

HOW TO GUIDE: The Qualities of a Good Employment Support Worker

1. Introduction

Within the activities of Supported Employment there are a wide range of tasks and roles expected of its workforce. The traditional approach to the Supported Employment model is to provide consistent support from customer engagement and referral through to independent working wherever possible. This consistency is important to developing and maintaining relationships and maximising skills development and social integration within the workplace.

Some employment services split the various tasks into specialist roles carried out by different staff, each with their own job description. This paper covers support offered throughout the customer journey and is intended to offer guidance to commissioners and service managers on the recruitment of employment support workers.

In this paper the term Employment Support Worker is used to denote the role of supporting a job seeker from referral to independent working in the open labour market. The term 'job coach' is often used in this context but the European Union of Supported Employment defines this role as specific to providing in-work support and is therefore only applicable to a part of the overall customer journey.

Employment Support Workers need to have the ability and skills to undertake customer assessments, provide vocational information and guidance, develop personalised action plans, engage with and canvass employers at different management levels, have an awareness of risk assessment and workplace health and safety, provide initial and on-going training around personal and vocational skills, and have a strong knowledge of the wide range of discrete support services and be able to gain access to this where required.



Figure 1: *Illustration of the various roles associated with employment support*

Staff may enter the profession from a wide range of backgrounds and may or may not have relevant qualifications. Employment Support Workers should be able to gain specialist qualifications according to their national qualification frameworks but a qualification should not necessarily be a pre-requisite to entering the profession. Indeed, having the right attitudes is the most important attribute of Employment Support Workers.

Some agencies commonly recruit staff from within the social care environment but there is anecdotal evidence that knowledge of disability issues can be acquired whereas the attitudes cannot always be easily taught. The list of job roles described in figure 1 does not include that of disability expert and it may be that focussing during recruitment on

the basic attitudes required, will lead to selecting staff members who can acquire the skills and knowledge but already have a strong underlying set of social values and core beliefs. This assumption opens up a wider pool of potentially effective Employment Support Workers. Many agencies have reported the successful recruitment of staff from commercial or sales backgrounds. There is an argument to suggest that people who have not worked in disability support services are more open to ideas and have higher expectations of the job seeker.

A range of professional qualifications are being offered across Europe but there has been little pan-European discussion about the requirements of the workforce. This paper is intended to stimulate discussion around the content of workforce qualifications and exactly what makes a good Employment Support Worker.

This paper discusses the personal qualities and characteristics, skills and knowledge that Employment Support Workers are expected to bring to the Supported Employment. It also discusses issues related to the role of the organisation in employing and supporting its workforce. It must be recognised that each country has distinct legislative and cultural contexts and there may be differing expectations as to the roles and responsibilities of Employment Support Workers. Attached to this guide is a template of an example of a Job Description¹ for an Employment Support Worker that may be of use to Supported Employment service managers when they are considering recruiting new Supported Employment staff.

2. Personal Qualities and Characteristics

The job of Employment Support Worker involves a wide range of roles. The worker may have to be an assessor, salesman, trainer, coordinator, counsellor, mentor and negotiator all combined in one person. Given that it is rare to find someone who has previous experience of all of the roles, there needs to be a debate about what sort of previous experience is potentially valuable to the Supported Employment sector. It may be that personal attributes or attitudes are more relevant than, and just as important as, previous work experience.

Those job seekers who are most disadvantaged in the labour market may have grown up with low expectations of working. Sometimes, their carers, teachers and support workers may not have fully supported their work aspirations. The Employment Support Worker might have to address these low expectations and it is vital that they have a clear focus on achieving an appropriate and sustainable job outcome for that job seeker. The Employment Support Worker must believe that the job seeker can achieve employment.

¹ See Appendix - Template - Job Description - Employment Support Worker

An Employment Support Worker has to liaise over time with a range of stakeholders, including job seekers, employers, co-workers and support services. They have to earn the trust of others in order to achieve positive outcomes and this is often dependent on the quality of relationships that are built and maintained. They may have to deal with sensitive issues and so approachability, tact and credibility are essential.

Employment Support Workers are responsible for mentoring job seekers and employers and so must demonstrate a high level of personal ethics and principles. They must be able to demonstrate a passion for their role and be creative as they seek to work in partnership with others to overcome barriers.

A good Employment Support Worker will seek to empower the job seeker; treating them with respect and showing dignity by encouraging the maximum involvement in their individual plans. Stereotypes can be avoided by using a person-centred approach and taking full account of each person's individuality.

High levels of customer service are vital. It may take years for a Supported Employment service to gain a strong reputation amongst employers but this can quickly be undone if unsatisfactory staff activity leads to poor levels of customer satisfaction. It is important to pay attention to the finer detail of services offered. Going that bit extra in terms of customer service also drives repeat business with employers and other partners.

Staff must be able to work within the context of service targets and must take responsibility for their part in achieving those targets. Many staff from a commercial background thrive under this pressure.

Supported Employment agencies should have some form of quality assurance process and Employment Support Workers must be able to understand how their actions contribute to the quality of the service. They must have insight into their role in generating and maintaining quality services and be able to contribute to the overall quality of services by setting a good example to colleagues.

Stamina and persistence are useful qualities for Employment Support Workers. It can be very disheartening when Employment Support Workers get continual negative responses from employers when they are searching for job opportunities. It is important that service managers recognise the potential impact of this on their workers and provide appropriate support.

Employment Support Workers require regular opportunities to discuss their work with colleagues and line managers. This can be achieved through formal supervision and appraisal systems. This support is important in maintaining the motivation and drive of individual staff. In some countries, internal and external counselling augments this support.

Finally, Employment Support Workers must also be flexible. We are increasingly moving towards a 24 hour economy and support may be required at weekends and outside the 9-5 of many office jobs. This has implications for contractual terms and conditions of Supported Employment staff.

3. Skills

As previously discussed, the quality of relationships is a key indicator of success and it is crucial that Employment Support Workers have the communication and interpersonal skills needed to initiate and maintain relationships with a wide variety of people from company directors to shop floor workers, from job seekers to their family members/carers.

Staff must be prepared to network widely and initiate discussions with employers, partner agencies and other stakeholders to create the innovation and opportunities that are needed to offer a high quality service to customers.

A successful Employment Support Worker must be able to inspire confidence and have the skills to negotiate job opportunities. They can only do this if they have a strong belief that success is only a matter of raising expectations, overcoming barriers and identifying solutions. They must be able to encourage, inspire, cajole and enforce and the personal qualities needed for this should not be underestimated. Indeed, the ability to demonstrate these skills should be actively tested during staff recruitment and selection.

It is impossible to be an expert in every vocational area and yet services place job seekers into jobs and work experience opportunities across all vocational sectors. The Employment Support Worker must be able to quickly identify the essential and critical components of each job role so that they can offer discrete training or supplement the training offered by employers.

Good observation and analysis skills can help with the early resolution of any difficulties in the workplace. These skills are vital to the successful integration of a disabled employee and are greatly enhanced by having a detailed knowledge of task analysis, systematic instruction and an understanding of the relevant practical issues.

Employment Support Workers may need to support change management within employing companies. They must inspire the confidence of company management and should be able to collect and analyse data and prepare written reports to a high standard.

Employment Support Workers may have to negotiate with different levels of management in order to arrange work experience placements, secure employment, negotiate reasonable adjustments to job duties, deal with harassment issues, enlist support for addressing development plans, support co-workers and so on. An Employment Support Worker may have to manage the different perspectives and expectations of the employee, employer and family members and so they must be able to negotiate

and resolve conflicts to everyone's satisfaction.

The social integration of disadvantaged employees is critical to successful outcomes and a good Employment Support Worker will have the skills to foster this without making themselves the centre of attention.

Equally, Employment Support Workers need to be able to deal with sensitive matters such as disciplinary procedures, deficits in health and safety practice, personal hygiene issues and the disclosure of confidential information in a way that is respectful but firm.

Workers are often operating on their own for long periods and must be able to structure and manage their time effectively. Being able to organise and prioritise are key skills for Employment Support Workers.

4. Knowledge

In order to succeed, the Employment Support Worker must be able to network in a complex working arena combining the interest of the job seeker and the employer by finding the necessary support from the service network.

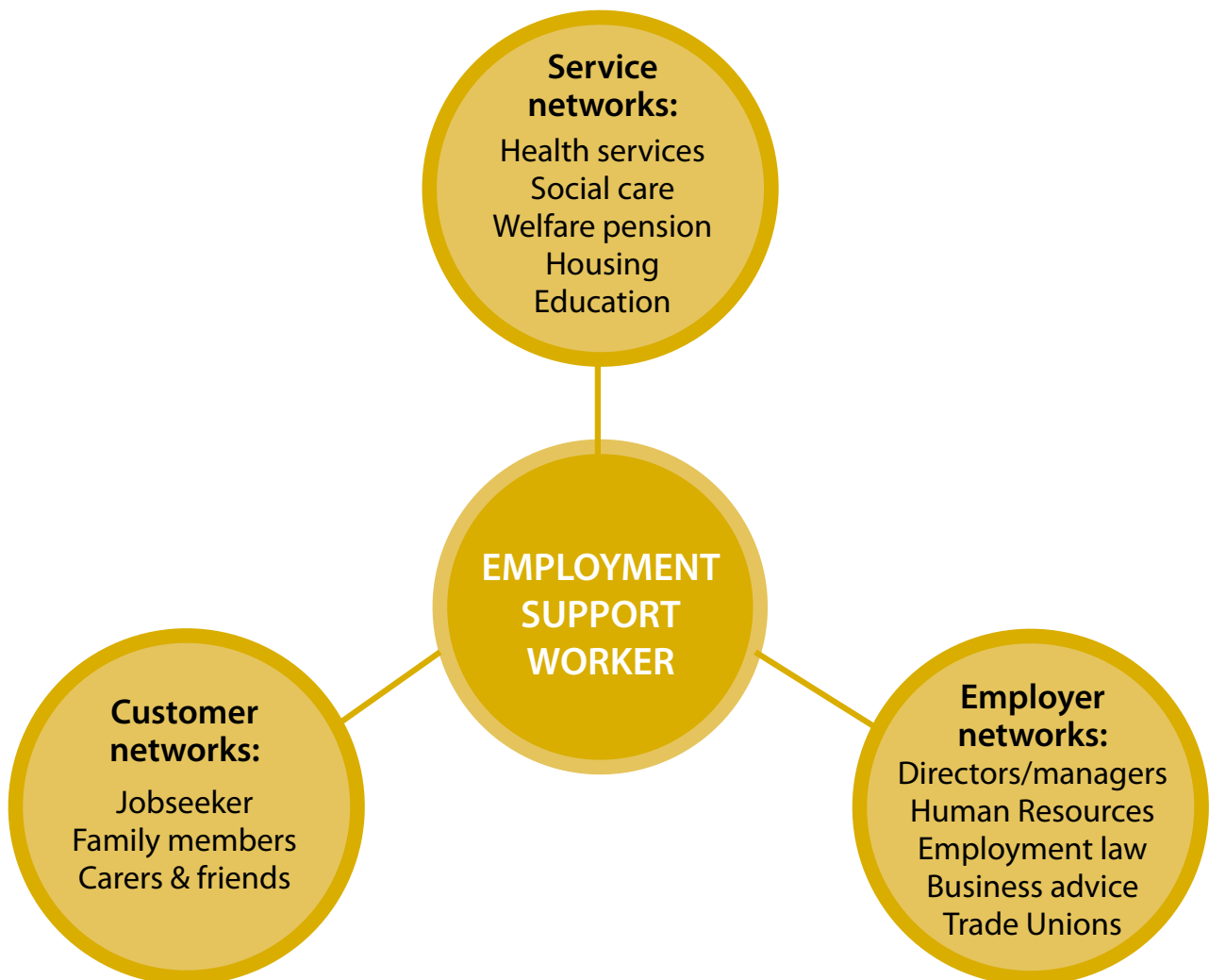


Figure 2: Illustration of the networks that Employment Support Workers liaise with.

The worker has to satisfy the needs of both the job seeker and the employer, both of whom are key customers for Supported Employment agencies.

It is not essential that incoming staff have high levels of knowledge of disability or personal experience of working within disability services. This is knowledge that can be acquired through induction and ongoing development and that is critical to the success of a good Employment Support Worker.

Increasingly, it is important that staff have an overview of the complexity and mechanics of welfare benefit entitlement and in-work financial supports so that they can offer advice on better-off calculations and maximise income levels for job seekers/employees. Staff need to know how to access specialist advice around the detailed financial implications of working.

They must also have an awareness of employment law and anti-discrimination legislation in their respective country because they will need to be alert to issues of exploitation, harassment and discrimination within the workplace.

Services have a duty of care to their job seekers when placing them in a workplace. Health and safety is primarily the employer's responsibility but Employment Support Workers should ensure that employers are meeting their health and safety and insurance responsibilities and that any risks have been assessed to ensure that the employee is able to work safely. This may involve supporting employers to meet their responsibilities.

Employers may have little experience of successfully recruiting significantly disabled employees. They may be influenced by media stereotypes and some of the common myths around health and safety, sickness levels and support needs. The Employment Support Worker must be able to give relevant information to the employer, and co-workers if appropriate. They must be aware of legislation and equal opportunities principles to work against these stereotypes and find solutions.

There are technical aspects to the role of Employment Support Worker. Staff must be aware of the eligibility issues, data and reporting needs and practical requirements of funding measures. They must be able to compile concise but comprehensive reports, maintain database information, record minutes of meetings and communicate action plans to stakeholders.

Perhaps one of the most important requirements is the awareness that the job seeker/employee has a private life outside of services. They have a right to expect their privacy to be respected and Employment Support Workers must recognise the limits of their support and involvement. They must be able to respect an individual's confidentiality. They are not the best friend of the job seeker/employee and passion and commitment must be tempered by understanding the boundaries of their role.

Many disabled employees experience a reduction in social care support once they start working and can become reliant on Employment Support Workers for general advice and guidance. It is important that the Employment Support Worker understands the

range of specialist and general provision available locally from other services and can access them as needed.

Reflective Questions

The following questions are intended to initiate further discussions and should help service managers to reflect their methods and approaches:

- When recruiting staff what is the most important quality? Experience, formal qualification or personality?
- Where should you advertise to ensure you attract the best possible candidates?
- How can you make sure that your staff have the necessary soft skills and attitudes?
- How can you ensure a good quality induction for new staff?
- What are appropriate ways to support your staff to cope with the challenges of their job?

Tips for Supported Employment Service Managers

This How to Guide was developed by practitioners for practitioners. Therefore the listed “Useful Tips” and “Things to Avoid” should help readers to benefit from the authors’ experience:

Useful Tips:

- Implement a mentoring system using experienced staff to ensure good quality induction for new staff
- Provide opportunities for ongoing career development
- It can be a lonely job – support your staff
- Ensure supervision and appraisal systems are in place
- Get out with your staff to see what life is like from their point of view
- Support Supported Employment Workers when they are feeling demotivated
- Encourage peer support
- Provide feedback on situations and achievements to the Employment Support Worker
- Celebrate success, give praise

Things to Avoid:

- Avoid emphasising the need for formal qualifications and/or experience rather than personality and soft skills
- Avoid that heavy workloads means reduced time for team discussion, problem-solving and learning

TEMPLATE - Job Description *(for example purposes only)*

Job Title - Employment Support Worker

Job Purpose

Provision of a Supported Employment service for people with disabilities and health issues adhering to the 5 stage process of the Supported Employment model and the values and standards of Supported Employment.

Maintain and manage an active caseload ensuring that the values and principles of Supported Employment are upheld.

Main Duties

Client

1. Identify and attract suitable clients for Supported Employment.
2. Work with clients on a one to one basis using a person centred approach.
3. Compile a vocational profile which will establish the client's skills and expectations and identify barriers and support needs. Develop an Employment Action Plan.
4. Identify suitable jobs through discussions with both client and employers.
5. Organise time limited Work Experience Placements when appropriate and in accordance with client needs. Provide support and monitor progress.
6. Provide information regarding welfare benefits and the financial implications of paid employment.
7. Provide appropriate support and training to enable clients to secure and sustain paid employment.
8. Provide aftercare through ongoing support.

Networking

1. Develop a network of contacts and build relationships with Health Professionals, Social Services, Labour Offices, Welfare Benefit experts etc to assist with the referral, assessment and support of job seekers.
2. Work with employers to develop employment opportunities through a range of support initiatives.
3. Raise awareness of Supported Employment through presentations, attendance at meetings/events and marketing.

Develop and awareness of:

1. Disability and employment issues.
2. Topics relating to employment including relevant Government employment programmes
3. The current local job market and employer needs
4. Recruitment and selection techniques
5. Income maximisation including welfare benefits
6. Retention and Redeployment issues.