

2009 Jobcentre Plus Customer Satisfaction Research; findings from quantitative and qualitative research

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Background, objectives and methodology

The 2009 Customer Satisfaction Research was commissioned in order to provide an up-to-date assessment of customer satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus services. The Customer Satisfaction Research involved three elements, all three of which were undertaken during the recession: A representative quantitative survey of Income Support (IS), Incapacity Benefit (IB) and Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) customers; qualitative follow-up research with Jobcentre Plus staff and customers to further investigate issues that arose from the quantitative survey; and a qualitative study of satisfaction amongst customers claiming Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).

In total, 4,125 customers, who had been claiming or receiving benefit in December 2008, participated in the quantitative research conducted between July and October 2009. The overall response rate was 52 per cent. The qualitative follow-up research involved 80 depth interviews with JSA, IS and IB customers who had taken part in the preceding quantitative survey. In addition, 50 paired depth and six telephone interviews were conducted with a range of Jobcentre Plus staff. A separate qualitative study amongst customers claiming ESA was completed involving 30 face-to-face depth interviews with ESA claimants that sought to explore customer experiences of making a claim for ESA.

Customer profile and use of Jobcentre Plus services

Of the quantitative interviews achieved, 37 per cent were with JSA customers, 39 per cent were with IS customers and 25 per cent were with IB customers. The proportion of JSA customers was higher than in previous years and one in six of these customers were in professional, managerial or technical occupations in their most recent job. Qualitative follow-up interviews were conducted with a sub-set of the respondents who took part in the quantitative survey and who were either new customers, were identified as having experienced problems, were dissatisfied with self-service channels or had made a complaint.

Quantitative findings showed that nine in ten JSA customers had attended a face-to-face meeting at a Jobcentre Plus office in the previous 12 months, compared with nearly eight in ten IS customers and four in ten IB customers. Over the previous 12 months, JSA customers had a more intensive relationship with Jobcentre Plus and while their claims tended to be shorter, contact was more frequent and covered more contact channels.

Overall satisfaction with Jobcentre Plus

The quantitative research identified that the majority of customers (75 per cent) said they were satisfied with the services provided by Jobcentre Plus, including one in three (33 per cent) who were very satisfied, while 12 per cent were dissatisfied. While direct comparisons

with the 2007 Customer Satisfaction survey were not possible, analysis indicated that there has been no substantive change in overall satisfaction since 2007. The 2009 findings indicated that IS customers were the most satisfied (82 per cent satisfied), followed by IB customers (75 per cent), while JSA customers were the least satisfied (68 per cent satisfied and 19 per cent dissatisfied). This pattern by benefit type applies throughout the findings. Respondents mostly said that Jobcentre Plus services were at least as good as expected (84 per cent), although 13 per cent said they were worse than they had expected. Over half of customers felt that improvements were needed (46 per cent some or slight improvement and 15 per cent much or huge improvement).

The qualitative research found that customers were generally very satisfied with the service they received but where dissatisfaction arose this was usually only in respect to a single aspect of the service delivery with all other aspects being positively viewed. In some instances, dissatisfaction arose because of a single incident, such as an adviser being abrupt or insufficient information being provided in response to an enquiry; in other instances it was due to repeated experience of the same issue, such as a lack of privacy or lengthy waiting times to use the Jobpoints.

Interactions with Jobcentre Plus staff

Overall satisfaction with various contact channels was high, with at least half of customers very satisfied with their most recent contact (56 per cent for face-to-face, office based meeting and 50 per cent for telephone contact). Satisfaction with office-based meetings was greater where the meeting was to talk about jobs or finding work and lower for Fortnightly Job Reviews. Satisfaction with telephone contact was lower when the reason for contact was to discuss an existing claim or to report non-receipt of payment.

Where appointments were made for a face-to-face meeting or phone call with Jobcentre Plus, most said that this happened at the appointed time. However, 11 per cent said the face-to-face meeting time did not occur on time and 17 per cent said a telephone appointment did not occur on time. A quarter of customers felt the time they waited for their call to be answered was not reasonable. Ratings of specific aspects of service were generally positive, with at least half of respondents rating each aspect very good. For both face-to-face and telephone contact, the highest ratings were given for being treated in a friendly and polite way, while ratings were least positive in relation to providing information that was relevant to needs and circumstances.

One in ten customers who had attended a face-to-face meeting said that there were issues that hadn't been addressed (ten per cent). A slightly higher proportion of respondents who had made contact by phone said there were issues that hadn't been addressed (15 per cent). The qualitative research identified a number of issues that were not resolved to the satisfaction of the customer. These included a lack of explanation about why expected benefit payments were outstanding and customers having to resubmit information repeatedly because it was lost in the process of being sent to Jobcentre Plus or misplaced by Jobcentre Plus staff.

Office environment and self-service contact channels

Eighty-two per cent of customers who had visited a Jobcentre Plus office for any purpose in the previous 12 months were satisfied with the conditions at their local office, while fewer than one in ten (eight per cent) were dissatisfied. When rating various aspects of the office environment, respondents were most positive in relation to the safety of the environment, while views were slightly less positive in relation to providing appropriate privacy for customer needs.

At least three in four customers were aware of self-service contact channels: Jobpoints (87 per cent), the Jobcentre Plus website (82 per cent) and Customer Access Phones (78 per cent). Nearly half of customers had used a Jobpoint or the website, while only a quarter had used a Customer Access Phone in the last year. The majority of customers who had used each of the channels found them at least fairly helpful, although Customer Access Phones and the website were more likely to be considered helpful than Jobpoints. The qualitative research identified key issues with the search facility on Jobpoints, as well as the website. Jobs in distant locations were displayed alongside local roles, job titles and descriptions lacked detail and unrelated job sectors were advertised together (for example, administration and hospitality roles). Other issues identified included lack of privacy when using self-service channels in-office, queues and waiting times for use, a noisy environment, and for Customer Access Phones specifically, restricted usage and poor maintenance.

Access to Jobcentre Plus and problems experienced by customers

Around three in four customers (76 per cent) said that they found it easy to get in contact with Jobcentre Plus, although 16 per cent found it difficult to get in contact. While 80 per cent of customers said that their local office was convenient to get to, 13 per cent found it inconvenient. Fifteen per cent said that their access to Jobcentre Plus was limited in some way (for example due to distance, services not accommodating their physical requirements or problems with staff). Around one in ten customers had encountered problems with their benefit payment after notifying a change in personal details or circumstances and a similar proportion had received incorrect or contradictory information from Jobcentre Plus. The qualitative research identified problems arising with a benefit payment following a change of address or change in benefit type and examples of customers receiving contradictory explanations from staff.

Whilst 17 per cent of customers said they had felt like complaining in the previous 12 months, three per cent had actually made a complaint. Respondents were most likely to have felt like complaining about staff attitudes, lack of knowledge amongst staff, mistakes or unclear information, or the speed of service. Customers who had complained were likely to be dissatisfied with the way the complaint was handled (59 per cent dissatisfied). The qualitative research identified reasons for this, including the length of time taken to receive a response, the disinterested manner of staff dealing with the complaint and the customer being passed around from one staff member to another without the complaint being resolved.

Key drivers of satisfaction

Overall, the survey confirms that indicators 1-4 of Departmental Strategic Objective 7 (Ease of Access, Treatment, Timely Response and Right Outcome) are aspects of service that are considered important by customers, and that Jobcentre Plus is generally performing well in these areas. Multivariate analysis indicated that Ease of Access had the greatest impact on overall satisfaction and that for both face-to-face and telephone contact specifically the driver with the strongest impact on satisfaction was 'providing information relevant to needs and circumstances'. For both types of contact, aspects of service delivery based on customer treatment and those aspects which rely on achieving a timely response had a strong impact on satisfaction.

New customers

New customers from a professional, managerial or technical occupational background were less satisfied about Jobcentre Plus services and had more sophisticated expectations regarding speed of service, quality of training courses, staff knowledge and understanding of the customer background. Staff noted that this group were particularly difficult to satisfy and felt that their higher expectations needed to be

more carefully managed. New customers from other occupational backgrounds expected to be given simple information about the benefit system and Jobcentre Plus services, as well as being provided with basic training and advice. These expectations tended to be met by Jobcentre Plus and as a result this group was generally satisfied with the service they received.

Satisfaction amongst customers claiming ESA

The qualitative research identified that being treated in a friendly manner was the most important factor in determining satisfaction amongst customers claiming ESA. The importance of this was emphasised in cases where the customer thought that the wrong decision had been made about their ESA status. Although these particular customers tended to be less satisfied, their experience was often improved by the way in which staff engaged with them. Delays, waiting times, lack of explanation of the decision making process and not being told when a decision would be made were seen as key elements of dissatisfaction for customers claiming ESA. Customers who were assessed as eligible for ESA tended to be more satisfied with the claims process than those who were still waiting for a decision or had been assessed as fit for work.

Conclusions and ideas for improvement

Although the majority of customers said they were satisfied with the services provided by Jobcentre Plus, the research identified how services could be improved. Customers and staff suggested ideas for improvement related to a number of service aspects including the speed at which services are delivered and complaints are resolved, the relevancy of information provided to customers, the level of support and advice provided by staff and the functionality and availability of self-service channels.

Across all aspects of service, staff stressed the importance of managing customer expectations. Managing expectations was particularly important for customers from professional, managerial and technical occupational backgrounds. In addition, staff suggested that customers could be better informed about their own responsibilities during the process. Customers and staff both emphasised the importance of providing detailed information and 'signposting' around the Jobcentre Plus claim process. This was felt to be particularly important for those who were unfamiliar with the services or new customers. Also, it was suggested that staff should be attentive to the particular needs of new customer groups and be aware about how they might differ from established customers.

The importance of treating customers in a polite manner and respecting their privacy were emphasised by both customers and staff. Staff and customers agreed that making improvements in these areas would increase customer satisfaction with the office environment.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 775 4. Research Report 657. July 2010).

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

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