



**Developing client skills profiles in guidance for unemployed adults**

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## **1. Introduction**

Researchers from the Universities of East London and Warwick are working with five careers guidance companies (Careers Enterprise Group, Essex Careers & Business Partnership, Futures Careers guidance, Sussex Careers Services and VT Southern Careers) to develop and pilot a new approach that will enhance the use of labour market information (LMI) in the guidance process. The research is funded from the European Social Fund's ADAPT strand, which requires innovative research projects to develop ways of 'adapting the workforce' for the future. The main target groups for ADAPT are former employees from any sized company who have been unemployed for up to 12 months, and those from SMEs (small to medium enterprises) who are threatened with redundancy.

Our research project is investigating new ways of presenting labour market information as an integral part of the guidance process, using a skills approach. One major outcome for the project will be the production of a prototype IT program. Three European partners who are also part of the project team will ensure we are able to test ideas and their transferability to European labour markets.

## **2. Research Process**

The starting point for the research was to ask whether it was possible to get individual clients to reflect upon their range of skills, and then see if it was possible to describe the world of work in terms of future skills requirements. After conducting a survey of the constructs of work currently used in careers guidance, Hirsh *et al* (1998) concluded that there is great potential for using skills as the dominant construct for describing work (p27). For the initial phase of the project, our research methodology involved introducing careers practitioners to our description of key skills and asking them to use this as part of their guidance with clients. The 'skills matrix' developed for this purpose (Brown, 1998) consisted of five categories of skills:

- \* communication skills
- \* information processing skills
- \* intellectual skills
- \* special skills and
- \* skills associated with autonomous working.

Although the importance of technical or occupational skills is acknowledged, it was decided that data about this skill category would be separately identified.

The initial phase (April-September, 1998) involved fifty seven careers practitioners, working with approximately two hundred and fifty clients across the five participating companies. Practitioners were asked to encourage clients to draw on a variety of life contexts, not just formal employment, to identify skills and examples produced testify to their success in managing this request. Hirsh *et al* (1998) also comment on the lack of research which has been undertaken on 'which constructs and frameworks are used most by practitioners and are found most useful by their clients' (p28). Our research has taken account of the language, constructs and frameworks used by practitioners when working with their clients.

The richness of data collected is striking, providing powerful examples of skill utilisation and the contexts in which they were developed or demonstrated. One other emphatic finding was the way in which practitioners consistently reported difficulties in integrating a skills assessment within their guidance, even where they considered this would be of great benefit to clients, because satisfying policy demands overrides identified client need.

The second stage of the project is currently underway. A prototype computer program, which assists clients to produce individual skills profiles, is being piloted by practitioners. Feedback from this pilot will ensure refinement of the program. Two further sections of the program are also being developed. One section will present relevant labour market information on skills needs and skills deficiencies; the other will deal with key guidance issues such as qualities, knowledge and experience, individual constraints, decision-making processes, labour market changes and individual preferences (such as work values, life style and organisational culture).

### **3. Language for description of skills of individuals, in employment and in the labour market**

One way of conceiving of the use of skills at work could relate to work as comprising: (1) practical activities; (2) working with information or ideas (including abstract thinking / organised reflection / analysis); and (3) working with people. Now most work will involve a combination of these elements and skills too can be linked to them. So initially we considered the starting points of this approach could be that:

- a) all jobs involve use of a set of essential skill requirements to varying degrees, but jobs can also be successfully performed by people with differing mixes of these skills;
- b) all jobs could also be thought of as involving, in varying degrees:
  - completion of practical tasks, routines or activities;
  - working with information and ideas (including abstract thought, organised reflection, analysis);
  - working with people.
- c) the aim would then be to get clients thinking about occupational areas in this way rather than focusing upon particular job titles
- d) it should be possible to allow for differences in **preferred patterns of working**: that is, some people like to follow established ways of working and are focused upon the completion of tasks and following plans, while others are more open to coping with variety, uncertainty and last minute changes.

### **4. Development of a skills matrix for unemployed adults**

Development of a skills matrix for unemployed adults making use of this approach would:

- \* aim to get clients thinking about available jobs, career choices and their past and future working life in terms of sets of skills, broadly defined;
- \* be able to cross-reference to the use of other tools (Adult Directions; SOC; Kudos etc.);
- \* create a 'richness of description' for thinking about work.

The criteria for evaluation of this approach would then be how far does it help clients to look beyond traditional job classifications in identifying the skills required in changing labour markets and enable them to reflect upon their own skills.

Note within this approach examples of the use of skills are drawn that involve a deliberate mixing of areas and jobs: the intention is to use an approach that is directly useful to clients rather than imposing analytical or conceptual rigour. One option may then be to help clients consider different types of areas and work in some more detail in each of the three areas, as a means to help clients to orient themselves to the three broad areas. Also it is important to note that occupations and areas may appear under more than one heading. These considerations may help individuals realise there are a number of different settings within which they could apply their skills. This in turn may then influence the individual to broaden the areas within which he or she is prepared to look for work.

## **5. Feedback from practitioners**

These ideas were extensively discussed with practitioners in June 1999 and the consensus was that there was considerable mileage in pursuing an approach based upon practical, information and people skills, but that the initial ideas were too complicated to convey to a wide variety of clients. Following on from this, the project team came up with a simplified six-fold typology that could also be used across the five broad education and training levels. This new skills matrix will be demonstrated at the conference, but the rationale for the types and levels is as follows:

## **6. Typology of skills**

### **I. Practical**

#### **Type 1: practical skills in production and maintenance activities**

Producing/harvesting resources; making or repairing things (using mechanical, technical skills): in, for example, forestry; farming; engineering; construction; food preparation; repair and maintenance; mining

#### **Type 2: providing services with a high practical content**

Providing services with a high practical component in, for example, (animal care other than farming); transport; conservation; print; security; stagecraft; laundry; sporting; cultural; artistic activities; police; fire services; armed forces

## **II. Working with information and ideas**

### **Type 3: organising information**

Organising information: information processing (organisation; administration; record-keeping; filing; clerical; finance; accounting; computer programming) occurs in many contexts, but obvious examples, would include some legal services; travel agents; payroll services; civil service)

### **Type 4: working with ideas**

Working with information and ideas in more abstract or open-ended ways: research, analysis, inquiry, evaluation, investigation: for example, in science; diagnostic medicine; detection; systems analysis; strategic management; journalism; project management

## **III. Working with people**

### **Type 5: Interacting with people in the provision of health, social and education services**

### **Type 6: Interacting with people in the provision of goods and services**

Interacting with people in the provision of goods and services in other sectors: for example in, leisure and tourism; hotel and catering; selling; retailing

## **7. Levels of work**

The above skills can be exercised in a variety of combinations and contexts and also at a number of different levels. Levels can be described in a number of ways, but we opted to use a method that equated broadly to the standard five levels used to describe the five NVQ levels. We also tried to make broad equivalencies to other education and training provision, although it should be emphasised that these should not necessarily be equated with entry level qualifications. Rather they are intended to indicate a broad equivalence to skill level in each type of work. Remember, however, that it is the breadth of skills required across different types of work activities that may make particular jobs demanding. This applies even more so when work involves complex combinations of practical, information and people skills. Similarly this tool could be used to point up the differences within the same type of work. So the fact that most job titles span more than one type and level should be regarded as a strength, in that it is likely to lead to discussion and reflection upon the use of skills rather than a simple attempt at pigeon-holing jobs into single boxes.

### **Level of work**

*Level 1* basic entry: application of skills and knowledge in a range of activities, most of which may be routine and predictable: often requires limited training and few formal qualifications: NVQ level 1.

*Level 2* varied range of work activities, some of which may be non-routine; may require individual autonomy or working with others; education and training typically GCSEs; GNVQ Intermediate; NVQ level 2

*Level 3* application of skills, knowledge and understanding in complex work activities; requiring considerable responsibility and autonomy; education and training typically at the level of A levels; Advanced GNVQ or NVQ3

*Level 4* application of skills, knowledge and understanding in a broad range of technical or professional work activities; often with considerable autonomy and possibly responsibility for others; education and training typically at graduate level or NVQ4

*Level 5* specialist technical or professional work activities; and/or significant responsibility for the work of others, resource allocation, design, planning, implementation and evaluation; considerable personal autonomy; education and training typically involving specialist postgraduate, professional qualifications, or NVQ5

A final caution is that we have tried to design a single over-arching template for the purposes of discussion. In the long run we may feel these types of matrices (or grids) may have more value when applied to a single sector, simply in order to emphasise the range of skills and combinations of skills that are required within particular settings.

**Please contact us if you are interested in trialling any of the project materials.**

Fuller information on the project can be found on website:

*<http://www.uel.ac.uk/research/adapt/>*

**CAREERS RESEARCH NETWORK:**

The ADAPT project is supporting the development of a Careers Research Network, intended to provide opportunities for dissemination and discussion of practice-based research in careers guidance. Further conferences and events are planned. For further information on this, please contact: Rachel Mulvey, University of East London, Department of Psychology, Romford Road, Stratford, London E15 4LZ.

**References:**

Brown, A.J. (1997) Using Skills as the Key Mediator of Meaning in Labour Market Services of the Future, ADAPT Project Paper, Coventry: IER, University of Warwick.

Hirsh, W., Kidd, J.M. & Watts, A.G. (1998) Constructs of Work Used in Career Guidance, Cambridge: CRAC.