

JOB WORKSHOP

- A short-term project with long-term effects -

***A project for individuals with
occupational disabilities***

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THANKS!

First and foremost we would like to thank our boss at the Employment Office in Skoghall, Lillemor Sinter, who gave us great support and the opportunity to develop this method of working with groups. We would also like to thank our colleagues who sometimes had to take a greater share of the responsibility for day to day work during the project period. Personnel Administrator Olle Hjelm was an invaluable link in our contact with Hammarö Municipality.

Finally, we would like to thank Michael Hjerth at FKC Mellansjö, who has provided us with continual guidance and inspiration in our group work.

Background

The background to our project was that we as vocational counsellors at the Employment Office in Skoghall met a large number of job seekers whose situation had not changed to any great extent for long periods.

The project came to be called “Job Workshop”, and took place over a four week period. The first group participated in the project in November 1999, and the second group in March 2000. Due to a variety of reasons, there was a lack of time available before the initial start-up, and only very few working days were available before the project was to be up and running.

The aim of the project was to prepare the way for more long-term planning aimed at work, and to break the cycle of unemployment. All of the participants had in common that they had at least one registered occupational disability. The length of time during which the participants have been registered with the unemployment authorities varies, but it can be mentioned that approximately ten individuals have been registered with the Employment Service or the Employability Institute for seven years or more.

Report

The report will give an account of the methodology, participant selection and implementation of the project. The results will be presented, and in conclusion we will present our summary of the project in a discussion section

If you, the reader, feel unsure about reading through the whole report, you can go directly to the “Results” section. After reading the results you can decide whether or not you want to read about how we have conducted the project.

Our hope is that we in this report can highlight *one* way of utilising a solution-focused method for occupationally handicapped individuals who have had difficulties in establishing themselves in the labour market. The method can also be used to advantage in different contexts when working with unemployed individuals.

In the discussion section we ask, among other things, whether it would be possible to work with similar groups but without wage-subsidised employment during the period of the project. Would a shorter period of time with repeated counselling be effective in working with development processes leading to individual long-term planning?

Method

Participants

Individuals who, as far as we knew, had no future plans and who had at least one occupational disability were invited to join the project. Altogether, 19 individuals participated in the project, divided into two groups. The ages of the participants ranged from 23 to 55 years, and the length of time they had been unemployed ranged from a couple of months to 12 years. Their occupational disabilities which were registered with the Employment service included psychological, physical and socio-medical disabilities. Several of the participants were diagnosed with 2-3 different disabilities.

Table 1. The distribution of gender in each group.

	Group 1	Group 2
Women	4	5
Men	5	5
Total	9	10

Solution-focused working model

We have chosen to develop a group methodology which is based upon the work and results of Steve de Shazer/Insoo Kim Berg, Ben Furman/Tapani Ahola and Michael Hjerth.

The concept of solution-focused methodology involves working with solutions rather than investigating problems. This means that the focus is upon establishing and working towards goals and solutions suggested by the participants themselves, investigating the successes already achieved and analysing the resources required in order to reach the goals. Striving towards a constructive alliance between the counsellor and the participant, and acceptance of the views and arguments put forward by the participant create a favourable climate for starting a process where the participant is often motivated and prepared to make an effort in order to attain his/her goals. The project has been continuously evaluated by means of so-called scaling questions, and by measuring the therapeutic alliance between the counsellor and the participant.

Structure

Platform - which individual project is each participant going to work with?

Goals/solutions

Resources and advances

Concrete and realistic plan of action

Project Supervision

Michael Hjerth from FKC Mellansjö has supervised the project and has given us great support in the development of our working model throughout the project period.

Project Implementation

We chose to invite the target group, consisting of job seekers with no particular plan of action known to us, to an information meeting. Participation was voluntary. During the month of the project, the participants were provided with work by Hammarö Municipality, financed by a wage subsidy. Placements were made both in municipal departments and in the private sector, within existing operations. It was possible for the participants to leave the project at any time or to change workplace. Everyone who came to the information meeting and had no alternative plans chose to participate in the project (19 of 21).

Workplaces

The project began with three days of introduction within the group. Several of the participants had no idea which occupational area they should choose, and were sceptical as to whether they would be able to find a suitable placement within three days. Before the project began we had not arranged any specific work placements. We wanted to base the placements on the participants' own ideas and wishes, rather than presenting them with a ready-made 'menu' of jobs. By means of various exercises and discussions, each participant gradually began to get an idea of what would be a suitable starting point. By the third day, each participant knew in which workplace they were going to start work, and had got in touch with the appropriate boss/manager. During the project period, contact was maintained with each participant by way of visits to the workplace along with the responsible boss or manager in order to discuss, among other things, the possibility of continued employment.

For those who felt unsure about their choice of occupation, it was possible to try different workplaces during the course of the project. This has been regarded as a great advantage in the project. A few participants chose to change workplace during the project, and this has, in some cases, resulted in continued employment after the end of the project.

Counselling

The form of counselling has been adapted according to the needs of the group and the various stages of the project. Altogether six working days were spent on counselling the group. The counselling has included discussions and exercises conducted in the large group, work in small groups, pair work and individual tasks. Between activities we have provided information and introduced new topics and tasks. The participants have also had access to individual counselling when required.

We met the group once per week, for a half or a whole day each time, during the project period. On these days, we worked according to the wishes of the group participants, based on previous experience, resources and skills. One way of strengthening the participants and injecting hope was to highlight previous successes and emphasise those aspects which were already functioning well. In addition, the meetings were used to work on individual goals, and using these as a starting point, to construct realistic plans of action in terms of each individual's abilities. It was necessary to work very flexibly, and we have improvised to a great extent according to the needs of the group and the participants.

Results

Results May 2000

Group 1: 9 participants (November 1999)

6 participants from this group now have employment. Of these, two individuals will begin work on 15th May 2000 and 1st June 2000 respectively.

1 participant is at present taking part in an assessment of working capacity, the aim of which are employment which will probably begin in August 2000.

1 participant is taking part in vocational training, the final date of which is unclear at present.

1 participant is no longer in touch with the Employment Service; probably receiving sickness benefit or some other solution.

Group 2: 10 participants (February 2000)

4 participants have employment

2 participants are taking part in vocational training. (One of these participants will probably be ready for employment in September 2000, the other person is involved in a longer training period).

1 participant is taking part in work placement in preparation for becoming self-employed.

1 participant is taking part in an assessment of working capacity, the aim of which is employment which will probably begin in August 2000.

2 participants have at present no employment.

When each respective group finished the project (Dec '99 and March '00), six participants continued in employment. On 1st June 2000, 10 people will have had or are planned to have started employment of at least three months duration. Of these, only one person has a wage subsidy, because that person belongs to the category 'young disabled'. 6 people are participating in vocational training or assessment of working capacity which look very much like leading to employment. Two of these people will in all probability gain employment as of August/September 2000. In addition, two participants continue to apply for suitable employment while there is one participant with whom we no longer have any contact.

Results August 2000

Group 1: 9 participants (November –99)

8 participants have or have had employment¹.

1 participant with whom we no longer have any contact.

Group 2: 10 participants (February 00)

6 participants have or have had employment.

1 participant have started a longer education.

1 participant is enrolled in vocational training.

2 participants have no employment.

Number of individuals in employment before and after the project

According to the statistics available to us today, *at least twelve people* will have had employment during 2000, in accordance with their capabilities. It is also likely that one or more of the four individuals at present participating in vocational training/assessment of working capacity, will gain employment during 2000. In comparison with the situation previous to participation in the project, only *two individuals* from the group had had at least three months of employment consisting of part-time (at least 50%) or more during 1999.

The areas in which participants have gained employment are, among others, a school kitchen, an architect's office, reception, computer companies and the health service. The jobs in question are within both the private and the public sector.

Result summary

Altogether the project had 19 participants. At the second follow-up six and eight month after the last meeting of the group 16 participants was or had been either employed (14 participants) or in education (1 participant) or vocational training (1 participant)). Two of the participants had no employment or registered work related activity before or after the intervention. The last participant had we where unable to trace.

During the ten (group 1) and twelve (group 2) month prior the start of the project only two of the participants had employment with a duration of three month or more. See figure 1.

¹ Include employment that had, or is expected to have, a duration of more than three month.

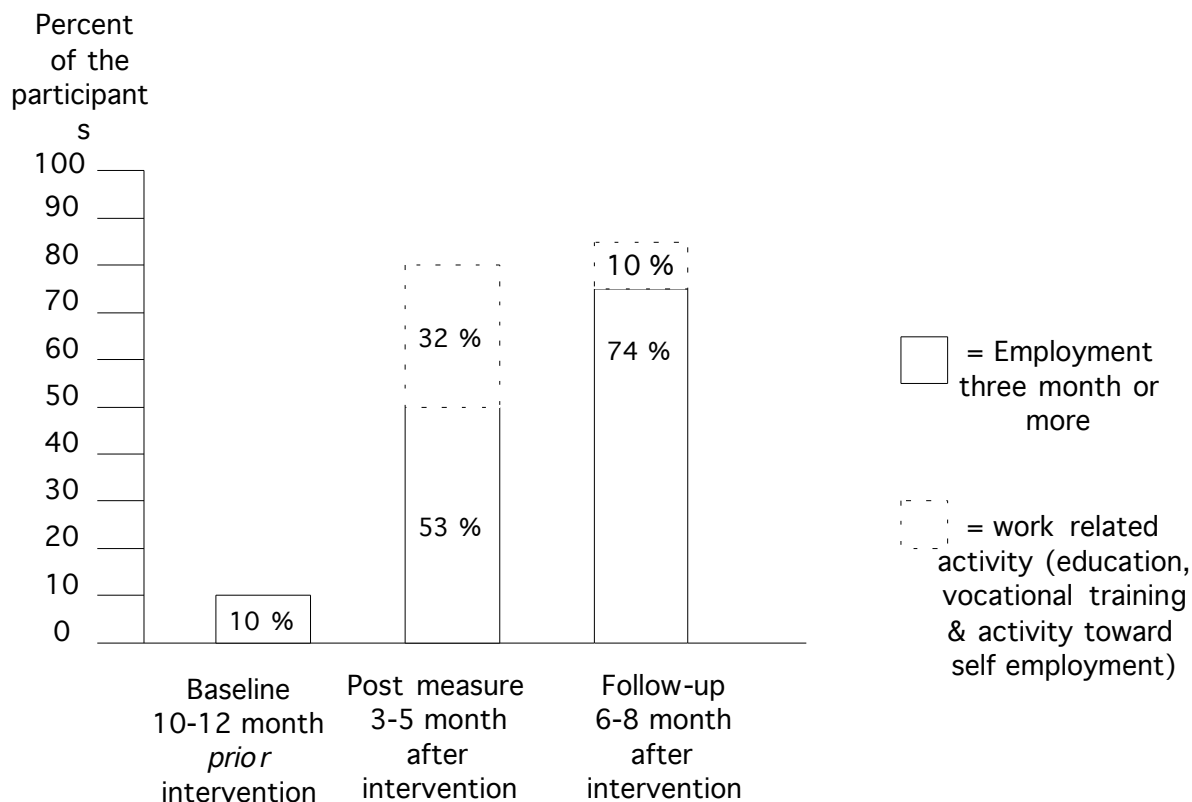


Figure 1. Data regarding the 18 participants of whom data was available for all measure points. Base line 10-12 month prior to intervention. Post measure results at 3-5 month and follow-up at 6-8 month.

Of the 16 participants who not had worked for three month or more during the baseline measure 12 had worked for three month or more at follow up. This means an increase by 75 percent between base line and follow up measures. The two participants who had been employed three month or more at baseline both had worked three month or more at follow up. One participant could not be traced, but was not on unemployment insurance during post and follow up measures. This person is not included in result calculation in figure 1.

Discussion

Several of the participants in the project can be characterised by the fact that they have had very little employment in recent years. Consequently, they have been registered with the Employment Office or the Employability Institute for long periods, and in certain cases the participants have also had active contact with the Social Security Office or the Social Services. For many of the participants, the experience of many years of unemployment, together with their assessment of their own capabilities have resulted in a situation where the role of the authorities has mainly consisted of passive financial support and meaningless measures. Before the project, several participants expressed that they had little or no hope of finding a job or a suitable area of work in the foreseeable future.

Our working method has not included doing any investigations or mapping out of the background of the participants in the traditional sense. We have instead concentrated on formulating and working with the goals which the participants themselves already had or desired to set up. By means of carefully investigating and clarifying the goals, the road to

fulfilling the goals also becomes clear. It also becomes clear if the goal is *attractive* and *realistic*, and if there are any aspects which require particular attention. By not questioning the goals set up by the participants, we have experienced that the individuals feel both motivated and prepared to take a great deal of responsibility for fulfilling their goals. We can also mention that in some cases, the 'goal' was not to find work, but that working as a means of support was an important step along the way to fulfilling a greater goal.

As participation in the project was voluntary, participants were able to leave without risking any unpleasant consequences in terms of withdrawn benefits, etc. We have attempted to avoid all forms of pressure within the project and have instead provided the participants with opportunities to create space in which to grow. This has meant that we have not had to force any individuals to accept jobs which have been offered during the course of the project, but have instead functioned as sounding boards in discussions where the participants have had the full authority to decide whether or not to accept a job.

Several participants had previous experience of having to do all the practical work themselves in terms of contacting employers and arranging work placements, etc. In contrast to this we have, in certain cases, helped the participants with telephone contact and study visits, etc. We are convinced that this has been a great help to several individuals, and has been a decisive factor for some. During the course of the project, several individuals developed the ability to make the necessary contacts themselves.

How important was it that participation in the project was voluntary?

A solution-focused working method requires the establishment of a good working relationship between the counsellors and the participants. This alliance creates, among other things, a climate where the participants feel motivated to make changes in their own situations. The voluntary aspect of the project has been greatly appreciated by the participants, and several have said that they have not felt fear or pressure to accept work for which they were uncertain of being competent. We believe that this has had a positive effect on the number of work opportunities created, and on the participants' views of their own capabilities. Many participants have thus dared to try work about which they had previously been very sceptical. We have not experienced a single case where a participant has used the voluntary aspect of the project as an excuse to avoid making an effort to solve his/her own employment situation, or to leave the project.

In what way have the results been affected by providing wage-subsidised employment during the course of the project?

We believe that the offer of employment during the course of the project has caused many participants to accept a place in the project, without initially being aware of all the advantages of participation. The participants have been guaranteed a wage for one month, which is a great advantage compared to, for example, a training allowance. Our method of using wage-subsidised employment during the project has undoubtedly been appreciated, but we must emphasise that this is only ONE way of working with this type of project. We believe that it would also be possible to conduct such a project using training allowances for placements to assess working capacity, or alternatively with retained unemployment benefit and no placements between counselling sessions. However, here we would anticipate that more of those invited to participate would turn down the offer. How this would affect the number of individuals finding work after the project is hard to predict.

Have age, gender, previous experience or type of occupational disability had any effect on which individuals have found work after the project?

We are unable to find any obvious links regarding these criteria. We can instead gladly note that several of the older participants in the project have been every bit as successful as the younger participants.

What could have been done differently?

If we were to re-run the project with these groups, we would do more or less exactly the same as before. We would possibly plan to have two extra days between the introductory phase and the start of the placements. This would provide greater flexibility at least psychologically, although in practice the groups had no difficulty in arranging suitable employment in the initial three days. Another aspect which may have improved the results even further concerns our authority to decide about wage subsidies. If we had had the authority to decide about wage subsidies, we believe that all the participants could have been offered employment after the project.

Summary

As a more personal reflection upon our work, we would strongly recommend this method of working with both groups and individual counselling. A solution-focused working method helps to create a positive and stimulating climate for both counsellors and participants. The participants have found it both enriching and enjoyable to talk about their previous successes and the advances they have made during the period of the project. We also feel that several participants have regarded the project as a new chance, where they have been able to show personal qualities and resources which they had previously found difficult to see in themselves.

The aim of the project was to prepare the way for more long-term planning aimed at employment, and to break the cycle of unemployment. The fact that so many participants also gained continued employment was a positive acknowledgement of the success of the project.

With regard to the results; they speak for themselves, and we find it difficult to indicate any specific influential factors. We can, however, begin to see that the long-term effects of the project appear to be positive, as the number of participants in employment continues to grow.

For those who wonder whether a solution-focused working method would be successful in their own sphere of work, we can only give one piece of advice; try it yourself!

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