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Centre for Research in  
Education Inclusion  
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# **Employers' Views of Supported Employment for Disabled People in Scotland**

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# **Executive Summary**

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## ***Introduction***

This summary report presents findings from a small scale research project undertaken by Pippa Coutts of the Scottish Union of Supported Employment whilst she was working as an Exchange Fellow at the School of Education, University of Edinburgh. The research was supervised by Professor Sheila Riddell.

## ***Disabled people and employment***

More disabled people want to be in work than are and there is an inequity between the employment rate of disabled people and the general population. Only half of the disabled population is in employment. The approach proven to enable disabled people gain and retain employment is supported employment. Supported employment is an individualised model of support with an employment focus that enables individuals to overcome barriers to work, and once in employment, provides on-going support to employers and employees. The exact number of disabled people participating in supported employment in Scotland is not known.

## ***The research***

The research took place in Scotland at the start of 2012. The researcher, the SUSE Supported Employment Development Consultant, conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with managers of supported

employees, who knew the individuals and their work well. The support currently being provided was from the government employment programme for disabled people, Work Choice.

## ***Research findings***

### **The status and take-up of supported employment in the workplace**

- The motivation for engaging with supported employment was varied, but in several cases it was around retaining existing staff. One motivation for recruiting supported employees was a desire to give disabled people greater opportunities and life chances.
- Managers reported the majority of their supported employees had been in work for more than a decade. The length of time they had stayed in work was considered an advantage by most employers.
- The traditional DWP Supported Employment Programme with its wage subsidies ended in 2001, and a surprising number of the employees had been in place before that change. Some were still receiving wage subsidies.
- Most managers in the research did not think a wage subsidy necessary to employ disabled people. However, there were only 1-2 supported employees in each workplace, which is less than 5% of employees overall.

### **The Work Choice Programme as a delivery vehicle for supported employment**

- Managers reported issues with Work Choice when they had previous experience of support from different programmes and/or agencies. They found the paperwork time-consuming, there was a perception that reviews were tick-box exercises and not enough

attention was paid to individual circumstances. In some cases, the supported employment agency was perceived to be inefficient.

- Many managers believed that the Work Choice programme did not provide sufficient on-going support for disabled people with more significant or fluctuating needs, and there was too much emphasis on moving people into unsupported employment rather than providing on-going support.

### **Characteristics of supported employees and their impact on the workplace**

- Managers generally felt people in supported employment were good employees – loyal, reliable, motivated and enthusiastic. However, in some cases it was pointed out that even if the quality of work was high, or the person skilled, the productivity of the supported employee was lower than that of other employees.
- Many of the supported employees were in entry-level jobs, for example with facilities management companies or in hotels or care homes. Their managers often saw clear advantages in having supported employees in these posts in terms of their good attendance record and strong desire to work.
- Generally, managers thought that supported employees had a positive impact on the workplace. For example:
  - Supervisors and managers acquired new skills for managing supported employees, which were transferable to wider management practice, for example, simplifying the language of company documentation to aid the understanding of all staff
  - Disabled employees could be ‘inspirational’, overcoming barriers to work and having a strong desire to work



- Making changes to accommodate disabled people could have a positive effect on everyone, e.g. the development of more flexible processes and management.

They also identified challenges around employing and supporting disabled employees. For example:

- A learning curve for the managers in terms of understanding the impact of the individual's disability, with regard to the job and workplace
- Managing disabled employees often was time-consuming, as instructions may need to be explained patiently, clearly and repeated
- The employee's health condition or the workplace could change and there were challenges to adapting to these changes, e.g. finding an appropriate new role.

Overall, managers reported that staff teams were positive about their disabled colleagues. Managers felt that in some cases staff forgot about the individual's disability and treated the supported employee as just another team member. However, there were challenges and managers reported that other employees might:

- Express frustration over the extra time required to manage or work with some supported employees
  - Perceive that supported employees were given allowances, for example leniency over relatively low productivity
  - Resent having to cover for supported employees who were absent due to illness for a long period.
- Employers and managers provided a range of support to supported employees including the following measures:

- Adapting working patterns or hours of work
- Purchasing special equipment or developing tailored workplaces
- Delivering training on a 1-to-1 basis
- Adapting communication methods to meet the individual's needs.

### **The work of supported employment agencies**

- Managers reported benefits of working with specialist supported employment agencies, including the following:
  - the employees having someone to talk to from outside the workplace
  - a sounding board or safety net for employers or a mediator between the two parties.
- Most managers reported satisfaction with the support received over time from the specialist agencies, and if the support workers had helped with specific issues like redundancy or relocation that was particularly the case.

### **The future of supported employment**

- Managers thought critical success factors included the following: building a trusting relationship between the employee and manager; the existence of a real job for the employee; a good fit between the job and the individual's skills and aspirations; and a situation which suited both the employer and the employee.
- Supported employment was not perceived as successful where, despite making adaptations, there was reduction in an employee's productivity after illness or significant periods of sickness and absence.

- Managers thought there was a definite need for supported employment. They recommended to other employers that they keep an open mind about employing a disabled person.
- Managers' recommendations to supported employment providers included the following:
  - There was a need for more training and awareness raising activities so that managers developed a better understanding of supported employment;
  - There should be a greater focus on providing individualised support ;
  - Agencies should be more proactive in identifying and meeting on-going support needs.

It is noticeable that the latter two are core elements of supported employment, as outlined in section 1.

- Research participants spoke about their own experiences, learning and views. Learning, such as the critical success factors and the challenges and benefits of employing disabled people, had not necessarily been cascaded across the whole organisation. Although most interviewees were positive about employing disabled people, this was not necessarily the case for their employer, at a strategic level.
- Most interviewees did not feel that, to date, the recession had affected the organisation's ability to recruit disabled people, although several managers mentioned that there had been a 'tightening' within the workplace. Managers pointed out that changes in the nature of work, such as needing more flexible employees and greater use of IT, meant that they might be

reaching saturation point in terms of having suitable posts for disabled employees.

## ***Discussion and conclusions***

### **The current status and uptake of supported employment in Scotland**

The research revealed there are a small number of supported employees in workplaces. It also showed that many supported employees were recruited under the Supported Employment Programme which ceased to exist more than a decade ago. This suggests a declining willingness or ability of employers to take on supported employees. This is of concern when nearly half of the managers interviewed felt their employers or industries were feeling the effect of the economic recession, and interviewees talked about the changing nature of workplaces having a negative impact on the employment of disabled people.

During the Supported Employment Programme there was a cash incentive to take-on supported employees. The European Union has recently recommended such incentives are necessary to promote employment for disabled people (COWI 2012). It concluded 'wage subsidies enhance job opportunities through Supported Employment' (COWI, 2012, p8). Many interviewees explained that motivation for engaging with supported employment was altruistic, driven by a desire to improve the life chances of disabled people. There is a danger that the good will of employers may run thin as the on-going economic downturn places huge pressures on businesses and local authorities. There is probably a case for re-examining the use of a range of incentives to encourage engagement with supported employment to stem a possible decline in its uptake.

## **The quality of jobs and career progression for supported employees**

Managers' perception that most supported employees were undertaking entry level jobs reflects the findings of other research (Ridley et al., 2005). Managers were not asked about the reason for the high preponderance of basic level posts, but it is unlikely to be because the employees were new to the job market, with many supported employees reportedly in their jobs for over a decade. It is more likely to be related to the jobs suiting the employees or limited opportunity for career development. Employees interviewed in Ridley et al.'s study reported satisfaction with their jobs, although employers rarely thought about their career development. This research with managers revealed examples of them developing individuals within their roles, but there was little evidence of career planning for disabled employees on a broader scale or of their being supported into more advanced roles.

## **The need for longer-term and individualised assistance for supported employees**

Both supported employment agencies and managers provide support to employees on an on-going basis. Generally, the support is not complex or involving specialist equipment, but involves adapting the work schedule, role or company training to enable the disabled person to perform their tasks effectively. In line with good practice in supported employment, managers maintained that support should be on-going and flexible.

## **Work Choice as the vehicle for the delivery of supported employment**

Managers were enthusiastic about the supported employment approach and they thought more supported employment should be funded. However, they were less enthusiastic about the current Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) national programme Work Choice. Some highlighted its bureaucratic approach and lack of individualised support. There was also concern about the lack of on-going support and pressure to move people into open employment as soon as possible. There were concerns that the programme did not provide sufficiently extensive support for disabled people with complex or fluctuating conditions, particularly people with mental health problems who have very low rates of employment.

### ***Implications of the research for different groups***

#### **Implications for employers**

Supported employment is the employability approach known to be successful in enabling disabled employees to gain and retain work, yet this research indicates that supported employment may be on the decline. The decline is in spite of the fact that managers regard supported employees as valuable staff members. Employing and managing supported employees is rewarding for managers, other staff members and the company. This is particularly the case when there is a good fit between the employee and the job.

It is recommended that more organisations employ supported employees, and existing employers spread the practice across their organisations. To achieve the latter, positive experiences need to be

communicated to organisations' high level managers and boards. Appropriate support for employers and employees is also required. There is a clear role for supported employment agencies and their representative bodies in making this happen. Commissioners, local and national government also have a role in promoting the development and sustainability of supported employment and its uptake within and between employers.

### **Implications for commissioners**

Strategies to reverse the decline of supported employment include ensuring that supported employment opportunities are available for all disabled individuals who wish to participate, irrespective of impairment. This would imply the need for additional opportunities to be made available beyond those which exist already through the current DWP funded Work Choice programme. It is recommended that appropriate, high quality supported employment be funded that includes incentives for employers to take on more disabled people, particularly those with more significant impairments.

### **Implications for the DWP**

Managers in the research had clear opinions about the current DWP programme Work Choice. Given that employers are central to the increased employment of disabled people, it is recommended employers and managers who have worked with DWP welfare to work programmes are included in evaluations of Work Choice and the design of the national programmes for disabled people.

It appears that employers' opinions are not often canvassed, and it is recommended that other stakeholders, including DWP, commissioners

and supported employment agencies give more time and attention to finding out and responding to employers' needs and experience.

### **Implications for supported employment providers and their networks**

The research identified a gap in terms of spreading good practice and positive experiences within workplace teams or departments across the wider organisation. It is recommended supported employment agencies and their representative bodies endeavour to engage with employers at a more strategic level to persuade them to discuss supported employment at board level rather than on a case by case basis with individual teams. The purpose would be to ask employers to commit to employing a larger number of disabled employees. Supported employment agencies would have to provide or facilitate appropriate high quality support for these employees.

This research with employers gives a clear indication that employers want the type of support promised by supported employment good practice - job matching, individualised, on-going support. This provides an argument for supported employment agencies to promote and protect quality and to provide the necessary training, opportunities for qualifications and reward structures for their staff to ensure this happens.



# **Employers' Views of Supported Employment for Disabled People in Scotland**

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Sheila Riddell, Centre for Research in Education, Inclusion and Diversity,  
University of Edinburgh

## ***Introduction***

This report presents the findings of a research study which examined employers' views and experiences of supported employment for disabled people. The study was conducted by Pippa Coutts of the Scottish Union of Supported Employment through a University of Edinburgh Exchange Fellowship<sup>1</sup>. In undertaking this work, she was supported by Professor Sheila Riddell, Director of the Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity.

The overall aim of the research was to investigate the current state of play in relation to supported employment for disabled people in Scotland. Originating in the 1970s in the USA, the aim of supported employment is to help disabled people access the open labour market by providing initial support through a job coach. Over time, the aim is to gradually withdraw the initial intensive support, until the disabled person is supported by his or her co-workers. Whereas there has been considerable focus on the way in which supported employment is experienced by disabled people themselves (see, for example, Riddell et al., 2001), much less attention has been paid to the employers' perspective. This small scale study was intended to address this gap in

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<sup>1</sup> The Exchange Fellowship Scheme within the University of Edinburgh's College of Humanities and Social Science is designed to encourage joint working and knowledge sharing between the University and public, private and third sectors.

the literature by investigating employers' views of the opportunities and challenges afforded by supported employment schemes. In particular, we wished to assess whether supported employment is currently being used to help disabled people sustain a real job, rather than participate in an endless circuit of training.

The report is structured as follows:

- Section 1 provides contextual information, outlining the current policy and practice in relation to supported employment in Scotland.
- Section 2 describes the research methods used in the study.
- Section 3 provides details of the employers we spoke to in relation to their experience of supported employment in Scotland.
- Section 4 summarises employers' perceptions of the ways in which supported employment programmes were experienced by the disabled people working within their organisations.
- Section 5 describes the types of support offered by employers and their experiences of working with supported employment agencies.
- Section 6 summarises the views of one of the major supported employment agencies working within Scotland.
- Section 7 discusses employers' views of developments which might be needed to ensure that supported employment schemes worked more effectively, particularly in the light of the current difficult economic climate.
- Section 8 draws conclusions and considers implications for a range of stakeholders.

## SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

### 1.1 *Disabled people and access to employment*

Participation in the labour market is recognised as a key means of achieving social inclusion. However, Labour Force Survey data indicate that whereas about 70% of non-disabled people are employed, only 50% of disabled people are in work (Office for Disability Issues, 2012).

Table 1 compares employment rates of disabled and non-disabled people in Great Britain over a decade.

**Table 1: Employment rates of disabled and non-disabled people, GB, 2002-2012**

	Percentage disabled	Percentage non-disabled	Percentage gap between disabled and non-disabled
<b>2002</b>	44.5	80.7	36.2
<b>2003</b>	45.4	80.7	35.3
<b>2004</b>	46.8	80.5	33.7
<b>2005</b>	47.0	80.4	33.5
<b>2006</b>	47.4	80.2	32.8
<b>2007</b>	47.2	80.0	32.7
<b>2008</b>	48.3	80.0	31.7
<b>2009</b>	47.5	77.7	30.3
Figures above from 2009 and earlier are not directly comparable to the figures for 2010 and after given below.			
<b>2010</b>	48.4	77.5	29.1
<b>2011</b>	48.8	77.5	28.7

Source: Office for Disability Issues based on LFS data

**Table 2: Employment numbers and rates of disabled and non-disabled people by country and region, July 2008-June 2009**

Country/ Region	Not disabled			Disabled		
	Total Nos.	Nos. in work	%	Nos.	Nos. in work	%
<b>Great Britain</b>	30,083.8	23,635.3	78.6	6,698.9	3,343.6	49.9
<b>England:</b>						
East	3,446.1	2,851.7	82.7	594.5	341.2	57.4
East Midlands	2,210.7	1,763.5	79.8	519.1	289.2	55.7
London	4,353.4	3,199.7	73.5	768.7	342.6	44.6
North East	1,241.7	953.3	76.8	350.5	158.1	45.1
North West	3,405.2	2,633.3	77.3	831.2	365.9	44.0
South East	4,242.9	3,467.2	81.7	823.2	490.6	59.6
South West	2,521.0	2,076.2	82.4	561.1	306.9	54.7
West Midlands	2,669.5	2,026.9	75.9	613.5	287.9	46.9
Yorks & Humber	2,595.5	2,006.9	77.3	628.4	314.1	50.0
<b>Scotland</b>	<b>2,587.2</b>	<b>2,108.7</b>	<b>81.5</b>	<b>622.2</b>	<b>292.6</b>	<b>47.0</b>
Wales	1,405.0	1,088.4	77.5	386.6	154.4	39.9

Source: LFS, May 2009, accessed through Nomis, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2010

<sup>1</sup> All numbers indicate thousands

Source: Riddell et al., 2010

Despite the low employment rate of disabled people, there is evidence to suggest that many would welcome the opportunity to participate in the labour market. For example, Stanley and Maxwell found that 86% of people with mental health conditions currently not in employment would like to work (2004). Throughout the recession, the employment rate of disabled people has remained at about 50% (Meager & Huggins, 2011). Meager and Huggins (2011) conclude that despite improved legislation and various employability initiatives, 'little progress has been made in increasing the level and quality of disabled people's labour market participation'.

The reasons for disabled peoples' low levels of employment are multiple and individuals face different barriers. However, when the employment rates of disability groups are compared by medical diagnosis, clear

impairment-related differences are evident. People with learning disabilities, autism and mental health conditions are the least likely to be employed (Riddell et al., 2010).

## **1.2 *The supported employment approach***

Over time, a range of strategies have been used to help disabled people secure employment. For example, in the wake of the Second World War, quota schemes were used to encourage employers to take on disabled employees. Such schemes are still in use in many European countries today (Riddell, 2012). Originating in the USA in the 1970s, supported employment is seen as a particularly effective means of helping disabled people into sustainable paid work (Beyer & Robinson, 2009; Perkins, Farmer & Litchfield, 2009; Wistow & Schneider, 2007). Supported employment schemes were initially used to help people with learning difficulties, but have increasingly been extended to other impairment groups such as people with long-term mental health conditions. The essence of supported employment is that the disabled person should be assisted to obtain work in the open labour market rather than a sheltered workshop, and should be paid the going rate for the job. A coach might be used initially to help the disabled person master the various aspects of the job, but this help should fade over time, to be replaced by support from co-workers.

In Scotland, supported employment represents a central plank of the Government's employment strategy for disabled people (see the *Supported Employment Framework for Scotland*, Scottish Government, 2010). The exact number of disabled people participating in supported employment in Scotland is not known.

Supported employment is defined as individualised help geared to the needs of people with disabilities, long term conditions and multiple barriers with a view to securing a sustainable, paid job in the open labour market (Scottish Government 2010).

The key components of supported employment are the following:

- The job should be in an integrated workplace
- The jobholder is paid the rate for the job
- All individuals have the right to end their dependence on benefits.

The Scottish Framework outlines the overarching principles and the following five stage approach to ensuring good practice in supported employment:

**Table 3: The Five Stage Approach to Supported Employment**

Supported Employment Stages – supporting the aspiration towards 16+ hours of work				
Engagement by SE Service	Vocational Profiling	Job Finding	Employer Engagement	On/Off the Job Support and Aftercare
Helping disabled people most distanced from the labour market to make informed choices on their own future.	Identifying skills and preferences for work, giving work experiences that will help the individual make their own vocational choices.	Identifying the preferred job through employer engagement, also providing support to the employer.	Finding out about the workplace environment, co-workers and the ‘supports’ a person might need.	Providing backup to the employee and their employer, developing independence in the workplace and addressing career progression in due course.

Source: Scottish Government, 2010

From a slightly different angle, the European Union of Supported Employment Toolkit underlines the following essential elements of the supported employment model:

- The goal is paid work.
- Disabled people should be regular employees with the same conditions as other employees.
- To ensure employment retention, on-going support for both the employer and the employee is required. (EUSE, 2005)

Supported employment services are typically delivered by third sector organisations or local authorities. Within local authorities Social Work Departments have traditionally taken the lead in the delivery of supported employment, but economic development divisions are increasingly adopting this role. A patchwork of funding is used to underpin the work of supported employment agencies, including specialist programmes and grants from the DWP, local authorities, the European Social Fund and charitable foundations (Wistow and Schneider, 2007). Research by the Scottish Union of Supported Employment (SUSE) shows that it is difficult for agencies to find funding and this has a negative impact on their ability to provide services exemplifying best practice, for example, on-going support has been scarce. Supported employment services spend considerable time pursuing funding and programmes for individuals are often funded from multiple sources, with varying time frames and targets (Wistow and Schneider, 2007). Lack of sustainable funding was recognised in the Scottish Government's *Supported Employment Framework* as contributing to the current situation of patchy supported employment provision across Scotland (Scottish Government, 2010).

### ***1.3 Earlier approaches to supported employment for disabled people***

The UK Government-funded Supported Employment Programme, which ran from 1985 until 2001, differed in many important respects from current supported employment provision. The earlier programme paid wage subsidies to employers who took on disabled people, and also subsidised the wages of workers in sheltered workshops and factories, including Remploy. Individuals were entitled to wage subsidies if they were deemed: (i) able to achieve and maintain between 30 and 80 per cent output of a non-disabled person doing the same or similar work; (ii) unable to get or keep a job in open employment due to the nature and extent of their impairment. Under the scheme, the wage subsidy was paid to employers to compensate for any supposed under productivity of disabled employees, due to the impact of their impairment. Local authorities and third sector organisations had contracts to provide the scheme and to support disabled people to find jobs in ordinary organisations. Because of its emphasis on individual deficit, the Supported Employment programme was regarded as inconsistent with the social model of disability, which emphasised the ability of disabled people to participate on equal terms with non-disabled people, provided that reasonable adjustments were made.

The WORKSTEP programme replaced the Supported Employment programme in 2001. It too was 'aimed at disabled people facing the most significant or complex barriers to finding and keeping a job' (Purvis et al., 2006). However, there was a greater expectation that disabled people could and would work in open employment. Wage subsidies did not feature in the WORKSTEP programme, and the emphasis was on individualised support to enable people to gain and sustain work.



Despite the removal of subsidies from 2001 onwards, individuals whose wages were already subsidised continued to receive this support.

Now, WORKSTEP has been superseded by the Work Choice programme. ~~As was the case with WORKSTEP, Work Choice which~~ does not provide wage subsidies, and existing wage subsidies are currently being phased out.

#### **1.4 Welfare reform**

Currently, reform of the welfare benefits system, which has been underway for some time, is continuing and gathering pace. The Welfare Reform Act was passed in March 2012, with the aim of simplifying the benefits system, replacing multiple benefits with a single Universal Benefit. Whilst there was widespread agreement that the existing benefits system was overly complex, there is considerable anxiety that the squeezing of benefits will result in the intensification of poverty experienced by disabled people and other groups at risk of exclusion (Toynbee and Walker, 2012). The UK Government has stated its intention to 'put work ... at the centre of our welfare system', providing support for people to enter the labour market whilst at the same time providing financial support for people who are unable to work due to illness or disability (DWP, 2010).

A specific intention of the reform is to reduce the number of people claiming out of work benefits and allowances by placing an increasing emphasis on conditionality. Incapacity Benefit has already been replaced by the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), aimed at people who have limited capacity for work because of a health condition or disability. Before receiving the ESA, people are obliged to undertake a thorough medical test of capacity to work, known as the Work Capability

Assessment. Figures released in April 2012 showed 54% of people had been found fit for work (DWP, 2012).

As the welfare system requires more people to find work, questions arise as to whether sufficient jobs and adequate support are available.

Support for disabled people in finding and retaining work is currently provided through the Work Choice programme, which from October 2010 replaced WORKSTEP, Work Preparation and the Job Introduction Scheme. The principal mainstream employment support programme, running alongside Work Choice, is known as the Work Programme.

### ***1.5 Characteristics of the Work Choice programme***

Both the Work Programme and Work Choice have been described by the Government as more strongly focussed on helping disabled people obtain jobs in the open labour market compared with traditional welfare to work programmes. Work Choice has a slightly longer time frame than the Work Programme. Whereas engagement with the Work Programme is mandatory, participation in Work Choice is ostensibly voluntary, although there is a strong expectation that disabled people will actively seek employment. Work Choice is provided by a range of private and third sector organisations across the UK and has a modular approach. DWP funded supported employment is now delivered via Work Choice, which is divided into the following stages (DWP, 2011):

Stage 1: Engagement. The provider has 10 days to conduct an initial interview with a client referred to them. At this initial interview the provider decides whether to enrol the client in the programme, and at which point in the staged client journey (DWP, 2011). A needs assessment is undertaken and a

development plan is draw up with the client, which includes regular meetings or reviews.

Stage 2: Individualised support is provided for up to six months<sup>2</sup> to support a client into work.

Stage 3: In-work support can be provided to the client and the employer when the client enters a job. It is available for a period of up to two years.

Stage 4: consists of long term in-work support. This is on-going support in work, with meetings with the client to review progress.

As stated below, the ultimate goal of Work Choice is for the client to achieve unsupported employment, so that no further support is required from the agency.

The emphasis of the programme is on moving people into working environments where the support they need is, over time, provided by the employer and colleagues. Even though they are no longer on the programme, customers can call on providers for ad-hoc help, although if their circumstances change and they need more intensive support again, they can re-join the programme again.

(DWP, 2011, p.93)

When clients move to unsupported employment they are tracked by the programme for the next 6 months. In the geographical area in which the research was conducted, the Work Choice Prime Provider operated Work Choice Direct. The client was telephoned on a monthly basis to review progress during this period. If there were any issues, the previous

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<sup>2</sup> DWP recently suggested that the programme can be extended to nine months if extra time is likely to improve the client's chances of getting into work. However, some Work Choice prime contractors require their subcontractors to build a business case and ask permission. The programme can be extended to 12 months if there is a guaranteed job after that time.

support provider was asked to step in again. Many clients do not progress in a linear manner through all the stages.

Work Choice is a payment by results programme with the funding model designed to award service providers for job outcomes, but payment is also made for the successful completion of earlier stages. Providers are paid a 70% service fee, with a further 15% being paid when a client progresses to employment, and a final 15% when a client progresses into unsupported employment, which is payable after the person has been in work for a minimum of 26 weeks (DWP, 2011). A successful job outcome is counted as employment of 16 hours or more per week.

For these payments, Work Choice providers are required to support clients for a minimum number of hours per week or per month, depending on the client's stage on the 'employment journey'. As the journey progresses, there is a gradual reduction in support. The stepping down of support over time also was expected in WORKSTEP, although there was less emphasis in moving people off the programme as they became 'unsupported'. WORKSTEP had an 'occupancy payment', which is said to have encouraged providers to keep clients on the programme indefinitely, even if they no longer needed support.

### ***1.6 Work Choice: Outcomes of the programme***

The first evaluation of Work Choice outcomes was published by the DWP in May 2012, covering the period from the start of the programme (October 2010) to March 2012. The job outcomes were considered disappointing, with 14% of participants in work, including people who had transferred from WORKSTEP (British Association of Supported Employment, 2012). The number of people with long-term mental health conditions or learning disabilities within the programme is low. Less than

4.8% of participants have a moderate to severe learning disability and less than 0.5% of all participants have a long-term mental health condition. These low numbers are in spite of the percentage of people found 'fit to work' through the Work Capability Assessment. DWP statistics published in July 2012 show that 61% of claimants with mental or behavioural disorders were assessed as 'fit for work' (DWP, July 2012). It appears that people with long-term mental health conditions and learning disabilities are not engaging with Work Choice, although they were originally deemed a target group for Work Choice. These programme outcomes are in line with concerns expressed by a number of commentators such as Piggott and Grover (2009), who predicted that people less likely to move into employment might be overlooked or 'parked'. Similarly, Riddell et al. (~~2009~~[2010](#)) noted that payment by results schemes inevitably create perverse incentives, encouraging 'creaming', whereby companies concentrate on recruiting people who are the easiest to help get back to work (~~Riddell et al., 2009, p.63~~).

### ***1.7 Work Choice and supported employment***

Work Choice is the main programme through which supported employment is currently being delivered in Scotland, but there are some fundamental differences between this programme and the original conceptualisation of supported employment. Since its inception in North America in the 1970s, supported employment has been based on the assumption that disabled people should be included in regular workplaces wherever possible, that work support should be available to all irrespective of degree of impairment and that follow-on support should be open-ended rather than time-limited. However, people can only enter Work Choice through referral from Job Centre Plus or a specialist authorised organisation. In addition, as explained above, the programme

is time-limited and the amount of support available is finite. These features mean that tensions inevitably arise in attempting to deliver supported employment through Work Choice. Acknowledging these tensions, the British Association of Supported Employment recently stated that 'we do not recognise the Work Choice programme as a form of delivery of supported employment' (British Association of Supported Employment, 2012). In practice, pragmatic solutions are often used by employment support organisations, who attempt to overcome the limitations of Work Choice by using additional funds from other sources to boost the level and duration of support.

## **SECTION TWO: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS**

### ***2.1 Research questions***

The research questions addressed in this research were the following:

- How do employers understand supported employment and how do they use the Work Choice Programme as a vehicle for its delivery?
- What are their perceptions of the opportunities and challenges afforded by supported employment?
- What changes would be needed to make supported employment work more effectively?

In order to address these questions, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed. Interviews were conducted with 21 managers of disabled people undertaking supported employment. Topics covered included the following:

- The interviewee's experience of working with disabled people in supported employment schemes.
- The social characteristics of supported employees, the type of work undertaken and length of service.
- The challenges and benefits of working with supported employees and the type of support required.
- Whether the supported employment was underpinned by a wage subsidy.
- The input of the supported employment agency.
- The impact of the recession on supported employment.
- Measures which would improve supported employment services.

## **2.2 Research methods**

The research design was approved by the SUSE Board and by the Ethics Committee of the Moray House School of Education. In November 2011, the researcher contacted organisations affiliated to the Scottish Union of Supported Employment (SUSE). Third sector organisations funded by the DWP to provide the Work Choice programme agreed to participate in the research and supplied a list of employers working with their clients in a particular geographical area. These employers were asked if a member of staff with knowledge of supported employment and who was line managing a disabled person would agree to be interviewed. A few employers declined to be interviewed, generally because they were too busy, or in the case of a few large retailers, because they were not allowed to take part in research without permission from higher levels, which reportedly was not easy to obtain.

The interviews with employers/managers took place between February and May 2012. Twenty one individuals were interviewed. One declined to have the interview taped, but in all other cases the interviews were recorded and transcribed. When the transcription was complete, a thematic analysis was undertaken.

In two cases (companies four and five in table 2 below), during the interview it became apparent there was no supported employee in place. However the interviews were completed and transcribed as the companies had recently had people on placement, and interesting questions arose as to why the disabled person had not moved into a permanent post at the end of the placement. Two interviewees found that the disabled person had recently been moved to the Work Choice 'unsupported' category and technically were no longer supported



employees. Some workplaces had more than one supported employee, so the research covered more than 21 employees.

The interview questions concentrated on the team, department or site where the supported employee was working, rather than company policy more broadly.

To gather more information about the operation of the Work Choice programme as a vehicle for the delivery of supported employment, the researcher contacted two third sector organisations under contract to the DWP. In the event, only one interview was held with an organisation holding a major Work Choice contract.

## **SECTION THREE: DETAILS OF INTERVIEWEES, ORGANISATIONS AND SUPPORTED EMPLOYEES**

### ***3.1 The interviewees and their organisations***

Table 4 provides an overview of the interviewees, the organisations in which they worked and the disabled people within each organisation undertaking supported employment. The names of the companies have been removed to protect their anonymity. The organisations providing supported employment opportunities included micro enterprises (employing four people including the owner), small businesses, employing 5-50 people, and large organisations, which made up the majority. Sixteen were in the private sector and only four were in the public sector (three Council and one Health Board departments).

As table 4 indicates, the majority of supported employees were working in teams of about 15-55 people. Seven organisations had more than one supported employee managed or overseen by the interviewee.

### ***3.2 The supported employees***

For each individual, background data were gathered on length of time in the company's employment at the time and job title. This is summarised in table 4. The majority of the supported employees had learning disabilities and/or physical disabilities, and relatively few had mental health difficulties, considering that this is the largest category of disability amongst those claiming disability benefits. Most were in jobs described as entry level, such as catering assistant, housekeeping assistant, cleaner, domestic assistant, kitchen porter and canteen assistant. Only two had professional level posts, where the incumbent required a specific technical skill and a higher level qualification.

Another clear finding is that the supported employees had been in post for a relatively long period of time. For those where the time in the workplace was recorded, the average was 10 years. Only four employees had been in post for less than a year, and 11 employees had been with the company or department for eleven years or more, up to a maximum of 28 years. This means that for many of the supported employees and employers, much of their participation in supported employment was prior to the start of Work Choice. Many were supported previously by different agencies and transferred to the current support agency with the advent of the Work Choice programme.

Most of the employees were working more than 16 hours per week. For those where the data was available, the average number of hours per week was around 25, with a sizeable majority of people working full-time (36 hours per week). Four employees worked less than 16 hours per week. Two were on contract or in a bank, which means they were called on as and when required. They were individuals with mental health issues, where the illness fluctuates.

**Table 4<sup>3</sup>: Background information on the managers, their organisations and their supported employees**

Company No.	Company Profile	No of Employees on the site or in the department	No of Supported Employees	Interviewee's Designation	Employee	Hours worked per week	Approx. reported time in employment (years)	Job Designation	Impairment <sup>4</sup>
<b>1</b>	UK wide facilities management	16	2	Manager	A	20	>3	Cleaning	Physical impairment
					B	22	3	Cleaning	Anxiety
<b>2</b>	Micro business*	4	1	Owner	C	15	1/2	Junior engineer	Learning disability – mild head injury
<b>3</b>	National retail & restaurant chain	14	1	Manager	D	18	5-6	Catering Assistant	Learning disability

<sup>3</sup> Notes: \*The Federation of Small Businesses defines micro businesses as 0-9 employees; small businesses as 10-50 employees and medium businesses as 50-249 employees.  
The majority of the interviewees did not own the company so in the report the interviewees are referred to collectively as managers

<sup>4</sup> This is the manager's account of the person's impairment.

Company No.	Company Profile	No of Employees on the site or in the department	No of Supported Employees	Interviewee's Designation	Employee	Hours worked per week	Approx. reported time in employment (years)	Job Designation	Impairment <sup>4</sup>
4	National retail chain	At that site no employees. 1 placement for couple of months.		Manager					
5	Micro business	3	None. 1 placement.	Owner					Heart problem
6	Health Board Department	>70	1	Manager	E	36	11	scientist	Mental health difficulty
7	Local Authority Department	40-45	2	Manager	F	30	10	Janitor	Sensory impairment
					G	36	15 +	Janitor	
8	Large charitable	8	1	Manager	H		28	Technician	Physical disability
9	Financial Services	16	1	Manager	I	36	9+	Customer assistant	Physical and learning disabilities

Company No.	Company Profile	No of Employees on the site or in the department	No of Supported Employees	Interviewee's Designation	Employee	Hours worked per week	Approx. reported time in employment (years)	Job Designation	Impairment <sup>4</sup>
10	Private sector care provider	80	3	Manager	J	20	15	Kitchen assistant	Learning disability
					K	22	20	Customer assistant	Physical disability
					L	As hoc	5-6	Member of pool staff	Mental health difficulty
11	Private sector care provider	120	1	Manager	M	21	10	Housekeeping assistant	Learning disability
12	Facilities Management	25	3	Manager	N	30 <sup>5</sup>	25	Cleaning	Physical and learning disabilities
					O	30	4	Cleaning	Learning disability
					P	30	3	Cleaning	Learning disability

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<sup>5</sup> This is an estimate based on an answer of 5 days a week.

Company No.	Company Profile	No of Employees on the site or in the department	No of Supported Employees	Interviewee's Designation	Employee	Hours worked per week	Approx. reported time in employment (years)	Job Designation	Impairment <sup>4</sup>
13	Hospitality	55	2	Manager	Q	14	¾	Kitchen porter	Slight visual impairment
					R	14	15	Kitchen porter	Learning disability
14	Management agent	50	2	Managing Director	S	17 approx.	3+	Assistant in accounts	Learning disability (Down's Syndrome)
					T	Ad hoc		Grounds maintenance	Mental health difficulty
15	Private sector care provider	85	1	Manager	U	30	5+	Domestic assistant	slight hearing impairment
16	Retail chain	22	1	Supervisor	V	16	1/2	Checkout assistant	ME
17	Local Authority Department	15	2	Manager	W	36	17	Grounds maintenance	Learning disability

Company No.	Company Profile	No of Employees on the site or in the department	No of Supported Employees	Interviewee's Designation	Employee	Hours worked per week	Approx. reported time in employment (years)	Job Designation	Impairment <sup>4</sup>
					X	36	17	Grounds maintenance (street sweeping squad)	Learning disability
18	Local Authority Department	14	1	Manager	Y	36	20	Clerical assistant	Physical and learning disabilities
19	Hospitality	22	1	manager	Z	40	2 (& earlier on another contract)	hotel general assistant	Learning disability
20	Hospitality	Not known	1	manager	AA	17	17	Canteen assistant	Physical disabilities
21	Retail chain	Not known	1	HR manager	BB	6	1/2	Checkout assistant	Learning disability



### **3.3 Wage subsidies**

As discussed in section one, many of the supported employees, having been in work for more than ten years, had initially been employed during the earlier era of wage subsidies. However, the research found most of the employers did not receive a wage subsidy for the supported employee(s). Some had previously received a subsidy which had subsequently been withdrawn, and six still received a subsidy.

For the most part, the absence or withdrawal of a wage subsidy did not appear to be a major issue for the line manager (although of course senior managers at a higher level in the organisation might have a different view). This was because the worker was perceived to be carrying out a real job to a satisfactory standard. As one manager said, 'they earn their pay'.

However, this wasn't necessarily the case for the minority who were still receiving the subsidy. Five out of six felt that the original intention of the subsidy, to compensate for relative under-productivity, was still relevant.

We have to accommodate their conditions. So they are not always on the same agility and ability levels. (Manager in the public sector)

It was felt that the subsidy had been a factor in facilitating the retention of disabled employees. A manager of an employee who had developed a long-term health condition explained that the subsidy had made it possible for the company to retain the employee when her illness limited what she could do at work.

I think the limitations that she could do, really, she's an addition. She was fortunate that there was a subsidy, to be fair. (Manager in a large hotel)

For these managers, the subsidy acted as an important incentive in encouraging the business to take on someone who was not as productive as other staff

... It's not a huge subsidy. But it makes a difference between having somebody who would do the job at the normal speed or average speed. Compared to somebody who simply cannot. (Managing Director in medium sized company)

A few of this group of six felt strongly that the reduction in subsidy had negative consequence in terms of removing incentives to provide work opportunities for disabled people. One manager of a skilled employee in long-term supported employment had made the case for continued financial support, as the employee's productivity was unlikely to improve. The manager felt the case had not been taken seriously: the submission of the case had not been acknowledged nor had a response been sent within the agreed time period.

## **SECTION FOUR: EMPLOYERS' VIEWS, MOTIVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF WORKING WITH SUPPORTED EMPLOYEES**

### ***4.1 Motivations for offering supported employment opportunities to disabled people***

A key question which we address in this section is the motivation which underpins the decision of an organisation to take on a supported employee. This is important because much of the literature on supported employment assumes that this will happen automatically. However, relatively few workplaces in Scotland include supported employees, and as unemployment rises, it is important to understand what drives an employer to take on a supported employee in the first place, and then to provide on-going support. We wanted to understand whether, in employers' experience, the benefits outweighed the risks. Case studies are used to illustrate specific experiences, drawing on employers' accounts.

Interviewees explained that in many cases the decision to take on a supported employee was not theirs, since the person was already in post when they took up the job. Several interviewees felt unable to answer this question because it was such a long time since the employee had started the job and they were now part of the fabric of the organisation.

In a few cases, contact with a supported employment agency had started when an existing employee's health deteriorated, and the employer wanted to keep the person in work. In one case where an employee had a stroke the employer was already working with a supported employment agency and asked them for help in managing the

employee's return to work. Another employer realised a few years after they had employed a kitchen assistant that he had a learning disability and they contacted one of the disability agencies for support in work. In a third case, the employee was provided with an employment support worker, through WORKSTEP, after being in touch with his GP and the in-house occupational health service.

There was often a strong desire to help people who became disabled whilst in work, rather than simply dismiss them because they were no longer able to perform their work to the required standard. For example, one manager said that after an employee was diagnosed with a chronic condition and its effect became apparent, the employee was not able to perform as many work tasks as previously but the employer felt that continuing in work would promote her 'wellbeing and self-confidence'.

A minority of interviewees explained their motivation for seeking a supported employee. The most common answer was the desire to give disabled people an opportunity. One employer said that if he had hadn't been given chances in his own life, he would not be managing or owning businesses and he wanted to extend support to others. People were also aware that anyone could face deteriorating health or disability at any time. One manager commented: 'I might be disabled next week'.

One employer indicated that this philanthropy also had business benefits, as it was good for the organisation's image and the public appreciated 'us helping somebody who needs a bit more help than others'. (Property management company)

Employers also talked about the practical aspects which made it made it easier to provide supported employment opportunities, in particular, the

prior existence of a positive relationship with a supported employment agency built up by working with another staff member.

Five of the interviewees indicated that taking on supported employees had been a pragmatic decision as the supported employment agency or the disabled person had come directly to them asking for a post or placement, and the employer needed additional staff. When the employer had been approached by an individual, they were not always aware initially that the job seeker had a disability and was on a supported employment programme.

#### ***4.2 Managers' views of the supported employees***

The majority of interviewees were very positive about their supported employees, recognising them as valued staff members doing a good job. Positive comments made by employers include the following:

Experienced, good work colleague. ...Does a great job (Large national company).

She's quite good at what she does. ... She's keen to work. ... Keen to prove her worth (Micro business).

He's a valued member of the team (Care home).

He's really good. ... you know he just gets on and does things (Facilities management company).

People who had worked closely in teams with disabled employees commended their colleagues, and their work ethic:

He was a better worker than most guys in the squad. ... He learned and was the best worker I've had in my squad. Put it that way. (Supervisor of a team in a local authority service)

### **4.3 Supported employees' positive attributes**

Employees were positively described as being 'experienced', which could be related to their length of time with the employers. This positive attribute reflects the value of having employees who stay in post for years, rather than having to replace and retrain employees.

A facilities company manager said that the firm employs students, but there is high turnover amongst this group. By contrast, the supported employees the company employs are keen to work and are looking for 'stability'. He was pleased with the supported employees as:

They will stay loyal to you.

Another employer of cleaners emphasised supported employees' reliability:

They're really great at turning up tae their work all the time because unfortunately in the type a' business we're in, quite a lot a' my staff just phone up, 'Oh I cannae be bothered going in today', you know.

This theme of disabled employees' work ethic, compared to other employees, was recurrent.

... 90% of the people out there say they want a job and they don't want a job. But (disabled) people, that people don't give a chance to, they want to do a good job. (Hotel owner and manager)

One manager, in a workplace that had been operating for two years and had newly recruited staff, contrasted people who joined them on placement from the job centre and people who came through a supported employment agency. The manager said the job seekers were 'moaning' and only turned up as 'they were getting forced to go out to get their job seekers', whereas disabled people were enthusiastic and looking for opportunities:

They are wanting to work, they are finding it hard to get a job because they have got disabilities.

#### **4.4 *Sickness and absence***

When asked about supported employees' sickness and absence rates, the majority of interviewees said they were not particularly high, and a few stated that the employees were off less than most staff. This a clear business benefit, and was connected with the disabled employees' motivation, described above.

The benefits for the business was basically from a sickness and absence management point of view. ... they (the supported employees) would never have a duvet day. (HR manager talking about her previous experience in a hotel chain)

Some difficulties were also described. Three managers said that they had experienced long periods of staff absence related to an individual's mental health conditions or an addiction problem, and two employers talked about the challenges of managing people with deteriorating physical health conditions.

In a case where the employee had a long-term mental health condition, their absences caused recurrent complications for the individual, manager and staff team, although the individual was viewed as a 'valued member of staff'. Other individuals with mental health conditions were employed on short-term contracts, for example through a bank arrangement, which was possible for their job type.

#### ***4.5 Challenges in employing and managing supported employees***

Interviewees identified a mixture of challenges. A few were related to the physical nature of the workplace, but many were around supporting the employee and included issues with encouraging supported employees to fit in or issues with the supported employment agencies. The latter is covered in the section below. Over half, but not all, interviewees identified challenges.

Managers talked about a 'learning curve' when they had first worked with the disabled employee. In some cases, they continued to feel insecure about their ability to manage the individual. Managers were self-critical and talked about doing their best, but still being unsure that this was enough, and they emphasised that they did not want to let the disabled individual down.

Other managers talked about having to take time and be patient when training individuals or passing on key messages or instructions.

Although this did not apply to all disabled employees, the nature of some people's disabilities meant that simpler more straight-forward training and language was needed. In a few cases employers pointed out that the supported employee's work needed to be checked by the supervisor



to ensure that it had been completed to the required standard, and sometimes the employee would be 'buddied', whereas other staff worked alone. This means that additional time is spent with the supported employee.

Some challenges encountered in specific workplaces were pointed out. For example, one site was viewed by the interviewee as dangerous due to the continuous movement of heavy machinery. The fast-paced environment of city hotels was challenging for some supported employees. Finally, the changing nature of work in supermarkets might be problematic since companies were increasingly expecting employees to manage a range of tasks and have IT skills. Challenges posed by the physical environment for wheelchair users included inaccessible and over-heated offices and people with learning disabilities had difficulty using e-mail.

Challenges also existed in finding the right job for the individual over the span of his or her employment. This could be because the nature of the workplace was changing or the individual's health was deteriorating or was going to deteriorate as the person grew older. Generally, these individuals' disabilities included physical health issues and reduced mobility and managers were concerned about them getting less mobile and more tired. Employers were looking for assistance to keep these employees productive in work as long as possible, which might include a new wheelchair; continuing financial subsidy to make up for lower productivity; keeping the employee within a supported employment programme that allowed them access to flexible support when needed.

Where a valued employee had a long-term mental health condition and long periods of absence, the manager felt there was a particular

challenge around the provision of specifically-tailored mental health support. The manager felt there had been a gap in the provision of specialised mental health support for the employee. Also, the individual was receiving support from various professionals, including occupational health professionals, employment support workers, doctors and social care workers. However, arranging integrated support was difficult. The manager felt the individual's care and support might have been improved by a case conference when all the agencies came together.

#### ***4.6 Supported employees' impact on colleagues and clients***

Generally, the managers thought that the supported employees had a positive impact on the skills and attitudes of staff. They were inspirational and positive team members, who could 'make your day'.

Supervisors acquired new skills and experience through managing and supporting disabled employees, for example, learning how to communicate messages in different styles and to explain business jargon in a way that is readily understood.

I've done this job for about 12 years, to see something new and different; to have different challenges quite unusual at this point (Manager in the financial services sector).

Another advantage of supported employees was that disabled employees brought their own experiences of life and increased awareness of disability. They were ambassadors for disabled people, showing that if you are disabled you can work.

## Case study 1

The case study below illustrates the positive impact of a disabled employee on the company's clients and customers. The company supported the disabled employee to move jobs to accommodate his condition and to a post that benefitted both him and clients.

A supported employee, a wheelchair user, was initially employed in an office post within a housing and care provider for older people.

However, the employee's health worsened and he began to feel sick because of the heat of the office. The employer wanted to retain him and looked around for other environments and posts that would suit him. He was happy to do something different and he had a very positive rapport with care home residents, so he was redeployed to be an activity assistant.

He related really well to the residents and his employer felt that he encouraged them to talk. One resident with a disabled child commented 'I like to see the likes of that person here, because my son is in a wheelchair and never had that opportunity'.

Both staff and residents appreciated being able to support the disabled person, and the positive message about disability fitted well with the nature of the work in the care home.

A few employers identified positive impacts at a more strategic level, for example through contributing to the agencies' corporate social responsibility. One employer said

"It's good PR for us"(managing director in medium sized company).

Making changes in company procedure and practice to accommodate disabled employees also can have a positive effect on the whole company. A human resources manager explained that working closely with a supported employment agency to set up an in-house pre-employment training programme and change the company's recruitment processes to accommodate disabled people had triggered the development of more flexible processes and management across the organisation.

A few employers when asked about the advantages of having disabled people in the workplace said that there were no specific advantages or disadvantages. It was the same as employing anyone, and what was important was getting the right person for the job.

#### ***4.7 Attitudes of other employees towards supported employees***

Overall, the interviewees reported that other employees were positive about their disabled colleagues, and there had not been any real difficulties or problems.

They're great ... very supportive (Medium sized business)

Several managers stated that there were no differences in attitudes to disabled and non-disabled employees. A few said that other staff would not necessarily know that the employee was supported, or that the person's disability was 'irrelevant' to the staff team.

Team just see them as another member of staff, and just get on with it. (Manager of a team in a local authority service)

A couple of managers mentioned the disabled employees tend to be 'mothered' by others, especially female, staff. The managers discouraged this as they felt the disabled employees were capable of accomplishing their tasks independently.

Despite the general feeling that staff did not experience any real differences in treatment, a few managers pointed out areas of tension. One manager said that a supervisor 'hadn't the time' for managing disabled staff, although he felt the supervisor's attitude was becoming more positive over time. In another workplace, the manager saw the team was frustrated by the time it took to communicate with the supported employee, although they knew he was reliable and they would be upset if he left.

Another area of possible tension was perceived preferential treatment or allowances given to supported employees. For example, not being asked to make up time that had to be taken off due to difficulties getting to work in bad weather conditions or being less productive in work. In the latter case, and when staff frequently had to cover for a supported employee's absences, they could feel as if they were carrying the disabled employee. Sympathy 'was wearing thin' where a supported employee had been off sick for substantial periods over three years.

The managers believed that practices such as accepting lower productivity and exempting the supported employees from some rules should be viewed as reasonable adjustments rather than preferential treatment. One manager of 22 staff in a retail store said that some staff initially had moaned about the supported employees being slow or less productive. However, when the individual's need for support was explained these gripes stopped.

## **4.8 Support provided by employers**

The interviewees talked about a range of ways in which they support their disabled staff, ranging from adapting training and providing frequent supervision to purchasing specialised equipment.

Several managers described how they or other staff members supported disabled employees through mentoring, buddying or regular supervision. Examples of good practice included dividing up jobs into individual tasks and asking employees to accomplish these one at a time, and following up to remind people what had to be done.

Mr B's got more a' a learning disability. ... you've got tae keep reminding him, you know, to go, he'll forget to do an office and that. But our guys know him so they'll go and say, 'did you remember and do that office Mr B?'. And he'll say, 'Oh no', and he'll go and do it. But he's really good. I mean I don't have any problems. We've just got tae keep remembering sometimes to do things. (Manager in facilities company)

When we are working with him we have to be giving him duties and writing them down and getting him to go back to them. (Hotel owner and manager)

One provider of care services had adapted its training at an organisational level, developing a version of food safety training for people with learning disabilities.

The following case studies highlight adaptations employers and managers had made, for example in training and communications.

## Case study 2

An employer took on a person as a painter within the maintenance department of a hotel on a temporary basis. The employee had mental health issues and a member of the HR team noticed that he always had his head down and he didn't make eye contact with people.

His line manager was pleased with his work, but the hotel manager wanted the employee to speed up a bit. However, because the employee was withdrawn, his line manager thought carefully about how to approach this topic, not wanting to issue a target or an instruction in case that negatively affected the employee and his performance.

Instead, the line manager talked carefully with the employee about his current rate of work on each specific task and discussed whether he could speed it up. This was very successful. A few months later the line manager noticed there was 'something not quite right', despite the fact that the employee was 'great at doing his work'. An HR manager experienced at supporting people with disabilities talked with the employee and found that he was severely dyslexic, and he had never told anyone. Once the hotel was aware of this issue, his training was adjusted. He went on to do SVQ1 and 2, and his confidence grew markedly.

The HR manager said

'He is like a totally different person. He is still there. ... it must be five years now...(he's) really introduced stuff as well into the department. He used to make up his own paint charts for ordering. Things like that. So he is a real success. However, if it hadn't been for his manager it might have been a different story'.

### Case study 3

An employee of a customer service team had complex disabilities. His manager said that he had been brought up to think that there was nothing he could not do. He was described as having 'a massive desire to be effective' and was an 'inspirational' colleague. However, he had limited cognitive ability and struggled with reading.

In order to accommodate these barriers, the manager arranged for him to receive training on a one to one basis, taking time to explain concepts in a different way and communicate verbally rather than by email. The supported employment agency arranged for him to attend adult literacy classes, and his manager encouraged him to read at home every night. His comprehension and reading improved over time and he was able to articulate the team's business plan, whereas three years ago 'he'd barely be able to say what our business was'.

Generally team rewards were food based, such as lunches out, but the supported employee was not able to eat these, so the manager had to think of new rewards and ways of including him. She explained that there was a need to be more 'conscious' of one's actions to avoid accidental exclusion.

The manager felt that this person was able to hold down a job because of co-ordinated support by the agency, the team and the manager. Over the last three years, the supported employee had been given more responsibility as a result of his progress at work. This was underpinned by his desire to be a valuable employee.



Several managers reported changing an employee's working pattern or hours to enable them to stay in work and contribute more effectively, for example, starting a shift later than other staff because the supported employee needed extra time to get up in the morning. Also contracted hours might be spread over more days, and individuals might not undertake certain shifts, such as the earlier or later ones.

A few managers had tailored work to the individual's needs after they developed a long term health condition. One employer sought support and advice from the Job Centre and the employee entered a DWP employability programme, as a result of which the employer accessed a wage subsidy and employment support for the employee. The employer then adapted the individual's role to fit her needs due to declining health. The employer felt that the person was no longer able to contribute to the workplace at the required level. Without the subsidy and support they received initially, they felt it would not have been possible to keep that person in work.

In a few cases the employers had paid for physical adaptations, for example, buying a wheelchair as described below.

## Case study 4

A disabled employee's physical health was deteriorating, and he was becoming more reliant on his wheelchair for mobility. His existing wheel chair was heavy and falling to pieces. His employer asked the supported employment agency to assist with sourcing and purchasing a new wheelchair. However, this help did not materialise. The employer, particularly the HR department, spent a considerable amount of time researching possible funding, filling in forms and asking for referrals from medical staff. After around a year the employer decided to pay for a new wheel chair themselves, because 'it's not fair'. The employee really wanted to come to work, but was struggling as his existing, manual wheelchair was too heavy for him to wheel around.

### ***4.9 Critical factors underpinning sustainable supported employment***

The interviewees gave some examples of what had worked for them in terms of sustaining the employment of disabled employees. As reflected in a recent report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC, 2012) key factors include flexibility and creativity in managing the physical environment of the workplace and the allocation of tasks. The interviewees recognised the importance of both the individual's and the manager's contribution to positive sustained employment, with people citing the following as being particularly important:

- The individual's own attitude;
- The individual being recognised, valued and given more responsibility by the manager;

- Building up a trusting relationship between the employee and manager;
- Making an effort to include the individual rather than single them out, and to enable them to take their place as a team member;
- Taking time to build up an understanding of the individual, with a view to tailoring support;
- Ensuring that there is a good fit between the individual, the job and the organisation;

A small employer who had recently employed a supported employee said the recruitment was a success as it 'suits her, suits us'. A former HR manager of a hotel chain pointed out that the situation must work for both the employer and employee: 'It's a two way relationship'.

#### ***4.10 Summary***

Most of the managers interviewed talked about the positive aspects of using the principles of supported employment to ensure that a disabled person was able to find and keep a job. Several themes emerged including the reliability and loyalty of supported employees, with many being recognised for low sickness and absence rates; the high motivation of disabled employees; good quality of work; and their popularity with clients and co-workers. The research showed that employers also employ disabled people for altruistic reasons, such as a desire to support people facing disadvantage.

The positives were tempered by challenges, although some employers said that having a supported employee was 'non-descript', that is neither positive nor negative. The research suggested that when an employee acquired a disability or debilitating health condition during the course of

employment, managers identified more negative aspects than if the employee was recruited as a disabled person.

The challenges included gaining knowledge of the individual, their condition, their limitations and skills. Several managers talked about how they felt disadvantaged when taking over the employee's management as they had a low awareness of their disability and then needed time to learn about its impact on an individual's work ability. Another challenge was managing the staff team's expectations and grumbles, when they thought the disabled employee was receiving special treatment. Employers seemed to feel they were generally successful in doing this, pointing out to other staff that reasonable adjustments were required to maximise the disabled person's contribution to the workplace.

Managers identified some challenges around the changing nature of work which they thought might make it harder for disabled people. For example, the requirement for supermarket employees to have some degree of computer literacy may make it harder for people with learning disabilities to fit in than when jobs were more repetitive. The managers and employees in the research appear to be coping with these challenges, but it was implied the changing nature of work might impact on the future recruitment of disabled employees.

## **SECTION FIVE: SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES FROM THE WORK CHOICE PROVIDER**

### ***5.1 Type of assistance received from supported employment agencies***

Clearly, the success of a supported employment placement, particularly in its early stages, is likely to be associated with the quality of back-up provided by the supported employment agency. In this study, as noted earlier, all support was provided under the auspices of the Work Choice programme. In order to assess the quality of support, managers were asked about their experiences of working with supported employment agencies.

### ***5.2 Recruitment of staff***

Employers sometimes need staff at relatively short notice and, as illustrated by the case study below, there were some examples of supported employment agencies finding suitable people to fulfil specific requirement.

## Case study 5

An interviewee in a facilities management company said they had been helped by supported employment agencies to recruit staff to specific roles.

Prior to working with the supported employment agencies, vacancies were advertised through notices in the stores' windows. This led to the store being 'inundated' with people walking in off the street, and time was wasted interviewing people who were not suitable for the posts. The supported employment agencies found or recommended suitable people for the work, basing their selection of candidates on the types of individual already successfully employed in the facilities management company.

The manager explained that the supported employment agencies 'know what our requirements are. And they are good at filtering'.

### **5.3 Review meetings**

Once in post, the agency helped by reviewing progress of the supported employee and suggesting any necessary adjustments. Employers talked about how initially the supported employee received a visit from the support worker on either a weekly or daily basis, but later this decreased to fortnightly or monthly and then became quarterly.

Generally in these review visits, the employment support worker first met the employee, and then invited the employer into the meeting, so it became a three way conversation. The reviews included set questions on subjects like training needs; possible changes to the employee's role to accommodate any difficulties; and setting and reviewing targets for

the employee. The employment support worker at times talked separately with the employer.

Some employers talked about the review as 'a chat' and in other interviews the review meeting was not mentioned specifically:

I think they were just coming in, just to make sure he was doing all right. Or maybe a phone call or, I think they, we had a couple a' visits. (Hotel manager)

One employer described the reviews as 'superficial'. This employer pointed out that very little changed between the reviews and it seemed the employment support worker just went through a checklist, ticking off questions. In this case, the employee had just moved from supported to unsupported employment, so possibly the reviews seemed superficial because the employee had progressed to the point of not needing additional support.

Managers thought the review meetings offered the supported employees a chance to speak to someone outside of the workplace. Although many employers thought their employee would happily bring issues to them, they also saw the advantage in having a third party to turn to and if an issue arose between the employer and employee the employment support worker could act as a mediator.

#### **5.4 Other support to employers**

Interviewees mentioned a variety of other types of support the supported employment agencies had provided over time, for example, organising external training for employees; arranging speech therapy or literacy classes; working with the employer to tackle an employee's health

issues; preparing for the initial employment interview; and sorting out barriers such as the removal of an individual's bus pass used for travel to work.

One supervisor appreciated support to adapt in-house training, where the supported employment agency reviewed the materials and pointed out where more explanation or simplification was needed. Another supervisor was assisted to find the right job in the workplace for a relatively new supported employee who was struggling to do the job they had initially been given.

One individual had previously had emotional and counselling support from a specialist mental health agency providing supported employment, which had 'worked very well'. When the employment support worker from that agency moved on, the employee was deterred from receiving support, which negatively affected his ability to stay in permanent employment. The employer said:

The support was able to help him keep on an even keel. And without that it was more difficult and the issues would arise more often which to the employee were insurmountable. (Managing director in medium sized business)

Support was valued at the times of change, for example when relocating the business or during a redundancy consultation. In the latter case, the employment support worker attended every consultation meeting with the employee and the manager described this support as 'amazing'.



## ***5.5 Managers' view of the support they received from agencies***

Clearly, one of the factors likely to have a major impact on encouraging employers to engage with supported employment is the quality of the support they receive from specialist agencies. As indicated below, there were mixed views.

Most of the respondents appeared satisfied with the support they received. Where the support workers had assisted with a specific issue, such as redundancy and role change, the manager tended to speak more highly of the support. Also the managers of recently recruited supported employees were broadly happy with the quality of support, stating that the agencies do 'quite a good job' (Supervisor in large retail store).

Three of the four public sector agencies were happy with the support they received, but one felt that repeated reviews of an employee who had been in post for 27 years were unnecessary. The person in question felt that they were being singled out at work and disliked completing the forms.

One employer with several supported employees felt there was not enough support for one employee in particular who required a new wheelchair. Dealing with the bureaucracy associated with equipment procurement proved extremely difficult.

## ***5.6 Managers' opinions of the effectiveness of Work Choice as a delivery vehicle for supported employment***

Although not all interviewees knew that they were participating in the

Work Choice programme and not all had been in a previous DWP programme, some managers were affected by the change to Work Choice. They reported that over the last two years the reviews had involved a significant increase in paper work which they found difficult to manage.

And it's all a lot more forms to fill in. It's done now on laptops, the laptops come. But it seems to take ..., there's a lot of information I think that they need. I suppose from their point of view to make sure that the programme is targeting the right person. But they really cover the same ground (Manager in large hotel).

Managers were irritated because the additional paperwork was not matched by increasing efficiency:

Sometimes think they could be more organised, specifically since (the new Work Choice provider) took over the support (Manager in large hotel).

One manager of a long-term supported employee said:

It's not more support we want but increase in efficiency, decision making and clarity. (Manager in a Charity)

In another case where the manager thought the client had not been moved off Work Choice soon enough, the support (which was mostly review meetings) was described as a bit 'patronising' and not 'individual' enough.

The lack of individuality was highlighted by managers who felt the reviews were time-consuming but not particularly beneficial:

Our view would be that it's a bureaucracy which doesn't actually help. But I think they would think, 'Oh yes, we come in and see them every three months', which they do. But it's not helpful. In fact it just takes time and it isn't productive for him or us. ... it's pretty much a tick box exercise. (Managing director in medium sized business)

Getting the paperwork became much more focused than the actual person is what I feel. There was a lot of ticking boxes and things. And I appreciate that you have to have the paperwork and things to support it. But I'm not sure how helpful it was for the person being supported. (Manager in a care home)

There was a perception that getting someone into work was 'the be all and end all' and after that support was limited and formulaic.

One manager cited problems with support since there has been a change of agency. In one case the previous agency had been supporting staff for ten years, and the employer felt that he knew the employees well. That was not the case with the new agency, which was perceived to be giving less personalised support on a one to one basis.

Another manager was extremely upset with the support received since the change to the Work Choice provider, because he had not heard from the agency for months, there was confusion over meetings and the employer felt he had been promised a continued subsidy, which turned out not to be available. He said: 'I really find (them) terrible. ... I was misled. They haven't looked after the young lad. I am frustrated with them. I wrote letters of complaint and they haven't even replied'.

When an employee was moved off the Work Choice programme, the employer was informed of the disabled person's new status as an unsupported employee. In general, the employers appeared to be content with this decision. However, a few managers pointed out that initially the implications of the term 'unsupported' for them or their client had not been well explained.

## ***5.7 Summary***

The majority of employers were satisfied with the support they received from the supported employment agencies, although people had various ideas about how things could be done better. Where disabled employees and their employers had been moved from a previous DWP employment programmes to Work Choice there were complaints about the burden of the paperwork and changes in the system and support providers.

Managers talked about positive experiences when they felt the employment support worker had successfully helped overcome a barrier to employment and had a rapport with the employee. They recognised the need to look at everyone as an individual. These observations are very much in-line with good practice in supported employment, and make sense to employers because of their experience with disabled employees. A significant majority of managers thought that the support could be more tailored to the needs of the employee and, to a lesser extent, the needs of the employer. Not all research participants saw the support workers as being there for them as well as the employee.

Managers and their companies provide a great deal of support themselves, such as adapted training, adapted communication and

additional management time spent with supported employees. The managers spoke about their own experience and views, not that of the whole company. Seldom was the company view or practice evident, with support for employees being developed and signed off by the manager, with human resource personnel input in some cases.

## **SECTION SIX: SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT PROVIDER'S VIEWS**

### ***6.1 The Supported employment contractor's perspective***

An interview was conducted with a senior manager of a supported employment provider contracted to deliver Work Choice. Providing an overview of the programme, the manager explained that there had been a shift in emphasis since the introduction of Work Choice, with an expectation that a disabled person would be moved into employment in the open labour market as quickly as possible. Previously, more employability-related interventions were utilised, such as skills development and vocational training, but this is now much less likely as Work Choice is more target-driven, focussed on job outcomes and time-limited. A subcontractor quoted in the DWP initial evaluation of Work Choice placed a positive spin on this: 'The fact that we're outcome based, and that we're trying to convert people from supported to unsupported work, it really has focused the mind' (DWP, 2011). However, there are also potential hazards in this approach, including the tendency to focus on those closest to the labour market, whilst 'parking' those with greater support needs.

### ***6.2 The operation of the Work Choice programme***

The middle of 2012 was considered to be the peak period of activity for the provider organisations, which have a three year contract with Work Choice. There was a concentration on 'onflow', receiving clients from the referral agencies, finding jobs and moving individuals in work into 'unsupported' positions. This could be reflected in the concern of employers that their employees, many of whom had been long-time

supported employees, were not receiving the individual support they had previously experienced.

The provider stated that they provided structured support in work for 13 weeks (under module 2), and following that clients were eligible for on-going support on a more ad hoc for two years. This indicates a bias to providing support to gain work at the start of the job, with fewer resources available downstream. The provider argued that Work Choice is intended to promote independence, so there is less 'hand holding' by the employment support workers than was previously the case. The interviewee thought that sustaining work depended increasingly on the actions of the employer than the employment support worker. It is 'about good employer employee relationships' and employees establishing an open dialogue with their manager. There were several good example of this in the employer research, but it is evident that a growing onus is being placed on employers making great efforts to sustain work. It was recognised that this move to a time-limited, unsupported job outcome culture might be difficult for some employers. However, the manager stated that the supported employment providers were still offering employers:

- A safety net
- Someone to arbitrate
- Sounding board.

The manager pointed out that features of the Work Choice programme means that some disabled people who want to work are excluded. In particular, the programme only permits a comparatively short time period for work preparation and there is a clear expectation that everyone will progress to unsupported work of sixteen or more hours a week.

This means that, as noted by other commentators in relation to earlier programmes of employment preparation for disabled people (Riddell & Banks, 2005), there is gap in terms of supported employment provision. There is, in addition to Work Choice, a need for specialist employability provision, which provides more support, within a model akin to the original conceptualisation of supported employment, which envisaged open-ended support over many years if necessary.



## **SECTION SEVEN: HORIZON SCANNING**

### ***7.1 Advice from managers for funders / government, employers and agencies***

Interviewees were asked if they had any advice for employers, supported employment agencies, their funders and policy makers with regard to ways in which supported employment might be delivered more effectively in the future. Their responses are summarised below.

### ***7.2 Advice for funders and policy makers***

Most of the messages for policy makers and funders focussed on the continued need for supported employment. One employer said, 'There is crying need' for employment support for disabled people, and that giving disabled people more employment opportunities was valuable and necessary. There were requests for more funding for supported employment agencies and a re-instatement of employer subsidies.

One employer, who was not pleased with the service he was receiving from the supported employment provider, suggested that the Government and funders of supported employment should monitor and evaluate the work of the supported employment agencies more closely to improve the quality.

### ***7.3 Advice for employers***

One employer suggested that many organisations were not involved in supported employment because they were unaware of its existence. There was therefore a need for much more advice, information, encouragement and the sharing of experiences. Employers should keep an open mind about employing disabled people. Others said that if

employers were considering employing a disabled person they should receive encouragement and 'go for it'.

#### ***7.4 Advice for the agencies providing the employment support***

There were suggestions for improvements in quality at the start of the process, when the employee was first recruited and over subsequent years, when the role, illness or workplace of the employee might change. Interviewees felt that the provider agencies could provide more training for employers, the managers and teams of the supported employee, particularly when the person was first recruited. For example, it would be helpful if managers were given more information about what to expect when managing and developing the newly recruited individual. Managers were interested in training on the person's health condition or disability, how that type of condition may affect people's abilities and behaviours, what adaptations could promote people's health and productivity and how the manager might support the individual. It seemed that managers were looking for knowledge, reassurance and an insight into the support mechanisms and management strategies they might later use to support individual employees. Managers were also interested in support in developing people's jobs and careers.

There was a request for help to adapt mandatory staff training, like fire prevention, and health and safety for people with learning disabilities. One suggestion made by managers was for a continued focus on an individualised approach. This is perhaps harder for the agencies working within the targets and timeframes of Work Choice. However the manager of a care home explained that employers want support which fits a person's needs and aspirations:

It's about the company promoting their service a bit more and that being sustained. Not just, 'We'll get you in there and forget about you'. That's where I find now they are taking a step back they are kind of being left alone ... It's like, 'You've had your six months; we'll take a step back now; we'll do this; right that's you signed off'. But for people with disabilities it just doesn't work like that. It's like meeting individual needs. We do it all for our residents here. I prattle on till I am blue in the face, person-centred; individual care needs, blah, blah, blah. You know, they (the supported employees) should be getting the same.

These comments also reflect a desire for on-going support. Managers wanted agencies to be more proactive in providing on-going assistance for existing supported employees.

In addition, it was pointed out that the supported employment agencies were not very good at selling themselves. One employer commented on the difficulties of 'knowing where to source the support'.

### ***7.5 Advice for Work Choice providers***

With regard to the performance of the agencies delivering the Work Choice programme, some employers felt there was a need to streamline and focus the paperwork, as highlighted earlier. In addition, there were calls for greater clarity on what agencies could and could not provide. Related to Work Choice, they wanted more clarity on the agencies' targets and decision-making processes and what the employer could expect.

Some additional specific suggestions for improvements included the following:

- 2 or 3 month placements were too short. People needed longer to learn the skills they required in the workplace, although employers thought a trial period could be very effective for both the employer and the prospective employee.
- Employers, supported employment agencies and mental health services, particularly those working with people with mental health difficulties, needed to work more closely.
- The support agencies should align their development plans for the individual with the employer's own career review processes. Many employers carry out regular reviews with staff and set goals, but these are often not linked to the Work Choice goals and targets. It would be beneficial to both employer and employee if both sets were compatible or even the same.
- Employers would like help after the supported employee has been in post for some time to find new tasks in the workplace or a new role for the individual.

## ***7.6 The future and possible effects of the recession***

Interviewees were asked if the recession affected their company's ability to recruit disabled employees. In general, interviewees did not believe that there had been a major impact to date on their ability to provide supported employment, but it should be borne in mind that this is currently a very small scale activity. A minority believed that the recession had already had a negative impact on their ability to support disabled employees, mentioning financial stringencies and shrinking business. In one case, where the manager had three supported employees and was happy with the agency support, its major client was down-sizing, which had a direct impact on staffing:

We'll not be taking staff on. We'll be re-looking at hours. How we can incorporate into what we've got. And it's just the climate we're in just now. (Manager in facilities management company).

Some store managers talked about tighter budgets, which meant a smaller or restricted staff budget. Managers also mentioned tighter targets and a move towards employing staff who were considered multi-taskers.

A few interviewees said that there was a general 'tightening' within their workplaces, but this was not new, and had been going on for several years. For example, an interviewee in a Local Authority which had traditionally included supported employees in their workforce was now only employing full time permanent employees who have been with the organisation for many years. If short-term staff were required, they used agency personnel.

We haven't taken anybody on for a long time. I think that is how we are using the agencies. (Manager of team in a local authority service)

In this case, the interviewee made it clear that the pace and nature of the job, as well the Local Authority's recruitment and staffing policies, had changed which militated against employing more supported employees.

The job has changed a lot ... When I first started, years ago, we had to have so many people with disabilities and we used to have a lot more, but it was getting too dangerous.

Managers of supported employees working in offices made a similar point. New technology and increased automation made it harder to find

work for disabled people, and one said the workplace might have reached 'saturation point', in terms of finding suitable posts for disabled people. This idea of automation negatively affecting people's chances of work could be linked to the fact that most disabled workers in this study had learning disabilities and were in entry-level type jobs.

## **SECTION EIGHT: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### ***8.1 The status and take-up of supported employment in the workplace***

- The motivation for engaging with supported employment was varied, but in several cases it was around retaining existing staff. One motivation for recruiting supported employees was a desire to give disabled people greater opportunities and life chances.
- Managers reported the majority of their supported employees had been in work for more than a decade. The length of time they had stayed in work was considered an advantage by most employers.
- The traditional DWP Supported Employment Programme with its wage subsidies ended in 2001, and a surprising number of the employees had been in place before that change. Some were still receiving wage subsidies.
- Most managers in the research did not think a wage subsidy necessary to employ disabled people. However, there were only 1-2 supported employees in each workplace, which is less than 5% of employees overall.

### ***8.2 The Work Choice Programme as a delivery vehicle for supported employment***

- Managers reported issues with Work Choice when they had previous experience of support from different programmes and/or agencies. They found the paperwork time-consuming, there was a perception that reviews were tick-box exercises and not enough

attention was paid to individual circumstances. In some cases, the supported employment provider was perceived to be inefficient.

- Many managers believed that the Work Choice programme did not provide sufficient on-going support for disabled people with more significant or fluctuating needs, and there was too much emphasis on moving people into unsupported employment before they were ready.

### ***8.3 Characteristics of supported employees and their impact on the workplace***

- Managers generally felt people in supported employment were good employees – loyal, reliable, motivated and enthusiastic. However, in some cases it was pointed out that even if the quality of work was high, or the person skilled, the productivity of the supported employee was lower than that of other employees.
- Many of the supported employees were in entry-level jobs, for example with facilities management companies or in hotels or care homes. Their managers often saw clear advantages in having supported employees in these posts in terms of their good attendance record and strong desire to work.
- Generally, managers thought that supported employees had a positive impact on the workplace. For example:
  - Supervisors and managers acquired new skills for managing supported employees, which were transferable to wider management practice, for example, simplifying the language of company documentation to aid the understanding of all staff
  - Disabled employees could be ‘inspirational’, overcoming barriers to work and having a strong desire to work



- Making changes to accommodate disabled people could have a positive effect on everyone, e.g. the development of more flexible processes and management.

They also identified challenges around employing and supporting disabled employees. For example:

- A learning curve for the managers in terms of understanding the impact of the individual's disability, with regard to the job and workplace
  - Managing disabled employees often was time-consuming, as instructions may need to be explained patiently, clearly and repeated
  - The employee's health condition or the workplace could change and there were challenges to adapting to these changes, e.g. finding an appropriate new role.
- Overall, managers reported that staff teams were positive about their disabled colleagues. Managers felt that in some cases staff forgot about the individual's disability and treated the supported employee as just another team member. However, there were challenges and managers reported that other employees might:
    - Express frustration over the extra time required to manage or work with some supported employees
    - Perceive that supported employees were given allowances, for example leniency over relatively low productivity
    - Resent having to cover for supported employees who were absent due to illness for a long period.
  - Employers and managers provided a range of support to supported employees including the following measures:

- Adapting working patterns or hours of work
- Purchasing special equipment or developing tailored workplaces
- Delivering training on a 1-to-1 basis
- Adapting communication methods to meet the individual's needs.

#### **8.4 *The work of supported employment agencies***

- Managers reported benefits of working with specialist supported employment agencies, including the following:
  - the employees having someone to talk to from outside the workplace
  - a sounding board or safety net for employers or a mediator between the two parties.
- Most managers reported satisfaction with the support received over time from the specialist agencies, and if the support workers had helped with specific issues like redundancy or relocation that was particularly the case.

#### **8.5 *The future of supported employment***

- Managers thought critical success factors included the following: building a trusting relationship between the employee and manager; the existence of a real job for the employee; a good fit between the job and the individual's skills and aspirations; and a situation which suited both the employer and the employee.
- Supported employment was not perceived as successful where, despite making adaptations, there was reduction in an employee's

productivity after illness or significant periods of sickness and absence.

- Managers thought there was a definite need for supported employment. They recommended to other employers that they keep an open mind about employing a disabled person.
- Managers' recommendations to supported employment providers included the following:
  - There was a need for more training and awareness raising activities so that managers developed a better understanding of supported employment;
  - There should be a greater focus on providing individualised support ;
  - Agencies should be more proactive in identifying and meeting on-going support needs.

It is noticeable that the latter two are core elements of supported employment, as outlined in section 1.

- Research participants spoke about their own experiences, learning and views. Learning, such as the critical success factors and the challenges and benefits of employing disabled people, had not necessarily been cascaded across the whole organisation. Although most interviewees were positive about employing disabled people, this was not necessarily the case for their employer, at a strategic level.
- Most interviewees did not feel that, to date, the recession had affected the organisation's ability to recruit disabled people, although several managers mentioned that there had been a 'tightening' within the workplace. Managers pointed out that

changes in the nature of work, such as needing more flexible employees and greater use of IT, meant that they might be reaching saturation point in terms of having suitable posts for disabled employees.

## **8.6 Discussion and Conclusions**

### **The current status and uptake of supported employment in Scotland**

The research revealed there are a small number of supported employees in workplaces. It also showed that many supported employees were recruited under the Supported Employment Programme which ceased to exist more than a decade ago. This suggests a declining willingness or ability of employers to take on supported employees. This is of concern when nearly half of the managers interviewed felt their employers or industries were feeling the effect of the economic recession, and interviewees talked about the changing nature of workplaces having a negative impact on the employment of disabled people.

During the Supported Employment Programme there was a cash incentive to take-on supported employees. The European Union has recently recommended such incentives are necessary to promote employment for disabled people (COWI, 2012). It concluded 'wage subsidies enhance job opportunities through Supported Employment' (COWI, 2012, p.8). Many interviewees explained that motivation for engaging with supported employment was altruistic, driven by a desire to improve the life chances of disabled people. There is a danger that the good will of employers may run thin as the on-going economic downturn

places huge pressures on businesses and local authorities. Whilst there are arguments against wage subsidies, there is probably a case for re-examining their use in the context of a possible decline in the uptake of supported employment.

### **The quality of jobs and career progression for supported employees**

Managers' perception that most supported employees were undertaking entry level jobs reflects the findings of other research (Ridley et al., 2005). Managers were not asked about the reason for the high preponderance of basic level posts, but it is unlikely to be because the employees were new to the job market, with many supported employees reportedly in their jobs for over a decade. It is more likely to be related to the jobs suiting the employees or limited opportunity for career development. Employees interviewed in Ridley et al.'s study reported satisfaction with their jobs, although employers rarely thought about their career development. This research with managers revealed examples of them developing individuals within their roles, but there was little evidence of career planning for disabled employees on a broader scale or of their being supported into more advanced roles

### **The need for longer-term and individualised assistance for supported employees**

Both supported employment agencies and managers provide support to employees on an on-going basis. Generally, the support is not complex or involving specialist equipment, but involves adapting the work schedule, role or company training to enable the disabled person to perform their tasks effectively. In line with good practice in supported

employment, managers maintained that support should be on-going and flexible.

### **Work Choice as the vehicle for the delivery of supported employment**

Managers were enthusiastic about the supported employment approach and they thought more supported employment should be funded.

However, they were less enthusiastic about the current DWP national programme Work Choice. Some highlighted its bureaucratic approach and lack of individualised support. There was also concern about the lack of on-going support and pressure to move people into open employment as soon as possible. There were concerns that the programme did not provide sufficiently extensive support for disabled people with complex or fluctuating conditions, particularly people with mental health problems who have very low rates of employment.

### ***8.7 Implications for employers***

Supported employment is the employability approach known to be successful in enabling disabled employees to gain and retain work, yet this research indicates that supported employment may be on the decline. The decline is in spite of the fact that managers report that supported employees are valuable staff members. Employing and managing supported employees is rewarding for managers, other staff members and the company. This is particularly the case when there is a good fit between the employee and the job.

It is recommended that more organisations employ supported employees, and existing employers spread the practice across their organisations. To achieve the latter, positive experiences need to be

communicated to organisations' high level managers and boards. Appropriate support for employers and employees is also required. There is a clear role for supported employment agencies and their representative bodies in making this happen. Commissioners, local and national government also have a role in promoting the development and sustainability of supported employment and its uptake within and between employers.

### ***8.8 Implications for commissioners***

Strategies to reverse the decline of supported employment include ensuring that supported employment opportunities are available for all disabled individuals who wish to participate, irrespective of impairment. This would imply the need for additional opportunities to be made available beyond those which exist already through the current DWP funded Work Choice programme. It is recommended that supported employment should include incentives for employers to take on more disabled people, particularly those with more significant impairments.

### ***8.9 Implications for the DWP***

Managers in the research had clear opinions about the current DWP programme Work Choice. Given that employers are central to the increased employment of disabled people, it is recommended employers and managers who have worked with DWP welfare to work programmes are included in evaluations of Work Choice and the design of the national programmes for disabled people.

It appears that employers' opinions are not often canvassed, and it is recommended that other stakeholders, including DWP, commissioners

and supported employment agencies give more time and attention to finding out and responding to employers' needs and experience.

### ***8.10 Implications for supported employment providers and their networks***

The research identified a gap in terms of spreading good practice and positive experiences within workplace teams or departments across the wider organisation. It is recommended supported employment agencies and their representative bodies endeavour to engage with employers at a more strategic level to persuade them to discuss supported employment at board level rather than on a case by case basis with individual teams. The purpose would be to ask employers to commit to employing a larger number of disabled employees. Supported employment agencies would have to provide or facilitate appropriate high quality support for these employees.

This research with employers gives a clear indication that employers want the type of support promised by supported employment good practice - job matching, individualised, on-going support. This provides an argument for supported employment agencies to promote and protect quality and to provide the necessary training, opportunities for qualifications and reward structures for their staff to ensure this happens.



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