

Case study 3: overcoming barriers

Vedas

In the post-industrial town of Burnley, Lancashire and its surrounds, many 50+ jobseekers are faced with the prospect of career change and up-skilling if they wish to carry on working into their later years.

Jobseekers who were apprenticed / trained in industries once prevalent in the region may need some extra help in recognising how their skills can be updated and redirected towards the jobs market today.

Statistics show that an older jobseeker who loses their job will face greater difficulty in returning to the workplace, with fewer than less than 1 in 5 (18.7 per cent) of over 50s finding employment within three months.¹

One organisation in Burnley that has engaged with the need to upskill and retrain people at risk of long-term unemployment is Vedas, who combine training and personal development with focused employer engagement.

Vedas started as a commercial recruitment agency in 2000. Through Lancashire Colleges Consortium they become involved in the ESF Social Fund and are now active in the Innovation, Transnationality and Mainstreaming Demographic Change strand. The synergy between the Vedas commercial arm and the funded back to work programmes is very important, providing flexibility for qualified jobseekers and those looking for less-skilled work.

With their local partnership organisations, Vedas have established employment pathways to cater for older jobseekers (Diagram 1). Referral from Burnley Jobcentre Plus or Next Step careers advice and guidance (through Burnley Council Employment Development Team or self-referral) is the beginning of the journey for many 50+ jobseekers.

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¹ ONS, Labour Force Survey, Third Quarter 2009

Diagram 1

Burnley Jobcentre Plus	Burnley Borough Council Employment Development Team Referral to Next Step	Next Step (self-referral)
Vedas		
Age-No Concern		
(Employer route)		Other route
Life Coach Questionnaire		
Personality Profile Analysis (PPA)		
Skills Action Plan		Skills Action Plan
Altered Images	alternated with coaching sessions	
Sharing Experiences		
Employment		Further referral

Vedas' Age-No Concern (A-NC) project aims to improve the employability and motivation to work of people aged 50-64. As well as giving people new knowledge and skills to compete in the labour market, the project also matches their new skills to an employer's needs.

Close employer engagement enables Vedas to take the fear out of career change for older jobseekers. In *Licence to Skill*, candidates are able to visit employer premises for an introduction to a particular job role. Benchmarking the job roles and guaranteeing an employment interview for all candidates who reach this benchmark has made Vedas a 'one-stop shop' for jobseekers referred from Burnley Jobcentre.

Lesley Burrows, Managing Director of Vedas, explains that skills are important but the personality is decisive. Vedas' staff are trained in delivering Personality Profile Analysis (PPA) with clients. PPA provides an insight into how people behave at work (questions such as what are their strengths and limitations? Are they self starters? How do they communicate? And what motivates them?) and is the basis for all Vedas' training.

The *Personality Profile Analysis* enables people to become more aware of their work style and how they interact in situations. Vedas' claim that the accurate matching of jobseeker's personality and skills has led to sustainable employment (measured at 13 weeks) in 95 per cent of cases.

The *Life Coach Questionnaire* (LCQ) contains six questions and general comments and is an opportunity for the Vedas coach to have an informal discussion with a client about their best and worst experiences of looking for work. This informal discussion helps to establish trust in the provider-client relationship, especially important if the coach wishes to challenge a client's perspective in an effort to help them move forward.

Altered Images is a series of three workshops at weekly intervals aimed at 50+ jobseekers who have been unemployed for several months or longer. Naturally, confidence and motivation levels can be very low.

In small groups of four to 12 participants, *Altered Images* workshops last up to three hours and help clients set goals for themselves and start to rebuild their confidence and self-belief.

Basic presentation and communication skills can present particular difficulty for the 50+ jobseeker: for instance, making a simple telephone call for someone who has never had to communicate using the phone. Their reluctance to contact a referral partner or employer by telephone could be seen as lack of interest when it is more often fear that they will be unable to manage the telephone contact or indeed the job.

The series of workshops led by coach and Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) practitioner, Kerry Price, plays a large part in transforming the experiences of older jobseekers. (NLP is the practice of understanding how people organise their thinking, feeling, language and behaviour to produce the results they do.) The emphasis is on positive mindset, regularly reinforced through discussion and exercises (eg, *Sun Dials*, *Positivity Stars* and *Then, Now and Next*). Taking the customer back to an earlier time when there were fewer restrictions in their life, the techniques provided help to rebuild the client's self-belief, showing how behaviour can affect the results they obtain. These self-development sessions are interspersed with individual life coaching sessions, if required.

Irrespective of their background or levels of seniority, real friendships have been formed from the peer support obtained during the training, confirms Project Manager Lindsey Danson.

In the final *Sharing Experiences* interview, participants feed back about the programme. This enables Vedas to discuss work readiness and progression routes (employment pathway or referral to another provider able to meet a participant's identified needs, for example: training, more personal development).

Mentors are available to every jobseeker that needs one. Distinct from the job coach, whose skill set is helping people in their employment search (CV, interview techniques), a mentor can offer 'soft skills' support in the crucial period when work has been secured and a client is adjusting to working life again.

Sustainable employment is measured in Vedas' targets and staged payments. They claim their success in the welfare to work arena is due to the strength of their programmes and the skill of delivery staff, professional engagement with employers and maintaining good relationships with their network of local providers.

Altered Images

Sundials

Sundial segments used to introduce yourself and start to identify positives about yourself and other members in the group, eg Who do you look up to and why? Two facts about yourself. What did you want to do when you were a child? What do you want to achieve?

Positivity Stars

Positivity is a theme promoted throughout the workshops with positive actions and comments (about self and others) rewarded with stars, and prizes at the end of the training. The positivity is catching! This is an extremely important – and enjoyable - part of the programme, highlighting the importance of thoughts, feelings and their impact on behaviour.

Then, Now and Next

Encourages candidates to reflect on their past and what they have done and achieved. And what they want to move towards. This is the start of building up a skills bank for each person, identifying the skills they already have, setting goals and having a future plan.