

The impact of the recession on the *nextstep* service

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Prior to August 2008 the great weight of the adult careers advisory service was directed towards helping those of low academic achievement. Access to the *nextstep* service was almost exclusively confined to those who had yet to achieve a level 2 qualification (5 GCSEs A*-C grade, or NVQ level 2).

However, the new *nextstep* contracts awarded by the Learning and Skills Council, which commenced in August 2008, took a step away from this limited eligibility by introducing the 'Universal' session. Although the main function of the Universal session was to provide signposting information rather than advice, as its name suggested, it was open and available to all, regardless of circumstances or academic achievement.

The main focus of the service though continued to be those with low academic achievement and for anyone who had yet to achieve a level 3 qualification (NVQ 3 or A levels) there was the 'Differentiated and Personalised Service (DPS)'. This was in-depth assistance that enabled an adviser to work with customers, via multiple interventions, on a 'journey' that only ended when they achieved their learning and/or work goals. With this level of support it was hoped that even hard to reach groups, such as the long term unemployed, lone parents, 50+ and those with disabilities, would find it possible to re-enter the labour market.

Unfortunately, no sooner had this new contract begun than the economy moved into recession and in the south west of England, month on month the number of redundancies and people claiming unemployment benefit rose, while the number of job vacancies fell.

Jobcentre Plus found themselves handling large numbers of fresh claimants, some of whom were experiencing redundancy and unemployment for the very first time. Because *nextstep* advisers had been tasked to help those with low qualifications levels, they had been working in the south west Jobcentres for quite some time, as low academic achievement was common amongst the long term unemployed. During this time they had been able to build good working relationships with Jobcentre advisers who had been referring claimants to them, mostly for help into employment initiatives. It was quite natural therefore that as the numbers of people signing on increased, so did the volume of referrals. Many of these had pressing financial commitments and were particularly anxious to get whatever help was available to assist them in a return to

work as quickly as possible. This may well have been a contributory factor in this increase, but whatever the reason, by late 2008 there were so many referrals being made to *nextstep* South West by Jobcentre staff that some kind of working agreement needed to be implemented. The initial steps in this direction took the form of a pilot scheme that was trailed in a limited number of Jobcentres, under which all fresh claimants were referred automatically to an advice session with a *nextstep* adviser. The *nextstep* service was also to be invited in to assist at all redundancy interventions that Jobcentre Plus handled in the pilot areas.

The Learning and Skills Council also assisted in this joining up process by making it possible for *nextstep* advisers to help 18 and 19 year olds, (previously they could only see those of 20+), and by creating the new 'Universal Plus' advice session. Via the Universal Plus, anyone in receipt of benefit, who was facing redundancy or who had been made redundant, would be entitled to an in depth advice session with a *nextstep* adviser, regardless of previous academic achievement. These couple of amendments made it possible for *nextstep* advisers to assist virtually anyone that the Jobcentre cared to refer to them.

This pilot scheme ran in the selected Jobcentre offices from January to March, 2009. Feedback on the pilot from jobseekers, *nextstep* advisers and Jobcentre Plus was so unreservedly positive that its life was extended and the geographical spread expanded to cover almost all the Jobcentres across the south west region.

For those *nextstep* advisers who found themselves now working almost exclusively out of Jobcentres or in redundancy interventions, the job was a little different from what it had been just a few months back. Then they had been helping a relatively small number of customers over an extended period, via multiple interventions. They would have been helping customers with a range of additional issues that made it difficult for them to find employment and move off benefits without one to one, intensive assistance. Now they were responding to the very high level of demand for initial access to the service and seeing large numbers of people, usually for a single intervention, mostly with regard to CVs and job applications. Yet, while previously helping someone put a CV together might have been completed over a number of interventions, now customers generally required them as soon as possible, often so that they could get them out to potential employers or apply for a particular vacancy, with a closing date just a few days away. In some respects this required immediacy suited the adviser, as appointment slots in the Jobcentres and at redundancy interventions, ran at half hourly intervals. The adviser could not really afford an extended completion period as tomorrow would bring further appointments and undoubtedly more

requests for the same type of assistance. To get everything that was required completed in time advisers often had to put in additional hours after the appointment day had ended, particularly if a customer was not able to type a CV up onto a computer and so needed this done for them.

Much the same need for immediacy was present in some other areas of assistance provided by advisers. In the past for example, retraining had been considered a viable and realistic option, even if it had meant spending a number of years at college before using the resultant qualifications to gain employment. Today, while many would have welcomed the opportunity to use a period of unemployment to retrain and change career direction, the thought of having to wait until the start of the academic year in September to begin a course, was generally off putting enough. The intrusive nature of many courses into the working week, making it difficult to reconcile both learning and full time employment, as well as the length of time it would take to get fully qualified, were usually enough to put many off the whole idea of retraining. A preferred option was usually to up-skill via an open learning course, many of which had flexible start dates and hours designed to suit the learner.

The difficulty was that as the number of unemployed rose, so did the numbers looking for such courses and by the early part of this year so many had signed up for what was available that the allocated funding was rapidly drying up. By May even Skills for Life numeracy and literacy qualifications, which had generally been under subscribed for as long as they had been available, had now run so far 'over profile' that there was a temporary freeze on any further inductions. For a period then *nextstep* advisers found themselves in a difficult position, as the range of possible referral and signposting options available began to wither away. Fortunately, the Learning and Skills Council was monitoring the situation and in early July was able to make more money available to help those looking to gain further qualifications. Of particular significance was the amount of money now directed at those who had been unemployed for six months or more. This was a new element in the assistance given to adult jobseekers as up until this time much of the additional help that had been available, especially when it came to paying for course fees, came as a result of either being in receipt of an income based benefit, or not yet having achieved a level 2 qualification. Unfortunately, many of the newly unemployed were well qualified and in receipt of 'Contributions Based Jobseekers Allowance'. This is not regarded as income based benefit, since entitlement relies on the number of national insurance stamps paid. In the past this group tended to fall between the stools and generally found funding for courses extremely difficult to acquire, so this shift in eligibility criteria was most welcome.

Referral to *nextstep* by the Jobcentre, of substantial numbers of well qualified, work ready and highly motivated jobseekers was yet another major change that advisers had to adapt to.

'Just a few months ago I was seeing predominantly long term, unemployed, BL3, (qualified below level 3), from postcode areas associated with hardship and social need. Many were aged 40 – 65, or were lone parents, having to adjust to the change in child age entitlement to Income Support. Now I am seeing people of all ages, postcodes and social groups, across the full range of academic levels. There is new category of professional person using the jobcentre service and redundancy support events, not seen before in seven years of workplace advice.' *nextstep* adviser in Cornwall

This was a learning curve for both advisers and clients. For the last four years *nextstep* advisers had not seen many professional people with high qualification levels. While they were adept at helping to construct 'Skills CVs', (those emphasising a persons skills rather than the qualifications or employment history), they were perhaps somewhat less experienced when it came to advising on CVs, applications and employment opportunities for managerial positions. The same could be said with regards to advice on qualifications, where the expertise generally lay in advising on those at or below level 3, rather than at graduate or postgraduate level.

Many clients had been in a particular sector and/or with a particular company for most of their working life and now, in spite of good qualifications and employment histories, redundancy found them ill equipped to handle job search, CVs, and application forms in an online, email age where competition for jobs was fierce. While most were glad to get what help they could and were extremely pleased to hear that there was an organisation on hand that could give them free assistance with such things, there were limitations to what the service could provide and some clients found this difficult to appreciate.

'Those with qualifications above level 3 tend to have higher expectations of the service and often require more individual attention. They expect a professional relationship to develop where they can use the adviser as a consultant whom they can contact by phone or email on an ad hoc basis. A few clients expect a recruitment service where the adviser contacts them when a matching vacancy has been sought out. It's often difficult to explain to them that, because of funding limitations, the Universal Plus service provides for just one in-depth interview.' *nextstep* adviser in Cornwall

The entrance of these well qualified, highly motivated jobseekers onto the market served to increase the competition for the jobs that were available. Even unskilled, low paid vacancies were receiving numerous applications and the employers were able to pick and choose. An applicant now needed to show that they had a relevant work history and possess all the appropriate training and certification that the particular vacancy required.

Those that could not were finding the level of competition extremely daunting. Those who had been out of work for some while, that lacked experience and had few qualifications were particularly vulnerable. These included the long term unemployed, lone parents, 50+ and those with disabilities. These are the very people that would have benefited from the intensive support provided by the 'customer journey' that was originally envisaged from the *nextstep* service, had it not been for the changes that the recession has brought about.

No one can doubt that the changes made to the *nextstep* service since the beginning of the new contract in August 2008 have been a success. In utilitarian terms they have certainly delivered the greatest good for the greatest number and the advent of the 'Flexible New Deal' programme, which has referral to a *nextstep* adviser written in, it would seem as though the close links between Jobcentre Plus and *nextstep* will continue into the foreseeable future.

It is a real credit to the *nextstep* service that it has been flexible enough to alter course and adapt so rapidly in response to the new role required of it. In doing so it has raised its profile to become far more of a universal service, helping a wider range of people than might have been envisaged some nine months ago. The real credit though must go to the individual advisers who have not only handled a steep learning curve with alacrity, but put in the extra effort and hours that have been required to bring assistance to those in need.

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