

Improving progression to sustainable unsupported employment

A review of strategies developed by Workstep providers

This report evaluates the strategies and practices of Workstep providers aimed at moving adults with significant physical, mental and personal barriers into sustainable jobs and identifies barriers to progress. Case studies illustrate effective practice.

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Executive summary

The Workstep employment programme, funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), provides support for disabled people facing complex barriers to getting and keeping a job. Although the proportion of participants progressing into sustained, unsupported employment is improving, it remains far too low.¹ The DWP commissioned Ofsted to report on the strategies developed by providers who had been successful in enabling Workstep participants to progress into unsupported employment.

Inspectors visited 21 providers of Workstep programmes (12 of which were local authority providers), 49 employers and interviewed 80 participants between December 2008 and March 2009. They also interviewed staff from the DWP and a group representing Workstep providers. The providers in this survey demonstrated a marked change in culture from the first years of the Workstep programme. They promoted positively the skills that participants would bring to the employer rather than promoting a deficit model in which the employer believed that it was doing the provider or the participant a favour.

With the most effective Workstep providers in the sample visited, participants were clear from the outset that they would be working towards unsupported employment and signed agreements to that effect. They were monitored closely and had realistic targets for their development. They received support that was carefully matched to their individual needs and developed their personal skills to match the needs of local employers. The providers worked effectively with other training providers and wider support agencies to support and develop participants' personal, social and employment-related skills. In some cases, they gave them opportunities to gain qualifications that recognised their vocational competencies such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) or specific short courses leading to certification in areas such as food hygiene or the use of specialised tools in forestry work.

The most effective providers worked very closely with employers to ensure that participants were well matched to their skills needs and the jobs that were available locally. The larger providers had effective arrangements with national companies. They had often negotiated guaranteed interviews and provided training which related specifically to that company.

The better Workstep providers were developing a range of long-term strategies to move participants from sheltered workshop provision into sustainable jobs and these were beginning to have some impact. However, achieving such progression was harder for those organisations that mainly had clients inherited from the previous programme of sheltered employment.

¹ Data provided by the DWP indicate that progression into sustained, unsupported employment rose from 4.1% of Workstep participants in 2004 to 9.8% in 2007–08.

Areas for improvement remain in the design and delivery of the Workstep programme. A particular weakness was provision for work-related Skills for Life. Participants who needed to improve their literacy, numeracy and language skills did not always receive specific training or encouragement. Few of the providers had specialist staff who could provide such development, and sometimes the support they provided allowed the participants to avoid tackling their needs in this area altogether. While participants were sometimes content with this, their unmet needs remained a major obstacle to unsupported employment. Although some of the providers visited had good partnerships with specialist providers who were able to offer development of literacy and numeracy skills, too few of these specialists related it to the participants' employment needs and aspirations.

Although the better providers were using data well, many did not use their data sufficiently to analyse the performance of different groups of participants and to adjust provision to meet their needs. The Workstep contract itself, or the interpretation of it by providers, limited the success of working with certain potentially vulnerable groups, such as school leavers or those having left the armed forces.

Key findings

- The providers that successfully improved progression into unsupported employment had a clear strategic focus on progression and communicated this as a priority to frontline staff highly effectively.
- When providers introduced advice about progressing into unsupported employment early in the programme, participants had greater expectations of gaining unsupported employment quickly and made better progress.
- Training, coaching and approaches to learning that were matched well to the needs of individuals were the most successful strategies in developing participants' personal, social and employability skills.
- Formal agreements with participants, setting out expectations about clear and timely routes onto and out of the Workstep programme, were essential in increasing progression into unsupported employment.
- Vocationally relevant literacy, numeracy and language skills were, in the main, insufficiently developed by providers.
- Detailed progress reviews were very effective in maintaining the focus on progression into unsupported employment.
- The most effective providers prioritised local employers' needs for specific skills very well, and developed participants' skills to meet such needs.
- Successful providers promoted positively to employers the skills participants would bring with them rather than leading employers to believe they were doing the provider or the participant a favour; employers focused more on the abilities of the participants, expecting them to progress into unsupported employment.

- Partnerships with other training providers and wider specialist support agencies were crucial in tackling the multiple barriers that many participants faced. For example, such partnerships gave participants access to specialist vocational training. The diversity of specialist provision was often the deciding factor in enabling participants to tackle multiple barriers to employment.
- The more effective providers were able to develop good long-term strategies to overcome historic barriers to unsupported employment, including the advantageous work conditions and pension arrangements offered by the previous workshop schemes.
- In the best providers visited, good approaches to improving quality, such as sharing practice, peer review and improvement planning had a considerable impact on the rate at which participants moved into unsupported employment.
- A lack of flexibility in interpreting the Workstep funding model constrained the work of some of the providers visited. Although the Workstep contract allows the necessary flexibility in specific instances, this was not being exercised by some of the providers visited, to the detriment of potential participants who were then lost to the programme altogether.
- In the 12 local authorities visited, the awareness of the Workstep programme in the wider council was poor. The result was that too few council departments offered suitable employment or placement opportunities to Workstep participants. In addition, strategic planning within key departments, such as economic development, was insufficient to ensure a higher profile for Workstep participants when new businesses came into a council's area.

Recommendations

The Department for Work and Pensions should:

- ensure that all contract managers apply the flexibilities within the contract with greater consistency so that opportunities are available to all participants equally.

Providers should:

- agree development plans with all participants that identify clear actions and specific dates for progression, based on the results of effective and comprehensive initial assessment processes
- provide coaching and training for individuals, matched to the specific, identified needs of local employers and use participants more effectively as mentors, both for other participants and with employers
- develop job-related Skills for Life coaching or training
- develop close relationships with employers and, ideally, develop written agreements for mock interviews, guaranteed interviews and pre-employment training

- work with a range of partners and support agencies, such as training providers, access to work and health care professionals, to provide for all the participants' needs, enabling them to overcome their barriers to employment
- use observations of practice and rigorous monitoring of participants' progress more effectively to improve overall provision
- in local authority provision, consider Workstep provision in strategic planning for equality and diversity
- use data to analyse discrepancies in the effectiveness of provision, including the performance of different groups of participants, so they can set specific targets for staff and subcontractors
- use peer review processes to enable them to assess their progress in relation to that of others.

Providers with participants who transferred from the previous sheltered employment programme should:

- assess the value of some of the longer-term strategies outlined in the report and adopt those most suited to their provision, such as developing social firms.

Background

1. The Workstep employment programme provides support for disabled people facing complex barriers to getting and keeping a job. It aims to maximise participants' potential and, where appropriate, to move them into unsupported employment. Support is closely matched to their individual needs and may include informal and formal training provided by employers, other partners or the Workstep provider. The Workstep programme also offers practical assistance to employers themselves.
2. Workstep replaced the sheltered employment programme in April 2001. Some Workstep providers inherited a relatively static population of participants who transferred from the earlier programme.

Information, advice and guidance

3. The timely provision of information, advice and guidance was a key feature of effective provision leading to unsupported employment. Information provided before participants started the programme was particularly important. Providers worked well with disability employment advisers who took time to understand what the providers could offer and could match participants well. The providers and the disability employment advisers took great care to direct those who were not suitable for Workstep to alternative local provision, such as work preparation programmes or to mental health teams.

4. The most successful providers helped participants stay in work and progress into unsupported employment by giving very regular advice during the programme. Participants were given sufficient time to reflect on information and discuss important changes with their families or carers. When providers introduced advice about progressing into unsupported employment early in the programme, participants had greater expectations of gaining unsupported employment quickly and made better progress. For example, one provider guided participants through short-term targets which helped them towards their long-term goals. The provider employed occupational psychologists whose professional expertise helped the participants to set realistic and achievable targets.
5. The better providers had formal agreements with participants that reflected many of the features of contracts: that is, they were clear, specific, and ambitious, setting out expectations on both sides. They set out clear and timely routes into and out of the Workstep programme. New Workstep participants agreed relevant, job-specific goals and their development plans contained a range of action points that helped them to increase their skills, both before they found work and once they had started a work placement.
6. One of the local authorities took great care to ensure that only participants able to benefit from Workstep were taken onto the programme. Initial assessment was used very effectively to discuss and evaluate participants' vocational profile, skills and employment history. Another local authority restricted the length and permanency of the employment contracts in its factory provision, clearly encouraging participants to see Workstep as a stage in the process of moving towards unsupported employment. From the beginning, new participants joining the programme were clear about the need to move into sustainable unsupported employment.

Partnerships

7. The most successful providers made good use of local networks through which they gained access to colleges, training providers, mental health teams, community occupation teams, vulnerable adults' teams, and disability employment advisers at Jobcentre Plus. They used the networks very effectively to provide additional and specialist support to participants in work placements and sustainable jobs.
8. Providers used their expertise well to advise their partners. For example, one of the providers visited offered a range of services to employers, such as help in drafting work documents and advice on employment law. It also had good links with a national centre for neurological injuries, creating leaflets to help employers to understand the effects of brain injuries better. Several providers offered disability awareness training for employers' staff to support the integration of participants into the workplace. They linked successfully with

disability employment advisers in Jobcentre Plus to make them more aware of participants' needs.

9. The best providers promoted and maintained good relationships with a number of organisations. For example, one local authority had good links with the adult education service to provide literacy and numeracy teaching for participants. Providers also had mutually beneficial links with organisations such as local building firms and the fire service, where fire-fighters injured on duty were supported to maintain employment.
10. Working in partnership with local consortia was an important factor in successfully delivering a rich and diverse Workstep programme. One organisation based within a local authority was an integral partner in local strategic activities that promoted employment opportunities for those in the community whose circumstances made them the hardest to reach. These strategies included leading on the development of policies for equality and diversity, and encouraging participants to talk about their personal experience to other people. The organisation worked as part of a local consortium to ensure that the needs of employees and employers were met. What the provider offered to employers was clear and realistic, agreeing exactly what would be done to support them and participants. Great emphasis was placed on gaining the trust and confidence of employers and on resourcing each placement effectively. The consortium offered employers a wider choice of providers with more specialisms and strengths than a small provider, working alone, could offer.

Coaching and support

11. Workstep advisers gave very effective personal support to participants which supported them in their search for work. Advisers were ambitious for participants and regular contact inspired them to find work. Telephone calls to them were well-structured and provided support at critical times. Effective questioning identified participants' concerns and staff were skilled in resolving them. Regular visits or telephone calls were crucial in identifying any concerns that were arising, allowing advisers to arrange appropriate support in a timely way.
12. The best providers:
 - helped participants to take personal responsibility for their welfare and progression into unsupported employment
 - helped participants to understand what to expect from employers and, in return, what employers would expect from them
 - provided individual support for participants and, where necessary, specific services from specialist partners.

13. Generally, the providers visited had a wide range of expertise across the spectrum of disability and were particularly well placed to support participants who had complex needs. The better providers had effective strategies to remove multiple barriers to participants' employment. For example, participants with learning difficulties had training in how to travel; those who were concerned about the financial implications of taking a job rather than relying on welfare benefits were helped to calculate the income they would receive from working. Sensitive topics, such as poor hygiene, were tackled promptly and effectively, often with practical solutions such as supplying packs of basic toiletries followed by individual coaching about appropriate behaviour, attitudes and dress in the workplace.

A very shy participant was not interacting well with his peers or supervisors in one of the supported factories. He was reluctant to take on new tasks, preferring to concentrate on the routine tasks he had been undertaking for a number of years. Managers, with the shop floor representative for learners, sensitively encouraged him to discuss his fears and decide on a course of action. He attended an assertiveness course and an outward bound-style course and is now a departmental supervisor, managing a factory production line.

14. Funds from the Access to Work programme were used extensively and were particularly useful in solving problems at work for disabled people.² At one provider, Workstep advisers held joint meetings with employers and participants to look at aids and adaptations available through Access to Work. Advisers then supported participants in completing and submitting applications for funding. The successful providers visited made very good use of adaptive resources, such as commercially available, height-adjustable desks, enlarged computer mouse controls or software to convert dictation directly to text. They also made good use of materials they designed themselves, such as laminated cards setting out routines for work; these were simplified or illustrated with simple pictures and pinned to the inside of participants' pockets for easy but discreet access.
15. Providers supplied information in accessible formats that participants could read easily. Development plans were constructed carefully and, where required, were presented in such a way that they could be understood by participants who had low levels of literacy. Simple guides explained what to do in the event of accidents and helped participants to understand workplace duties. One provider used pictures very effectively for important information. For example, a deaf worker in a factory had a pictographic training manual in the early stages of his employment to help him understand his role. One participant was

² Funding from the Access to Work programme can contribute towards the costs of travel, adapting premises, and providing specialist equipment or a support worker.

given a prompt card which showed how to clean a coffee machine; another explained safe techniques for manual handling.

16. One provider supplied a good range of easily understood leaflets to support employers' understanding of common disabilities and health conditions, and booklets were available to help participants with tasks in the workplace.
17. Providers used mentoring successfully to support participants. As part of a peer mentoring scheme in one provider, qualified participants supported those who were unqualified and inexperienced. In another, all participants were supported by an employment mentor who helped them to develop a vocational profile that recorded their experiences, interests, education and learning styles. Job coaches provided effective coaching, mentoring and support to participants, and combined support with training effectively. Some coaches acted as a buddy in the workplace, which enabled participants to carry out new tasks or make independent journeys for employment and training.
18. The most successful providers seen used progress reviews well and focused on progression into unsupported employment, as in the following examples.

One provider set and tracked pre-employment objectives fortnightly, moving this to every 24 weeks once the participant was employed. Often, good three-way communication took place between employers, participants and Workstep advisers or job coaches. Employers' active engagement in the review process improved participants' rate of progression considerably. Workstep advisers were involved in the setting of targets and goals. With training, participants became more confident in speaking out and giving their opinions. Workstep advisers or job coaches helped participants and employers overcome barriers as they emerged, and solved a variety of problems, whether they were about adapting machines or moving from benefits to waged income. The frequent and close monitoring of targets had a positive impact on progression for many participants.

One provider had a formal partnership agreement with a training organisation to deliver NVQs to participants. Training staff understood participants' individual needs and were skilled appropriately to support their learning. Participants' progress was monitored well and in different ways. The support worker participated in the training sessions and monitored participants' progress in developing skills. The provider's personal adviser consulted the participants specifically, gaining feedback from them, the support workers and the impartial learner advocates. Individual interview sessions between participants and their support workers, as well as quarterly, minuted meetings between the provider and the training organisation, were all used well to monitor progress.

19. All the providers helped participants to discuss their disability or health condition in an effective and positive way. This was often done as part of an interview about what they could, rather than could not, do.

In one local authority, participants were encouraged to write a letter to support their application forms for jobs. The letter gave employers enough information to understand participants' disabilities in the context of the job for which they were applying.

In another provider, individual participants' personal advisers carefully ensured that participants fully understood their own disability. They encouraged them to explore the language that they felt comfortable in using when describing themselves. In some cases, they encouraged participants to write a description for their employer of what they could do and how they would need support.

20. Providers did not always celebrate success well enough. In some cases, participants' small steps to unsupported employment were not recognised sufficiently, and in others employers were not sufficiently aware of the potential and capability of Workstep clients.

Skills development

21. In the successful providers visited, good initial assessment that identified participants' needs for support and the way they preferred to learn and communicate, was a key factor in increasing progression to unsupported employment. This usually included an assessment of participants' literacy, numeracy and language skills, using standard assessment tools. However, although this process identified participants' abilities, it did not always mean that the key barriers to employment were identified successfully.
22. The best providers developed participants' personal, social and employability skills well. Many of the Workstep participants interviewed during the survey had benefited from good activity-based learning about health and safety, equality, diversity and safeguarding. Often, participants joined working parties on health and safety or equality and diversity, acting as representatives for their colleagues and providing up-to-date information, to the provider and, later, to their colleagues. They increased their knowledge of these topics very effectively and built credibility with their colleagues. Effective vocational profiling ensured that individual training programmes were focused on developing the skills that participants needed. Participants who were new to Workstep agreed relevant, job-specific goals. Their development plans included action points that helped them to improve their skills before they started a job.
23. However, even among the generally successful providers visited for this survey, the participants' employment-related literacy, numeracy and language skills were generally insufficiently developed. Only a few providers offered

vocationally relevant Skills for Life training; at best, this provision was satisfactory. The providers rarely showed sufficient expertise in literacy, numeracy and language training, although the better providers made arrangements with specialist organisations to develop these skills satisfactorily.

24. In some providers, a 'skill scan' ensured that participants worked towards qualifications or parts of qualifications that related to their ability and the skills the employers needed. Achieving recognised, relevant qualifications enhanced participants' transferable skills and the better providers used external training provision to support them in this.
25. In the better providers, employers were consulted to ensure that all training was relevant to participants and their core duties. The training organisations gave written feedback after each learning session and this informed participants' formal reviews. Formal reviews were held at a minimum of six months and all those involved evaluated a participant's progress and set new targets for achievement.
26. Group training was not used frequently by the providers visited; however, where it was used it had a very positive impact. Participants in one local authority benefited from very good group training in personal skills in a high quality, commercial training environment. The social interaction within the group was very positive. Participants identified practical and realistic ways of overcoming barriers at work.
27. Some providers offered personal development activities to match the aspirations of participants, such as vocational training in horticulture or painting and decorating, or activities to increase their social skills such as outward bound-style courses or assertiveness training.

A Workstep provider used its supported employment facility at a local plastics company to develop work-related and Skills for Life qualifications for the participants. A full curriculum of accredited NVQs ranged from level 1 in injection moulding and thermoforming to level 3 assessor units. Some 23% of participants achieved an accredited qualification in 2007–08. Non-accredited learning activities included job rotation, confidence-building, manual handling, and health and safety. Participants were enthusiastic about the training they received. Although progression rates were still low, some participants had moved into unsupported employment using the skills gained on the production line.

28. Many of the participants observed were able to develop their skills within supported factory-based employment, although the often favourable terms and conditions were a disincentive to progression.

Engagement with employers

29. The successful providers visited kept a clear focus on the needs of employers. In order to achieve sustainable employment for participants, the best providers made every effort to ensure that development for the participants met business needs for the employers, and matched their support specifically to the skills the businesses needed.
30. Workstep advisers were usually highly skilled in matching participants to employers. Where they identified participants' individual preferences and requirements effectively, participants sustained their job and progressed into unsupported employment more quickly.
31. Providers developed bespoke materials to help participants rely less on fellow workers or managers, as in these examples:

Job coaches in a local authority had adapted materials to meet participants' individual needs. These were in formats which fitted their learning need and helped them to understand workplace duties and instructions. A profoundly deaf participant had no signing ability to communicate outside his family base. A job coach with expertise in British sign language supported the development of the participant's signing skills and, using photographs, developed maintenance guides for machinery. The participant is now in unsupported employment and is teaching members of his family to communicate through signing.

A provider used an occupational therapist to develop the skills of a participant who had problems with short-term memory and therefore interrupted other workers to find out what he had to do. His work rate improved dramatically when he used a notepad, digital recorder and other memory aids to do the job.

32. Information from engagement with employers was skilfully incorporated into participants' job preparation and coaching before they had interviews. The successful providers seen were active in providing programmes tailored to the needs of employers, as in this example.

Two of the larger providers worked closely with employers to gather evidence on the vocational skills required and the role of work experience in preparing for work. This was supported by analysis of the local labour markets and high quality reports that were shared with all partners. Initial assessment focused on the best routes into specific employment; personal development was linked to vocational, transferable skills. Local managers met employers regularly to discuss ways to break down barriers to recruitment and advisers worked with employers to ensure reasonable adjustments to the recruitment processes. Some employers sent job descriptions in advance to inform training and preparation for interviews.

33. Some large organisations had arrangements to ensure that Workstep participants had priority when it came to work placements that could lead to sustainable jobs. In these cases, the participants received individual pre-training to develop the competencies the business needed. Employers valued the bespoke support for staff and participants because this ensured good integration into the workplace. Complementary and pilot programmes, such as the 'Dare to be different' project, were used well. Through providing direct access to specialist advice for employers and guidance on legislation and opportunities for funding improvements, these helped larger employers to improve the services that had a direct impact on disabled people in their workplaces.³
34. Two large organisations had a number of service-level agreements with national employers such as Barclays, Tesco and ASDA. The employer would guarantee job interviews and, in some cases, would offer guaranteed jobs. In some instances, arrangements were made with large employers for Workstep participants to be eased into a work placement before supported employment and possible unsupported work. Progress for participants in these contexts included work as cleaners, car park attendants, post administrators and care workers.
35. The better providers maintained close working relationships with employers and quickly resolved issues that might jeopardise employment, for example, areas where employers were dissatisfied or those which might result in participants being dismissed. The providers were quick to intervene with participants and employers. Workstep advisers had developed skills in working with employers to identify specific adaptations that participants needed, including making reasonable adjustments to working environments. They were also skilled in helping employers to tackle and resolve poor performance or absence.

A provider used a detailed task analysis so that participants were trained very carefully to the standards the employer required. This identified core routines in job tasks, matched to the specific needs of participants. Good individual training plans showed how support would be provided to meet company productivity targets and helped participants gain the skills they would need to be successful. Much realistic, practical training, supported by mentors or job coaches, was focused clearly on the workplace skills that needed to be achieved.

36. Well-managed work placements, with the lengths of stay determined for each participant, had a positive impact on progression. Work placements with voluntary organisations were effective in building participants' confidence, work routines and employability skills. When placements were monitored carefully,

³ The 'Dare to be different' initiative, developed by a large Workstep provider, helps larger employers to improve the services that have a direct impact on disabled people in the workplace.

and participants were challenged to progress into paid work, voluntary organisations provided a good stepping-stone to employment. However, the less effective providers placed too much emphasis on maintaining activity in the placement rather than challenging participants to take up paid work.

37. In two providers, the participants themselves were highly involved in improving wider services outside Workstep. In one provider, participants accompanied Workstep advisers on external visits to highlight some of the challenges they might face. For example, a group of participants advised the council on re-developing the local bus station. In another provider, participants sat on a number of council advisory groups that discussed improvements across council services. Participation in such groups gave Workstep a higher profile, but it also improved the confidence and self-esteem of those involved, as well as raising their aspirations to progress to unsupported employment.
38. The better providers visited were also effective in using the Workstep programme to help employers retain employment for current staff who had become ill. These providers used the Workstep programme's capacity effectively to support employees with worsening health conditions to continue to work.

Management strategies

39. Progression rates to unsupported employment were generally low, but improving. Around one quarter of the providers surveyed had progression rates over 30%.
40. The better-performing providers in the survey had clear data on job starts and, thereafter, progression rates into unsupported employment.⁴ They displayed charts showing performance to improve the awareness of staff and participants of the Workstep programme's goals. These providers compared themselves favourably against a national average of 26% for job starts and 9.8% for sustained progressions into open employment for 2007–08.
41. Successful providers had a clear strategic focus on increasing progressions into unsupported employment. Strategic managers communicated this to frontline staff effectively. The providers in this survey demonstrated a marked change in culture from the first years of the Workstep programme. At that stage, providers saw their role as keeping participants on the programme rather than using reviews, training and a realistic view of employment opportunities to encourage progress. These providers promoted positively the skills participants

⁴ 'Job starts' are where participants may go into a job with Workstep support, that is, the first step. 'Progression rates' refer to progress to unsupported employment, that is, the Workstep element of funding or personal support or both is withdrawn. For a provider to claim 'progression', a participant must sustain the job for a defined period of time, following the withdrawal of support.

would bring to the employer rather than promoting a deficit model in which the employer believed they were doing the provider or the participant a favour. With this cultural shift, employers focused more on the abilities of the participants and expected them to progress into unsupported employment. The better providers used individuals who had successfully moved into a range of unsupported jobs effectively to provide role models for other participants.

One provider had a clear and highly effective focus on ensuring that participants progressed to unsupported employment. All the participants started with a clear understanding that they would aim to progress in six months. Employment advisers visited very regularly, gave good individual coaching and access to training opportunities. They used a scoring system to assess the progress of individuals in key learning and personal development objectives. They undertook full reviews at three months and six months, resulting in detailed progress reports. In 2004–05 their progression rate was 33%. In 2008–09 it was 59%, and 68% for the two previous years.

42. The providers with the higher progression rates were often those who were recruiting new participants. They made it clear to participants from the outset that they were expected to move into unsupported employment. However, at the time of the survey, the progression rates for some providers were in decline where, previously, they had been good. For some providers, this was because they had taken on participants from the supported employment programmes; the favourable terms and conditions of these were a disincentive for participants to move on. One provider visited had adopted a workshop model in direct conflict with the intention of the model which advocated progression to open employment.
43. Most of the providers visited were finding ways of overcoming historic barriers to employment, particularly participants' reluctance to move away from the advantageous work conditions and pension arrangements they had enjoyed previously by being employed in the supported employment factories or workshops. In these they had had permanent contracts, sheltered work environments and pension rights, protected by strong union representation. In one provider, managers set clear and effective direction. The staff worked in three teams, each with a different focus and skill set: in employer liaison and recruitment; in training and motivation of participants; and in managing factory provision. Managers in the factories were working towards making the factories more cost-efficient and were training participants to help improve the businesses. Participants in factories were benefiting from good advice and guidance from the training and employer liaison departments about external job opportunities. Some were moving to unsupported employment as a result of this interdepartmental approach.
44. Three of the larger national providers all reassured participants that they could return to the programme from unsupported employment if they needed to.

With this reassurance, most had the confidence to make and sustain their move. The providers also offered continuing telephone support for employers to overcome their reluctance to manage participants without support. One strategy used by two of these providers was to design individual programmes; this meant that they could show through the final review paperwork that all a participant's targets had been achieved, and that they had reached a standard similar to that of other employees, with no further targets needed to be set through the Workstep process.

45. The following illustrates a range of measures taken by one of the largest providers of Workstep to support participants moving from managed workshop provision.

The provider had completely re-organised its business to reflect better the needs of its changing market, moving from managed workshop provision to increased use of 'shop front' premises. While some participants remained in supported business provision, the number was vastly reduced from the previous model. The provider was working with the remaining participants to help them to progress, through managing the wage subsidy to employers to make it more economical for employers to employ them directly.

The structure of the new organisation was highly defined, with specialist services matched to the differing needs of the market. A team worked nationally, regionally and locally, specifically on engaging employers. It was particularly effective in establishing agreements with national employers to secure guaranteed interviews and specialist pre-employment training for participants. In some cases, large employers agreed in their mission statements and strategic developments that a fixed percentage of posts would be allocated annually to Workstep participants.

46. Some providers were creating social firms, an initiative in which new enterprises functioned as workers' cooperatives. This served as a long-term solution to moving long-stay participants to meaningful unsupported employment. Other providers, especially those in councils, succeeded in moving long-stay participants through what was termed 'job-carving', that is, working with specific departments to identify a valuable role that was not currently being undertaken by another employee but which fitted the skills of particular participants.

One provider worked with a participant who went on to an unsupported job as a concierge in a council's busy 'one-stop shop'. The provider worked with the managers and supervisors to identify the role. Staff then worked with the supervisors to develop the participant's skills and confidence. They set a realistic date for progression into unsupported employment.

47. Another strategy, used by councils and larger providers who had good access to a broad range of departments, was to secure a number of placements in different settings that were most likely to extend the range of individuals' skills and experience. This was especially successful for some long-stay participants who had been so sheltered in their work experience that they lacked sufficient confidence to move on. The range of experience gained was crucial in developing them.
48. Increasingly, providers were using Train to Gain to give further skills to participants following their employment. Two of the larger providers encouraged employers to achieve work-related NVQs for the whole of their workforce.
49. The best providers developed projects to attract participants from under-represented groups or those with specific or complex needs. One national provider had several interesting initiatives and partnerships which recruited participants effectively from potentially vulnerable groups. For example, several projects were working with schools, colleges and employers to promote a seamless transition from school to the world of work. The provider had developed a good partnership with mental health specialists, seconding a member of the team to work with them to identify participants who were well enough to enter the Workstep provision. Another provider was very active in the 14 to 19 curriculum. The manager was leading the manufacturing and product design level 2 Diploma; this engaged young people from a range of schools in work experience. The participants demonstrated manufacturing activity and gained appropriate skills. From the start of these programmes, it was made clear that the final goal was to progress to open employment.
50. The better council-based providers added much value to the Workstep programme with a range of services funded by other sources to which Workstep staff had access for the benefit of participants. For example, one provider benefited from the secondment to the Workstep team of an occupational therapist from the National Health Service. In another provider, complementary staff teams from social services, housing, and education worked closely together, which benefited participants and improved the integration of services as a result.
51. Most local authority settings lacked sufficient awareness of the Workstep programme across the council. Most of the providers interviewed were trying to raise awareness of their provision more widely. The better providers were achieving some success and were finding that central government legislation on disability was helping local authorities to be more positive about their provision. Workstep was mentioned increasingly frequently in strategic planning.
52. However, all local authority providers interviewed were finding it difficult, in relatively isolated positions within the local authority, to develop a broader understanding of their provision among council employees. Providers had more

success in this when they located the Workstep provision in a department where the strategic aims matched well with those of the host department, for example, where Workstep was a defined service within social services departments or where it took the lead on equality and diversity in workforce reforms within economic development departments.

Improving quality

53. In many of the providers visited, good measures for improving quality, including sharing good practice, peer review and planning for improvement, had a considerably positive impact on progression. Observation was often a key factor in improving participants' experience but also in keeping staff focused on the realistic steps needed to improve participants' skills.
54. Self-assessment, involving staff, participants and partners, was used well to drive up standards and to focus on development planning. The best providers conducted focus groups with participants rather than simply asking for evaluation forms and sought employers' views through interviews. They analysed their annual data to assess progress and trends, particularly progress to unsupported employment. Staff targets were linked clearly to the planning process.
55. In the better providers in the sample visited, sharing practice with other providers and consortia improved provision and increased progression, as in this example.

One provider had two contracts: one for the work it managed in its own right and another for work contracted to it from another provider. Its own provision benefited greatly from the lessons learned through the consortium work. Managers actively applied the methods from the consortia to their own provision. The audits of quality by the consortium's lead contributed to improving all provision. Strategies that were successfully improving progression to unsupported employment across the consortium were being applied, with some success, to the internal provision. The internally managed contract benefited from feedback from participants and stakeholders through an external partner.

56. The better providers also used peer review well to identify good practice and to improve where weaknesses were found. In one local authority, the manager was part of a Workstep peer review group that visited member companies to conduct observations and provide objective feedback to staff. The observations fed into self-assessment and then informed actions to improve progression. It was clear to inspectors that other providers would benefit greatly from using peer review processes to enable them to assess their own progress against that of others.

57. Staff in the better providers used data well to assess their team and individuals' progress regularly. One provider used management information well to evaluate performance and set targets. Within a consortium, detailed action plans for departments recorded key improvement initiatives and highlighted some good practice. The less effective providers, although they held data on management information systems, were not using them sufficiently well to monitor progress.
58. Also, data were not always used effectively to analyse the performance of different groups and to adjust provision to meet the needs of participants. For example, although providers assessed participants' Skills for Life needs initially, very few analysed the results of this each year to see if there had been any increase or decrease in the number of participants with such needs. They rarely used the information to inform planning or resources. Few analysed their data by type of disability, age or ethnicity so that programmes might be adapted as necessary.

Contractual flexibility

59. When inspectors asked the providers if there were any limiting factors within the Workstep programme, many reported that, in some cases, the way in which the funding model had been interpreted in specific instances was preventing them from working with some groups in society. For example, the better providers engaged with schools to create a seamless transition to the world of work. However, they found that, if they worked with the students for three months before they left school, in many cases they had to wait for six months for the leaver to become eligible for Workstep. The seamlessness of the transition was lost and many leavers did not then return to any provision.
60. Similar difficulties were encountered by people leaving the armed services or offender institutions. Providers and prospective participants had to wait for the mandatory six months before most of the participants became eligible for Workstep. Some did not return after making contact initially. Others found that their mental health problems were exacerbated by long periods of unemployment. Although clauses in the Workstep contract allow some participants to become eligible before the six-month stage is reached, the survey found that, in some areas of the country, these options were not being exercised.

Notes

The initial sample of providers was selected from the small number of those who had been judged to be good or outstanding. The sample was then augmented by including providers where progressions were a strength or who had effective strategies to improve them. Following consultation with the DWP, the larger providers were included automatically.

Between December 2008 and March 2009, inspectors visited 21 providers of Workstep programmes, 12 of which were local authorities, and interviewed 78 of their staff. They also visited 49 employers and interviewed 80 participants. They held discussions with staff of the DWP and a group that represented Workstep providers. Inspectors scrutinised documents related to participants' programmes and progress, and sampled portfolios of evidence. The settings visited included council-based providers, private providers and providers with charitable status.

Inspectors also analysed inspection reports for 23 providers of Workstep published between 2007 and 2009. The providers and reports were selected on the basis of good inspection outcomes and the identification of particular strengths in relation to strategies for improvement.

Further information

Ofsted publications

The impact of Train to Gain on skills in employment: a review to follow up the 2007/8 survey (090033), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090033.

Managing Department for Work and Pensions contracts: how prime contractors manage subcontractors (080257), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080257.

Inspection reports of Workstep provision can be found at 'Inspection reports' at: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Websites

Information about Workstep can be found at:

www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk.

www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/Employmentsupport/WorkSchemesAndProgrammes

Annex: Providers contributing to the survey

The following providers contributed to the survey and arranged interviews with employers and employees on programmes funded by Workstep.

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
Barrowmore Industries
Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council Workstep
Birmingham City Council
Borough of Poole Workstep
Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council
Cornwall County Council
East Riding of Yorkshire Council
Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities
Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council
Oaklea Trust
Pure Innovations Ltd
Remploy
Scope
Shaw Trust
Sheffield City Council Workstep
Shropshire County Council
South Tyneside Workstep
Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council Workstep
The Pluss Organisation
Training into Employment

Glossary

Adaptive resources	Commercial or in-house designed aids for disabled participants
Impartial learning advocate	Trained individual providing advocacy support to participants in all learning aspects of their programme
Job starts	Job starts are where participants may go into a job with Workstep support, that is, the first step
Participants	Disabled people engaged in the Workstep employment programme
Partners	Organisations supporting the Workstep programme provider such as training organisations; support agencies such as housing or debt counselling and employers
Progression rates	Progression rates refer to progress to unsupported employment, that is, the Workstep element of either funding or personal support, or both, is withdrawn
Provider	An organisation funded by the DWP to provide the Workstep employment programme
Sheltered Employment Programme	The forerunner of Workstep – operational until April 2001
Sheltered workshop provision	For those participants who are not ready for unsupported employment – these are mainly factories or employment situations such as in laundries in council services – the majority of which were set up as part of the sheltered employment programme
Social firms	Organisations that trade for social/environmental purposes to create jobs for those who find it difficult to find employment and whose workforce is at least 25% disabled people
Supported employment	Workstep participants are in employment and receiving training, counselling and financial support from the Workstep programme
Train to Gain	Train to Gain is the national skills service that meets the needs of employers to improve the skills of their employees as a route to improving their business performance. The

	service offers advice on everything from basic skills through to leadership, financial support and management training.
Unsupported/open employment	Optional element of the programme based on assessment. Progression from supported employment, possibly retaining some support element for a time
Workshop model	Framework for Workstep workshops designed to prepare participants for unsupported/open employment