



Evaluation of the Group Work Psychological Wellbeing and Work Feasibility Pilot

By Meg Callanan, Tze Ming Mok and Triin Edovald

Background

RAND (Europe) in their report on *Psychological Wellbeing and Work: Improving Service Provision and Outcomes*¹ recommended a pilot of a group based intervention (Group Work) based on the JOBS II model developed by the University of Michigan. The JOBS II model was designed as a week-long workshop that aimed to enhance the self-esteem of participants, provide them with the social skills to job search effectively and build their resilience to setbacks.

The Group Work pilot was designed to trial this approach in a UK context and was aimed at Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants who were struggling with their job search. It was piloted between August and December 2014 in the Thames Valley and Gloucester & West of England Jobcentre Plus districts.

Aims and methods

The evaluation was designed to provide insights into the performance of Group Work and identify learning from its implementation and delivery to inform a larger-scale trial.

In-depth interviews were carried out with eight Jobcentre Plus staff, eight Provider staff and 32 claimants who participated in the intervention.

¹ Van Stolk, C., Hofman, J., Hafner, M. and Janta, B. (2014). *Psychological wellbeing and work: Improving service provision and outcomes*. A Report by RAND Europe.

Observations of six Group Work sessions were carried out and analysis of Management Information (MI) was undertaken to provide insights into pilot take-up, retention and outcomes.

Key findings

Referral and take-up

- Of 461 claimants that were referred to Group Work, 236 (51 per cent) went on to attend the first day of the intervention. Of these, 194 (40 per cent of referrals) went on to complete the week-long course.
- Work Coaches used a range of approaches to select and identify claimants for the Group Work intervention. These included referrals based on the length of time claimants had been unemployed; referrals based on an informal wellbeing assessment; and referrals based on specific demographic criteria and benefits history (e.g. claimants recently made unemployed or those who had transferred to JSA from other benefits).
- Facilitators delivering the intervention felt that claimants who needed to refresh their work search skills (for example, the newly unemployed, school leavers, those looking to change career path, or those returning to work after a career break) benefited most from the strong job search skills content of the course. Claimants with mild psychological wellbeing needs related to their job search (for example,

low self-esteem, low confidence and those struggling with job search setbacks) were felt to benefit from the group dynamic and the skills of facilitators were felt to be paramount to achieving positive outcomes.

- Group Work Facilitators felt that the intervention was less suitable for claimants with more severe psychological wellbeing needs (e.g. clinical depression) and those who had been very long-term unemployed and were lacking in motivation. For this group, the focus on job search skills was not felt to be appropriate because of their distance from the labour market.
- To ensure appropriate referrals were made to the intervention, Work Coaches recommended face-to-face meetings between themselves and the Provider, as well as, opportunities to shadow the provision. Staff also suggested widening eligibility to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Income Support (IS) claimants and consideration of some form of pre-course assessment to help Work Coaches identify appropriate referrals.
- To encourage take-up of the intervention, staff and claimants welcomed the use of Initial Reception Meetings (IRMs) that provided an opportunity for claimants to meet Group Work Facilitators and have their questions answered. Focusing promotional materials on 'wellbeing and work' and avoiding use of the term 'psychological wellbeing' was also recommended.

Group Work delivery

- The Group Work intervention aimed to build resilience to the setbacks experienced while job seeking. The core components included job search skills training; active teaching and learning methods; inoculation against setbacks; social support from the Facilitator and group and Facilitator referent power (whereby Facilitators become a referent person that participants esteem).

- Effective group facilitation is the foundation of the JOBS II model. The evaluation found that the short duration of the pilot meant Group Work Facilitators did not receive the extensive training (seven weeks) that is recommended in the JOBS II model and this is likely to have impacted on fidelity to the model.
- Staff delivering the intervention recommended updating the language of the intervention so it is more suitable for participants in the United Kingdom (UK), increasing the diversity within the examples and including new material on digital job search and the benefits of volunteering. Recommendation was also made to increase the specific wellbeing content within the intervention.
- Participation in Group Work was voluntary. However, there was a perception amongst some claimants that participation was mandatory and in some instances this resulted in claimants attending Group Work who did not want to participate. Group Work Facilitators and other participants reported that this undermined group dynamics.

Engagement and retention

- There was a high retention rate over the week-long intervention, with 194 of the 236 participants (82 per cent) who started the intervention going on to complete it. Practical factors that delivery staff and claimants felt aided retention included running the course over short days (10am to 2pm) in easily accessible locations, reimbursing travel and childcare costs, and providing lunch.
- The majority of participants (68 per cent) were male.
- Forty-five per cent of participants were aged between 30 and 49, while a further 37 per cent were aged between 50 and 59.

- The evaluation found that levels of engagement could not simply be described in terms of completion or non-completion. Claimants interviewed as part of the evaluation fell into four groups – engaged completers, disengaged completers, involuntary non-completers and voluntary non-completers. Positive group dynamics, strong facilitation and high pre-existing levels of motivation were all factors that underpinned the experiences of claimants who positively engaged with and completed the intervention. Whether the intervention was perceived to be voluntary or mandatory was also important, with group dynamics damaged by the perception that participation was mandatory in some instances.
- Group Work Facilitators reflected that participants who were nearer to the labour market found it easier to engage with the job search content of the intervention. The long-term unemployed or those nearing retirement age were felt to be harder to reach, and therefore, less likely to have positive job search outcomes.

Perceived impacts

- A questionnaire completed at the start and end of the intervention was used to track outcomes. The questionnaire incorporated five validated instruments to track changes in wellbeing, self-efficacy and mental health:
 - Wellbeing (WHO-5 Wellbeing Index);
 - Work self-efficacy (Job Search Self Efficacy Index (JSSE); General Self Efficacy Scale (GSE));
 - Mental health Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7 Item Scale (GAD-7); Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9).
- All five measures showed improvements between pre- and post-test scores. In terms of participant characteristics, being aged '50 years and over' was associated with lower scores in self-related job search self-efficacy compared to those aged '30-49' ($p < 0.05$). No differences were found in relation to gender.
- Findings from qualitative interviews with claimants identified a number of factors that underpinned positive outcomes including positive group dynamics, skilled facilitation and active learning techniques. Where these features were absent, positive outcomes were less evident.
- To aid engagement and retention, careful consideration should be given to how the intervention is marketed, avoiding references to 'psychological' support. Other measures that were found to facilitate engagement included accessible venues, reimbursement of travel costs, and provision of childcare.
- Fidelity to the JOBS II model was undermined by limited Facilitator training. Careful selection of Facilitators and adequate training and supervision could significantly improve the overall intervention delivery.
- Facilitators recommended updating the language and terminology used in the intervention so it was more suitable for participants in the UK. They also recommended updating material to include digital job search and volunteering opportunities and increasing the explicit wellbeing content.
- Key to larger-scale piloting will be clarity around the 'core components' of the intervention and where there is flexibility to fit local contexts.

Conclusion

- Analysis of five validated instruments that tracked changes in wellbeing, self-efficacy and mental health showed improvements between participants' pre- and post-test scores. However, as a single-group study that lacked a comparison group, the quantitative results emerging do not allow us to conclude that the observed positive change in outcomes is due to the Group Work intervention. A full impact evaluation is needed, with a control group in the case of a randomised controlled trial, or a comparison group in the case of a quasi-experimental design.
- A larger-scale trial of Group Work should focus on understanding how (and which) claimants are recruited to participate in the intervention, and whether a valid comparison sample can be selected.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 911003 01 4. Research Report 905. September 2015).

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