



Reducing Skills Shortages through effective guidance and training of older workers

Report of an Ideas-Building Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 5th – 6th March 2007

The focus for this event was to explore the need and scope for establishing a national infrastructure to assist older workers into job vacancies that are hard to fill due to skill shortages. Such an infrastructure could provide one solution to the national skills challenge set out in the Leitch Review.

As with all Open Agenda reports, this report aims to reflect the main ideas and views put forward during the event, with the understanding that not everybody involved in the discussions may have endorsed *all* of the ideas included. Phrases that are italicised are direct quotes from the event, and a list of participants is included at the end of the report.

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Universal or narrow?

At the outset of our discussions we quickly came to the view that *"there is no sense in setting up separate services for older workers"* to meet skill shortages. These services should sit within a wider universal infrastructure *"facing employers on the one side and individuals on the other, with the **right** connective tissue in between."* The purpose of this infrastructure is to support businesses and individuals in different ways so that they flourish.

The type of support or intervention will vary according to the particular goal that a business or individual wants to achieve, and what they need to do to achieve it. Alternatively, support can be needed to refocus energies if a goal is unattainable or found to be not what clients' really want.

More than anything else, we felt that this dual-facing system is *"about encouraging creative solutions"*: stimulating *"employers' imagination"* about how to resolve issues, and helping individuals, who want or need to change their work, not to let any preconceptions (about jobs or their skills and potential) limit their options.

As far as older people are concerned, we felt that a separate, narrow range of services targeted at people within a particular age group would neither be helpful nor well received. The circumstances, different aspirations and different needs of people over 45 years will be as varied as those of the adult population as a whole.

We agreed that it is the **stage** a person has reached in their life that can be a trigger point for change, not their age. There are points throughout peoples' lives when they welcome confidential and independent information, advice and guidance on work, life and health options. What we felt is needed is to ensure that all age services are as *"visible and joined up as possible"* on the one hand, while dispelling preconceptions about age on the other.

Build on and build in

There was a consensus that the infrastructure should be built upon existing structures and roles, wherever possible. The gap, of course, is a new adult careers guidance service, as recommended in the Leitch Review.¹

¹ A key recommendation within the Review is to establish a new universal adult career service providing labour focused careers advice for all adults (para 8.29, Leitch Review of Skills)

However, in line with the Review we agreed that the way forward was to build on existing structures rather than create new ones.

But by building on we did not necessarily mean holding onto existing ways of working. Indeed, there was a strong view that working practices should only continue if they are proven to be working well. Again, endorsing the Leitch Review, three design features were put forward as critical to success.

- **Flexible** A universal system does not mean a nationally imposed organisational infrastructure. Building on the starting point of what is working well, *"the system should allow for regional interpretation."* This means that the same organisation would not necessarily deliver the same services across the country. So while there is a country-wide offer, the organisations delivering services in different regions should be those that *"stakeholders feel most confident can deliver."*
- **Responsive** As a given, the system needs to be responsive to employers and individuals, whether in work or unemployed. To some degree, this should determine its role and measures of success. Success cannot be captured through 'predicted outcomes': so many into jobs, so many retained in employment, specific changes to employers' recruitment and retention policies. These outcomes are the responsibility of organisations delivering particular types of support that employers and individuals want.

The success of a universal system is that, on the one hand, it helps individuals and employers articulate the issues they are grappling with, and then advocates where they can find help. On the other hand, the system needs to *"ensure that publicly funded support is fit for purpose:"* it is the type of advice, guidance and training which employers and individuals want. Fulfilling this dual role is what will make the system responsive, and its success should be measured against how effectively it responds and influences other agencies to respond to demand.

- **Connected** The importance of the connectivity of the system at strategic and operational level cannot be overstated. A system which aims to match the needs and aspirations of two disparate groups, employers and individuals (those wanting to work, progress or change career) has to *"have first class intelligence about both groups if it is going to meet expectations"* successfully.

In addition, it needs to be well connected to the range of mainstream Government funded interventions designed to help specific groups of employers and individuals, as well as the services, including training, available through the services of voluntary and community organisations and the private sector.

Employer facing - KEY MESSAGES

- *Stimulate employers' imagination about possible solutions*
- *Think about the hook that will capture employers' interest with regard to recruitment and retention strategies*
- *Ensure that those advising employers have firsthand experience and knowledge of local information, advice, guidance and training services*

In many ways we felt that employer facing information, advice, guidance and training services are already well-

established and respected. In parts of the country, Business Link is a familiar and trusted brand amongst employers. That said, there was a strong view that the remit of some employer facing organisations should be reviewed so that there is more emphasis on their role *"in stimulating employers' imagination"* with regard to meeting their skill shortages, and wider recruitment and retention policies. At the same time, we felt that the recently established Sector Skills Councils could play a key role in challenging employers' preconceptions and encouraging them to consider recruitment and workforce development strategies that are new to them.

Many felt that often employers do not consider new solutions: they opt for what has worked in the past. However, given changes in demographics, technology and work patterns the old solutions simply do not work. This is when advice about different approaches, such as upskilling existing workers or introducing more flexible working hours is most likely to hit the mark.

Another 'way in' for employer-facing advice and guidance services is in the wake of new legislation. No employer wants to fall foul of the law. On the back of a rather negative stance: 'what do we **have** to do?' ideas about recruitment and retention strategies could be presented as positive solutions and, given that *"employers will need to do something are more likely to be of interest and taken up"*.

The other 'missing link' that many business facing organisations have is a **first-hand** understanding of local training and placement services that employers can tap into. They may know of them, but not in detail and not sufficiently to advocate use of a particular service. Yet this is what employers often want: recommendations.

There is a world of difference between 'selling' someone a service and a recommendation. To be on the safe side and *"to ensure a truly independent service"*, it is often better to opt for more than one recommendation, and outline the differences between each. However, information without the warmth of recommendations is less likely to be taken up, and can also give the impression that the person giving the information *"doesn't really know about the ins and outs of what they're suggesting"* and whether it is really likely to be what an employer is seeking.

Individual facing - KEY MESSAGES

- *One service for all adults*
- *Confidential, and designed to empower the individual and enable them to make informed choices*
- *Delivered through a range of settings, including voluntary and community centres by advisers who understand and reflect the age and experience of individuals*
- *Linked with a range of services and training opportunities funded by the State, individual or both*

What we felt is needed is an adult guidance service that offers *"Skills Health Checks"* that are free of charge to the individual. Skills Health Checks would be available at times and in ways that suit individuals throughout their working lives.

The Skills Health Check would comprise a diagnosis of *"where people are in their lives and what this means as regards the career options"* open to them. The diagnosis would go much further than simply an assessment of skills and prior learning. It would cover all the key areas in a person's life:

- Health
- Personal finance
- Family
- Skills and training
- Work history
- Attitude to work as part of life
- Aspirations

The rationale behind this is that *"work is only one component in people's lives"*, albeit a very important one.

There are other components that are equally and sometimes more important, and which have a strong influence on the work the people want, are prepared, or need to do. Any assessment of skills, training needs or work options has to be placed within the context of what else is happening in a person's life for the diagnosis and subsequent advice and guidance to be meaningful.

Naturally, the diagnosis would need to be conducted in a sensitive and confidential way. The adviser carrying it out would **not** be an expert in **all** the areas outlined above, but *"know someone or an organisation that is."*

The idea would be that expert advice would then be accessed where relevant. Once individuals' have received the advice they need to make an informed decision, they could then talk through with their adviser the employment options open to them. This could include:

- Retraining and changing career (especially where there are skill shortages)
- Remaining with an employer, but negotiating employment terms and conditions that they feel more comfortable with
- Self-employment
- Portfolio working
- Volunteering

Indeed, any type of employment that meets their health and income needs, and provides them with the life-work balance they are seeking.

We felt that this type of service would be valued by people of all ages, especially when experiencing a major change in their lives, such as moving, having children, health problems, or just seeking a new direction. It was envisaged that people would use the service several times during the course of their lives. We also envisaged that services would be delivered through different approaches such as, for example, e-guidance as in the CareerChangeWebsite developed through the Tick Tock project located at www.careerchangeproject.org.uk

Some of the in-depth services people may be referred to following diagnosis would be paid for by the State: for example, health checks and financial advice. Other services they would need to pay for themselves. This could include life coaching or, perhaps, training that the State does not view as a priority and therefore does not fund fully.

One idea that was put forward to support this approach is for all individuals to be encouraged to agree that a nominal sum, say £1.00 a week, would be taken from their pay. This money would be paid into a portable personal fund and, importantly, would be **their** money to spend as they wish.

However, the purpose of the money would be *"to buy, when needed, different types of professional support and training."* Working on the basis that there will be three or four times when an individual may wish to use specific services say every 5 years or so, they would have around £250 to invest in themselves each time. Some sort of incentive, such as tax breaks on the purchase of specific services or training could make this idea even more attractive.

The connective tissue

We felt that as the model stands, there could be a real risk of it naturally dividing into two parts: one facing employers and the other individuals, and never the twain meet. What we felt needed to be put in place was connective tissue in the form of *"a brokerage between employers and the employment pool."*

It was envisaged that the brokers *"will be evangelistic."* They will need to enthuse to their colleagues working with individuals and employers about the value of reviewing and challenging preconceptions *"what being an older worker, younger worker, working mum means."* and considering new options. While these preconceptions remain, employers may well be missing the solution to plugging skill shortages or just ensuring their businesses thrive and individuals may be limiting their choices and lowering their horizons unnecessarily.

At the same time brokers would need to ensure those looking for jobs are aware of what employment opportunities exist. In today's world when advertising tells us we can have everything we want, grounding people in reality is a sensitive and sometimes difficult job. Again, the task has an element of evangelism within it. How else *"do you persuade manual male workers seeking employment to consider working in call centres?"* It should not be their only option, but surely as the nature of work changes we need to ensure that they consider how they might best earn an income and consider **all** the options.

Just how this brokerage role works as the connective tissue within an employer/individual facing model needs further detailed exploration. Two options were suggested.

The first would be a dedicated team working with both teams of advisers to bring them together to share information, and take on a more challenging and creative role with their clients – encouraging them to leave behind their preconceptions about who is best suited to fill vacancies and the scope for workforce development.

The second approach would be to bring advisers working with employers and individuals together for training, information sharing and, perhaps, 'job swapping' as a way of widening their perspectives and developing new ways of working with both each other and their clients.

It was suggested that one way of signalling support for a more connected and creative approach from the top would be the publication of a new Performance Service Agreement (PSA) target jointly owned by a number of Government Departments such as, Education & Skills, Work & Pensions and Trade & Industry. This is an idea that has been explored a number of times in recent years. Perhaps the announcement of the Spending Review later this year will help move us in this direction.

Professionalism

What will be demanded of advisers working with individuals will *"be more than careers guidance."* As one person pointed out, *"their role is more holistic, similar in ways to the role of Citizen Advice Bureau advisers."* We felt that from the outset that there should be professional accreditation and recognition of the role². There is also a strong case for developing some sort of accreditation for business advisers, perhaps focused on recruitment and retention, to encourage them to think creatively about solutions that celebrate diversity in the workforce.

There was strong support for the idea of 'showcasing the profession' and the service so that both become visible and known, in much the same way as the Connexions Service is known today. As someone said, *"Next Steps is a well kept secret!"*

The purpose of showcasing is not only about creating a new recognisable service that becomes part of our culture in a similar way to gyms, life coaching and, less recently, the Citizens Advice Bureaux. It is also about raising awareness about career opportunities within this new service. 10 years ago becoming a fitness instructor was not a mainstream career option. 5 years ago the idea of earning a living as a life coach was not considered as a possibility by most, certainly not male manual workers! This is why many felt strongly that we need to encourage individuals to consider joining this new profession, by showcasing career options and progression possibilities.

Endnote

By the end of the event it felt that we had moved a considerable distance in sharpening up a model that, amongst other outputs, would help to reduce skill shortages through the effective guidance and training of older workers. Some shifted radically in their thinking: they moved from favouring a discrete service for older workers (45 years plus) to supporting strongly the idea of a 'universal' service for all adults.

The key to success we saw as bringing together the two sides of the equation: those looking for work or to change jobs with employers needing to fill skills gaps through recruitment or workforce development. This is not to suggest forcing a fit between the two. The challenge is two fold:

First, encouraging advisers to consider their clients' needs – be they employers or individuals – *"creatively and from different viewpoints."* Second, stimulating advisers to use a blend of challenge and creativity in the way they work with clients. The challenge is about exploding preconceptions. The creativity is in getting clients to consider new and, sometimes, unexpected solutions.

So what are the next steps? Participants from the South East Region felt that the event had helped sharpen up elements in a new approach that they are keen to test out in the region in the coming months.

This is a really exciting development that could help us to take a significant step forward in building capacity from funding projects that have developed excellent practice, funded through ESF and other discretionary funding, to a model that can reach more people and employers. This test bed approach will build on what is proven to work well. It will aim to build capacity through influencing established services and plugging gaps in infrastructure.

² The University of Kent has developed a qualification accredited by the Open College Network that could be piloted as an initial standard for professional advisers.

At the same time, we were conscious that even test bedding across a region is not enough to change attitudes and explode preconceptions at the speed with which this needs to happen to keep the economy buoyant and meet the demands of the country's aging workforce.

We felt that what we also need is to encourage a stronger and more visible cross Ministerial support, and buy in from the highest level of the relevant Government Departments and Agencies. One way in which it was suggested that they can demonstrate this support in a matter of months would be through the cross-Department backing of a national media campaign to explode preconceptions about age. Just think of the impact that could have.

What we all felt is important is that we don't allow the issue of age and work to remain on the back burner. It needs to be tackled by recognising that past patterns of employment and retirement no longer apply, and recognising that people's aspirations and potential don't change when they reach a certain age! This challenge we felt needs to be taken up by champions from all walks of life and given wide media coverage. And while we have those who are 'talking the talk' and winning people round, we also felt it important to be demonstrating how we can maximise potential and meet skill shortages in practice through test bedding.

With this two pronged strategy there was a shared confidence that change can be brought about. The challenge we now face is to make it happen!

Krysia Hudek, Open Agenda, 20th March 2007

Participants

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Sam Mercer	Employers Forum on Age
Greg Dyche	Deputy Director, Department for Education and Skills
Cathy Hughes	Head of Partnerships, Jobcentre Plus
Keith Frost	The Age and Employment Network
David Winning	Director of Public Affairs, Working Links
Stephen McNair	Director, Centre for Research on the Older Workforce, NIACE
Anne Fairweather	External Relations Manager, Recruitment and Employment Confederation
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