



Small employer recruitment practices

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Background and methods

TNS BMRB was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to explore how employers approach the recruitment and hiring process for unskilled and semi-skilled workers. This included the factors that influence recruitment decisions and how hiring decisions are made in practice, in order to support Jobcentre Plus customers who are seeking work and further inform the Department's employer engagement practices.

This report presents the findings from a qualitative research study carried out between May and July 2013, and based on:

- **six focus groups with small employers** reflecting a range of industry sectors to explore the range of stated recruitment practices, and
- **three employer case studies**, providing the opportunity to observe any differences in how employers describe their recruitment process and what they do in practice.

The employee recruitment process

Employers' staffing requirements varied considerably, depending on the business size, sector and the nature of job contracts. Reasons for recruiting were:

- **rebuilding** the business following downsizing during the recession of the last few years;
- **expanding** the business following business growth or movement into new markets;

- **replacing** staff that leave as part of the natural process of staff turnover;
- **high turnover** businesses that continually recruit as their sector tends to see a regular flow of employees, particularly in the transport and caring sectors;
- **seasonal** recruitment, especially in the hospitality, catering and retail sectors.

Employers in this study did not generally have a formal approach to specifying the job skills and person criteria for staff vacancies, particularly when looking for unskilled or semi-skilled staff, with neither detailed job specifications nor person specifications being available. The exceptions were where employers required more skilled employees, such as a chef or Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) driver, or for roles where there was an element of risk (such as with a youth worker).

The most frequent recruitment channels used by employers in this study included: word of mouth, unsolicited applications and local advertising – including local papers and shops; employers had some, but very limited experience of using social media, specialist trade publications, recruitment agencies and Jobcentre Plus to recruit employees. While the recruitment practices described by employers were wide ranging, they generally incorporated a three stage process of sifting, an interview and often a work trial.

The sift process was often very informal and could be based on: how a potential employee left a voicemail message and whether the person sounded interested and enthusiastic; how they dropped off unsolicited applications and whether

they had dressed appropriately and taken into account the business's busy periods; and informal chats prior to interview.

Interviews were not usually scripted, with no set questions, and with each interview covering different topics. Interviews could be by telephone or face-to-face, with a face-to-face interview always being required before hiring.

Trial periods were common, ranging from one day to a number of weeks; sometimes the trial period was a rolling process until the employer was either satisfied with the employee or they were asked to leave.

Curricula Vitae (CVs) were usually offered by potential employees although not all employers used them. Whilst employers may use them to examine a person's work history, others saw it as a conversational prompt to be used during the interview or as a platform to discuss skills and abilities. Employers were generally suspicious of 'production line' CVs that all looked the same as well as CVs that had unexplained gaps or appeared to oversell qualifications and skills.

References were not always requested and were rarely taken up, primarily because of the view that a previous employer cannot give a bad reference. They were most useful where a candidate's truthfulness was suspected; personal character references were often sufficient where a person had little or no prior employment history.

The hiring decision

In assessing and making the decision to employ, employers have a number of features they look for. There are some behaviours and features that they are concerned about and there are issues that they either do not look for or are not generally concerned about:

- **What employers look for:**
 - personal and interpersonal factors – such as motivation and enthusiasm, 'work-readiness', level of engagement with the employer, and overall presentation; and
 - practical factors such as employee flexibility and fit with the hours of the job, length of travel to work, or the holding of appropriate certifications (mostly for semi-skilled work).
- **What employers are concerned about:**
 - lack of enthusiasm, motivation and engagement with the employer;
 - a mismatch between candidate behaviour or presentation and job requirements;
 - perceived overqualification;
 - overselling of qualifications or skills; and
 - inconsistent employment history or unexplained gaps.
- **What employer tend not to look for in an unskilled or semi-skilled candidate:**
 - qualifications;
 - job-specific work experience or skills, unless a specific skill is required in order to carry out the work in hand;
 - current employment status, with unemployment being unimportant if the reasons are deemed acceptable;
 - work history, providing gaps are suitable explained.
- **What employers do not generally ask about:**
 - candidates' criminal records or criminal history;
 - history of substance or alcohol abuse; and
 - health and mental health issues.

Across the research, there were some employers who spoke quite openly about including some prospective employee characteristics such as age, gender, family status, race and perceived socio-economic status as part of their employee assessment process. While they were aware that this might contravene equalities legislation, at the same time they expressed a fierce need to protect the business that they had built, and indicated that they were not willing to take risks with their livelihood and felt that they 'had to' ask candidates about any issue that might impact on their ability to complete the job at hand or to fit in with the workforce.

Employers' experiences of recruiting through Jobcentre Plus

Experience of Jobcentre Plus was limited, and respondents' perceptions of the Jobcentre Plus offering tended to be based on experiences from some time ago or from the reported experiences of friends and colleagues. Perceptions were fairly mixed overall. On the positive side, Jobcentre Plus was praised for its tenacity in finding candidates for interview and offering space in the jobcentre to carry out the recruitment process. However, the Jobcentre Plus approach was considered by some of the employers in the research to be at odds with their less formal approach to recruitment, giving them a feeling of being out of control of the process in terms of the number and types of people being referred.

While the limited experiences that employers had of recruiting through Jobcentre Plus were mixed, there was a strongly held view that a large proportion of candidates submitted for interview were not appropriate. This was because candidates appeared to: lack motivation to engage with the employer and to discuss previous work or educational experiences; display a lack of knowledge about and interest in the job; dress or behave inappropriately; or seem inappropriate for the job. Employers also thought that too many candidates relied too heavily on the CVs to tell their story.

Conclusions and implications

The research suggests that **small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are often very open to employing Jobcentre Plus candidates, and are not necessarily concerned about issues such as unemployment, lack of qualifications, or lack of specific skills.** If prospective employees can provide reasonable explanations for any gaps or inconsistencies in their skill or employment histories – and can genuinely communicate that they are willing and motivated to work now – SME employers may be very willing to engage them for semi-skilled and unskilled work.

However, despite this general openness the research also identified a range of potential challenges for engagement:

- Jobcentre Plus' offering does not fit with employers' current informal recruitment practice – alongside a general resistance to engaging with more 'formal' recruitment channels;
- Jobcentre Plus candidates do not match the assessment criteria that employers valued; and
- Jobcentre Plus candidates are not prepared for interview using the 'right' criteria.

In order to overcome these challenges, Jobcentre Plus can enhance a candidate's prospects by preparing candidates and engaging with employers in a way that takes into account their specific context, recruitment processes and values. These include:

- candidates need to be prepared for **informal recruitment practices** and understand that **every contact with an employer counts**, including initial voicemail messages and informal telephone or face-to-face chats;

- care needs to be taken with a candidate's **presentation** and understanding of the importance employers place on motivation, enthusiasm, and the ability to communicate willingness to work. Candidates also need to recognise that they have to engage the employer in conversation and demonstrate that they can see themselves in the job role working alongside the employer and other employees. Appropriate dress and behaviour are also essential;
- candidates need to **do their homework** and take a little time to learn about the industry, the nature of the business, and/or the job role. A quick website search can go a long way towards showing an employer that a candidate is interested in more than a pay-cheque;
- candidates must **understand the role that CVs and applications play** and that both provide an opportunity for a candidate to tell the employer about themselves, their experience, and their interest in the job rather than being the basis on which an employer makes their decision. Candidates should be able to explain any gaps or inconsistencies in their employment history. While a good CV will not necessarily get a candidate very far towards getting the job, a bad one can significantly reduce their chances;
- candidates should be **prepared to answer questions about practicalities around work hours, flexibility and travel to work.**

Employers are generally willing to consider Jobcentre Plus applicants but want to ensure that their limited recruitment time is spent considering high quality applicants, and that engagement with Jobcentre Plus is as straightforward and simple as possible. If Jobcentre Plus can help to ensure applicants are as strong as possible and smooth the engagement experience, positive recommendations are likely to circulate via word of mouth.

Potential considerations include:

- providing a more tailored experience, including more sifting of potential candidates that takes into account employer priorities and preferences. It may also be useful for Jobcentre Plus to assess employer preferences in terms of employee presentation and approach to interview which could help avoid inappropriate candidate presentation;
- providing limited applicant numbers in line with employer needs and preferences with a clear and easy option for employers to 'close' applications once they have as many as they need; and
- simplifying the vacancy-taking process so that employers do not need to draw up a 'formal' job specification, or are helped by Jobcentre Plus to put them together.

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