

In-House Research

Right to Bid – Letter on Demand Evaluation

by Paul Trenell

Department for Work and Pensions

In-House Research No 4

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Paul Trenell

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Context

- 1.1. Right to Bid was launched in January 2009 and invited organisations to bid for funding to provide employment services which complemented existing DWP mainstream provision. The aim of the initiative was to harness provider knowledge and promote innovation through encouraging small scale or proof of concept pilots that met localised gaps in provision. The Right to Bid Scheme ended in May 2010.
- 1.2. Letter on Demand was the first project to be approved under the Right to Bid initiative. The pilot took place from October 2009 to April 2010 in three Jobcentre Plus districts: Walthamstow, Leytonstone and Redbridge¹. Employment Advisers selected appropriate (job ready, IT-literate) customers for the service, and gave them a voucher entitling them to access the Letter on Demand service free of charge. Customers visited the Letter on Demand website and entered information (employment history, experience, personal details etc.) into the website, which was then used by LoD staff to construct a personalised CV and covering letter which was emailed to customers within 48 hours. The customer could then use the CV and letter to apply for jobs, and had the option of adding to or editing the products in order to tailor for specific jobs. Each CV and letter ordered cost the Department £75. Once received customers were able to edit the CV and letter themselves. The total spend on the project was £56,780 excluding VAT.

2. Methodology

- 2.1. This paper is not a formal impact assessment of the Letter on Demand service as the design of the pilot did not provide for a control group against which the outcomes achieved by the Letter on Demand Service can be measured.

- 2.2. This paper draws on three sources to evaluate the Letter on Demand pilot:

- **DWP administrative data drawn from the Labour Market System**
A pilot marker was used in the Labour Market System to identify all customers to whom a voucher was issued.
- **Customer interviews conducted by Letter on Demand**
Letter on Demand conducted three customer telephone surveys with customers who completed the online application process². The sample frame included all customers who successfully completed an application. 189 interviews were conducted representing 26% of completed applications, and a 64% response rate among contacted customers.
- **A web survey with Jobcentre Plus Employment Advisers**
Jobcentre Plus Employment advisers in each of the three pilot districts were asked to complete an email survey about their experience of Letter on Demand. 33 of approximately 100 advisers involved in the project

¹ Redbridge joined the pilot from February 2010.

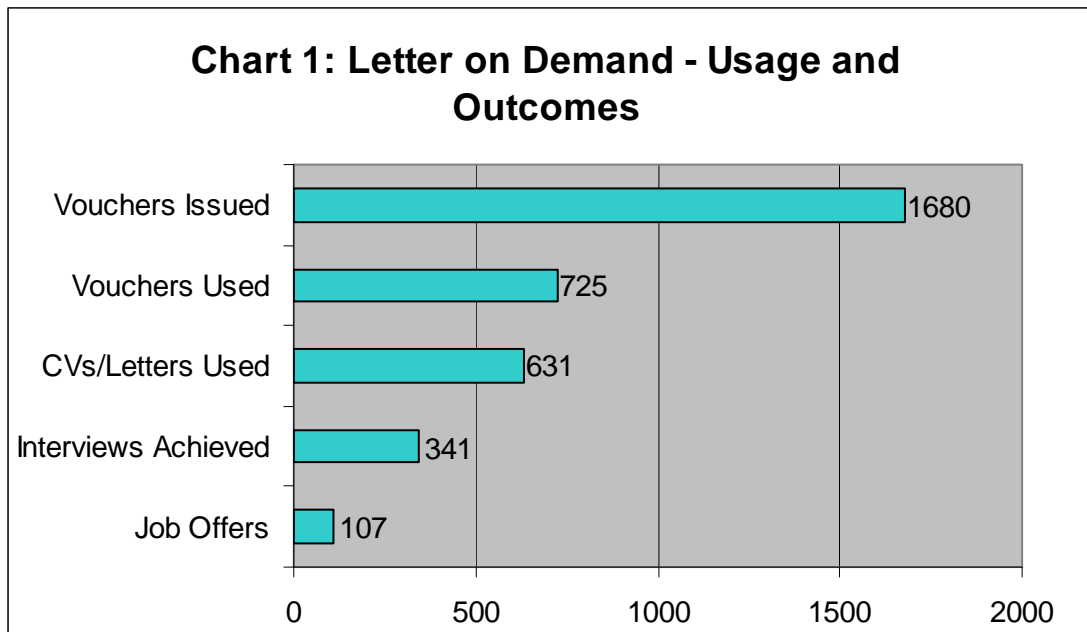
² The first wave of interviews was conducted in late January 2010 and captured customers who completed the process in October and November 2009. The second wave of interviews was conducted in early March 2010 and captured customers who completed the process in January 2010. The third wave was completed in July to August 2010 and captured customers who completed the process from late February to early April 2010. The first two waves captured customers from Walthamstow and Leytonstone, the third wave captured customers only from Redbridge.

responded, covering all districts involved, and advisers for customers at stages 1, 2 and 3 of their Jobseekers Allowance claim. The survey was completed between 8th September and 20th October 2010.

3. Results

3.1. Voucher Use

Combining DWP administrative data with Letter on Demand customer survey data allows us for estimation the number of customers who progressed to each stage of the programme.



Stage	Number	Percentage of total vouchers	Percentage of vouchers used	Percentage of cv/letters used
Voucher Issued	1680	-	-	-
Vouchers Used	725	43%	-	-
CV/Letters Used	631	38%	87%	-
Interviews Achieved	341	20%	47%	54%
Job Offers	107	6%	15%	17%

Source: Letter on Demand Customer Survey 2010 and DWP Administrative Data

From 1680 vouchers issued, 725 customers successfully completed the on-line application process and were issued with CVs/covering letters, giving a voucher-use rate of 43%. 631 customers actually used the CV to apply for a job of which 341 achieved an interview. Of these 341 customers 107 received a job offer - 15% of all customers who used the voucher.

Many of these customers might have found work without support from Letter on Demand, especially as the provision was targeted at customers who were job ready and IT-literate. It is not possible to identify the size of this effect as there was no reliable control group. Some other customers may have used

the support received to find a job at some point after the time they were surveyed.

Non-use should be separated into 2 categories: voucher non-use and CV/letter non-use. Whilst ideally both usage rates would be as high as possible the latter is of greater concern because the Department incurred a cost once the CV/letter was dispatched, regardless of whether the customer then used the products.

Reasons for voucher non-use

As less than 50% of customers who were issued with a voucher actually reclaimed a CV and letter Jobcentre Plus Employment Advisers were asked to identify any factors which could help to explain this limited take up.

- **Difficulty understanding the process:** Advisers reported that some customers found the process too complicated, which discouraged them. It was also felt that some customers struggled to express the information required from them in writing by Letter on Demand in order to populate the CV/letter. For these customers a face-to-face or verbal service would be more appropriate.
- **Lack of confidence using the internet:** While customers may have access to the internet, this should be distinguished from customers who feel comfortable using the internet and secure transmitting information over the internet. Advisers felt that the web-based approach discouraged some people.
- **Lack of motivation:** Advisers felt that some customers simply lacked the willingness to complete the process. This links to that fact that the pilot was not compulsory, and there were no sanctions for failing to use the voucher.
- **Issued to inappropriate customers:** Linking to the three bullets above, there is evidence to suggest that vouchers were issued indiscriminately – perhaps at customers who were not job-ready or not IT-literate – as the initiative was ‘just’ a pilot, and that simply issuing a voucher was an easy outcome for Advisers.
- **Difficulty completing the process:** Some advisers reported that customers had tried to complete the process but encountered difficulties such as faulty codes, difficulty submitting information to LoD and a failure to receive a CV. Such reports were limited and cannot be verified.

Reasons for cv/letter non-use

13% of customers who used their voucher to redeem a CV/letter did not subsequently use the products. Customer feedback gathered through Letter on Demand customer surveys can help to explain the reasons for this:

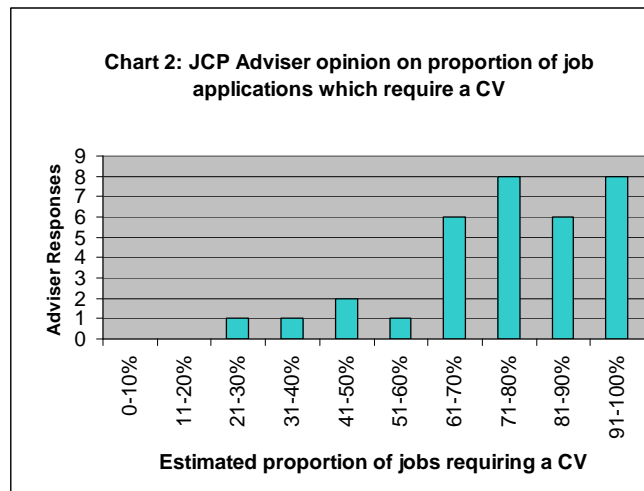
- **Already got a job:** A small proportion of customers said that they had found a job before needing to use the CV/letter.
- **Did not like CV or letter:** Some customers did not like the products, however this was limited, and for a variety of reasons – for example some

felt the CV was too short, some felt it was too long. These are personal preferences and do not suggest a systematic flaw in the products.

- **Already had a CV:** Of greater concern is the fact that a relatively high number of respondents referred to existing CVs that they preferred to use. In some cases this was a product developed themselves with the help of family or friends, but in other cases the CV had been developed through other JCP support channels. One customer referred to a JCP workshop, and another to a JCP sourced face-to-face CV course. This suggests a duplication of efforts which should not have arisen given that Right to Bid was designed to complement, not replicate, existing provision.

- **Not appropriate for industry:**

A number of customers suggested that their industry did not require a CV, typically because networks were more important, or because a specialised CV was required for their profession and the generic format used by Letter on Demand did not meet this requirement. Customers from professions including carpentry, design, and banking made this point. However, in general such occurrences were limited.



Jobcentre Plus Employment Advisers were asked to estimate the proportion of job applications made by Jobseekers Allowance customers which require a CV. Chart 2 shows the results and suggests that most jobs that JSA customers apply for do require a CV, indicating that the service would be appropriate for the majority of customers.

A notable number of respondents said that they had used *either* the CV or the letter. Sometimes this was due to a preference for one over the other, but more typically because they only had a need for a CV or a letter but not both. This was because they already had a CV, but needed a letter, or because the jobs they were applying for did not require a letter. By bundling the two elements together the pilot was providing a number of people with a service that they did not need or use, all at a flat rate of £75 per person. A more appropriate option may have been to split the two products and allow customers to specify which element they required, with according cost reductions for selecting just one product.

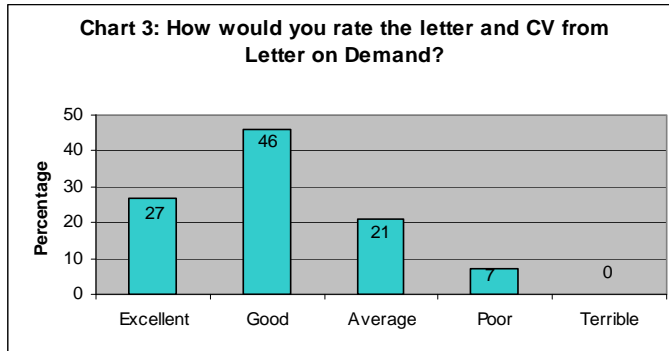
The findings above demonstrate that the service could have been better targeted in order to improve usage rates and reduce costs. Improvements could have been made by only offering vouchers to:

- Genuinely IT literate customers;
- Customers who did not already have a CV that they were happy with;
- Customers who definitely need a CV for the type of job and industry they sought;

- And by offering customers the option to receive either a CV or a letter as appropriate, rather than having to receive both products.

3.2. Product Quality

The majority of customers who applied for and received the CV/letter were happy with the quality of the products, with chart 3 showing that 73% of customers



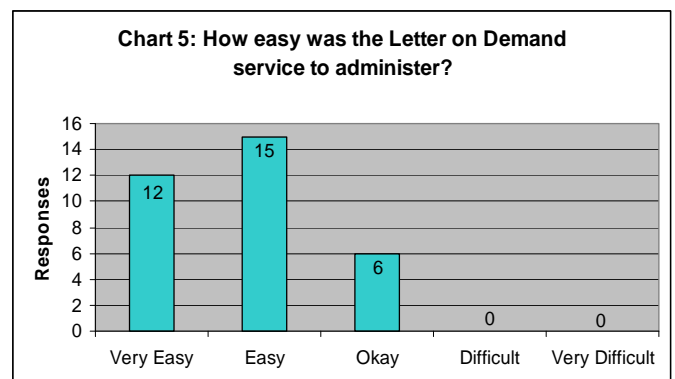
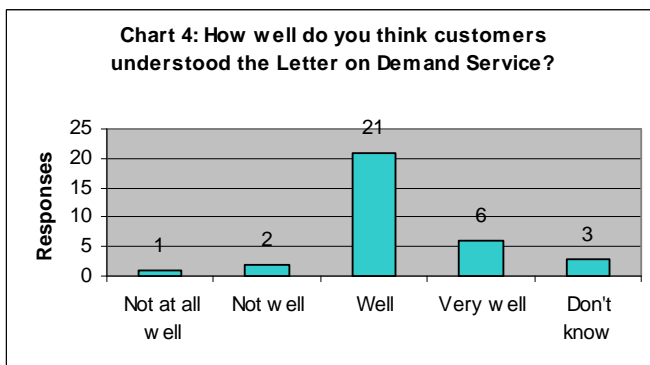
Source: Letter on Demand Customer Survey 2010

thought the CV/letter were either good or excellent. 94% of customers said they would recommend the service to others. However, this was on the basis of JCP funding the service. Many customers stated that the service would be expensive on a private basis (perhaps unsurprising when comparing the £75 fee to the maximum £65 Jobseekers Allowance payment).

Qualitative customer feedback confirmed the generally positive view of the CV/letter. Many customers spoke of the products as an improvement on what they possessed already. In addition to this simple outcome some customers spoke of the CV/letter as giving them ideas, and appreciated another person providing a take on their skills and abilities. Customers also felt that the process provided them with support and encouragement for the job search process, with one customer describing the experience as “a real ego-boost”. The softer-outcomes associated with the project are difficult to measure, but customer feedback gives a real sense that the CV/letter had an impact beyond the practical use of having a tool to apply for a job.

3.3. Process/Operational Issues

The process behind Letter on Demand appears to have worked well. No advisers felt that the service was difficult to administer, whilst the large majority of advisers felt that customers understood the service well as illustrated charts 4 and 5 below.



Source: JCP Adviser Survey, 2010

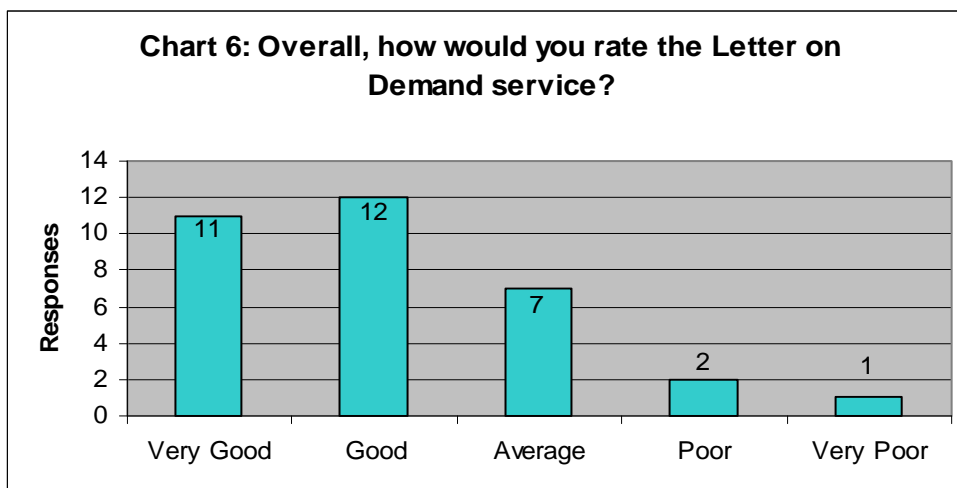
Customer feedback from those who completed the process corroborates these adviser reports³. Few customers reported any difficulties with the process, whilst many commented on the service being straightforward, even “slick”. A recurring theme was that customers were impressed with the speed of the turnaround, and no customers reported receiving their CV/letter outside the specified 48 hour timeframe.

3.4. Further feedback from Jobcentre Plus Advisers

Advisers were asked whether they felt the service would be appropriate for any other customer groups. Several advisers identified graduates as being likely to benefit from the service, others felt that customers who were almost job-ready could benefit. However, the majority of advisers did not suggest other customer groups who would benefit from the service.

The Right to Bid initiative was intended to support provision which filled a gap in mainstream employment support. As such, advisers were asked how customers would develop a CV in the absence of the Letter on Demand service. The majority of advisers stated that the customer would prepare the CV themselves, with the support of friends and families. Some advisers stated that customers could be referred to existing providers, with the Jobcentre Plus Support Contract identified as an alternative avenue. One adviser said that they had been helping customers to produce CVs themselves. Overall an ad hoc picture of CV support emerged.

Advisers were asked for their opinions about the service as a whole. The majority of advisers felt the service was either good or very good, with very few considering the service to be poor.



Source: JCP Employment Adviser online Survey, 2010

Advisers were asked to recommend improvements to the service. Suggestions included:

- **Offer contact line for customers:** A very strong theme from advisers was the need for a contact facility between customers and LoD. This could be by phone line or an e-mail facility, but some form of contact for help or advice was repeatedly advocated. This would have benefited customers who needed assistance, and would potentially have lead to more completed applications, and therefore more payments for Letter on Demand.

³ Please note the distinction: those customers who were able to complete the process reported that the online application process was straightforward, but some customers claimed they were unable to complete the service due to difficulties with the process. This may reflect the customer’s level of IT-literacy/confidence rather than the Letter on Demand system.

- **Improve CVs:** Some advisers felt that the CVs issued by LoD could be improved, in terms of general appearance and making the CVs more modern and less formulaic. Another observation was that customers found it difficult to apply for a wide range of jobs with a specifically tailored CV. However, customers do have the option of editing the CV, and 74% of customers did so.
- **Simplify Process:** Advisers felt that the website could have been more user-friendly and easier for customers to complete.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1. Functionally the Letter on Demand service worked well. Customers and Advisers found the process straightforward and swift. The number of customers who did not use the voucher, and especially the number of customers who used the voucher but not the letter or CV is a concern. This could have been partially remedied through better targeting of the service, ensuring, only customers who needed a CV were offered the voucher, and also by allowing customers to apply for either a letter or CV as required. Savings could also have been achieved by negotiating a reduction from the market rate with Letter on Demand – DWP was paying the same amount as private customers for the service. Where customers received a CV and letter they were generally happy with the quality of the product, and also reported soft outcomes such as a boost in confidence. The overall number of job outcomes is reported above but these cannot be directly attributed to the Letter on Demand service due to the lack of an appropriate control groups for comparison.

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the Letter on Demand pilot, the first initiative to be operated under the Right to Bid initiative.

Right to Bid was launched in January 2009 and invited organisations to bid for funding to provide employment services which complemented existing DWP mainstream provision. The Letter on Demand pilot took place from October 2009 to April 2010 in three Jobcentre Plus districts: Walthamstow, Leytonstone and Redbridge. The pilot gave jobseekers access to an on-line service which provided them with a CV and covering letter for use in future job applications. This evaluation was completed by social researchers within the Department for Work and Pensions using administrative data drawn from the Labour Market System, telephone interviews with pilot participants, and an on-line survey of Jobcentre Plus Employment Advisers.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, please contact:
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