

Evaluation of MES – Jobcentre Case Studies, Year 2

Research Summary

GHK, as a member of the Performance Partnership, was commissioned to undertake a qualitative research study of the impact of the Modernising Employment Service (MES) programme on Jobcentres' and their local partners' business processes. The study forms one of six projects from the overall evaluation of the MES programme.

A staged case study approach was chosen to provide an early assessment of the impact of all MES related developments – Jobpoints, Employer Direct Customer Service Centres (CSCs), InformES/Business Information System (BIS), Apply Direct - on the Jobcentres' and their local partners' business processes and resourcing. The intention was to inform the continued development of IT and to ensure that the ES, and now Jobcentre Plus, capitalise fully on the benefits that flow from MES.

This summary presents the key findings from the third and final sweep of case studies based on qualitative interviews with Jobcentre staff, district office staff and partner organisations. Visits to Jobcentres were undertaken during July and August 2002. A report of the first year's research was published in July 2002, WAE122.

The objectives of the research were to:

- Identify any changes in Jobcentre performance, work processes, and the nature and composition of the business which result from all MES related developments
- Assess the impact of MES related changes on Jobcentre staff and partners.

Key Findings

- Overall, satisfaction levels with the MES programme remained high among Jobcentre staff, as the programme has in fact modernised local offices with the introduction of new technology.
- It has been possible to identify areas in which the MES programme appears to have contributed to the efficiency and effectiveness of Jobcentres and Jobcentre Plus as a whole, e.g. through greater accessibility to vacancy information.
- Jobcentre staff presented mixed views about improvements to efficiency: some developments had led to improvements whilst others had had adverse effects.
- The majority however reported that the MES programme has improved customer service, particularly for Jobseekers who are motivated and able to use self-service facilities.
- Some dissatisfaction was noted due to perceived ineffectiveness of certain MES initiatives, such as Employer Direct or the Appointment Booking System (ABS).
- The re-occurrence of some issues over the time of research suggests that early problems were not solved through the bedding-in process, but their resolution may present real opportunities to increase the effectiveness of MES.

Sweep 3 – MES year two, 2002

The MES programme continued to bring further changes to local Jobcentres in the six months between fieldwork Sweeps 2 and 3, including the completion of the roll-out of Jobpoint telephony, the launch of Apply Direct, Labour Market System (LMS) release 15, the re-branding of Jobseeker Direct, and the virtual network of Employer Direct. These developments were regarded as significantly smaller in their impact compared with changes provided by Jobpoints and Employer Direct.

Technical and operational issues reported by the staff interviewed were minor. The technology was reported to be reliable. Current problems included the slowing down of LMS, a range of issues around ABS not working effectively, and the search functionality of Jobpoints not addressing certain needs. Issues around skills deficits of staff using IT in general and also specific applications, BIS in particular, were also identified.

Jobcentres increasingly rely on other parts of Jobcentre Plus, particularly Jobseeker Direct and Employer Direct, and consequently need to work with these new service divisions. Issues around the working relationship between Jobcentres and Employer Direct CSCs identified in earlier reports had improved in certain offices, particularly those that also reported to be closely liaising with the CSC and that had undertaken exchange visits to establish mutual understanding and trust.

Impacts on resources and staff roles

Resource pressures identified during Sweep 2 had improved slightly by the time of Sweep 3, especially through

the availability of telephony, which allows waiting customers to ring Jobseeker Direct (JSD) instead of waiting for a member of staff to become available. This was seen to have helped particularly Response to Displayed Vacancies (RDV) during busy times such as lunchtime. There were, however, other issues which raised the question of whether MES had generated the resource-saving benefits it intended, as offices continue to be involved in activities which should have become obsolete (e.g. follow-up) and as some applications do not work as effectively as anticipated (e.g. ABS, Jobpoints).

Impacts of the MES programme on individual staff roles varied. For example, with Jobseekers increasingly carrying out their own job searches, frontline staff reported undertaking fewer job searches themselves. This has, however, not necessarily reduced enquiries about vacancies. Jobpoints particularly were viewed as attracting additional people into some Jobcentres, such as employed people at lunch time.

In contrast, Advisers dealing with harder to help Jobseekers have seen fewer changes in their jobsearch activities, as less motivated customers are less likely to use any of the self-service facilities. Self-service facilities are also not effective for all Jobseekers, as some experience difficulties using them, for example due to low basic skill levels or inappropriate search functions.

The role of Employment Service Systems Administrators (ESSA) continues to be impacted on greatly by the increased level of technology within offices. As a result staff carrying out this role need to spend more time on ESSA related duties.

At the time of Sweep 3 of fieldwork the role of Vacancy Service Managers (VSMs) seemed to vary slightly across the case study offices, depending on a

number of factors. Where the quality of vacancy information continued to be an issue, VSMs were involved in this to a greater extent. The same applied to the follow-up process. Part-time VSMs also needed to prioritise this role with other duties, but the focus of VSMs across all offices appeared to be on servicing and filling vacancies.

Impacts on business processes, services and performance

As the MES programme provided staff and customers with increased choices to access vacancy information, there is some scope for local office staff to influence customers' methods of job search. For example, all visitors to the Jobcentres are reportedly encouraged to use Jobpoints; telephony allows customers to ring JSD while in the offices; and the marketing of various services increases customers' awareness of them. Two offices had supported this by employing a floorwalker to direct customers, as well as to provide support in the use of Jobpoints.

Other business processes have also been affected by MES, for example:

- Job searches carried out by frontline staff, however some offices also reported increases in the overall number of enquiries.
- Vacancy display – Jobpoints allow for immediate and up-to-date display with a greater amount of information available, but issues were still raised about the quality of vacancy information now taken by CSCs. In addition, some offices presented latest local vacancies on a display board as this search is not possible on Jobpoints, but requested by Jobseekers.

The majority of interviewees reported that the MES programme has improved customer service,

particularly for Jobseekers who are motivated and able to use self-service facilities. Mixed views were again presented about the effect of MES on services to employers, although opinions have gradually improved over the course of all three stages of fieldwork.

It has been possible to identify areas in which the MES programme appears to have contributed to the efficiency and effectiveness of Jobcentres and Jobcentre Plus as a whole, e.g. through greater accessibility to vacancy information. Overall, Jobcentre staff presented mixed views about this as they identified improvements by some developments and adverse effects by others.

Impacts on partner organisations

Similarly to previous Sweeps, little impact on partners could be identified, perhaps due to the fact that many were training providers or programme centres that deal with harder-to-help Jobseekers. The MES programme has mainly changed the way they access vacancy information (i.e. through the Internet), although some Jobcentres continue to provide vacancy lists by fax or email. Partners' views on various issues also mirrored those of Jobcentre staff.

Suggestions for improvement and conclusions

Overall, satisfaction levels with the MES programme remained high among Jobcentre staff, as the programme has in fact modernised local offices with the introduction of new technology. However, satisfaction levels were lowered because of perceived ineffectiveness of certain initiatives, such as Employer Direct or ABS.

Throughout the three Sweeps Jobcentre staff identified areas in which various MES products could be improved, e.g. search functions of Jobpoints, increased access to email. The re-occurrence of some of these issues over the time of the research indicates that these issues were not solved through the bedding-in process of the various MES developments, but could provide a real opportunity to increase the effectiveness of MES.

At the time of Sweep 3 Jobpoints were still regarded by interviewees as having had the main impact on Jobcentres. Employer Direct was viewed as having changed the relationship between employers and Jobcentre Plus as a whole, and local offices in particular. Although Jobcentres were still involved in servicing employers, the removal of employer-related business processes shifted their focus towards Jobseekers. Additionally, Jobcentres have changed from being the sole provider to providing one of a number of alternatives for Jobseekers to access vacancies held by Jobcentre Plus.

Overall, the Internet Job Bank appears to have had little impact on Jobcentres. Although increased use has been reported over the last year by Jobcentre staff, reports of Jobseekers enquiring about vacancies they had found on the website were significantly lower than enquiries based on Jobpoint searches. Jobseekers who use the Internet Job Bank are believed to ring Jobseeker Direct rather than visiting a Jobcentre.

Most staff interviewed for Sweep 3 reported that Apply Direct had not had a great impact on local offices, due to relatively low take-up and the short time it had been in place. It was however expected that this would change in the future, and consequently affect Jobcentres greatly, as this service reduces the need for

Jobseekers to contact staff about vacancies.

Although this was the final report of Jobcentre case studies, the IT development programme still continues, for example through future LMS releases, and planned changes to the websites and other applications.