DWP Department for Work and Pensions

Research Summary

A study of language and communication between advisers and claimants in Work Focused Interviews

By Paul Drew, Merran Toerien, Annie Irvine and Roy Sainsbury

Background and aims

Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) are central to the provision of information, advice and support for benefits claimants. How Personal Advisers (PAs) manage these interviews is, therefore, vital for helping claimants to move towards and back into employment. While numerous studies have highlighted the significance of the advisory role, most previous research has relied on retrospective reports (e.g. interviews with claimants) or indirect measures (e.g. job entries) to examine adviser effectiveness. There is a gap in our knowledge about what actually takes place in WFIs themselves: how advisers manage the style and content of the interaction and how claimants respond.

To address this gap, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned an in-depth, qualitative study of WFIs held in Jobcentre Plus offices and private sector Employment Zones (EZs). The study was conducted between May 2007 and May 2009 by researchers in the Department of Sociology and the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York.

The principal aims of the study were to:

- contribute to the evidence base regarding what actually takes place in WFIs;
- identify those techniques and styles used by advisers during WFIs that seemed to be most effective in moving people closer to work;
- make recommendations concerning effective practice in WFIs, for three main claimant groups.

Research methodology

The study used a sample of video recordings of real WFIs taking place in eight Jobcentre Plus offices and two EZs across four regions of England. Between July 2007 and June 2008, recordings were made of over 180 WFIs, with the following claimant groups:

- lone parents claiming Income Support (IS);
- people claiming a benefit related to ill-health or disability; and
- people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) while unemployed (both 18-24 and 25+).

Forty-three self-selected advisers offered to take part. Claimants meeting with these advisers took part on a voluntary basis; 80 per cent of those approached agreed to have their WFI recorded.

Using the methodology of Conversation Analysis (CA), we examined in close detail the strategies, styles or techniques the advisers used to manage the various interactional activities that take place during WFIs. According to the WFI type, these activities included: asking claimants about their job goals; explaining conditionality; whether and how advisers conducted a job search with claimants; and how they gave advice about training possibilities, external providers and childcare provision. We then examined whether the interaction proceeded differently when one or another technique was used. Our aim was to see which techniques were demonstrably more effective – within the WFI itself – at helping claimants move closer to the labour market.

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Adviser techniques were defined as effective if there was evidence that one or more of the following were achieved:

- claimants demonstrated they **understood** the information offered by advisers;
- claimants gave verbal indications of increased **self-confidence** in their ability to find or progress towards work;
- a genuine **conversation** about work-focused commitments was opened up;
- a discernible **turnaround** in claimants' outlook was evident – for example, a change from not considering work as a future possibility to a more positive stance;
- claimants committed to undertaking specific **activities**, such as applying immediately for local vacancies or joining a work-focused support programme.

Findings on effectiveness in WFIs across all claimant groups

Across all WFI types, interviews containing language associated with movement towards work were characterised by the following **styles of interaction**:

- **collaborative** – PAs treated the relationship with claimants as a partnership;
- **directive** – PAs guided the interview agenda, providing explicit instruction on a range of practical matters, such as what to wear to interviews, how to answer interview questions or find suitable childcare;
- **proactive** – PAs pursued employment and training opportunities there and then and also gave indications that they intended to monitor whether or not the claimant explored these possibilities (e.g. with a phone call later in the week);
- **positive** – PAs clearly identified and highlighted the skills of claimants, stressing how these could be harnessed and marketed to employers in the search for work;
- **challenging** – PAs required claimants to engage actively in job seeking, encouraging them to think differently about their situation.

These styles were generally found to a greater extent in WFIs held in the private sector EZs, although they were also evident in Jobcentre Plus. One key difference stood out: EZ advisers discuss and develop a claimant's CV with them during the WFI, while Jobcentre Plus advisers do not. Constructing a CV provides a valuable focus for discussing a claimant's experience and skills – and for providing claimants with practical advice about how to present themselves to potential employers.

Underlying these various interactive styles are two broad approaches to the WFI – a **process-led** approach, where the main focus is on meeting the basic procedural requirements of the WFI, and a more individualised or **claimant-focused** approach, where the adviser offers a more tailored service. While it is necessary, during certain tasks, to take a process-led approach, it is generally the case that more claimant-focused interviews are more successful in fostering a journey towards work – **as evidenced by communications made during the interviews themselves**.

Findings on effectiveness for specific groups

Separate analyses were conducted on WFIs with three specific claimant groups. Main findings on effective strategies included:

- New Jobseeker Interviews (NJIs) with JSA claimants (18-24 and 25+):
  - using an open-ended format for asking about job goals (e.g. *What would you like to do?* rather than *Type of work you're looking for*).
  - avoiding assumptions (e.g. that a goal was unrealistic) by explicitly exploring claimants' job goals in some detail;

  - helping claimants to think of second and third job goals which, whilst being realistic, were also related – preferably as stepping stones – to their main goal;
  - tailoring information to the individual (rather than providing standardised advice), by first learning more about, for instance, what they had already done to look for work;
  - encouraging claimants to be proactive (rather than minimising what they were expected to do to look for work);
  - explicitly inviting claimants to commit to taking specific steps towards work (rather than simply telling them what they should do);
  - conducting a job search together with the claimant, thereby creating an opportunity to give claimant-focused, tailored instruction and encouragement, including the support they needed to make suitable applications.
- Initial Pathways to Work WFIs with Incapacity Benefit (IB) claimants:
  - providing explanations about the purpose of the interviews that conformed to three principles: **simplicity, staging and tailoring**;
  - presenting voluntary programmes using a 'language of opportunity' (e.g. emphasising what a claimant stands to gain from participating) rather than a 'language of penalty or imposition';
  - there was a tendency, in initial interviews, to focus on gathering and giving information – resulting in the postponement of further steps towards work until some point in the future. In some cases, this resulted in missed opportunities to respond positively to claimants' expressions of interest in the possibility of re-training and other relevant programmes. Effective practice consisted in talking with claimants about the steps towards work they might take in the meantime – even if a return to work was not imminent;

NB: the research was conducted prior to the introduction of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and associated changes with the Pathways to Work regime.

- Initial and review WFIs with lone parents claiming IS:
  - flexibility in the use of Better Off Calculations (BOCs), in view of the finding that, in initial WFIs, lone parents tended to respond to BOCs in a non-committal or negative manner, but were usually more positive in review meetings. The key difference seems to be job readiness: the BOC does not appear to encourage claimants to **begin** to think about returning to work. Thus, it may be that BOCs only have significant value when used with those who are more job ready;
  - providing information about programmes and benefits available in a way that was **tailored** to what claimants had said about their circumstances;
  - using follow-up questions to explore claimants' circumstances and needs regarding childcare more fully;
  - enquiring about claimants' work plans **for the future** rather than their **present** plans (since they tended to respond more positively to the former, thereby opening up a more fruitful discussion);
  - using positive and constructive reformulations of claimants' more negative views about the likelihood of finding work, thereby opening up further work-related discussion.

Training and policy messages

Based on the close examination of real interactions in WFIs, we have identified communicative techniques that are demonstrably more effective in progressing claimants towards work, **during the WFI itself**. We recommend, therefore, that advisers adopt these techniques (illustrated in detail in the main report).

Changes are currently being introduced to give advisers more flexibility over the timing and content of some WFIs, allowing greater tailoring of services to the individual claimant.

Our findings support these policy changes. There is evidence that, for many of the tasks conducted during WFIs, a tailored, claimant-focused approach is more effective than one in which advisers simply 'tick the boxes'.

In utilising video recordings of actual WFIs, this study has provided an unprecedented level of direct insight into the conduct of WFIs in Jobcentre Plus and EZs. Our findings have implications for Jobcentre Plus adviser training and for DWP/Jobcentre Plus approaches to learning and development. However, how best to implement these recommendations goes beyond the scope of the present study and is a matter for DWP and Jobcentre Plus colleagues to determine.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 712 9. Research Report 633. June 2010).

You can download the full report free from: http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp

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