

# PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY CALL FOR EVIDENCE: JOBCENTRE REFORM

The Institute of Employability Professionals (IEP) welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence in response to the Work and Pensions Select Committee's inquiry on Jobcentre Reform. Within our evidence we have canvassed our network of over 300 fellows, representing many years' experience in the sector focussing on items which closest align with the IEP's vision; ***'Employability Professionals Everywhere Are the Best They Can Be'***.

## ABOUT THE IEP

The IEP is a not-for-profit organisation focused on enhancing the standards, quality, and professionalisation of employability practice globally. Established in 2011, the IEP's mission is to improve lives by improving the skills and effectiveness of employability professionals, thereby helping individuals achieve sustainable employment.

As the sole professional membership institute for the employability sector worldwide, the IEP provides various member benefits. These include access to the IEP Learning Academy, which offers accredited learning and qualifications aimed at aiding career progression for employability professionals. Members also have opportunities to collaborate and share ideas with other professionals and subject matter experts, further developing their skills and knowledge.

***How effective is the support provided by Work Coaches, particularly to groups that experience disadvantages or particular challenges in the labour market (e.g. young people, disabled people, older workers)?***

## WORK COACH CAPABILITY & TRAINING

Satisfaction with the service received by customers in receipt of Universal Credit (UC) remains positive for those engaged in the Intensive Work Search regime, although feedback from our members suggests a decline since the Institute of Employment Studies detailed survey in 2021<sup>1</sup>. This decrease is mainly attributed to the shift back to face-to-face on-site delivery. While satisfaction rates remain high among UC cohorts, customers in other benefit groups who face increased barriers to employment, such as health or housing issues, find the service less satisfactory. This dissatisfaction is often due to a process-driven approach rather than a person-centred one, with a lack of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/work-coach-provision-of-employment-support/work-coach-provision-of-employment-support>

transparency regarding the necessity or rationale for the applied processes. We concur with the findings of recent research by DWP<sup>2</sup> that

*“For work coaches, effective WSRs are underpinned by building rapport and trust, tailoring meetings to individual needs (i.e., meeting focus, time and channel), and understanding personal circumstances and skills so the right support is offered. To support an effective meeting, it was important for work coaches to have enough time to prepare and cover everything during the WSR and be able to remind claimants of their commitments. Overall, an effective WSR meeting relies on good rapport and a tailored approach from the work coach, taking into account all of the claimant’s barriers, skills, motivation and aspiration and providing support in a positive and encouraging manner, while also challenging the claimant’s beliefs about what they can achieve. An individual claimant’s skills, motivations and barriers will inevitably play a part in their perception of the WSR’s effectiveness. Allowing sufficient time for work coaches to prepare and carry out the meetings, along with the autonomy to tailor the frequency and channel of meetings, will mirror claimants’ wishes and will encourage a positive rapport and an increased WSR effectiveness.”* See also Drew et al<sup>3</sup>.

Our findings suggest that more comprehensive training focused on appropriate and well-documented inter-personal skills and knowledge, delivered through consistent reliable high-quality interactions is recommended to enable Work Coaches to understand the unique circumstances of their caseloads. By developing individualised plans that include interventions and input from key stakeholders, such as carers, housing, or health teams, true progression planning can be promoted<sup>4</sup>.

Work Coach capability is frequently measured by caseload size; higher caseloads typically result in a less personalised service and a more process-oriented approach. Our research also highlights the importance of consistency in support, with customers benefiting from ongoing relationships with the same Work Coach, building trust and confidence. This has been particularly evident in smaller, local Jobcentres, where coaches possess true local knowledge of the labour market and stakeholder activities, leading to more robust and personalised work plans. In contrast, larger, urban Jobcentres with high staff turnover experience challenges in providing consistent support. According to CIPD analysis<sup>5</sup>, Jobcentres fall within the public administration sector category and have an average staff attrition rate of 25% across the UK.

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<sup>2</sup> Todorova, Dr Greta, Beth Pitcher, and Faye Clitheroe. ‘What Makes Work Search Reviews Effective?’, DWP RR 1081, February 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Drew, Paul, Merran Toerien, Annie Irvine, and Roy Sainsbury. ‘Personal Adviser Interviews With Benefits Claimants in UK Jobcentres’. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 47, no. 3 (3 July 2014): 306–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08351813.2014.925669>.

<sup>4</sup> See for example the specialist articles in the IEP Journal; January 2025.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cipd.org/uk/views-and-insights/thought-leadership/cipd-voice/benchmarking-employee-turnover/?form=MG0AV3>

Training has historically focused on ensuring compliance with processes rather than addressing claimant needs and developing skills to meet these challenges through positive challenge and motivational techniques. Assessing the skill levels and personalities of Work Coaches and matching claimants accordingly, rather than based on geography or benefit type, could improve service delivery<sup>6</sup>. A centralised individual triage service approach would support this, enabling the appropriate allocation of caseloads wherever possible.

### *How could JCP reach a greater number and diversity of employers in order to offer a wider range of opportunity?*

## **EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT**

Our research and analysis indicate that over the past decade, Jobcentres have primarily focused on national initiatives with large, national employers. This has often sidelined the local relationships and approaches previously utilised, where targeted employer and stakeholder relationship management was consistently applied across the country. While there are instances of positive employer relationships in certain districts, these successes tend to be driven by individual efforts rather than overarching policy.

Through our members direct interaction and work, we identified that smaller employers often avoid engaging with Jobcentres due to the time-consuming nature of the process or the initial difficulty in establishing contact. Given that over 70% of all job placements for Universal Credit customers are with SMEs, feedback from our members suggest that local, hands-on relationship-building is effective. Experience of our members also found that local employers, typically in the small and micro business category, are a key part of their communities. Since the pandemic many have a drive to play their part in driving prosperity locally and taking part in local initiatives, giving time (social investment) rather than cash, an agenda Jobcentres could be the conduit for, bringing together local employers, stakeholders and communities, using their information to drive footfall to events etc.

A consistent, national strategy to foster credibility, trust, and sustained relationships will ultimately yield better outcomes for Jobcentres and the communities they serve.

### *What opportunities exist for digital and AI-tools to improve JCP?*

## **DIGITAL & AI EMPLOYMENT SERVICES**

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<sup>6</sup> Cederlof, Jonas, Martin Soderstrom, and Johan Vikstrom. 'What Makes a Good Caseworker?', n.d.

Our research demonstrates that digital tools and AI are increasingly being employed in the provision of employment and support services, resulting in significant transformations in how customers interact with assistance, how advisers deliver and tailor services, how employment programmes are individually structured, and ultimately, how outcomes are achieved.

These technologies play a critical role in several areas:

#### Enhancing Accessibility and Engagement:

Digital tools facilitate remote access to support for customers at any time, mitigating barriers such as geographical constraints, mobility issues, and caregiving responsibilities, while also reducing travel costs and carbon emissions, allowing reinvestment in other resources. Some, such as telephone and video meetings, are already in use<sup>7</sup>.

Potential applications of various media include:

- Higher frequency and more accessibility of customer contact (communication technologies)
- Evaluation of eligibility for services and benefits (intelligent systems)
- Increased accessibility and lowered mobility requirements (communication) and reduction of language barriers (automated translation)
- Increasing information disclosure and sharing under adequate confidentiality protocols.

This short list alone demonstrates both the potential to drive engagement and satisfaction levels, and equally the potential, if not well applied, for the technology to exclude some groups or reduce the value for some customers.

#### Personalising Employment Support:

AI could potentially enable the creation of personalised support plans for customers throughout their employment journey. It can supplement the work of customers and work coaches in analysing customers' profiles, work histories, and skills. This may contribute to tailored job recommendations, identification of potential employment barriers, and suggestions for relevant training opportunities and specialist provisions to help customers overcome these barriers. This approach might assist coaches in tailoring their support and helping customers construct SMART Action Plans even within a mainly process-led, universal model of service.

However, a very wide variety of tools have been used or are in use, with mixed results. The lesson from experience is that few automated tools have turned out to be the magic solution, and all are moderated by advisers /coaches: *'In none of the examples identified in this review has the adviser been replaced by one of these tools, even in*

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<sup>7</sup> But see Harding, Andrew J.E., Jonathan Parker, Sarah Hean, and Ann Hemingway. 'Efficacy of Telephone Information and Advice on Welfare: The Need for Realist Evaluation'. *Social Policy and Society* 17, no. 1 (January 2018): 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746416000361>.

*instances where it was highly automated’, and ‘advisers (or case workers) administer the diagnostic tool and have discretion over their outcomes’<sup>8</sup>.*

AI Agent technology has the potential to further automate the referral process between various government departments and services, developing a comprehensive personalised social and economic support plan for customers, reducing departmental duplication, simplifying the customer experience, and fostering greater engagement in all interventions.

Digital platforms may streamline employer engagement by

- matching customers with vacancies
- analysing labour market trends
- facilitating direct interactions with employers thus complementing on-the-ground engagement teams,
- and recording essential meeting information.

Automated (possibly AI-powered) job matching tools can address large databases<sup>9</sup> to identify opportunities based on skills rather than job titles alone and can process larger volumes of active roles. However, these are rarely sensitive to very local labour markets nor to non-skill aspects of work that human advisers can address.

We have not seen independent evaluations of the potential gains from the use of AI in personalisation of employment guidance. That there are concomitant risks is widely understood, and we feel that the use of AI, in its machine-learning and prediction<sup>10</sup> mode, to replace or supplement human advisers/work coaches carries personal and reputational risks. Examples might include undermining autonomous decision-making and confidence building<sup>11</sup>, replication of bias, failure to adapt to new and previously unknown events, false authority, loss of trust<sup>12</sup> and eventual disaffection<sup>13,14</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Bimrose, Jenny, Sally-Anne Barnes, Alan Brown, Chris Hasluck, and Heike Behle. ‘Skills Diagnostics and Screening Tools: A Literature Review’, DWP RR No 459, 2007

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.onetonline.org/> for example

<sup>10</sup> Van Den Berg, Gerard J., Max Kunaschk, Julia Lang, Gesine Stephan, and Arne Uhlenborff. ‘Predicting Re-Employment: Machine Learning Versus Assessments by Unemployed Workers and by Their Caseworkers’. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4561624>.

<sup>11</sup> Stone, Dan N., Edward L Deci, and Richard M. Ryan. ‘Beyond Talk: Creating Autonomous Motivation through Self-Determination Theory’. *Journal of General Management* 34, no. 3 (March 2009): 75–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030630700903400305>.

<sup>12</sup> Siau, Keng, and Weiyu Wang. ‘Building Trust in Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, and Robotics’, n.d.

<sup>13</sup> Floridi, Luciano, Josh Cowls, Thomas C. King, and Mariarosaria Taddeo. ‘How to Design AI for Social Good: Seven Essential Factors’. *Science and Engineering Ethics* 26, no. 3 (June 2020): 1771–96. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-020-00213-5>.

<sup>14</sup> Véliz, Carissa. ‘Moral Zombies: Why Algorithms Are Not Moral Agents’. *AI & SOCIETY* 36, no. 2 (June 2021): 487–97. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-021-01189-x>.

Thus it is imperative that such applications are fully tested, subject to careful ethical management and tests of functionality and acceptability.

### Supporting Work Coaches:

Digital tools can assist work coaches by automating repetitive administrative tasks, such as:

- appointment booking with automated reminders and rescheduling,
- virtual appointments for those with mobility issues or childcare needs,
- handling routine queries via automated (AI or otherwise) chatbots, thereby freeing staff to give greater and better-tailored support to complex cases.

Personalised online dashboards displaying job search progress and next steps can be useful where customers have the skills, resources and motivation to use them. This can provide time for higher-quality face-to-face interactions with customers, which research indicates is directly correlated with positive job and other outcomes<sup>15</sup>.

The Institute is currently working with partner organisations to explore the use of AI in supporting front-line interactions between employment advisers and customers.

## **DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING**

We conclude that data analytics can offer valuable insights into

- employment trends,
- programme efficiency,
- programme effectiveness, and
- jobseeker progress.

This aids employment service providers in refining their interventions and improving outcomes at individual, local, and national levels. However, early and careful design of the analytical methodology is necessary. Without it, post-hoc evaluations are interesting but limited. An example is the useful work by Todorova et al (above).

Integrated AI-driven data analytics will be valuable as delivery aims to empower individuals to engage with support as needed, in their own time, and connect with relevant opportunities promptly. Smart systems can flag when additional support may be necessary, allowing work coaches and advisers to review flags and agree personalised actions utilising local support networks.

Use of the newer technologies can enhance employment services' effectiveness and efficiency, supporting better outcomes for customers and more streamlined operations for service providers and Jobcentres. But their application requires care to mitigate the risks that they contain.

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<sup>15</sup> Op cit: Todorova, Dr Greta, Beth Pitcher, and Faye Clitheroe. 'What Makes Work Search Reviews Effective?', DWP RR 1081, February 2025. Many other sources agree.

## *To what extent does JCP have an “image problem”? How might this be addressed?*

### PERSONAL RISK AND LOSS AVERSION<sup>16</sup>

There are instances in the research that indicate that certain groups may do less well when presented with an employment service, and that interactions between personal circumstance and welfare provisions can have de-motivating effects<sup>17</sup>. In these situations, the limitations or risks of the overall system are (or should be) moderated by the customer’s adviser: their relationship is preventative and facilitative, and the creation of trust and challenge between them is a significant factor in outcomes and reputation. As noted by Graham et al<sup>18</sup> *‘Practitioners utilising the techniques would require thorough training, practice and supervision in the techniques to use them skilfully and appropriately within their remit’*. In short, professionally trained and human interactions are necessary (and often sufficient) conditions for effective employment advice. Where institutional settings or reputation counter-act the work of people, success is less frequent, and failure more common. Thus the reputation of Jobcentre Plus with its staff and its customers, and the systems it deploys, should be part of the future plan.

### THE VALUE OF PROFESSIONALISM

At the IEP, we aim for our members (individuals and corporate bodies) to provide all customers with a professional service. Our goal is to secure work and social inclusion for customers, ensuring they have equal opportunities in society. To achieve this, we focus on the professional development of staff to deliver a consistent and personalised service that supports individual needs and fosters positive outcomes, thereby contributing to a positive labour market and economy. Our members’ feedback has suggested that an inconsistent approach to the above, and to recruitment practice generally, is contributing to the image problem held by Jobcentres.

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<sup>16</sup> Subosa, M, Mansour, J, and Wilson, T. ‘Behavioural Insights in Employment Services’, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Exemplified within the texts of Taylor, Rebecca, and Jane Lewis. ‘Understanding the Impact of JRRP for People with Mental Health Conditions’, n.d., and Webster, Russell and Great Britain, eds. *Building Bridges to Employment for Prisoners*. Home Office Research Study 226. London: Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2001. and James, R; Booth, D. ‘Self Efficacy Effective Jobsearch Implications for Advisory Interviews’. DWP, 2007. and Williams, N., and R. Birkin. ‘Communication Style: Help or Hindrance in Facilitating Return to Work?’ *Occupational Medicine* 61, no. 6 (1 September 2011): 380–82. <https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqq193>.

<sup>18</sup> Graham, Victoria, Simi Jutla, Danny Higginson, and Alyson Wells. ‘The Added Value of Motivational Interviewing within Employment Assessments’. *Motivational Interviewing* 10, no. 1 (2008).

Research indicates that key skills and tools provided through training, coaching, and observation, using a set of professional standards, equip frontline practitioners with the knowledge and skills needed to support participants facing complex barriers to employment. Key subjects include motivational interviewing, coaching, IPS integration, Trauma-Informed Practice, mental health, neurodiversity, employability support for individuals over 50, AI for Employability, and more.

We feel that Jobcentre staff stand in need of the same range of skills. But we recognise also that the changing relationship between welfare (UC and other systems), Jobcentre Plus, contracted-out employability services/programmes, and also with health, social, housing and justice services creates a complex world that requires both clarity and unity of purpose and some simplicity of operations. In our view, the skills of the front-line adviser or coach, supplemented by technical and organisational means, are the most important factor in success for unemployed and advancing customers.

Consequently, we feel that in principle, all employability professionals should have access to the same set of effective and ethical skills and tools, skills and tools that enable staff in Jobcentres and other delivery spaces to offer the best service to customers.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In summary, the evidence underscores the crucial role of Jobcentre reform in enhancing the effectiveness of employability services provided to customers across the nation. The Institute of Employability Professionals (IEP) supports the skills needed for professional development and tailored support, with the integration of those digital and AI tools that improve customer outcomes. By addressing the specific needs of disadvantaged groups, building effective local partnerships and fostering stronger employer engagement, Jobcentres can more effectively assist individuals in attaining sustainable employment. The IEP is dedicated to advocating for these reforms and supporting employability professionals in their mission to enhance lives through meaningful employment opportunities.

We therefore welcome any opportunity to support and advise or contribute to the evolution of Jobcentres.



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