

Pushing the envelope – how to transition long-term unemployed job seekers back into work

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Abstract

This paper discusses a pre-employment training programme that we have created and tested with a variety of long-term unemployed clients, including Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander job seekers. Common to a range of models we tested is the use of business mentors for all participants and a tough-yet-supportive approach that mirrors the boundaries of the workplace in the training environment. We will discuss one of these models, called Employability for Life, in detail, and give the example of two programmes run within Ford Motor Company and in partnership with the Job Network and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. This program had an average success rate of ~75% which is far in excess of any other programme targeting the same highly disadvantaged clients that we are aware of.

History

We have been running pre-employment training programmes for long-term unemployed and 'at risk' young adults for the past 6 years. The initial model focused on young adults, usually with no or very little work history and incomplete schooling. This model, called Interviewing Your Future (IYF) was run over 25 times in Melbourne, Sydney, Bendigo and Ballarat.

The IYF programme was a 5-day full-time programme coupled with 3 months mentoring. The mentors came from the corporate sector, from companies such as ANZ, Ford, Lend Lease and KPMG. During the foundation 5 days we focused on positive mind management, problem solving, effective job search and transferable skills. The last day was reserved for mock interviews with HR professionals from local businesses.

These programmes on average had a 67% success rate, with success being defined as either full-time employment or full-time education. They targeted young adults from 'at risk' backgrounds in the 15-25 years age group. The participants were mainly engaged through an outreach programme, usually promoting the programme in areas where these young adults congregated, such as shopping malls. This brought youth who had ceased engagement with mainstream social services back into the system. Some participants were nominated via local agencies.

Two years ago we broadened our focus from young adults to long-term unemployed people of any age. We also developed a more intensive programme, called Employability for Life (EFL). This programme will be discussed in detail in the later sections of this paper. The first section is dedicated to the target group and what problems need to be addressed in a programme such as EFL.

The Target Group

Employability for Life was created to provide long-term unemployed (12 months or more) or otherwise highly disadvantaged job seekers with an avenue back into work. The people this programme targets face disproportionate barriers to entry into work, including:

- Age – for mature aged workers recently retrenched who may have been in the same job for 10-20 years plus
- No recent work experience – a resume full of gaps without the 'stable work history' most employers insist on
- Personal issues – drugs, alcohol, depression that impact a person's ability to hold down a job
- Discrimination – which is illegal but still often applies to Aboriginal people and immigrants/refugees looking for work
- Disability – previous work injuries or accidents can have highly adverse effect on job prospects. This group also includes people with some form of mental disability

The current system of employment services through the Job Network is often incapable to deal with the prejudices and negative attitudes on both sides, those of the client and the prospective employer. We would like to stress again that this programme specifically targets the 25-33% of job seekers that tend to have great difficulties finding employment through the Job Networks.

On top of the barriers to (re-)entry into the job market, most long-term unemployed people have only two primary networks:

- Other unemployed people, and
- Employment and welfare agency staff

The first means that they have little access to employed role models and little opportunity to access the 'hidden job' market - via who you know. The second point is important because staff in job and welfare agencies often have a different value system than the private sector. This is demonstrated by being more tolerant of unprofessional behaviour and so people aren't pushed to develop a professional persona.

Overall this lack of suitable role models, stability and healthy boundaries only reinforces negative behavioural patterns and often leads to a cycle of getting a job and then getting sacked within the first few days or weeks for failing to turn up on time or similar 'offences'.

To us these observations meant that breaking old habits and forming new positive and productive ones is at the core of breaking the cycle of unemployment. We decided that any intervention has to clearly outline the professional behaviours employers are looking for and that they need to be demonstrated consistently.

Therefore Employability for Life places a big focus on attitude, stressing not just 'what' to do right but also 'how' you do it right. We clearly outline and enforce professional boundaries that will be demanded in the workplace, starting with the most basic like punctuality, calling in when running late and staying focused over a full working day. This ability to stay focussed culminates in the last 5 weeks with a 12 day full-time work project with a strong problem solving and team work component.

In our experience the target group we are working with needs a healthy mixture of mirroring back and challenging inappropriate behaviours together with positive reinforcement and positive experiences. This help to:

- Build self-esteem & responsibility through feeling in control
- See what are the other areas of their life that they need to manage e.g. debt, anger, health
- Develop a healthy respect for self and others
- Learn assertive behaviour, rather than passive or aggressive behaviour
- See there is much more to holding down a job than just the technical component
- Get a sense of the importance of attitude to an employer

In constructing a suitable model to service this clientele it was therefore necessary to combine a wide range of components and package it in a form that has the highest chance of producing successful outcomes. For us this meant we had to include:

- Attitudinal training and consistent feedback
- Training around the non-technical aspects of work
- Technical training
- Work experience and experiential learning in the private sector
- Mentoring by a business mentor
- Supervised job search

The programme has further been specifically designed to combine all five approaches for enhancing self-esteem:

- Cognitive Approach – focuses on challenging the manner in which individuals view their experiences, to help them view things positively rather than negatively.
- Behavioural Approach – encourages people to adopt specific behaviours so that they can express themselves confidently, so that others will relate to them in a positive manner.
- Experiential Approach – designs activities or situations that enable individuals to experience their strengths, relate to others in positive ways and receive positive feedback to develop a more positive sense of identity
- Skill Development Approach – focuses on the development of specific skills, with the assumption that by functioning at a higher level individuals begin to achieve greater success and thereby enhance their self esteem
- Environment Approach – addresses all aspects of a system to provide a more positive environment where individuals become involved in decisions that affect them.

The EFL Model

Employability for Life is an intensive 9-week full time pre-employment training programme designed for highly disadvantaged and long term unemployed job seekers. It combines classroom based training with supervised job search, 1-on-1 mentoring and work experience. The programme requires partnerships with industry for the work experience and the work projects. Typically this will be in manufacturing, hospitality, horticulture, retail and similar industries where tertiary qualifications are not needed for entry level positions.

Week 1	Week 2-4	Week 5-9	Week 10-15
Positive Mind Management, Team Building, Transferable Skills, Problem Solving, Resume	1 day supervised job search and 1:1 coaching		
	3 days work experience	3 days work project	
	1 day technical and/or attitudinal training		
	1.5 hours per week mentoring by the business mentor		
Auxiliary support services around housing, drugs & alcohol, debt, anger management, health etc.			

In the first week participants undergo 5 days of intensive classroom training that opens them up to new learning, teamwork and establishes a positive attitude. During this week typically 10-15% of participants will drop out as their level of commitment is being tested through a full, high energy 40 hour week and through being pushed to reflect on their own behaviours. The final step during this first week is creating a draft resume based on transferable skills.

For the next 3 weeks the participants spend 1 day each week job searching and applying for jobs using online sites such as jobsearch.gov.au, email and local papers. During this day the trainers also conduct 1-on-1 coaching sessions. A second day each week is spent doing further classroom based training that ranges from OH&S to financial literacy, basic communication, professional networking, how to access the hidden job market and life design. The remaining 3 days are spent doing work experience at the industry partner's site.

During the last 5 weeks the work experience days are replaced with a work based team project, usually in teams of 3-5 participants. This project work creates better problem solving skills and better team cohesion. The teams are assigned real work projects by the industry partner, conduct the projects at the industry partner site and the project results are presented to managers from the industry partner on the last day of the programme.

From week 2 of the full-time programme going through to 6 weeks after the full time component is completed each participant is assigned a mentor from the industry partner(s). Each mentor has received two full days of training to prepare them for their role. The mentor focuses on resume, mock interviews, networking and keeping the job search on track. Similarly, they model the professional behaviours and boundaries that employers need.

The Philosophy

The key to the 75%+ success rate of the programme is not in its content. The key is how it is delivered. The delivery is based on high energy, asking for a lot, setting tough goals and enforcing strict boundaries. It is also based on reinforcing positive behaviours and calling participants on negative behaviours. This starts with a strict focus on punctuality throughout the whole 9 weeks. We encourage continuously based on empathy and providing skills for self-improvement. All successes are celebrated, all feedback is given honestly and in an appropriate time frame.

Most long-term unemployed job seekers have forgotten what boundaries apply in the workplace and many have never learned to respect healthy boundaries for themselves or others. This often leads to a cycle of gaining employment and getting sacked within a few days over minor violations of workplace 'rules' such as being late for work or from breaks, talking too much, or not been able to manage basic private life issues around their professional life (e.g. often taking an hour off to sort out something they perceive requires 'urgent attention'). By creating a course environment that mirrors these workplace rules in a strict fashion we have 9 weeks to provide feedback on all rule violations and illustrate the consequences each such behaviour would have led to in a real job setting.

In contrast, the current values prevalent in the welfare sector essentially favour 'self-determination' and the 'right to be who you are'. Whilst good and noble values, they ignore the rules of the workplace and fail to distinguish between right and wrong. We instead prefer to be honest about what the real values in the workplace are and how each participant has all the resources to be successful in getting and keeping a job. That means that we constantly hold up the mirror to participants about their behaviours and how they affect them, others and their chances of success in the job market.

It is a mute argument from our point of view on whether the rules of the workplace should be as harsh as they are or why there aren't more 'tolerant' or 'nice' employers out there who respect that it is not always possible to keep private problems out of working hours. In truth, these are second tier considerations that will have to wait¹. In the first instance the setup of the programme favours self-selection of participants who really want to work and are prepared to make changes in their lives to support their goals.

The Employability For Life model was created to have sufficient time and interaction to influence those willing to change and willing to unlearn destructive behaviours. It takes 3-4 weeks to break an existing pattern and establish a new one. Because the participants have some 42 hours of interaction per week with people who do not share their 'normal' (destructive) environment, those new patterns have a chance to take hold through positive reinforcement. We consistently find that successful participants move out of their previous circle of 'friends' and establish new networks.

¹ These considerations are re-emerging in highly paid knowledge economy jobs where work-life balance is back on the agenda to keep the best from downshifting or leaving the company. But we are talking about largely unskilled jobs.

The Programme Components

In going through the programme a participant will typically receive:

- 3-5 hours of 1-on-1 coaching and feedback on behaviour
- 100 hours of classroom training mixing practical skills such as OH&S with interpersonal skills, goal setting, life design, team building, financial literacy and job search skills such as networking
- 5-15 mock interviews with mentors, industry partners and other HR representatives
- 8 days of intensive job search under supervision with a minimum target of 5 job applications per each job search day
- 9 days of work experience at the industry partner's facility with feedback on their performance
- 15 days working on a real life work project in small teams of 3-5 people
- 18-24 contact hours with their mentor
- Facilitated contact with external agencies on issues such as housing, getting their car roadworthy, getting a phone, debt management etc.

We have already mentioned the importance of individual, behavioural feedback. We extend this concept to individual case management, coaching and mentoring. In our experience ~25% of participants need intensive assistance with related problems, typically around housing, domestic violence, debt, childcare/rearing and drugs/alcohol, anger management. The EFL programme is based on involving other agencies to assist with these problems. Our role might be to find a suitable agency, bring together case workers or assistance with taking the first step (such as accompanying them to the first meeting).

Beyond that all coaching is focussed on job search and success within the boundaries of the workplace. We mainly find ourselves confronting anger, violent outbursts, hopelessness and denial of personal responsibility. All of these behaviours are mirrored back and explored in the 'would be' work environment. Then we supply alternative strategies that participants can try out whilst still in the programme.

The classroom training components are quite flexible apart from critical modules on job search, resume writing, networking, communication skills and life design. We continually stress the positives and positive attitudes. Inevitably as the course progresses participants gain jobs and provide a boost to the others to try harder.

Classroom training in such large groups only works as a high-energy affair. The argument against large groups that is often made is that individuals will be left behind or receive insufficient attention. This is not a problem because of the level of individual attention and support they will receive in coaching, on the work projects and the job search days. Basically the classroom training introduces important concepts and re-establishes the bonds within the group – the 'we are all in this together' feeling. It is also designed to boost the energy levels of the group as a whole.

Workplace relevant training such as OH&S or training modules relevant to the industry partner hosting the work experience give participants immediate and transferable

skills. We have found that the simple fact that trainers from the industry partner deliver the training boosts the self-esteem of participants.

Work experience is given so much time because most participants in the target groups we work with are very hands-on and quickly tire of 'brain work'. They want to work and we want them to work and feel productive. We have successfully used job rotation over the three weeks work experience to give participants the chance to experience several jobs or work areas. This often enables them to refine the type of work they are looking for and therefore the chances of keeping a job.

Three words of caution with regards to the work experience are in order at this point. First, not all workers are perfect and the participants will inevitably focus on the ones who violate workplace boundaries or rules that we are trying to enforce. We happily acknowledge that this is the case and then point out that all the other workers do seem to be following the rules. Change your focus is our message.

Second, participants are not currently eligible for WorkCover when working in private enterprise. This has been raised with the Victorian State Government. There are two ways around this: the industry partner or the programme host can obtain personal accident insurance or decide to employ the participants on a part-time work basis. In the long term it would be much preferable to have WorkCover extended to work experience in private enterprise.

Third, unless they are employed and paid for the work experience, participants will be working 8 hour days 'for free'. It usually doesn't take long before someone (participant or a worker at the industry partner) comes up with the term 'slave labour'. Our participant agreement that each participant has signed has of course covered this, but it has been forgotten. We remind the participants that they agreed upfront to work 'for free' and that we are giving them the chance to experience a particular employer and job first-hand plus receiving on-the-job training.

The work projects are another critical component and often give rise to a lot of angst from the participants or the industry partner. We have found that it takes 4-6 weeks of preparation for the industry partner to come up with suitable projects that can yield results in 12-15 days using teams of 3-5. Typical projects will be feasibility studies, investigating quality or OH&S problems or conducting some sort of research. Each project is assigned a supervisor from the industry partner who guides the team.

The reason we have the projects is because they force the participants to apply the problem solving, communication and team building skills that we have taught them and that they can learn from each other and their project supervisor. We have found that 10-20% of participants will really struggle with the projects. Team composition therefore is crucial and we carefully identify leadership potential and skills mix required when breaking the group into their teams. Notwithstanding the struggle or the sometimes boring projects the sense of achievement that comes from solving a real workplace issue will astound everyone involved, especially the staff from the industry partner hosting the projects.

Of course through providing the overall project manager, we not only assist the project supervisors with the inevitable issues that will come up (anger, conflict, absences are

the most typical) but we also push the teams and supervisors to set higher targets. There is usually great reluctance to accept that 'unskilled' and 'unemployed' participants can solve a real workplace issue. We challenge this belief from the onset and slowly build the confidence of participants and project supervisors around their projects.

The highlight of the projects are the final presentations to mentors, staff and managers from the industry partner. The last 3 days of the programme are dedicated to creating PowerPoint presentations and practising. Unsurprisingly, 99% of participants will have never used PowerPoint or done any public presentations. Surprisingly, the quality of the presentations is usually outstanding and 66-80% of participants will get up in front of 50-100 people to present their project. This leaves them on a real high and further boosts their confidence.

Finally, supervised job search and mock interviews are an essential component of the program. The quality of support (intensive assistance) that participants receive from their job network will vary greatly. We and the mentor spend a total of 4-8 hours on creating and polishing their initial resume. Then we spend a further 2-6 hours teaching them to extract key requirements out of job adverts and to customise their resume accordingly.

The supervised job search includes teaching the use of job search websites, setting up and using email, creating covering letters and making applications. We push participants to apply for a minimum of 5 jobs on each job search day. We review all applications before they go out, polish covering letters, listen as they make phone calls and provide feedback. Carefully selecting jobs that a participant wants to do and has the skills and experience for often takes most of the time.

Mock interviews are conducted by us, the mentors, mentors colleagues, HR staff from industry partner and industry representatives invited for formal mock interview days. By the end of the programme a participant on average will have had 10 mock interviews and received quality feedback at each one of those. If participants had been afraid of interviews they will have had so much practice that the fear is much reduced. They will have written out their standard responses to the typical interview questions and rehearsed them many times. Of course mock interview days always include the chance of impressing a particular employer and turning the interview into a real one. We foster the chances of this happening by inviting companies who are currently hiring and through inviting Group Training Companies for potential apprenticeships and traineeships.

As we mentioned in the first section, the mentoring participants receive is a component of great importance. We believe that mentoring is a deliberate pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a lesser skilled or experienced person, with the agreed upon goal of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop specific competencies. In our case the whole relationship is set up around finding and keeping a job. The mentor will have received 2 full days of training with us, primarily around advanced communication skills and life design. This training includes some 15-20 exercises and mentors receive a workbook for future reference.

We match mentors and protégé primarily around the difficulty of the protégé and the degree of willingness to deal with difficult emotional situations the mentor displayed in the training. Other than that we allow mentors and protégé to choose themselves when mentors get to know them by assisting in exercises during the first week of the program. We do not pair male mentors with female protégés.

The mentor-protégé relationship is based on an agreement that both parties draft and sign in the second meeting. Further, each week the mentor and protégé agree on a list of tasks and actions for the protégé. The mentor tracks completion of those actions and provides assistance with the resume, covering letters, introductions, information interviews and mock interviews. Often the mentor is one of very few securely employed people within the protégé's network.

By offering each participant their own personal business mentor we ensure that each protégé is provided with someone who is fully focused on them and their success. The mentor helps them out at roadblocks, provides opportunities through access to new networks and job opportunities and keeps protégé on track in achieving their goals. This relationship also boosts the protégé's self-esteem and helps rebuild trust in other adults. We have found that mentors are crucial in sourcing access to the hidden job market, information interviews and access to professional groups/agencies that may otherwise be difficult to penetrate.

The mentoring is facilitated, we meet with the mentors once a week for an hour for the 13 week period. In those sessions we explore what problems have come up and how to solve them. The mentors also support each other and share their experiences, providing insights and ideas to the whole group.

Mentoring is not only relevant to assist participants in their job search, but also an essential component of post-placement support once participants have started in their job.

EFL Results

We have run 3 Employability for Life programmes in Melbourne and Geelong. The number of participants varied between 20 and 27, we measure this number at the beginning of week 2. We also found that the number of stable participants is ~60% of the number of people who applied. This means that to get 30 participants for a programme we need 50 confirmed applications. Of the 40% who are dropping out most will not show up for the programme at all and others will drop out during the first week. The benefit of this approach is that commitment has been established after week 1 and we had only 1 or 2 people leave the programme after week 1.

In the first programme which was ran in the City of Hume in 2002, 16 of the 20 participants, or 80%, found jobs within 13 weeks of programme completion. This programme was with a mixed group aged 17-57 who had been unemployed for up to six years. Brite Industries, a non-profit organisation employing clients with a range of disabilities acted as the host and Hume City Council provided part of the funding. The mentors came from Ford Motor Company.

The second and third programmes were ran in conjunction with Ford and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and were exclusively for indigenous job seekers. Both programmes were hosted by Ford and all mentors came from Ford. They were designed as part of Ford's long-term strategy to employ more Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders and partially funded by DEWR under the STEP programme for indigenous job seekers and partially by the referring Job Networks. The programmes started in September 2003 and January 2004, respectively.

These two programmes required a small degree of customisation to account for the specific needs of indigenous participants. Mentors, project supervisors and participants each underwent a full-day cross-cultural communication training. Furthermore, Ford employed an indigenous consultant to assist with cultural issues, link with the communities and to provide group work with participants within a cultural specific context.

Participants in both programmes were aged between 18 and 58 and most had a patchy employment history at best. One person had not been in employment for 20 years, many only had seasonal work (fruit picking). In both groups the desire for stable employment was very strong. We had to confront a range of anger issues with roots in cultural discrimination and also had to address concerns over racism in the workplace. Ford has over 60 nationalities of workers but had only 1 or 2 indigenous employees before the programmes.

The second programme had a success rate of 67% and in the third program 74% of participants found jobs within 13 weeks. From the second programme only one person resigned from their job since starting employment and in the third programme all but two participants who found jobs are still employed. Ford now employs over 25 people of Aboriginal descent.

As expected, we have also seen big advances in life circumstances outside work. A follow-up with the participants still employed at Ford after 6 months has confirmed that participants:

- Accommodation becomes more stable
- Paid off or paying off debt
- Have been able to buy new or relatively new car
- Are now saving for a deposit to buy house
- Are rebuilding relationships with family (parents, spouses, children)
- Sourced necessary counselling to tackle long term issues

Participant Recruitment

Ideally all participants are nominated via their Job Network agency, in which case a pre-existing relationship has been established and we can get a history about why they are struggling to get or keep a job. Of course not all people who form the target group for these programmes are actually registered with a Job Network. This presents a problem since only the Job Networks have the means to pay the estimated \$1,900 course fee. In the pilot programmes we ran this was overcome through back-up

funding from DEWR, but once the programmes are sustainable other ways have to be explored.

Benefits

Apart from the very high success rate for this very difficult target group the EFL programme has a range of other benefits. It promotes public-private partnerships by drawing on private enterprise for the work experience, work projects and mentors.

Especially with respect to the mentoring the private enterprise will gain significant benefits from employees taking part in this programme. These are:

Individual

Broadly speaking we have seen a positive impact on staff professional development, especially in leadership skills, emotional intelligence and more flexible behavioural & communication styles. Furthermore:

- Staff participating as mentors gain new perspectives and take more responsibility for themselves
- Staff participating in EFL mentoring show higher levels of motivation in the workplace and increased identification with their employer
- We have observed clear improvements in individual empathy, flexibility and better conflict resolution skills
- Mentors gain a better understanding of personal and organisational values and different values systems
- Clarity on human needs and motivation as drivers of behaviour have proven valuable in understanding how to better motivate work teams

Company

- Effective in aiding cross-cultural communication, diversity initiatives and in creating a more inclusive workforce
- Improved inter-departmental communication and internal networking if mentors come from all parts and levels of the business
- Recognition of business engagement in the community results in improved reputation
- Cause related marketing opportunities can be utilised by the business

The clear benefit for the Job Network is in having an effective programme to target a client group that is very difficult to place. The Employment Services Contract allows the Job Network agencies to utilise funds from the Job Seeker Account to invest in such comparatively expensive training programs. A suitable split between up-front course fees and outcome fee sharing provides the necessary balance between success incentives for the host and cash flow predictability.

For the participants the greatest benefit besides gaining employment is the holistic approach of the programme. They are prompted to design their new life, not just obtain work. This higher level of self-reflection and preparation results in the excellent

track record of stable employment outcomes we have observed. The programme has also put them on track to confront other key issues in their life, such as debt, health or substance abuse. We have seen a consistent pattern of better family relationships, health improvements, improvements in accommodation and improved self-esteem in all participants who gained and maintained employment.

Sustainability

Discussions are currently underway with DEWR and the Job Network agencies to identify a potential permanent host for EFL programmes in Melbourne and Geelong. A model for financial sustainability based on course fees and outcome fee sharing with the Job Networks has been developed. We are hoping that this programme will become a permanent fixture to assist the long-term unemployed from the second half of 2004. The model for sustainability can be utilised by other companies wanting to become hosts of EFL and obtain a non-exclusive licence to the programme.

Learnings and Summary

Employability for Life has been proven to be a highly successful model in dealing with the specific needs of long-term unemployed job seekers. It was specifically designed for job seekers for which the current Intensive Support through their Job Network is simply not enough to get them into stable work. Behavioural modification and a positive attitude can only be achieved through a high-intervention programme like EFL.

The EFL model has been proven in 3 pilot programmes with excellent results for the intended target groups. We are predicting that a host with 3 staff will be able to run 6 programmes a year with 30 participants each and achieve an average success rate of 70%.