

Advice on learning and work: what is a disadvantage, and how do you overcome it?

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The government's plans for a universal careers advice service for adults address the needs of people across more than one spectrum. They aim to help the highly qualified and educated as well as those with minimal or perhaps no qualifications – and all between. They aim to help young and old adults and all between, and achieve continuity with careers advice services for young people. They aim to help those active and only slightly underachieving in the labour market as well as those who start far from it, perhaps having spent a long period out of work or never having worked – and all between. They aim to offer the same service to people with physical, psychological or socio-economic difficulties as to those without them.

There are challenges in designing such an all-reaching service. If it suits people at one end of any of those spectrums, will it be useful or attractive to those at the other? If it aims for the middle, it could end up not appealing to either end or indeed even to people in the middle. A study for the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP, 2008) suggests we know more about guidance work at each end of the qualification spectrum than we do about how to reach (let alone meet the needs of) people in between. It is possible there is a similar pattern for the other kinds of advantage/disadvantage spectrums, but the picture is confused by so much overlap in the variables (people disadvantaged in one way are sometimes but not always disadvantaged in others).

A real danger faced by the new service is that because of the pressing needs for more disadvantaged people to enter the labour market, for their own sake as well as any urgency for the government to reduce the benefits bill, it will concentrate on the needs of that group and lose its balance. Some point to the way the targeted Connexions service undermined the universal offer for young people (for example Watts, 2008). Public sector careers advice for adults has traditionally focused on that end of the spectrum (*nextstep* services and their predecessors through the 1990s have been targeted at people with few qualifications, as explained in Hamilton, 2009). At present the picture is obscured by the current recession, where *nextstep* and Jobcentre Plus are responding to a new challenge in large numbers of newly-unemployed, better qualified people. It is not easy to see how long this situation will last, though Hamilton (2009) suggests they

find work more quickly than the more traditional, more disadvantaged users. They continue to have real needs, and a universal service must continue to meet those, and meet them better, as well as spread its support more evenly.

At the time of writing the intended model for the new adult careers service is for a core specialist group of advice agencies (successors to the current *nextstep* services and the telephone-and-web-based Careers Advice Service, which has not been restricted to people with low qualifications, and Jobcentre plus) that will work closely with 'advancement networks', to be built locally to respond to needs and strengths in specific areas (DIUS, 2008). Possible arrangements for these networks are currently being piloted through ten 'advancement prototypes'.

The concept of the 'guidance network' has developed in two directions in recent decades: the term can refer to groups of agencies that deliver a similar range of services, who have much in common and much to gain from sharing professional practice (we could call them 'same function networks'); or to groups of agencies whose work differs from other network members, each focusing on specific needs or target groups and complementing that of other network members (perhaps 'complementing networks'). In practice, this distinction can be blurred by the difficulty of categorising the many different ways in which agencies grow up to help different people; but it is a helpful one to hold in mind. The range of models in the prototype pilots includes networks of both types, and combinations of the two. What do we need to understand, to enable either kind of network to help people at the disadvantaged end of the different spectrums without compromising their offer as a universal service?

The research project commissioned by the City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development and the CfBT Education Trust (Hawthorn and Alloway, 2009) explored good practice in reaching disadvantaged adults among agencies that will be key players in both these kinds of advancement network: agencies that have developed specialist ways of working with certain groups of adults, and will take and receive referrals from others in the networks, i.e. members of the 'complementing' networks; and also three of the core career guidance agencies that in theory at least address the needs of all adults *including* those with disadvantages. The benefits of a detailed study of their methods goes beyond simply understanding them as current or future network members: they have developed an approach to their own specific target client groups that could have wider application, not only for other disadvantaged adults but also for use with those at

the other, 'advantaged', end of those different spectrums. The study faced a host of methodological and analytical problems. What counts as disadvantage? On whatever definition, and given that it would be impossible to look at all kinds of disadvantage, how could one construct a sample that could represent the wider group? Then, having collected qualitative data from users, practitioners and managers, how could one analyse and present the findings to be useful beyond the very specialised groups of agencies similar to each case study?

The sponsors of the work approached these problems in a measured way, explained in detail in Morris (2009) commissioning first a literature review (Gutherson, 2007) and then a study of the policy considerations to which the project could contribute (Watts, 2009 summarises the earlier unpublished working paper). The research methodology rested on a conceptual framework drawn up before questionnaire design and sampling began, which explored the factors known to challenge careers advice work with adults who had difficulties in relation to the labour market. This made use of the formal published literature and also on the ongoing concerns of the professional associations working with these groups (including the National Association for Educational Guidance for Adults and the Institute of Career Guidance). This gave the project team a number of issues to which the fieldwork researchers could be alert through the semi-structured interviews, while remaining open to unforeseen concerns that the respondents would themselves bring forward.

Given the problem of achieving any true kind of representation in our sample (see Watts, 2009 for a fuller account of the possible forms of disadvantage), we started from the categories used in an earlier review of work with disadvantaged adults (Hawthorn *et al.*, 2002) and for each contacted a range of researchers and specialist national bodies seeking their opinion on where best practice could be found. Narrowing down to a shortlist was not easy, but our final selection of twelve included:

- a range of kinds of disadvantage such as physical or mental conditions (visual impairment, learning difficulties); social (homelessness, refugees, offenders); economic (low earners); health (people recovering from mental illness); and life stage (older adults)
- ways of working with adults with a disadvantage (including community projects reaching people with single or multiple problems such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, mental health problems, ex-offenders, and people on incapacity benefit); the use of telephone and internet (the Careers Advice Service); and two *nextstep* services, one of which was using innovative ways of reaching people in rural areas, and the other innovative use of inter-agency collaboration
- a geographical spread across England.

The draft report was sent to a wider group of policy makers and researchers who along with managers of the twelve case studies were invited to an 'interpretation' workshop to explore their reactions to the project findings and recommendations. This was an immensely useful process, outside our usual experience, allowing us as far as our data would permit to draw out issues that were of especial interest or concern and which we had not emphasised. It was pointed out that by focusing on *kinds* of people, and *ways* of working, we might have missed the significance of *over-riding* disadvantages that cut across all or any of these categories, especially lack of functional literacy and the confident use of English.

The case studies stand as useful material on their own. But we were also able to identify more general lessons that could be useful more broadly. As information begins to come through from the advancement network prototypes, in which some partners are unfamiliar with the main body of experience in reaching and working with disadvantaged groups, the eleven 'critical success factors' identified in our study could be helpful. These covered general lessons from all case studies about ways of:

- understanding, assessing and meeting client need
- reaching the target groups
- encouraging progression
- recruiting, training and deploying staff
- using volunteering for clients and in service delivery
- working with employers
- working with other agencies
- managing effectively
- assuring quality
- addressing funding issues
- using appropriate measures and evidence of impact.

Full details of these can be found in the project report. Finally, at a project team meeting towards the end of our fieldwork the research team, all themselves specialists in work with the groups they had studied, shared their views on the seven more un-quantifiable 'key messages' that stand out in services that really help their users:

- Help starts from what is immediately needed by the client (not driven by pre-ordained categories or entitlements)
- Careers advice is couched within a much broader programme of support
- Help is closely linked to the client's readiness and need for help

- Progress is achieved through small steps
- Effective help involves persistence
- Staff really care, and celebrate success
- The advice empowers the client to help themselves in future.

While these headings may seem simplistic, the detailed understanding that lies behind them is available from the report and the case studies. Agencies already working with disadvantaged adults will recognise the challenges and be interested in how others have overcome them, and hopefully will have other suggestions of even better approaches. All these topics are relevant too to agencies working with adults who are not faced with disadvantages and who are looking to progress their career whatever the context. But it is also possible that from this group of headings an agenda could be drawn up for the nascent advancement networks: to what extent, within our network, are we achieving the best possible service for all our clients along the eleven dimensions? Are the agencies in the core service able to say they hold the needs of the client, as encapsulated in the key messages, as their main priority? This approach offers a framework against which the needs of all services users, across all the spectrums that the new adult advancement and careers service hopes to help, could be considered and more effectively met.

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