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ACTIVATION AND INTEGRATION: WORKING WITH INDIVIDUAL ACTION PLANS

**Individual Action Planning (IAP): Resolving tensions and
maximising impact in European PES?**

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Individual Action Plans (IAPs) are designed to empower the client, but can also be used to control*

Action plans (IAPs) have wide and common usage across a range of operational contexts like, for example, politics¹, economics², educational policy³, educational practice (Pill et al., 2010)⁴, health education (Lorig et al., 2003); employability curricula (Davies, 2000; Moon, 2004; Pritchard et al., 2004; Rouncefield & Ward, 1998; Watts, 2006); and marketing (Bergadaà, 1990), as well as in employment and career counselling. They are used as a mechanism for self-management and self-regulation – whether at the level of the State, multinational companies, local governance, organisations or the individual. In addition to encouraging autonomy and designating responsibility, they can also be used to control and manipulate behaviour through coercion and monitoring.

In counselling, individual action plans (IAPs) are commonly regarded as a way of empowering individuals. Here, empowerment is the opposite of powerlessness, helplessness, alienation or feeling out of control and relates to the ability to influence what happens to individuals. An employment action plan should both help clients/customers to maximise their potential, as well as balance aspirations and capabilities against available options in the decisions they make. They should also remind clients/customers (ideally in their own words) of the steps they have agreed to take and help them to monitor their progress towards their employment goal. The increased use of the internet in formulating, updating and recording client/customer IAPs is likely to prove irresistible in employment and career practice in the future because of the synergies and efficiencies possible (Harris-Bowlsbey et al., 2002).

Overall: IAPs used in employment counselling should help clients/customers to maximise their potential, as well as balance aspirations and capabilities against available options. Employment counsellors can use IAPs to empower clients/customers or to manipulate and control.

Two well established and respected bodies of knowledge that are relevant to understanding the concepts underpinning the current and potential use of IAPs in employment and career counselling relate to experiential learning and locus of control. Key concepts of each are briefly summarised below.

¹ For example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) use individual partnership action plans to frame the objectives and the communication framework for dialogue and cooperation between itself and various countries.

² The Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation use Individual Action Plans (IAP), which reports are updated annually by each APEC Member Economy, recording its actions that help realise the APEC goal of free and open trade and investment in the APEC region.

³ For example, a local authority in England (Leicestershire) uses Individual Education Plan as a record of strategies to help a child progress.

⁴ IAPs are used in courses for study skills, skills for life, problem solving, planning for academic progression, personal development planning, etc.

Experiential learning is at the heart of the practice of IAPs

Underpinning the principles and practice of IAPs is experiential learning. Experiential learning was elaborated by Kolb (1984), with a simplified version developed by Gibbs (1988). The essence of experiential learning is represented in the well-known diagram based on Kolb's work (see Figure 1) and/ or also the work of Gibbs (see Figure 2).

Applied in the **Public Employment Service (PES) IAP context**, the concept of experiential learning illustrates the learning processes of:

- Problem identification (that is, what is the main barrier to progression?);
- Making sense of the problem (that is, what did I do wrong?);
- Deciding what needs to be done to solve the problem (that is, what needs to be different?); and
- Moving to action (what do I need to do?).

The role of the employment counsellor is crucial in facilitating and supporting the process of IAPs, which at its best is one of individual learning. Clients/ customers are required to reflect on their past experiences, then identify future action that is focused on avoiding self-defeating behaviours and previous mistakes.

Figure 1:

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

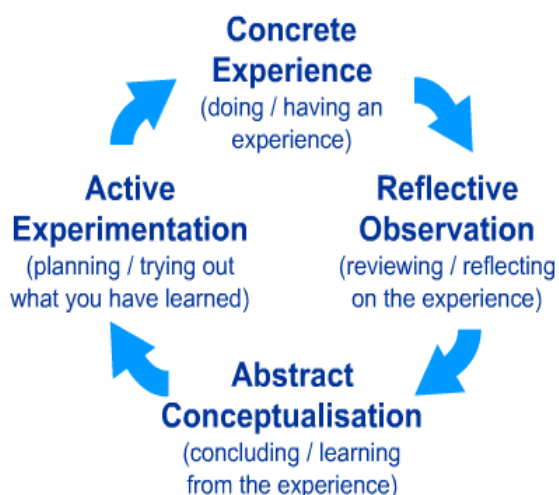


Figure 2:

Gibb's Model for Reflection



In the PES context, a private provider operating in the UK and elsewhere (see Appendix 6.3): regards the ability to engage in critical reflection as central to successful progression. The IAP is regarded as a dynamic and constantly evolving document, which is held online.

An understanding of client’s locus of control can assist the perception of counsellors and can also help to improve outcomes

A key indicator of whether PES IAPs are successful is whether the client/ customer undertakes the action(s) agreed. This is likely to depend, in part, on the extent to which the individual client/ customer feels motivated to carry out the actions agreed. The concept of ‘locus of control’ refers to the distinction between people who feel that they are in control of their own destinies and those who do not (Rotter, 1966). The former group are referred to as having an ‘internal locus of control’ (that is, control is within themselves), whilst the latter group is referred to as having an ‘external locus of control’ (that is, control lays outside them). Figure 3 illustrates these two distinctions.

Figure 3: Locus of control

Internal locus of control	External locus of control
‘I am in charge of my life.’	‘It doesn’t make any difference what I do.’
‘I can make choices and decisions to get what I want.’	‘There’s no point in trying because I won’t get anywhere.’
‘I feel good about myself.’	‘Anyway, I’m not very good at anything.’

Research findings correlate high internality with better coping strategies and cognitive processing of information, lower risk of anxiety, higher motivation to achieve, high involvement in social action, greater value placed on skill-determined rewards and greater attempts at controlling the environment (Sue & Sue, 1990). The behavioural predispositions of internal control correspond closely to those necessary to achieve the positive outcomes that are the ideal focus of IAPs. In fact, most frameworks underpinning employment counselling assume high internality, individual autonomy and control, and choice in career decision-making. The adoption of frameworks that assume internal-control as a central characteristic of human behaviour may lead employment counsellors to judge clients/ customers negatively who are high on external-control. For example, a client/ customer scoring high on external control may rule out a particular course of action involving a degree of risk because: ‘it is not worth trying, I won’t be able to do it anyway’. Such responses are likely to be regarded as unhelpful, even dysfunctional by employment counsellors assuming individual control, since it is likely such clients would be unwilling to co-

operate with recommended outcomes emphasising choice, control, risk and action. Equally, the same clients/ customers are likely to experience the approaches of employment counsellors that assume individual control to be unrealistic, alienating and not relevant to their situation.

An understanding and acknowledgement of locus of control is, therefore, important in employment counselling practice related to IAPs to ensure that proper account is taken of different cultural and social experiences. Minority ethnic groups, people from low social classes and women score significantly higher on the external end of the locus-of-control continuum (Sue & Sue, 1990). Individuals can be taught to increase their self-perceptions of internal self-control, through setting realistic goals and taking personal responsibility for their actions. This can result in increased motivation and improved achievement (Hopson & Scally, 1981). Increasing self-efficacy is often part of group work in PES and IAPs can be used to contribute to this process. Equally, evidence indicates that neglecting this aspect working with clients/ customers who have an external locus of control is likely to result in a negative outcome, in terms of sustainable employment destinations and level of cooperation by clients/customers.

In the PES context, management of the live register in *Ireland* includes a measure for 'locus of control' (fatalism) as part of their initial assessment of unemployed clients. Here, external locus of control, poor education, lower social class, subsidised housing and high levels of psychological distress were defining characteristics of the registered unemployed (Barrett et al., 2001, p.29).

A **Canadian** study into the assets and barriers to finding employment found that those of a Non-Western ethnicity had longer job search lengths, higher levels of pain and suffering while simultaneously scoring higher in meaning and employability skills (Stolte, 2006). It has been found that clients/ customers suffering from labour market discrimination are more likely to have an external locus of control.

Overall, understanding of the experiential learning cycle, which underpins the process of action planning, together with the concept of 'locus of control' are crucial to the delivery of effective IAPs.

1.2 Role of individual action planning in the PES context

Employment counselling is about constructive change and should have a practical end. However: 'There is nothing magic about change; it is hard work. If clients do not act in their own behalf, nothing happens' (Egan, 1994, p.29). The client or customer comes to talk about problems and opportunities related to their employment progression (perhaps expressing pent-up emotions), discuss goals and identify solutions that will help them to change their lives. If no such change takes place, then the employment counselling is of little use.

In counselling, there are a number of potential roles of IAPs, including how plans can:

- Help clients develop self-discipline and learn how to become self-regulated;
- Prevent clients from becoming overwhelmed, by keeping steps toward achieving a goal manageable;
- Assist clients develop more useful ways, or strategies for coping;
- Provide the opportunity to evaluate the realism and adequacy of goals;
- Make clients aware of the resources needed to implement plans; and
- Raise awareness of unanticipated problems that need to be solved to achieve a goal. (Egan, 1994)

In a PES context, Schneider (2008) argues that the role of IAPs is to 'increase the productivity of job search' (p.2). Four broad roles for IAPs have been identified, within a fairly standard action plan model used in employment assistance services in Canada:

1. improve career decision making;
2. enhance skills;
3. improve job search;
4. and maintain sustainable employment

(Beauchesne & Belzile, 1995, p.182, quoted in Stolte, 2006).

Overall:

The role of IAPs with unemployed clients/ customers is becoming increasingly important in Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs). IAPs in PES can be used to empower clients/ customers or to manipulate and control.

2 INDIVIDUAL ACTION PLAN: THE PRACTICE

2.1 IAP practice varies, but overall the quality of the relationship established by employment counsellors has a significant impact

IAPs are a critical feature of the employment counselling process and central to the work of PES. A study of Public Employment Services (PES) in Europe identifies the attention paid to helping individuals develop personal action plans as one of four⁵ characteristic features of careers guidance and counselling services (Sultana & Watts, 2006). Typically, IAPs issued by PES are legally binding for both client/ customer and the PES, with sanctions following failure of either party to fulfil the agreement (Schneider, 2008). Considerable variations exist regarding the duration of unemployment when an IAP is created. The range is from 'not specified: all interviews are voluntary' to 'once a week' (OECD, 2007). The frequency and length

⁵ The other three are: the personalisation of services; the attention paid to individual's attributes and preferences; and the attention paid to long-term career strategies.

of interviews will affect the type of the IAPs negotiated with clients/ customers. For example, if interviews are mandatory, short and timed every week or every two weeks, then the IAP is likely to take on the function of monitoring specific client/ customer behaviour. If interviews are purely voluntary, with clients/ customers when they present for support at the PES and take longer, then it is more likely that the approach to the IAP will be client-centred, with the client/ customer empowered to become self-motivated to engage in the actions negotiated and agreed with the employment counsellor.

In a PES context:

The modernisation of the **German** PES, the Bundesagentur für Arbeit (BA), has included the development of a differentiated guidance concept for the different services offered in the BA which links legal regulations and organisational processes with a theory-based understanding of counselling. **The counsellor-client relationship is based on a working alliance between counsellor and client, with defined principles of action: this is viewed as an important precondition for the acceptance and implementation of guidance results by clients, especially in settings where the client is expected to act according to certain legal constraints.** A distinction is drawn between two counselling formats (Rübner, 2011):

- *Orientation counselling (for career guidance specialists for young people)*, **designed to support the processes of career choice and career development of young persons (including school and university students) and adults. The aim is to support the client's decision-making process regard choices of education, occupation and jobs, and to control their career.**
- *Integration counselling (for employment advisers / placement officers)*, **designed to integrate clients into work or apprenticeships. The aim is to secure a sustainable placement in a job or apprenticeship, so as to reduce unemployment and shorten the period of unemployment payments.** Initial assessments are designed to establish those needing little or no support, those requiring 'activation', those requiring 'assistance', and those requiring 'strong support'. Support may include addressing barriers to placement and developing readiness for training. For some, it may involve case-management methods (adapted from social work). It continues until the client is successfully integrated.

Slovenia PES (Appendix 6.1): IAPs agreed with clients in group situations have not been found to be as effective as those agree on a one-to-one basis. The PES is, therefore, in the process of changing their practice towards more individually negotiated IAPs. This highlights the importance of 'ownership' by the individual client. A more intensive approach is used with clients who are harder to help with more in-depth counsellor interventions.

Jobcentre Plus, **England** (Appendix 6.2): The customer is required to report progress every two weeks at a fortnightly jobsearch review (FJR) interview, and confirm their active steps to seek work as a condition of receiving benefit. The Action Plan, the Jobseekers Agreement (JSAG), is used to help customers focus on work as a long-term goal.

A private provider operating in the UK and elsewhere (Appendix 6.3): IAPs are written according to SMART objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound). 'Review and refresh' sessions are held regularly (either weekly or every two weeks) for the purpose of monitoring progress and maintaining client motivation (e.g. by celebrating progress).

A high quality IAP need not be lengthy. A few key sentences or phrases can paint a clear picture of the individual client/ customer and why they have chosen an agreed employment, training or personal development goal and how they intend to achieve this goal. Indeed, clients and customers are more likely to use a succinct, simply expressed plan with a clear rationale, to which they can refer easily and quickly.

Ensuring consistently high quality of IAPs is essential. Organisational policies on IAPs typically relate to:

- Their purpose in the particular organisational context;
- The process used to produce a plan (for example, preparation, timing and distribution);
- Standards and principles underpinning the production of plans; and
- Types of plans used (that is, formative, interim, summative or transitional⁶ or integration agreement, guidance plan, job-seeking agreement, activity agreement⁷).

Standards and principles for IAPs in PES and outsourced agencies clearly will need to reflect Ministerial guidelines, but can also be complemented by the organisational understanding of client/ customer need and the process of employment counselling. Such standards are likely to include: a summary statement of the client/ customer's current situation; their choice of career/employment goal(s); rationale and preferred route towards a goal; a 'back-up' plan, in case the preferred goal or route is not possible.

⁶ DfEE (1997). *Performance Assessment Survey: Career Action Plans*. Goldthorpe, Rotherham. Ref: PA3/X

⁷ See Schneider, 2008.

In the PES context: One example of an 'action plan formula' used in a funded employment assistance service in **Canada** is as follows: '1) identify the employment difficulty (barrier); 2) clarification of the employment difficulty; 3) develop an action plan; and 4) implementation and evaluation' (Beauchesne & Belzile, 1995, p.182, quoted in Stolte, 2006).

Presentational standards may also be included, like the requirement to use plain language, at a level suitable for the client/ customer and legibility. Also likely to be included is a statement of the timed and specific actions to which the client/customer has signed up.

Organisational strategies that can be used to safeguard the quality of IAPs include:

- Experienced staff designated to monitor the quality of all IAPs at least each month against organisational standards;
- Senior managers to check random samples of IAPs at least quarterly;
- Systematic evaluation of the combined data from these monitoring processes to identify whether and how quality standards should be modified;
- Training of staff in organisational standards and procedures, in addition to sharing of good practice (e.g. through peer review);
- Provision of constructive feedback to each individual staff member on their IAP performance (as part of a regular performance review process), with agreement to provide training, coaching and further monitoring where this is needed to improve performance;
- Collection of end-user (that is, clients/customers) data regularly on levels of satisfaction with the IAP process, including how they have used the action plans and how valuable they have found them;
- Monitoring whether clients/customers have achieved their goal(s). The time frames used for the collection of these data to reflect the circumstances of the clients/customers (for example, short-term, medium-term and longer-term);
- Use of ICT, where feasible, to provide integrated access to IAPs by all practitioners working with a client/customer. To increase ownership of employment goals, client/customers should also (ideally) be given online access (though consideration should be given to the potential impact of the digital divide, in this regard)⁸.

Overall: the consistent delivery of high quality IAPs within the PES context will depend on the skills, knowledge and understanding of the employment counsellors, but equally important are the organisational policies and structures that should support employment counsellors in their delivery of IAPs.

⁸ DfEE Action Note 6 (undated): *Good practice in career action planning*. Sudbury, Suffolk. Ref: GP16

2.2 Tensions between client centred and directive approaches

In simple terms, a client-centred approach to IAPs works exclusively from the perspective of the client and follows the leads provided by the client. In contrast, a directive approach operates externally, typically from the requirements of the PES context, which places an emphasis on sustainable employment. PES employment counsellors have to reconcile dual conflicting requirements when they adopt the role of counsellor, taking a client-centred approach to supporting and empowering their clients/ customers, yet at the same time, policing compliance with various requirements designed to get them off the unemployment register and back into sustainable employment. The legislative responsibilities and resource constraints of PES mean that the directive, monitoring, controlling or policing role will often override the counselling role.

At the heart of this tension between the practice of counselling and the policy constraints of PES is the matching model of career guidance and employment counselling, with its assumptions about occupational behaviour. The originator of the matching approach (Parsons, 1909) argued that the best occupational choices are made when people have achieved:

1. an accurate understanding of their individual traits (abilities, interests, achievements, etc.);
2. knowledge of jobs and the labour market; and then
3. made a rational and objective judgement about the relationship between these two groups of facts.

Developed over a hundred years ago, the significant and continuing influence of this approach on the broad practice of careers and employment counselling is clear. For example, recent findings from a five year longitudinal study in England, into effective career guidance and counselling for adults, indicate that career and employment practitioners in England are still heavily reliant on this approach (Bimrose, et al., 2008). This matching approach lends itself comfortably to the formulation of IAPs at the end of an interview, where clients/ customers and employment counsellors agree an employment goal and plan the action necessary to take this forward. Employment decision-making is seen as an externally planned, controlled sequence, aimed at the acquisition of the skills/ qualifications that are usually (but not always) job specific. The usefulness of this approach is, however, increasingly being called into question, especially for disadvantaged groups.

Although slight variations in the types of IAPs used have been introduced, the basic structure remains the same, aligning more closely to a directive, rather than client-centred approach to IAPs, because of the focus on the duties of benefit recipients, rather than on their individual development and responsibilities (Schneider, 2008). However, within this broad approach, there is scope for both a 'support effect' as well as a 'compulsory effect' on the client/ customer.

Little research has been published into the interviewing styles of employment counsellors, but it is reasonable to assume that these will be reflected in the approach taken to IAPs.

In the PES context: One **Swiss** study found that caseworkers who place less emphasis on a co-operative and harmonic relationship (characteristic of an holistic approach to practice) and adopt a more directive approach, increase chances of employment, but only in the short and medium-term (Behncke et al., 2010b). This is perhaps to be expected, since clients/ customers are likely to comply to avoid sanctions being imposed, but may not commit to the employment or training goal in the longer-term.

The same team of researchers also examined the likely effect of matching caseworker characteristics (that is, gender, age, education, nationality, experiences of unemployment) with those of their clients/customers. In this study, no detectable effects on employment were found on the basis of matching just a single characteristic (Behncke et al., 2010a).

In the absence of a robust evidence base, it is not possible to reach any firm conclusions about the relative merits of either a client centred or directive approach to IAPs. Indeed, since these seem likely to be combined in practice, it would be difficult to distinguish the impact of one, compared with the other.

Overall: the matching approach to employment counselling continues to dominate PES policy and practice, despite being developed over a hundred years ago in very different labour market conditions. This approach is highly structured and so lends itself comfortably to a directive approach to IAPs. A purely client-centred approach to counselling is slightly at odds to a more directive approach. Many career and employment counsellors feel more comfortable adopting an approach to their practice that places the best interests of their client/ customer at the centre of their practice, rather than simply implementing policy requirements. Herein lies something of an ethical dilemma for practice, with little support typically available for practitioners to resolve the issues that arise from the tensions inherent in trying to reconcile the two approaches.

2.3 *It is difficult to gather evidence of different IAP approaches and there is little current research*

Interviews are vehicle for setting up IAPs and evaluating the impact of employment and guidance counselling interviews is difficult and complex (Hughes & Gration, 2009). Four different levels of impact outcomes for employment and career counselling have been identified (Hughes et al., 2002):

- **Immediate outcomes:** including enhanced knowledge and skills, attitudinal and motivational changes such as decision-making skills; opportunity awareness; increased optimism about potential opportunities.
- **Intermediate outcomes:** including improved search and decision-making skills such as enhanced job search ability and the ability to cope with, and plan beyond, disappointment.
- **Longer-term outcomes for the individual:** including progression to training, education/work and reducing the propensity of learners to embark upon and subsequently drop out of education or training courses.
- **Longer-term outcomes for the economy:** including increased productivity, enhanced employee recruitment and retention and improved ability to secure a job with improved pay or in shortened periods of unemployment.

The frequency and length of interviews are constrained by caseload, legislative requirements and other constraints under which PES operate. In turn, these will affect the approach taken by PES practitioners and the impact that PES interviews have on clients/ customers.

In the PES context: ‘caseworkers’ with good employer contacts are better at placement and the effectiveness of counselling has been found to depend, at least in part, on its intensity (Behncke et al., 2007; Hainmueller et al., 2011).

In terms of evaluating specifically the impact of different approaches to IAPs, research is lacking that focuses on IAPs, separately from the whole interview. Whilst ‘Work First’ interviews have been found to have the largest impact on outcomes as measured over two years, the outcomes of training programmes are being found to be increasingly equal to these approaches (OECD, 2005).

In the PES context: An evaluation of *Ireland’s* ‘Employment Action Plan’ process found that approximately 2,000 participants had an average of five contacts with their case officer, compared with other European countries, which often have just one or two interviews to set up written agreements with jobseekers. Around a quarter of clients who attended the interviews were referred to training or education programmes and high proportions exited from benefit.

Another study from *Finland* found that IAPs with clearly focused job-search were quite successful, but only if evaluated in terms of the satisfaction of the client. The ‘Personalised Action Plan’ for an employment programme in France (from 1999) involved interviews with young people after six months of unemployment and adults after 12 months. A second interview took place two months later. Estimates indicated that this programme had only a modest impact on longer-term exits from unemployment and social assistance benefit (OECD, 2005).

Similarly in *Germany*, IAPs were found to increase job search behaviour, but not

short-term employment (Schneider, 2008).

A study of the **Swedish** Activity Guarantee found that three fifths of the participants did not even know that they had an individual action plan (Forslund et al., 2004). However, no reference is made in any of these studies to the type of IAP used or to the nature of the IAP process.

A longitudinal case study in England, which tracked 50 adult clients over a period of five years (2003 – 2008) to evaluate the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling in England, provided insights to the extent to which IAPs are implemented over time. A weak relationship between the IAPs and their implementation over a five year period was found, but this was because of dramatic changes in personal circumstances (for example, redundancy, divorce, etc.) with the result that the implementation of the originally agreed course of action was no longer feasible. Despite this apparent ‘failure’ of IAPs, clients were typically positive about their interview overall, because they provided a range of advantages to clients/ customers. Relevant to the subject of IAPs, these research findings showed that clients have differing decision-making styles, which remained consistent over time. This suggests that different employment counselling practices should be sympathetic to different decision-making styles to ensure that clients/ customers take ownership of their IAPs and are sufficiently empowered to implement the agreed action. (Bimrose et al., 2008).

Overall: Measuring the impact of different types of IAPs is challenging because of the many and complex variables involved. Reliable evidence on the impact of directive, compared with client-centred IAPs is not currently available. In real-world research, it would be difficult to evaluate the impact of this particular aspect of interviewing in isolation from the rest of the intervention.

2.4 Reasons and practice of outsourcing action planning

New partnerships and new sources of funding for PES and careers service delivery features high on the agenda of many countries, to supplement or replace diminishing budgets within government-funded services. Decentralisation is the dominant discourse linked to the fundamental redistribution of power for democratic decision-making and public service delivery. Trusting individuals to take control of the decisions that affect them by devolving power and increasing citizen participation, and promoting community ownership are becoming primary goals.

In addition to the role of financial pressures in contracting services out of the public sector, one other motivation is the belief that services will be delivered more efficiently, more cheaply and perhaps more creatively than the public sector. Consequently, there is a changing relationship between public, private and community sector organisations in the short and medium term, with shrinkage

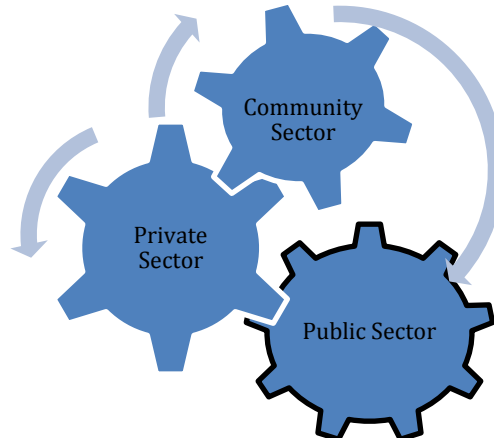
anticipated in the public sector and expansion in the private sector. (Bimrose et al., 2011). This shifting paradigm is illustrated below, in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Shifting paradigms for career guidance and counselling service delivery

From this:



To this:



Despite the common theme of contracting out services, models have varied substantially between countries. For example, Australia is often quoted as an example of a country that has contracted out its entire service to private providers. In England, it is claimed that the Work Programme ensures value for money for the taxpayer by basing payments largely on results, and paying service providers from the benefits saved from getting people into work. The Work Programme provides tailored support for claimants who need more help to undertake active and effective job seeking. Participants receive support to overcome barriers that prevent them from finding and staying in work. It is delivered by the Department of Work and Pensions in England to contracted service providers who have been given complete autonomy to decide how best to support participants while meeting their minimum service delivery standards. It is very much a partnership between Government and providers from across the public, private and third sectors⁹. It seems that outsourcing of activation services is particularly effective for clients/ customers with multiple, complex social and personal problems.

⁹ See <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform/the-work-programme/>

In the PES context: A private provider operating in the UK and elsewhere provides an example of public, private and community sectors working together (Ingeus, 2008). Individual action plans are regarded as pivotal to services to clients. They are used as ‘the engine’ that integrates client information from other strands of the delivery process and provides a clear roadmap of where the client has been and where they are heading. With the initial profiling process providing information on potential barriers to progression, (like housing, education, childcare, previous employment, etc.), the action plan pulls this information together and provides a realistic picture of the client’s job goal and how this will be achieved. It is a dynamic, not static document, constantly changing in response to the changing circumstances and needs of the client.

One key feature of current action planning practice is the focus placed on the sustainability of employment. Another key feature is the co-production of the action plan, between client and adviser (often involving other in-house specialists, like health care specialists and/or mental health specialists or local specialist provision delivered by external partners).

Overall: As a consequence of shrinking resources because of the global recession, a shift from public sector to private sector provision is underway in many countries across Europe. The extent to which this fundamental change to the model of delivery of services proves to be more efficient and effective in terms of positive outcomes for clients/ customers remains to be seen. In the short term, results have been promising, but in the longer term, the evidence is not yet clear.

3 WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

3.1 Skills required of PES counsellors for different approaches

Irrespective of the type of outputs required from IAPs, the delivery of consistently high quality PES will be dependent (at least in part) on the competence of staff. Entry requirements for employment counsellors vary across countries, with some PES and partner organisations demanding high levels of educational qualifications; others relying on ‘life experience’; yet others use a mixture of educational qualifications at the point of entry and competence, work-based approaches for orientation training.

Various attempts have been made to identify the skills required by career and employment counsellors. For example, CEDEFOP (2009) identified three levels of necessary accreditation: foundation, client-interaction and supporting competencies. Initial training for employment counsellors need to be complemented with continuing professional development to ensure that they are constantly updated. Findings from the PES Dialogue Conference in 2011 highlighted the need for a careful approach to change management, involving PES staff in development and piloting, when new methods of delivery are being introduced.

Many PES have already developed training programs for staff.

In the PES context: *Slovenia* (see Appendix 6.1): A competence model has been developed recently for all employees within PES. There are six basic core competencies for all employees; three additional competencies for career counsellor specialists; and three more for other employees. The basic competencies are:

- Professionalism;
- Flexibility;
- Reliability;
- Client orientation;
- Cooperation; and
- Communication.

The additional competencies for counsellors are:

- Problem solving and problem recognition;
- Multidisciplinary; and
- Multicultural.

For each of these competencies, there are four levels with three behavioural descriptions aligned to each level. Currently, a matrix is being developed, to specify what competencies are required for different tasks.

Jobcentre Plus, ***England*** (Appendix 6.2): A competency based approach is used to develop and maintain the skills necessary for Advisers. This reflected the dominant philosophy that life experience is at least as useful as educational qualifications. The training for Advisers is delivered through a combination of remote online training, and supported case work in a real life office situation. Key skills and behaviours specified as required by Advisers for action planning are as follows:

- Good listening and communication skills;
- Questions that make the customer think;
- Allowing time to respond;
- Ensuring a balance of communication between the customer and adviser;
- Reflecting back information provided by the customer;
- Regular summaries;
- Focusing on positive aspects;
- Regularly seek the customers suggestions and ideas;
- Starting with the customers initial comments & building on this constructively;
- Responding positively to the customers' needs or concerns; and
- Ensuring the action plan is focused on progress, based on the customer's perspective and identifies their job goal, options and next steps.

An example of educational based courses for initial training of PES staff in Ireland follows:

One example from **Ireland** is a third level course for PES staff. This training course lasts over two years and is based on a combination of monthly two day formal sessions, coupled with distance learning methods and group work. The course is delivered by a University, in collaboration with the PES, and successful participants obtain a post-graduate diploma in guidance, action planning and counselling. The course content includes the following modules: Psychology of Human Development; Perspectives of Work and Unemployment; Vocational Guidance; Professional Issues in Adult Guidance and Counselling; Theory and Practice of Guidance and Counselling; Group work practice; Research and Evaluation Methodologies; and Psychology of Work and Working Life (Human Development Sector Unit, 2008).

The skills and strategies required for different approaches to IAPs are integral to the overall skills sets required for different approaches to interviewing. In other words, many skills (and some strategies) required for different stages of the interview will also be needed for IAPs and even different approaches to IAPs.

The key issue, here, is that skills can be used differently for contrasting approaches to IAPs. An example relates to agreeing IAPs with clients/ customers (that is, contracting). It is essential to clarify expectations and make roles and responsibilities clear at the early stages of implementation of the IAP. Contrasting examples of how an employment counsellor could agree client centred IAPs, compared with directive IAPs can be found in Figure 5, below:

Figure 5: Agreeing IAPs

Client-centred	Directive
<p>We've discussed the problems you've been experiencing in looking for jobs and the difficulties and distress this has caused you and your family. Agreeing a clear record of the actions needed to move you forward would help remind me what I need to do next to support you. It might also be helpful to you, too? If you agreed – what would you say is the most important for you to do after you leave here, today?</p> <p>It might also be helpful for us to meet again soon, to see how things are going?</p>	<p>From our discussion, it is clear that you need to take the following actions: work further on your CV along the lines discussed; follow up vacancies identified; find out about the costs of fares to attend selection interviews; and enquire about childcare support. What we need to do next is agree how you will achieve these actions, by when, and what support you will need from me.</p> <p>I will also make a follow-up appointment for you to see me one week from today to review progress.</p>

Other core skills for interviewing that can be used either in client centred or in directive approaches to IAPs include:

Questions: all questions are used to get information from the client/customer. Some types of questions can be used effectively to open up the dialogue between client/customer and career guidance counsellor. These are:

- Open questions (which encourage clients to express their thinking and feelings, for example, ‘tell me about...’ or ‘can you say what you felt when that happened?’); and
- Exploratory or probing questions (for example, ‘What stands in the way of you changing?’ ‘What is the worst that could happen?’).

Other types of questions are used to gather specific types of information and are used to ensure interviewees are brief and succinct in their response. For example:

- Closed questions (useful for obtaining information and facts, for example, ‘Did you know that would happen?’ ‘Do you expect to be offered that job?’);
- Leading questions (where the action suggested by the career guidance counsellor is contained in the questions or where the questions require a particular answer, for example: ‘So you’re not going to attend the training course?’).

A high level of skills in questioning techniques is needed for challenging:

- *Challenging:* to develop effective IAPs with clients/ customers, employment counsellors need to be able to challenge discrepancies; distortions; self-defeating behaviours; games, tricks and excuses. This needs to be done carefully – otherwise it risks provoking a defensive reaction in clients.

In addition to skills, employment counsellors need strategies for working with clients/ customers on their IAPs. These are more likely to be included in a client centred approach to IAPs and might include:

- *Brainstorming* – helping clients/ customers identify the different ways they could achieve a single goal. As many strategies as possible should be identified, however bizarre! Once a number of different options for action have been identified, then clients/ customer and employment counsellor review them collaboratively and try to select the best strategy (or combination of strategies) that is most likely to succeed.
- *Self contracts* – as a way of helping clients/ customers commit themselves to their goals. An agreement is set up, to which the clients commit. Some contracts identify specifically what clients are to do and indicate rewards for success and sanctions for failure. They can be particularly helpful in more difficult aspects of employment programmes as they help focus clients/customers energies.
- *Feedback* – one way of providing support and challenge. If clients/ customers are to be successful in implementing the IAPs, they need adequate information about how well they are performing. The purpose of feedback is not to pass judgement on the performance of clients, but rather to provide

guidance, support and challenge. There are two kinds of feedback: **confirmatory** feedback – letting clients/customers know they are progressing successfully towards their goal and **corrective** feedback, letting clients/customers know that they have deviated from the agreed course of action and need to get back on track.

Adopting a ‘SMART’¹⁰ strategy to IAPs appears to be common practice in PES. This is another example of a strategy that can be delivered in either a client centred, or directive way by employment counsellors. A directive approach is likely to specify action against SMART criteria, perhaps sequentially. In a client centred approach, it is more likely that there will be recognition that things are rarely neat, tidy or necessarily sequential.

In many interview frameworks, action or implementation is often tacked on at the end of interventions, though a client centred approach is more likely to emphasise the importance of action throughout the interview process – indicating that the client/customer must act on their own behalf from the beginning of the process.

Overall: the basic skills required by employment counsellors using a directive approach to IAPs are likely to be similar to those required for a more client centred approach. The significant difference is the way that these skills are used by employment counsellors. Different types of questions, for example, are likely to be characteristic of one, rather than the other, approach to IAPs.

3.2 Evidence base for contrasting approaches

Key words, such as outputs, throughputs and productivity gains emerge in the literature on the evidence of what works and for whom in career and employment counselling:

- An ‘**output**’ may represent the number of IAPs produced as a result of a given level of intervention(s);
- A ‘**throughput**’ measure may represent the number of clients using the service at any given time.
- In contrast, the term ‘**outcome**’ is often used to describe the impact of the intervention on the individual client (that is, the rate of progression into learning and/or work).

Evidence of what works has different meanings in different national contexts. For example, in some countries the focus is on process factors in the interview, while in others the focus is purely on throughputs that are measurable in quantitative terms - such as placement in jobs or in training (Sultana, 2005).

¹⁰ Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely.

It is also important to recognise that within countries, evidence on what works and what does not work in employment counselling is likely to vary for different people, for different organisations and at different levels (Bimrose et al., 2006):

- Clients and customers are likely to be most concerned with having access to high quality services designed to help support them with important career and employment transitions (that is, was the service accessible and useful?);
- Managers are often concerned more with formative issues (that is, which elements of the service contributed most effectively to the outcomes achieved and how can these be best managed to contribute towards improvement?);
- Employment counsellors will be interested in their own job satisfaction, career development and maintaining their professional integrity and providing a good service;
- Policy-makers tend to focus on summative evaluations and cost-benefit outcomes (that is, did the service achieve the expected outcomes and what are the cost implications for current and future provision?); and
- Employers are most likely to emphasise the importance of appropriate referrals to their companies (i.e. did the service provide an effective service in terms of signposting or supplying the 'right sort' of people for the company?).

An evaluation of what works best in active labour market policies among OECD countries shows that personalised assistance and strict conditionality regimes tend to be most cost-effective in the short-term (OECD, 2005). Here, the main aim is to increase the client/ customer's compliance with programme requirements. Such programmes typically include an IAP, with a set of agreed objectives for the PES and the client/customer. However, it is argued that IAPs used in this way should not only reflect both the skill needs and aspirations of the specific client/ customer, but also ensure that they are achievable in relation to labour market opportunities (Daguerre & Etherington, 2009).

In a PES context: It is generally assumed that IAPs increase job search intensity, but this apparently does not translate into employment in the short-term. So far, it has only been found that they lead to higher enrolment in ALMP measures at the time of the interview (Schneider, 2008). In fact, reliable evidence on impact is lacking: 'Despite the growing importance of individual action plans (IAP) in active labour market policy, research on their effectiveness is just starting' (Schneider, 2008, p.2).

A study from England (Drew et al., 2010) concluded that there is no specific form of words that seem most effectively to progress the interaction towards agreeing job goals that are both realistic and consistent with the background of the client/customer. The following approach is advocated:

- Explore past work experiences, training, preferences, using open questions;
- Ask explicitly what clients/ customers have job goals that are different from those they had in the past, again using open questions;

- Work with claimants to consider second and third job goals, whilst focusing on a cluster of related skills;
- Be cautious about assuming that ‘out of the ordinary’ job goals are unrealistic.

However, the overall objective of any programme is crucial – whether this is to improve employability or to raise employment *per se*? In practice, IAPs are used in different ways in different countries and there are likely to be variations between offices and even amongst employment counsellors. Comparative, longitudinal research is needed to explore the relative impact of the different approaches. This would only be possible if PES practitioners were able to identify the approach they most consistently adopt, against common criteria.

Overall: Evidence on the impact of different types of IAPs is not currently available – indeed, research into their effectiveness is at an early stage of development. Comparative, longitudinal research is required for robust conclusions to be reached on the efficacy of different types of IAPs.

4 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 *Core elements of effective IAPs*

Effective IAPs must ensure the client/ customer feels ownership of the agreed outcomes and the action necessary to achieve these outcomes. Principles of experiential learning should be embedded in IAP practice, which supports and encourages critical reflection on the part of the client/ customer. Additionally, an understanding of the crucial concept of ‘locus of control’ by employment counsellors is likely to encourage them to adapt their practice to achieve a more positive outcome for clients/ customers in the short, medium and longer term.

Organisational support for employment counsellors in their completion of IAPs, including training, constructive feedback, collection of client/ customer satisfaction data; and systematic evaluation of data from processes of monitoring whether clients/ customers complete the agreed action, are also essential elements of effective IAPs.

However, research evidence that provides a clear indication of what comprises the shape and structure of an effective IAP is currently lacking. From case study examples, it would seem that a shift may be taking place in practice towards a more client centred approach to IAPs, away from a more directive approach. How this is defined in different PES, in terms of the skills required by practitioners to deliver, remains open to speculation. However, literature provides a clear steer on the types of skills and strategies aligned with a client-centred approach, compared with those that are more sympathetic to deployment in a directive approach

Overall: There are clear indications of what foundations need to be in place to support the production of high quality IAPs by employment counsellors. However, hard evidence about the actual impact of different types of IAPs is currently lacking.

4.2 External partners and complementary services

There is a growing movement towards different forms of partnership to deliver services to unemployed clients, which not only involves the private, the public and the community sectors, but supports the transfer of innovation across organisational contexts. A feature of different models of partnership in the future is likely to be greater integration of technology in all aspects of service delivery. This would support higher levels of interaction and synergies amongst professionals in different sectors, but there are implications for workforce development and certain risks are associated with a greater integration of technology in the development and delivery of IAPs. For example, the digital divide represents a challenge – ensuring that the most disadvantaged in society are not further excluded by having only limited access to their own electronic record of their progress towards the goal of sustainable employment.

In the PES context: a private provider operating in the UK and elsewhere (Appendix 6.3) uses the action plan as a dynamic and constantly evolving document, which is held online. Since the Work Programme operates through an extensive partner network, the online system ensures coherence of support provided to clients. The online system is fully integrated, so that advisers can see (in real time) inputs and modifications from other professionals.

Whilst remote methods may work for some clients, the ability to apply ‘friendly pressure’ in the face-to-face situation is thought to work best with many ‘hard-to-help’ clients. The use of social media in the delivery of services is under consideration, especially for young people.

Overall: The changing context of delivery of PES in countries around the world indicates a shift away from public sector provision to more of a partnership approach amongst the private, community and public sectors. The greater variety of partners in PES delivery has the potential to foster innovation and the transfer of good practice, though also carries with it certain problems. For example, the greater use of ICT may increase the marginalisation that already exists as a result of the digital divide.

4.3 Balancing tensions

Directive, compared with client-centred, approaches to IAPs reflect a fundamentally different philosophy about human behaviour generally, and occupational behaviour in particular. Directive approaches are closely aligned to the matching model of

employment counselling, which was developed over a century ago. The extent to which it is still relevant in the current conditions is open to question. Approaches based on this model are more likely to translate into a directive approach form of IAPs.

With an increasing recognition that the matching model has limitations, particularly for the most disadvantaged in society, alternative approaches are being developed. However, whilst policy continues to espouse the matching model, PES practitioners are left grappling with the 'age old' dilemma of trying to reconcile the requirements and constraints of policy with the professional judgements they make about what is best for their clients/ customers.

There is no easy or simply solution to this problem – though recognition that this dilemma is largely left to the individual PES practitioner to reconcile in their own practice is important. The more that employment counsellors can be supported by supervisory practice and peer-to-peer support, the more likely they are to identify skills and strategies that might assist in particularly challenging casework at a local level.

Overall: Tensions exist between client centred and directive approaches to IAPs. Many employment counsellors feel more comfortable with a client centred approach to their practice, but have to operate within a policy context that is uncompromising regarding the extent to which sustainable employment outcomes are the only acceptable outputs. Under these circumstances, practitioners are generally left to try to reconcile these tensions for themselves.

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6 APPENDICES: CASE STUDIES OF THE USE OF IAPs

6.1 Slovenia

[Based on interview with Barbara Gogala, PES, Slovenia: 18th January, 2012]

The role of IAPs

Individual Action Plans (IAPs) are a core element of the activation process in Slovenian Public Employment Services (PES). Referred to as 'employment plans' in Slovenia, new legislation introduced in 2011 has further increased their importance. They represent the formal record of the negotiated agreement between the PES and unemployed individuals at the end of the counselling process. Each employment plan should record:

- Career goals;
- Activities agreed with the client; and
- The formal agreement between the client and the counsellor.

Current practice

Career counselling practice in PES in Slovenia follows the needs of the clients, aiming to take a holistic approach. All clients undergo an initial registration and profiling process. Essentially, this captures hard data about clients, like how long they have been inactive and identifies the main barriers to unemployment. Clients then have access to slightly different activation support, depending on whether they are regarded as easier or more challenging to employ as a result of the profiling process. It should be noted that there are slight regional variations, but generally, the two options for two different categories of clients are as follows:

Clients who are assessed as easier to employ – This group typically first attended a group session, during which they were provided with information (for example, rights, possibilities, advice on job search strategies). As a result of these group sessions, each participant was provided with an employment plan. These plans outlined at least two career goals, together with the various activities that helped the client achieve these goals. For example, the number of job appointments they should attend. Client progress was then measured according to the extent to which these goals were met and activities undertaken. However, it has recently become clear that these group employment plans were not so effective as the individually produced action plans, since clients often did not seem to understand their importance and so failed to take ownership of them. The PES is, therefore, in the process of changing their practice by reducing the amount of resource invested in these group sessions to 15-20 minutes.

Between the registration process and the next counselling session, clients are able to visit the PES and use certain facilities (for example, access to computers, the internet, various self-help tools and individual support from

the career counsellor specialists) available. If clients have not found work by the end of four months, they are seen again on an individual basis. The exact period of time that elapses between registration and the second counselling session depends on need of the clients, who initiate the appointment process. The purpose of the second session is to evaluate progress made during the four month period. A second employment plan is agreed, which includes a further appointment within 15 days to report on the goals and activities undertaken by the client. The client is obliged to agree more activities (for example, to see a career counselling specialist).

If unemployment persists, then clients continue to see a counsellor and review their employment plans.

Clients assessed as harder to employ – Clients assessed as more challenging to reintegrate into the labour market skip the initial, quick intervention and go straight to the in-depth counsellor intervention. Because of limited resources, this might occur sometime after registration (approximately 3 weeks). Some activation measures are made available earlier to these clients, depending on individual need and there is no limit on the number of times they can be seen by career counsellor specialist.

Tensions between holistic and directive approaches

The two core elements of employment plans are the job goals to be achieved and the activities agreed (for example, attending for job interviews). There is considerable scope for career counsellor specialists to spend significant time with unmotivated clients. However, whilst the counsellor focus should be on increasing motivation to seek employment, they are also able to manipulate client behaviour to some extent. For example, monitoring lists have been introduced for clients who are not achieving their goals or undertaking agreed activities over a period of time, with sanctions applied. Additionally, at the second interview, the career counsellor specialist is able to suggest jobs at one educational level lower than that held by the client.

The new legislation introduced in 2011 stipulates that the goals and job search strategy must reflect the individuals' preferences and the employment plans must also be negotiated with the client. However, these plans must also be realistically connected to the local labour market. All plans have to be very tightly specified, since they form the formal basis of challenging clients who might appeal against sanctions applied because of non-compliance. Here there is potential conflict, with the counsellor having to reconcile the two sets of potentially conflicting demands. This is a 'centuries old tension' – how to be an employment officer at the same time as being a career counsellor specialist? Counsellors get help with managing this conflict from their team leaders and colleagues. For example, regular case discussions are held at regular intervals (for example, once a week) with a career counsellor specialist present.

Outsourcing

New legislation enables all services to be outsourced. The Ministry decides what, when and to whom. There are many questions still to be resolved (for example, access to databases of client information). One decision has been made in relation to the outsourcing of workshops – which were (at the time of writing) going out to tender. The specification has been written with the cooperation of PES for different categories of clients: the easy to employ; the hard to employ; older workers. It is also likely that work with young people (aged 15-26) who remain unemployed after three months, will be outsourced.

Skills needed by counsellors

A competence model has been developed recently for all employees within PES. There are six basic core competencies for all employees; three additional competencies for career counsellor specialists; and three more for other employees. The basic competencies are:

- Professionalism;
- Flexibility;
- Reliability;
- Client orientation;
- Cooperation; and
- Communication.

The additional competencies for counsellors are:

- Problem solving and problem recognition;
- Multidisciplinary; and
- Multicultural.

For each of these competencies, there are four levels with three behavioural descriptions aligned to each level. Currently, a matrix is being developed, to specify what competencies are required for different tasks.

Evaluation and impact

Little hard evidence has been collected on the impact of different approaches adopted by career counsellor specialists, with this an under-researched area of practice. About one third of clients get jobs in the first three months of unemployment. Clients who remain unemployed after three months are probably those who did not take full ownership of their employment plan.

6.2 England

[Based on interview with Eamonn Davern, with additional input from Ciarán Morinan, DWP, England: 18th January, 2012]

The role of IAPs

Action Plans were introduced in England in 1996 with the introduction of the Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) as the social security benefit payable to unemployed people. They are formal records of the work focused activities that the customer and Adviser agree to undertake to progress the customer nearer to employment. Their main purpose is to:

- Summarise discussions between the customer and Adviser;
- Highlight progress between interviews; and
- Ensure quick and easy access to customer information for subsequent visits.

Legislation requires that JSA claimants are available for and actively seeking work. Action plans require a jobseeker to take a minimum two active steps towards employment each week.

Current practice

Employment and skills had become separated in policy and practice in the UK, with different departments being vested with responsibility for these two areas (Department of Work and Pensions for employment, Department of Business, Innovation and Skills for skills). However, more recently, skills have been brought closer to employment. This is generally regarded as a positive development in getting customers back into the labour market as quickly as possible. In England, the policy priority remains 'work first' – with a strong emphasis on Advisers encouraging customers to look as widely as possible for employment opportunities from the start of their period of unemployment. This relates to the belief that skills soon start to decay during periods of unemployment. The exception to this rule relates to customers who have a usual occupation and/or level of remuneration, who are permitted to restrict their job search accordingly for up to 13 weeks depending on their circumstances. If they have not been successful in finding employment within this period, then they are no longer able to restrict their job search. Action plans are required to reflect these requirements. Where customers fail to uphold their job-seeking responsibilities, sanctions are applied. The decision to apply these sanctions is made away from the local PES office – by a separate adjudicator with the right of appeal to a tribunal.

The customer is required to report progress every two weeks at a fortnightly jobsearch review (FJR) interview, and confirm their active steps to seek work as a condition of receiving benefit. At the initial meeting a diagnostic assessment is made, at which they are designated a 'red' amber or 'green' marker. This is used to

determine the amount of resource and support required by each customer, and frequency of attendance in addition to the obligation all jobseekers have to attend the FJR. The Action Plan, the Jobseekers Agreement (JSAG) is used to help customers focus on work as a long-term goal. Each action or step agreed with the customer should be recorded as an 'Action Item', each of which should be clearly assigned to either customer or Adviser, with a target date for completion. All customers benefit from an effective plan, even those who do not feel ready or able to return to work immediately. Plans need to be factual and the support offered is also detailed. To foster ownership, customers are encouraged to sign the plan. 'Action Items' must be:

- Specific;
- Stretching;
- Measurable;
- Achievable;
- Realistic; and
- Time Bound (SSMART).

Reviews with customers are recorded against specific Action Items. Up to ten reviews can be recorded against each Action Item, building into a history of the customer's progress. Information about the customer's job goals, employment history, personal circumstances and qualifications are pulled through from other parts of their Labour Market System (LMS) Client Record where this information is already recorded.

Tensions between holistic and directive approaches

As it previously operated, the English system represented an example of a directive approach to customer support, which was reflected in action plans. A structured approach was used, with clear requirements specified for Advisers to follow for each stage of their interaction with customers. However, more recently there has been a shift away from this towards a more customer-centred, holistic approach, with more emphasis on a self-managed approach.

Outsourcing

All counselling support for those furthest from the labour market, the long-term unemployed, and those with special barriers, has been outsourced through the Work Programme, though customers are still required to attend FJR to confirm their job search activity as a condition of benefit receipt. In addition, skills training provision comes from outsourced providers (like Further Education Colleges).

6.3 Private provider operating in the UK and elsewhere

[Based on an interview with Vincent Pattison and Anton Eckersley, Ingeus: 19th January, 2012]

Background

Ingeus (http://www.ingeus.co.uk/pages/about_us/0/ingeus.html) is a privately owned company that delivers flexible employment programmes to people who are the hardest to help, like the long-term unemployed, those suffering health conditions and single parents. From June 2011, the company began delivery of seven Work Programme contracts across the UK. It also delivers services in countries across Europe, as well as others like South Korea and Saudi Arabia. The company uses a core business model that is outcome focused and tailored to different country contexts, allowing a degree of local variation within and between countries.

The role of IAPs

Individual action plans are regarded as pivotal to services to clients. They are used as ‘the engine’ that integrates client information from other strands of the delivery process and provides a clear roadmap of where the client has been and where they are heading. With the initial profiling process providing information on potential barriers to progression, (like housing, education, childcare, previous employment, etc.), the action plan pulls this information together and provides a realistic picture of the client’s job goal and how this will be achieved. It is a dynamic, not static document, constantly changing in response to the changing circumstances and needs of the client.

Current practice

The action planning process is adviser-led, but client focused, with a good deal of adviser discretion permitted. It is the advisers who make professional judgements about how to deploy limited resources most effectively to move the client towards sustainable employment. However, where there might be disagreement between the client and adviser about the nature of resources selected to support progression, the client is allowed to ‘learn by doing’ and is allowed to pursue their preferred option within reason.

A key feature of current action planning practice is the focus placed on the sustainability of employment. Another key feature is the co-production of the action plan, between client and adviser (often involving other in-house specialists, like health care specialists and/or mental health specialists or local specialist provision delivered by external partners). This ensures that the clients are involved in the decision about choice of intervention and support and assists with ownership by the client of the plan. Action plans are also written according to SMART objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound).

‘Review and refresh’ sessions are held regularly (either weekly or every two weeks) for the purpose of monitoring progress and maintaining client motivation (e.g. by

celebrating progress). Developing the ability to engage in critical reflection is regarded as central to successful progression. The action plan is a dynamic and constantly evolving document, which is held online. Since the Work Programme operates through an extensive partner network, the online system ensures coherence of support provided to clients. The online system is fully integrated, so that advisers can see (in real time) inputs and modifications from other professionals.

Currently, face-to-face interventions are preferred over interventions at a distance. Whilst remote methods may work for some clients, the ability to apply 'friendly pressure' in the face-to-face situation is thought to work best with this client group. The use of social media in the delivery of services is under consideration, especially for young people.

Tensions between holistic and directive approaches

The view was expressed that more directive approaches to action planning are more likely to be successful with clients who are closer to the labour market than clients of the Work Programme. A more holistic approach is necessary for those clients who are suffering from multiple disadvantage. The approach taken by Ingeus is regarded unequivocally as holistic.

Outsourcing

Many services are delivered through a partner network, with the best operators in the public, private and voluntary sectors harnessed in the delivery of services to clients. Key mechanisms that integrate potentially disparate service providers is the core business model ensuring a common approach, the online system that builds a coherent and seamless experience for clients and the financial incentives to ensure that clients succeed.

Skills needed by Advisers

Advisers are recruited from a range of backgrounds. Some are graduates, some have specialist career guidance qualifications and others are local people with relevant experience. This approach is thought to maximise the potential for innovation in the workforce. Differences in the approach to recruitment have emerged across the company, even between regions in the same country. For example, in one region in Europe, psychologists are mainly recruited as advisers, whilst in another, advisers with a business background have been appointed.

The company has an in-house learning centre that delivers appropriate and intensive training for the skills and competencies required by advisers to operate effectively. The performance regime is both very strict and very flexible. A 'traffic light' system is used (gold, amber, red) to identify skill gaps in advisers. Additionally, a peer review ('buddying') system is in place, where more experienced advisers work with newer advisers to improve performance and build confidence. This performance measurement system means that if advisor performance remains below the accepted standard after receiving structured support and guidance they will not be allowed to

continue in the role. Case management sessions focus on developing the strategies used by advisers in dealing with clients more effectively. Advisers are challenged about why they decided to select one course of action as opposed to a different one, with alternatives identified and discussed.

Evaluation and impact

The relationship between the client and adviser is regarded as the foundation for success. However, the adviser style and approach that best supports the achievement of sustainable employment destinations is unknown, since evaluation research into the area is sadly lacking. Because Ingeus uses a core business model which is fundamentally the same across countries and providers, then it would be possible to compare and contrast practice across organisational and country borders.

The financial interest of all stakeholders in the broad partnership of service provision is likely to be crucial in securing commitment to success in terms of sustainable employment outcomes. The performance of advisers is monitored on a monthly basis. Areas for improvement are recorded in their own action plan, which becomes a mechanism for monitoring under-performance. Offices and regions are also monitored for meeting targets. Whilst it is acknowledged that the local labour market conditions are important, this is not regarded as a justifiable reason for targets not being met, as their experience demonstrates that there are still jobs available.