

Research Summary

This report provides the findings from Phase Three of the qualitative surveys of employers and case studies of the Customer Service Centres (CSCs). It focuses on progress that has been made since the inception of Employer Direct and compares the findings with the earlier two phases of fieldwork.

The objectives were to explore recent experiences of placing vacancies, determine what influences employers' satisfaction, assess whether the service had improved and explore staff perceptions at CSCs

Interviews were undertaken with 35 employers, 30 of whom had been interviewed in Phase One and/or Phase Two and five new employers were secured in the Trowbridge Jobcentre area. Interviews were also undertaken with all grades of staff at five Customer Service Centres (CSCs).

The three phases of the qualitative employer survey and CSC case studies have highlighted a number of different issues, some of which have persisted and some of which have been addressed. In general, as employers and staff alike have become more familiar with the Employer Direct service, satisfaction levels have increased.

Main Findings

- Employers' main concern throughout the research has been the quality of candidates. This is also the most important determinant of their satisfaction with a recruitment channel.
- The submission of poor quality candidates can be due to labour market conditions and the (un)attractiveness of certain

vacancies to candidates, but it may also be due to inappropriate submissions.

- Employer dissatisfaction may also be caused by inaccurate perceptions of how much screening and matching of candidates Jobcentre Plus can and does do. Jobcentre Plus needs to give consideration to its communication with employers and influencing their expectations.
- Operational issues raised by CSC staff in the earlier phases of the research have largely been addressed but there remain some issues around HR policies.
- The CSC recruitment process does not test for relevant skills so people without those skills were initially recruited and in this phase managers reported that temporary staff with appropriate skills could not be recruited because they could not get through the process. Managers – especially those where staff turnover was a problem - also felt they needed more flexibility to reward staff to motivate and retain them.
- The central call-handling system currently routes calls on the basis of each CSC's resources. This is less efficient as calls are not routed to CSCs where staff are better at taking calls.
- The follow-up information provided by employers is very variable and in some cases is unusable. Collecting it is very resource intensive and if the case study evidence is representative of wider experience it may be that the results do not justify the resource currently given.

Executive Summary

This report provides the findings from Phase Three of the qualitative surveys of employers and case studies of the Customer Service Centres (CSCs). It focuses on progress that has been made since the inception of Employer Direct (ED) and compares the findings with the earlier two phases of fieldwork.

This project is one of a number examining the impact of the MES programme. These projects together form the overall evaluation of the MES programme.

The objectives of this part of the research were to:

- Explore recent experiences of placing vacancies with Jobcentre Plus.
- Determine what factors influence employers' willingness to notify vacancies and identify changes.
- Assess whether the general level of service to employers has improved.
- Explore the staff perceptions of the impact of CSCs.

Interviews were undertaken with 35 employers, 30 of whom had been interviewed in Phase One and/or Phase Two and five new employers were secured in the Trowbridge Jobcentre area. All 35 employers had recruited someone within the last six months, but five were non-users of Jobcentre Plus services.

Interviews were also undertaken with all grades of staff at five Customer Service Centres (CSCs). Interviewees included Managers, Deputy Managers, Team Leaders, Deputy Team Leaders, quality controllers and Customer Service Advisers (CSAs).

The following sections highlight the key findings of the report.

Recruitment Practices

As in earlier phases, the research found that recruitment channels changed as one moves up the occupational 'hierarchy' in terms of the nature and level of job and that employers only tend to change channels when one fails, although there were some who have increased their use of a particularly successful channel. The main determinant of satisfaction was the quality of candidate a channel produced.

Perceptions of the Jobcentre Plus 'Offer'

Employers thought Jobcentre Plus offered access to a wider range of candidates (both by geography and type), matched candidates, provided a free alternative to newspapers and handled some parts of the recruitment process. However, perceptions of Jobcentre Plus are quite outdated – very few employers have recently visited Jobcentres and most said that they had not received any marketing materials for Jobcentre Plus

Experience of Employer Direct

General

As would be expected, overall awareness of MES products was higher than in Phase Two, particularly the new Vacancy Taking arrangements. All employers said ED was easy to use and a number said it was better than the old system – a big change from the earlier phases. Employers mentioned speed, understanding, and professionalism as things that had improved. The unsuitability of candidates remained the major concern of employers, but fewer employers reported the number of candidates not turning up as a problem

Vacancy Taking

All employers felt it was either easier to get through to ED or the same as it had been at Jobcentres. Regular users felt that understanding of their requirements had improved and most employers said the process was now much quicker. Most employers preferred to use the phone to contact Jobcentre Plus – a change from previous phases when more said they preferred faxes or emails. A significant number of employers still expect to see all the candidates that Jobcentre Plus submits and do not understand that many submissions are effectively expressions of interest. Most employers do not want a limit on the number of candidates submitted.

Vacancy Filling

Views on the screening and matching that Jobcentre Plus does were very mixed – some said there was very little, others that it was their main reason for using Jobcentre Plus. A very small number thought it had improved since the earlier phases but the quality of candidates was the major concern in all three phases. Around three-quarters of employers said matching was more important than speed or the number of candidates they got.

Follow-up

Employers who were offered a choice about how they did follow-up were most satisfied with the process and most did not consider the process too onerous although some who placed large numbers of vacancies did. Very few employers had had the process and its purpose explained to them but some recognised it was needed by Jobcentre Plus and they had to do it in return for using the service.

Organisation and Environment

All five CSCs visited now have multi-function teams (vacancy taking and follow up) and the resource split between the two functions had settled at 50:50 but varied around that in the short term. In general staff are happier with how the CSCs are operating and most felt CSC performance had improved qualitatively and quantitatively since the earlier phases. Staff turnover remains a problem in tight labour markets where the use of temporary staff naturally increases it but sickness levels have improved since Phase Two. Managers feel they need greater flexibility in recruitment and staff career development and to adopt some private sector practices, including staff performance incentives

Vacancy Taking

The model forecasting how many staff are required to take vacancies was perceived by staff to have been more inaccurate since the Virtual Network (VN) was rolled out. Views were mixed on the impact of the VN. Some felt it made managing easier, others said harder and some CSAs felt it had reduced pressure and others that it had increased it.

Submissions

The default submission limit on vacancies has increased to 50 but is not being consistently implemented – some CSAs continue to use their judgment or ask employers. CSC staff felt the number of submissions had increased as well and this meant Follow Up took longer and caused more vacancies to be suspended.

Performance and Quality

CSCs are generally not monitoring employer satisfaction in any formal way. Anecdotally CSAs felt that employers were generally satisfied but that the most common complaint was the quality of candidates. Some work has been done with Jobcentre advisers to improve the quality and relevance of submissions. A national quality framework has been rolled out that has had a significant impact, increasing the proportion of completely accurate vacancies markedly.

Follow Up

CSCs have taken different approaches to finding out what happens to clients referred to employers – some allocated it daily, some give areas or employers to certain members of staff. Some Jobcentres have retained involvement in the process, although this can lead to confusion and duplication. Most CSCs have a backlog of follow-up most of the time – this was thought to have increased because of the increased submissions limit and because there is one CSC not on the VN each day which means the others need more resource on vacancy taking and so have less on follow-up. CSAs reported huge differences in the feedback they get from employers on what happens to candidates. Very little of it is complete and/or correct and so CSAs are required to use their judgment, which they are doing in very different ways.

Conclusions

Overall Phase Three found that employers are happier with how the service works than they were in the earlier phases, with some comparing it favourably to the service they used to get from Jobcentres. However, there

are some outdated perceptions for Jobcentre Plus to overcome. The suitability of candidates remains employers' main complaint, but there appears to have been a very small improvement in this since earlier phases.

Staff at CSCs are generally happier about how the CSCs are now operating, and their overall environment. Earlier concerns about CSCs being too much like a private sector call centre have diminished – staff are less frightened by targets and recognise they are used to measure and improve performance rather than as a basis for, for example, disciplining or removing staff. Related to this increase in happiness is a fall in sickness and in some cases turnover – the staff that are there want to be there. However, staff turnover remains a problem for some CSCs and they felt they needed a different approach to HR management.

There are some issues about the freedom CSCs are given to manage locally and how much is centrally or regionally directed, particularly around HR policies and resources. CSCs have taken different approaches to new management grades, and to how resources are split between functions. For some, the volume of calls is a problem, especially those there are not fully staffed, and the Virtual Network is currently operating below maximum efficiency by ensuring that each CSC does its correct share of calls.

There are also issues around the follow-up process. The information on candidates returned by employers is often unreliable but is time-consuming to collect. There may therefore be better ways of getting the useful information, including improvements to the forms sent to employers, and explaining more clearly what is expected of employers. How the information is used could also

be improved by giving improved guidance to CSAs on what in particular to seek and use.