were trying to find, gain and stay in jobs. WORKSTEP staff said it was important to treat everyone as an individual and it was important to get to know people and help with different kinds of problems that disabled people experience, not just those at work.

WORKSTEP staff said they offered help with looking for jobs, such as form filling, interview techniques and talking to potential employers, job coaching and training, and ongoing support both to disabled people and their employers, helping avoid any problems that might arise. Disabled people mostly liked these kinds of help but they sometimes wanted more of a say in what they got.

Once settled in their jobs, people who worked in supported factories or businesses usually found it easier to ask for ongoing help and support. Some staff said that they checked up on disabled people by visiting them in the workplace or by phoning to see how they are going on. Disabled people sometimes wanted someone to ‘fight your corner’ when there was a problem at work.

Both staff and people supported through WORKSTEP said that employers needed a lot of ongoing advice to help disabled people to feel more personally satisfied in their jobs. Disabled people said they would like to work in places where they feel accepted and respected by their workmates and valued for their contribution. However, staff said that it was sometimes difficult to encourage employers to see all that disabled people can achieve in work.

Development in work

Few people supported through WORKSTEP were aware of its aims, but development in work was welcomed as a good idea that could help avoid boredom. Disabled people were aware that having training and qualifications were important in getting jobs. This was especially the case among people with learning disabilities. However, providers felt that people were sometimes sent on courses for the sake of it whether or not they actually needed the training. They felt that it was important to focus on skills that are important in helping people to get and keep jobs.

People who already had jobs when they joined WORKSTEP did not realise that it could help them to develop within their jobs. They thought it just helped them to keep the job they already had. They liked the idea that WORKSTEP could also help them to try new things.

The Development Plan was welcomed by WORKSTEP staff as an important way to record what disabled people were achieving through their jobs. It also helped staff demonstrate how they were helping people. Staff felt that there was pressure to focus on work-related achievements, rather than more personal or social goals which they and disabled people in the study felt were important. The researchers think that disabled people should be told about the aim of development in work and the support available. Development Plans could be used to record whether the goals that disabled people listed as important are being achieved.

Some people working in supported factories said Development Plans were a good idea and were usually reviewed once or twice a year.
They gave examples of how they told WORKSTEP staff they would like to try something new or do a course and then were given the chance to do this. Not all disabled people were aware of completing a Development Plan.

Progression into unsupported work

People supported through WORKSTEP were not sure about whether moving on to work without extra help was a good idea for them. They liked the idea of having a ‘safety net’ to fall back on and knowing someone would be there to help them if they had a problem. Some people were worried that they would be forced to leave the programme before they were ready, or that they would not be allowed back if their job did not work out.

WORKSTEP staff were keen to talk about progression. They said it was a good idea to encourage disabled people to think about working on their own and encourage them to be more independent of help from WORKSTEP. However, they realised this was difficult for some people, especially those who need a lot of help. Both staff and disabled people said they should be able to choose whether or not they would like to progress.

The researchers think people should be told that they can be allowed back to WORKSTEP and that WORKSTEP could be changed so that people who progressed can have a little support from staff when they need it.

WORKSTEP staff said they come across problems when they try to help disabled people to stay in work without extra help from the programme. In the past, employers were sometimes given money to help pay disabled people’s wages. Staff said that employers who still received this kind of help often did not want it to stop and that sometimes employers said they would not be able to continue employing disabled people without the extra money.

WORKSTEP staff said it had become easier since they started offering employers different kinds of help. Examples include helping to pay for training and job coaching, special equipment or adjustments to the workplace to help disabled people at work, and payments when disabled employees reached set targets or goals.

WORKSTEP staff felt Jobcentre Plus and the Adult Learning Inspectorate focus too much on progressing people into unsupported work. They said more attention should be paid to helping people develop new personal and social as well as work skills. For some people, improving confidence and independence are just as important as being able to do their job.

Suggestions for improving WORKSTEP

WORKSTEP staff suggested:

- There should be more flexibility in the way disabled people join WORKSTEP. Some staff felt Disability Employment Advisers relied on established WORKSTEP providers, which made it difficult for newer providers to fill their WORKSTEP places.
- Money WORKSTEP providers receive to help disabled people should be paid differently. They said it would be better to receive more money when new people join the scheme and were looking for jobs, and less money when people were settled in work without extra help. This would encourage staff to get more people on to WORKSTEP.
- A second scheme could be created to help disabled people not able to work 16 or more hours a week.

The researchers recommend:

- The Department for Work and Pensions could talk more to provider staff about what WORKSTEP is for, and the information could spread better inside the provider organisations.
An easy to read booklet for disabled people could explain what WORKSTEP is supposed to do and tell them what to do if they are not happy with the service.


It is available from Paul Noakes at the address below.

You can also download this report free from: www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/

Other report summaries in the research series are also available from the website above and from:
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