

SUPPORT@WORK

A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO SUPPORTING THOSE GOING INTO WORK



BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Starting work can be daunting, particularly if you have little or no recent experience of it - often coupled with the transition from benefit to a wage and requiring increased levels of life organisation and stamina. It can be a high stress point.

The SUPPORT@WORK project brings together a unique range of skills and experience of trade unionism, employability and employment rights in the first trade union based initiative to develop skills and knowledge to enable more people to sustain work once they get into jobs. Work is after all a two way contract between an employer and an employee, knowing the rules of engagement is an important part of being able to stay the course and perform well. How do those returning to work, those going into work for the first time or those working for the first time in the UK learn about their employment rights?

We are all aware that there are a range of things necessary to help people be prepared for their return to work after unemployment or illness. Many are described in the jigsaw illustration on the front cover, but one that is often overlooked... is employment rights. What is a contract of employment? What do I do if one of my children takes ill or has an accident when I'm at work or is it possible to have more flexible working arrangements?.

Much of the focus of preparation to return to work is in development of the individual to get the job, to date there has been a lot less emphasis on making that a sustainable experience with the result that some can find themselves on a merry-go-round of getting into work, things going wrong and then finding themselves back at the beginning again.

There is a whole body of law which governs employment in the UK today providing a framework for the terms and conditions under which those in employment can expect to engage with their employers. Some of this law has been hard fought for by the trade union and labour movement over the last hundred or so years and other aspects have been introduced more recently as a result of our membership of the European Union. Either way it is an essential part of the employability toolkit to know what to do if you feel you are being discriminated against at work or if you are not getting the remuneration you feel you were promised.

People returning to work or entering into the world of work can receive advice about their employment rights from agencies such as Citizen Advice Bureau or from internet services such as the ACAS website. The SUPPORT@WORK project does not replicate these services but adds another essential dimension. The project advises and supports people in negotiating with their employers through supervisors and managers. This can be very important in making a probationary period a success. Representation support, which is an area of trade union expertise, can be crucial in resolving disability and other discrimination issues at work.

HISTORY OF SUPPORT@WORK

The SUPPORT@WORK project was set up in October 2005 with a view to developing a trade union input to the employability work going on in Edinburgh under the Joined up for Jobs (JU4J) banner. From the outset it was designed to provide practical assistance to those making the transition from unemployment into work with the intention of making that work more sustainable through better understanding of rights and responsibilities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that if information is provided on how to deal with health and safety matters or absence through illness or disciplinary situations it can significantly increase confidence making it more likely that appropriate advice will be sought leading to action to address the issue rather than running away from it. Government policies also support this approach with a recent announcement of £37 million to aid early resolution of workplace disputes. This will be done largely through extension of the ACAS helpline and advice services.

Many of those who benefit from the project have:

- Little or no experience of the workplace.
- Been away from work for a very long time.
- No experience of work in this country.
- Changed circumstances when returning either as a result of family commitments or illness/disability.

What the project provides

- Input to employability training on trade union awareness and employment rights issues e.g. contracts of employment, disciplinary and grievance procedures, flexible and family friendly working practices, reasonable adjustments etc.
- Training for staff in employability projects on employment rights and casework together with hot topic training on pertinent subjects such as holiday pay, health and safety etc.
- The provision of a free and confidential telephone helpline to deal with employment rights enquiries from JU4J clients across the city and a full casework service dealing with issues arising for clients.
- The development of a network of trade unionists able to provide input to employability training and support those returning to work.
- The development of working partnerships with a range of different agencies and TUs to enhance their role in employability work.

WHAT THE PROJECT HAS DELIVERED

Training beneficiaries

Training is provided to around 250 people at training and intermediary projects in Edinburgh each year. This usually takes the form of a two hour session on one of a range of topics including: contracts of employment, flexible and family friendly working practices, reasonable adjustments in the workplace or health and safety. Training sessions are practical and interactive and usually delivered by a team member and a trade unionist with experience in the trade or professional area beneficiaries are likely to go on to work in.

Training staff

Staff training is provided in a variety of ways; team training in casework methods, hot topic training on current issues affecting all workplaces e.g. recent change in holiday entitlement legislation or in small groups within organisations. Around 100 staff across a dozen agencies have benefited from this training.

Casework

The project deals with in excess of 70 cases a year, some of which are enquiries which can be covered in a few telephone calls, others can result in cases which go all the way to employment tribunal. Eight such tribunals were handled by the project in the last year.

Partnerships

SUPPORT@WORK is engaged in a number of active partnerships to deliver and develop its work; It has a partnership agreement with Telford College which enable the delivery of employment rights training to mainly international students who are working in the city while studying or who will be working here on completion of their studies and a social research project with the STUC, SAMH, the Scottish Centre for Healthy Working lives and See Me to explore the issues around mental health and the workplace.

Trade Union network

A network of experienced trade unionists has been established to support the work of the very small project team, this now has 20 plus members from a range of trade unions and regularly provides input to training sessions.



CASE WORK EXAMPLES

1 - Discrimination

A shop worker of Asian ethnic background contacted the Project through the telephone helpline. She was experiencing problems at work of which one factor was communication problems as English was not her first language. She was having to put up with a form of verbal abuse which had racist overtones. She was finding it difficult to resolve the problems informally with her manager.

She was advised about the meaning of her employer's written terms and conditions and the employer's grievance policy and how it operated. A suggested grievance letter was drafted and she was guided on how she might represent herself. She was informed of the appropriate trade union which she could join.

2 - Probationary Period

An employee was two thirds of the way through a probationary period. He had been assisted in obtaining the job by a JU4J organisation. He was becoming very anxious about getting through the probationary period. He wanted to know how he could get feedback on his performance and find out what he had to do to be confirmed in the job which he liked.

The project looked at his job description and asked him how he felt he was getting on. We identified the precise areas on which he needed feedback. We then suggested he ask for an informal meeting with his supervisor. We suggested questions that he might ask and discussed the responses he might expect. We discussed how extra training and support might be negotiated if it was necessary.

PROJECT DETAILS

The project team

The SUPPORT@WORK Project team is Des Loughney, Terry Anderson (seconded from STUC) and Sandra Macaskill.

The project budget

The project is funded by City of Edinburgh Council and Capital City Partnership with additional monies raised from a variety of sources. The basic project budget is £50 K which allows the equivalent of one full time member of staff to deliver all aspects of the project work.

Future activities and issues

The last twelve months have seen new directions emerge in enabling those furthest from the labour market to secure work, new initiatives to enable young people not in education, employment or training and those with longer term health and mental health issues are now being explored with a view to enabling them to make a sustainable return to work. The trade union approaches to negotiated return to work and reasonable adjustments in the work place are both regarded as good practice with regard to enabling people to work and SUPPORT@WORK is currently exploring approaches which can be piloted with colleagues in the JU4J network.

The STUC has secured the involvement of SUPPORT@WORK in a research project to explore improved workplace support for those returning to work or in work with mental health problems. This is a joint initiative between the STUC, Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives, SAMH and See Me.

Other priorities for future development include:

- Generally continue to develop the TU role in employability work locally and elsewhere.
- Prepare materials for all JU4J projects.
- Address disability issues in the workplace as clients endeavour to retain jobs or get into new ones.
- Increase training capacity of project by matching in of TU reps from the network developed by the project.
- To continue to identify new ways in which the trade union role and contribution to employability work can be strengthened.
- To continue to assist employers and unions / staff groups and workers to negotiate better outcomes where there are legitimate and often complex concerns.

ORGANISATIONS WE WORK WITH

STUC
SAMH
Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives
See Me

Training providers/intermediaries

WOW
Cannongate Youth Project
HealthCare and Social Care Academies
Public Sector Academy and Working for Families
Skillnet
West Edinburgh Action
Into Work
Advocard
National Schizophrenia Fellowship
One Parent Families
Occupational Therapy Rehab Unit
The Engine Shed
Royal Institute for the Blind
NISUS
Mind 2 Work
Enable

Colleges

Telford College
Stevenson College

Trade Unions

UNITE T&G
UNISON
USDAW
PCS
FBU
RMT
Community
Prospect
GMB
EIS

The **SUPPORT@WORK** Project

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Free and confidential advice, support and representation

The **SUPPORT@WORK** project is funded by:
The City of Edinburgh Council
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STUC
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