

Work Experience Placements

Introduction

The concept of work experience placements for people with disabilities as a tool to help individuals find and maintain paid employment in the open labour market is an issue of much discussion in Supported Employment.

This paper provides the position of the European Union of Supported Employment with regards to the issues related to work experience placements within Supported Employment.

Background

Supported Employment was developed partly to prevent people with learning difficulties being stuck in sheltered workshops or in unpaid work. The origins of Supported Employment began with the recognition that the 'train then place' methods contributed little to the integration of people with disability into ordinary working life. The development of the 'place-train-maintain' strategy has worked well and the characteristics of natural supports, increased user participation and partnership working with key stakeholders are now common-place in Supported Employment.

The EUSE definition of Supported Employment includes the term "to secure paid employment in the open labour market". This was to signify that Supported Employment meant real jobs for real pay.

The organising of a work experience placement, therefore, could appear to contradict the EUSE definition as such a placement is usually without pay. Moreover, from a traditional Supported Employment perspective, the aim is to 'place-train-maintain'. This would assume that during the 'place-train-maintain' activity that the job seeker is in receipt of wages but evidence has shown that this is rarely the case.

The definition and components of a work experience placement is an area that has not been addressed and yet the use of work experience placements are common-place. This has led to a wide disparity of service provision and a range of views on the provision of work experience placements within Supported Employment.

The Issues

The majority of job seekers who access Supported Employment services have not been in employment for long periods of time or have not had any employment opportunities since leaving school or education and are unsure of their own job preferences, strengths and weaknesses. Supported Employment providers find that a work experience placement is an excellent tool to identify a job seekers' support needs as well as giving them a taste of real work. Moreover, they provide an opportunity for a job seeker to increase their choices by experiencing different environments and situations.

Research indicates that the majority of Supported Employment agencies use work experience placements as a method to achieve a paid job in the open labour market¹. However, there are signs that work experience placements are lasting increasingly longer, sometimes in excess of six months; it may be viewed that these placements are in actual fact voluntary jobs and are not being used as a progression tool or a stepping stone to paid employment. There is also a lack of clarity of the difference between a job taster and a work experience placement; this could be simply down to different providers using different terminologies, although a job taster was often seen as an activity that only needed to last from a few hours to a few days to enable a job seeker to sample a particular job.

Moreover, as Supported Employment has expanded into other client groups, then the 'place - train - maintain' concept remains an effective tool but cannot be considered as the only tool to support job seekers with a disability or disadvantage into paid employment. Supported Employment has developed significantly in Europe over the last ten years and the emphasis is no longer solely on individuals with learning disabilities.

There are views that work experience placements have no place in Supported Employment because people with disabilities should be trained in the workplace as a paid employee. There are also claims that disabled people in work experience placements are being exploited as they are 'working' but not being paid. These arguments are of course valid, but only to a point.

There is no doubt that work experience placements are a useful and effective activity in the Supported Employment process and they are directly and indirectly instrumental in assisting job seekers securing paid work in the open labour market. If an individual has been out of work for a long period or has never been in employment then they need to determine their job preferences and their own strengths and weaknesses. It is not necessary for people to undertake lengthy training programmes to discover this and a work experience placement will help an individual to identify likes and dislikes within a particular workplace

¹ Spjelkavik/Evans (2007): Impressions of Supported Employment – A study of some European Supported Employment Services and their activities; p. 16. Work Research Institute, Oslo.

environment. A work experience placement may give the individual something to add to their application form, CV and an area to discuss at a job interview, thus improving their employment prospects as well as boosting confidence and self esteem. It could give them an insight into what real employment is like and help them assess their own skills and stamina. A work experience placement may develop new skills and build on existing ones; it could also provide an up to date employment reference. There may be the opportunity for the employer to consider employing the individual on a more permanent basis especially as the job seeker can demonstrate their own skills, abilities and motivation whilst undertaking a work experience placement.

The main issue appears to have shifted to a point where it is no longer about 'should we organise work experience placements?' instead the issue has moved on to 'how should we define and organise work experience placements?' There is no point in maintaining the traditional line that there is no place for work experience placements in Supported Employment when such a large majority of service providers throughout Europe use them to assist and support job seekers into employment. We must also guard against the provision of systematic and compulsory work experience placements especially when they do not result in the job seeker achieving paid employment.

Position of the European Union of Supported Employment

The European Union of Supported Employment (EUSE) recognises and acknowledges that work experience placements are an integral part of the 5 - stage process and are likely to take place at stage 2 (vocational profiling) or stage 3 (job finding)². However, in line with the values and principles of Supported Employment, a person-centred approach must be adopted and a work experience placement should only be organised when there is a genuine requirement for it to occur. A work experience placement is an activity to assist the Supported Employment process and should be considered to assist job seekers to identify their job preferences, strengths, weaknesses, and support needs.

A work experience placement should be time-limited to avoid exploitation of the job seeker and EUSE would recommend that 8 -12 weeks is a sufficient time period to meet the objectives of the placement. A placement could be for any amount of hours per week but consideration should be given for it to be part-time hours to enable the job seeker to also continue with other elements of the Supported Employment process. Each placement should be risk assessed and be organised in a work place setting (preferably in the open labour market) or organisation or employment sector of the job seeker's choice.

² For more information on the 5 stage Supported Employment process see EUSE (2005): European Union of Supported Employment – Information Booklet and Quality Standards.

There must be an agreement by both the job seeker and the employer regarding the terms and conditions of the work experience placement; this agreement should cover issues such as placement objective, support to be provided, duties to be undertaken, limitations, insurance cover, reporting procedures and the evaluation process. The placement should be monitored and supported in the same way as a supported job.

A job taster should be organised in much of the same manner as that of a work experience placement. The main difference is that a job taster would not be expected to last for more than one week and should mainly be used for job seekers to sample different types of work for a short period of time.

The skills and knowledge gained during the work experience should be used to enhance the job finding process. Communications between the employer and the job seeker by the Supported Employment agency should be conducted in a professional manner which respects the dignity of both the job seeker and the employer and maintains the quality standards expected of Supported Employment.

Conclusion

Work experience placements should be viewed as a means to an end and not as the end result. They should be organised, developed and monitored within the traditional values and principles of Supported Employment and should only be undertaken when there is a genuine need to do so.

Further Reading

- EUSE Position Paper "Values, Standards and Principles of Supported Employment"
- EUSE Position Paper "Paid and Unpaid Work"

This document is available in alternative formats such as Braille, Audiotape or Electronically on request.

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