

Top Tips: Skills and experience of staff

Connect to Work (CtW) is delivered by Employment Specialists who provide:

- wrap-around support to participants
- engagement with employers and wider partners
- in-work support.

Other staff can also be recruited to support with aspects of the programme, such as stakeholder engagement, programme management, and service alignment and integration. While Employment Specialists primarily work on CtW, associated staff can work across other employment programmes to increase alignment and integration longer term.

Some delivery areas commission the delivery from providers, so won't directly employ staff, while others deliver the programme in-house. In either case, consideration should be given to the range of skills and experience staff working on CtW need to inform either the recruitment or commissioning.

You can find more information about the context in which this document was developed [here](#).

Lessons learned

The lessons below are drawn from the evaluations of a range of Supported Employment programmes, including : IPS Grow and Health-Led Trials. We have also used the Competencies framework and curriculum developed by UCL and IPS Grow about Individual and Placement Support Employment Specialists and the occupational standard developed by the British Association for Supported Employment (BASE) to describe the skills and knowledge needed in the supported employment sector.

Careful considerations should be given to:

- the skills and attributes that allows the staff working on CtW to best support people with complex needs to find and stay in employment.
- the working conditions to enable delivery of high-quality employment support and appropriate engagement and support of employers.

Skills, attributes, and experience

Other programmes have demonstrated that some attributes, skills and experience are particularly valuable for Employment Specialists and/or associated roles. These could include:

- **Knowledge and experience of working with disabled people, people with health conditions, and people with complex needs.** Those who have lived

experience can help support participants by being motivational for them, but also through their own insights can understand the experiences of participants' employment journey. Formal and informal training can also support Employment Specialists in the best approaches to use.

- **Having good local knowledge of the local labour market, employers and support offered in the area.** Having a strong understanding of the needs of local businesses, along with the support provided by other organisations is important so that staff can best support participants and refer them to the most appropriate support. For example, [The Growth Company](#) (TGC), the organisation delivering Individual Placement and Support in Primary Care on behalf of Greater Manchester, already had an Employer Engagement Team in place to support the wider provision of employment support programmes. This was particularly helpful for the Employment Specialists to draw on the expertise of the team to gain local knowledge of the labour market and employers.
- **A range of skills and attributes to support with a wide range of tasks.** Skills and attributes may include communication skills to build trust and relationships with wide range of participants and partners, creative thinking to remove employment barriers to participants, ability to work as part of a team and individually, experience in protection and safeguarding vulnerable clients, and an awareness of the social model of disability. [Competencies framework and curriculum](#) has been developed by UCL and IPS Grow to support the development of IPS Employment Specialists. [British Association for Supported Employment](#) (BASE) has also developed an occupational standard to describe the skills and knowledge needed in the supported employment sector.

Working conditions

The working conditions for delivery staff can impact the success of a programme. Other programmes have shown that:

- **Providing ongoing staff training to maintain fidelity to supported employment programme principles, including employment and health support, and leading employer engagement.** This was recommended following the large-scale evaluation of the trials of [Individual Placement and Support \(IPS\) in Sheffield and the West Midlands \(the Health-Led Trials\)](#). While extensive training was provided to staff who joined at the start of the programme, the training provided to staff gradually decreased.
- **Ensuring caseload size is manageable and that each Employment Specialist has a mix of complex and less complex cases.** The Grant Guidance set the maximum number of participants supported by each Employment Specialist, but recruitment and retention challenges can mean these are sometimes exceeded. The Health-Led Trials in Sheffield and the West Midlands showed that where Employment Specialists had higher than recommended caseloads, this led to high turnover and burnout of staff.

- **Ensuring time and capacity is protected to engage with employers, so that employers' needs are fully understood, and appropriate matches can be made.** The Health-Led Trials in Sheffield and the West Midlands shows that while Employer Specialists recognise the importance of employer engagement to overcome employers' misperceptions of the cost of reasonable adjustments, staff with less experience and time were less likely to engage with this task. High caseloads and working across large geographical areas meant staff were not able to dedicate enough time to engage with employers. In Greater Manchester, as part of the [Working Well Programme](#), employer engagement consultants were recruiting to provide more targeted support. Recruitment of associate staff, such as Employer Advisers to create and maintain connections with employers can be beneficial to support Employment Specialists with this aspect of the job.
- **Recruitment of additional staff to facilitate the delivery of the programme.** Other staff could also be recruited to support Employment Specialists with some aspects of the programme, including: Triage/Gateway/Pathway Advisers to support local areas with the development of referral routes and identify eligibility, and integration coordinators to further strengthen the integration between services. Staff with experience of providing in-work support, or self-employment, can also be recruited to support the Employment Specialists when people move to employment as this requires specific skillsets. These specialist staff could also be responsible for supporting programme participants at risk of losing their job.
- **Ensuring staff are kept up to date with changes and developments with the local area health, skills and employment landscape.** It is important that this information is provided on an ongoing basis and staff are aware of any changes so that they know what support and opportunities are available for participants.
- **Ensuring each Employment Specialist have regular catch up with supervisors and that the role of the supervisor score highly on a fidelity scale** (See for example item 5 on the [Supported Employment fidelity scale](#)). The role of supervisors is critical to support Employment Specialists, with one full-time supervisor responsible for no more than 10 Employment Specialists. Weekly catch up between the Employment Specialists and the supervisor can be arranged to review the programme participants situations and identify new strategies.
- **Ensuring staff wellbeing is monitored, to avoid burn out of staff and that best practice in working with participants is maintained.**

Key considerations

Skills, attributes and experience

What induction and on-boarding support will you provide for new Employment Specialists?

How do you ensure the recruitment of people who adhere to the ambition of supported employment programmes? Could your selection process include an

activity to demonstrate their listening skills? Will you look for specific qualifications such as in coaching and mentoring?

How could you recruit more people with lived experience of disabilities, limiting health conditions and other needs?

How can you involve programme participants in the recruitment and the ongoing training of staff to ensure staff can respond to the participants needs?

Working conditions and recruitment of staff

Where will you advertise vacancies to broaden the selection pool and ensure a diversity of applicants?

If you recruit people with lived experience of disability or health conditions, how will you support them in post if needed, so you can demonstrate and role model good practice to your employer and wider partners?

What strategies will you put in place to protect the caseloads and flexibility of support provided of Employment Specialists?

How will you ensure that Employment Specialists are provided with training, professional development, and networking opportunities to build their knowledge?

How will you support the wellbeing of Employment Specialists?

Examples of what is working well

Recruitment of people with lived experiences

The [Greater Manchester Work and Health Programme & Job Entry: Targeted Support \(JETS\)](#) is an employment support programme providing a wide package of support for people with disabilities to find permanent work. The programme uses staff from backgrounds other than employability support, many of them unemployed due to the pandemic and therefore having had a similar experience to the early JETS cohorts. These staff were considered to have brought different knowledge, skillsets and contacts, fresh perspectives and enthusiasm, and been relatable for clients. Despite the creativity in recruitment persistent challenges to recruitment were attributed to a competitive labour market with well-paid jobs available to potential candidates.

A success of the programme was the ability of staff to re-engage participants who had been previously dis-engaged. Underpinning factors were continuous professional development opportunities for staff in subjects, such as working with specific cohorts, for example people who are neurodivergent and people over 50, supporting people to overcome barriers to employment, such as childcare and money management, and developing staff skills in supporting participants with action planning and career progression.