

My working day

I AM an occupational psychologist employed by Jobcentre Plus, part of the Department for Work and Pensions, in the South East of England. The Department is the largest employer of occupational psychologists in the UK and currently employs about 60 work psychologists. Each district in our region employs a work psychologist (WP) to help meet their targets by directly and indirectly supporting Jobcentre Plus staff, customers and employers.

What makes my role as a WP different from other occupational psychologists is the range of activities – including development and upskilling, marketing and partnership working, service development and evaluation, and professional development – as well as the main customer group with whom I work, individuals who are ‘disadvantaged’ by a health condition or disability. I implement psychological interventions and develop a service that is an integral part of a work-focused approach to assisting individuals with a disability with their work-related needs.

To do this I need to develop good working relationships and communicate effectively with a range of stakeholders including jobseekers, employment advisers, employers and health professionals. I need to be able to communicate information clearly and concisely both in writing and verbally to stakeholders, most of whom do not have a background in psychology. I need to be able to work effectively as part of a team (being able to lead and facilitate groups when appropriate) and with individuals on a one to one basis.

Listening skills are essential in being able to understand the needs of jobseekers, and in order to design a personalised assessment process that meets their individual requirements. I need to understand the work-related implications of a variety of health conditions and disabilities, in order to develop fair and effective methods to assess my customers ability and find practical work solutions to reduce the impact of specific impairments.

My working day is ‘typical’ only to the extent that every day is different. Travel and flexibility are integral parts of my work, which is delivered in a variety of settings:

- at a Jobcentre Plus office to meet with a customer for a discussion and/or assessment;



MOIRA COATES on her life as a work psychologist for Jobcentre Plus.

- at a training venue to deliver a workshop for advisers;
- at an employer’s premises to perform an employment intervention;
- at a district office meeting with a Jobcentre Plus managers;
- at my office base, where I complete administrative and other general tasks.

My working week is planned to incorporate a combination of these responsibilities according to current needs.

Yesterday I may have provided a training event; frequent topics include the employment needs of individuals with acquired brain injuries, mental health difficulties, general and specific learning difficulties. I undertake regular training, coaching and mentoring of Jobcentre Plus staff to enable them to deal efficiently and effectively with employers and disadvantaged customers. I use formal and informal training needs analyses to identify gaps. Formal training needs analyses involve using tools such as questionnaires, focus groups, job descriptions and person specifications to elicit competencies associated with a specific job role and find the essential knowledge, skills and attributes required to perform the job successfully. Each individual is then assessed against these (e.g. through observation, critical incident analyses and results of performance reviews) and specific individual upskilling and development needs are identified. Informal training needs analyses include individuals identifying gaps in their knowledge and skills and asking for specific upskilling events, or managers asking for training to improve performance with a particular customer group or when new processes and procedures are introduced.

Today I may be undertaking an employment assessment with a jobseeker – referred to the WP services via the Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs), who are based in Jobcentre Plus offices. Initially the DEA will have a conversation with me to discuss the customers difficulties with regard to their job goals.

Telephone consultations about customers are a useful way in which I am able to advise on the most appropriate ways of progressing customers, and making professional judgements as to whether a psychological intervention will expedite the process.

If I believe that an employment assessment is likely to be helpful for the individual and adviser at this stage in the jobsearch process, the DEA will then discuss a referral to the WP services and assist the customer with the completion of an application form. Referral to the WP services is voluntary and requires the individual’s consent and cooperation. I may also advise the DEA to request consent for obtaining additional information such as medical advice before proceeding with an assessment.

On receipt of the paperwork I will assess the information received and contact the customer to make an initial appointment for an interview/assessment. I usually work with jobseekers in a quiet room in their local Jobcentre Plus or in my office. At the interview I will help the individual explore their job-related goals and assess how realistic these goals are in relation to abilities, circumstances and the local labour market. I have incorporated standard psychological measures into my interview process allowing me to assess general learning needs, mood, specific effects of their health condition/disability, social support and psychological well-being. The length of the interview depends on what information I need to elicit and what I already have available (e.g. medical reports and CVs).

In order to obtain objective information about their skills in relation to job goals I will use psychometric and practical tests (with the individual’s consent). An explanation is given to the customer about any tests they are asked to complete, using everyday language. Ensuring confidentiality and correct usage of psychological test materials is an important part of my role. The time taken for assessments varies – customers are allowed

to work at their own speed and given frequent breaks to maintain attention and concentration, as well as to reduce the effects of fatigue on performance. After I have scored and interpreted these assessment tests, I feed back and review the results with the customer in relation to their job goals.

For some customers the use of tests is not appropriate. Customers for whom tests may not be appropriate include those who have recently been assessed by clinical psychologists using psychometric instruments (here we would attempt to obtain copies of any reports/results). Some customers may also have difficulties with understanding or being able to follow the instructions to complete tests due to language issues (e.g. insufficient understanding of English and tests not suitable for use with an interpreter) or cognitive issues (e.g. difficulties with receptive language leading to misinterpretation of questions or test requirements). For others suitable tests may not be available, such as when difficulties are associated with social interactions and customers require assistance with improving communication/interpersonal skills.

In these cases I will use a variety of interventions including providing information about the effects of specific impairments on employment and about technological assistance available to compensate for particular difficulties. I may also use motivational interviewing techniques to assess job readiness and help customers who are ambivalent about engaging in the job-seeking process. I may use a solution-focused approach to support individuals with complex domestic and social situations to find practical solutions to problems. I find theoretical concepts such as 'locus of control' and 'self-efficacy' useful in such interventions. I have found that the extent to which individuals believe they are in control of their lives and able to influence what happens to them appears to be closely linked to their level of commitment and perseverance with the frustrations of the job-seeking process. Belief in their ability to succeed also appears to be a vital component in their ability to obtain and

retain employment. Advisers often report that the turning point for many customers is when they begin to believe that they do have valuable workplace skills and feel increased confidence that they can and will find employment.

The outcome of an employment assessment is a written report summarising the information gained from the assessment, and giving appropriate suggestions for action and professional guidance about the need for work preparation (as discussed and agreed with the customer). The report is used to support

steps that move the jobseeker towards employment.

Where customers are having difficulty with managing the effects of their health condition or disability I may need (with customers' consent) to contact and explore additional assistance with other

professionals, voluntary sectors and other public services, such as Access to Work. Frequently, appropriate medical or social services intervention is necessary to help customers move forward.

As part of my role I also undertake employment interventions with individuals who have a disability and their employers. Criteria for employment interventions are that the employee must be at risk of losing their job (retention case) or unable to progress in the organisation (development intervention) as a result of the impact of their disability. Both the employer and employee must be committed to the process of retaining/progressing the individual in their employment. The aim of the intervention is to investigate the nature of the difficulties encountered and make suggestions of possible solutions to be implemented. Interventions include job and task analysis, assessment of the suitability of special aids and equipment, identifying cognitive techniques and strategies to help with difficulties such as memory and attention, suggesting support to facilitate

learning through training, and recommending adjustments to the work environment or, in some cases, redeployment.

Evidence-based practice is important in the delivery of my work as a psychologist. I send evaluation forms to DEAs, customers/employees and employers with the report, and again a year after the intervention. I measure satisfaction with and the impact of the WP assessment on movement into or retention of employment.

The impact of my role is difficult to demonstrate because DEAs only refer the 'hardest-to-help' customers. As Mary Dagleish has noted (see article in the *Psychologist* archive at www.bps.org.uk/ck38): 'Rates of placing clients into work are therefore not a good measure of gauging the psychologist's contribution.' However, feedback from evaluation forms does show that WPs play an important role in assessing and developing the employability of individuals, enabling them to move more independently in the labour market, which is better in the longer term and reflects the changing nature of employment in the 21st century.

I regularly consult with and learn from my colleagues, as well as seeking up-to-date published information as a guide for using and developing 'best practice'. I am constantly aware of the continual interface between operational demands/issues and my own professional development.

Tomorrow I may be attending an event to develop my skills in cognitive-behavioural techniques, which are currently being evaluated in pilot studies by WPs in other regions.

My work illustrates the increasing involvement of psychologists in assisting individuals, employers and other interested parties with the work-related issues of health, well-being and diversity. I use my psychological knowledge and skills in a variety of ways to help individuals gain and retain appropriate and sustainable work.

■ *Moira Coates is with Work Psychology Services, Jobcentre Plus, Woking. E-mail: moira.coates@jobcentreplus.gsi.gov.uk.*

WEBLINK

Work and Organizational Psychology Arena:

www.workpsychologyarena.com