



**Employability and those
furthest from the labour
market: an analysis
grounded in social
networks**

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KEY FINDINGS

- Understanding issues of employability at the network level (families, communities, and neighbourhoods) can shed light on some of the barriers to employment that, despite the relative buoyancy of the local economy in recent years, continue to face many of those in areas characterised by high unemployment.
- In areas characterised by high levels of worklessness, access to bridging capital (people in different sets of circumstances who can open up new possibilities) can be scarce, foreclosing the availability of options outside a limited range of low-paid, low-status positions with little career development potential.
- Social networks provide important forms of self worth for those in insecure labour market positions. Roles in the “core economy”¹ enable people to maintain a sense of making a valued contribution, and can provide wellbeing and prestige in the absence of paid roles providing these.
- The absence of satisfactory paid roles can arise from a combination of low educational qualifications and skills, local labour market conditions, an absence of links into new opportunities and, connectedly, low aspirations within networks.
- Current policies and strategies understand the place of ‘supply side’ factors (individual qualifications, skills and attributes) and the role of ‘demand side’ factors (labour markets). However, less is known about the motivations that underpin personal agency in relation to job-seeking and the role of inter-personal factors in areas of high unemployment, leading to certain individuals failing to seek or find sustained employment.
- If strategies could be developed which take account of such factors they may be particularly adept at helping the substantial minority for whom policy attempts to get them into work and off benefits have failed to make an impact. If this is not achieved, this group will represent a significant brake on future growth in the city.

¹ The phrase “core economy” was first used by Neva Goodwin (1991) referring to activity that underpins economic activity yet is not measured on current indices. This can include caring for younger or older generations who are not currently making economic contributions, but will do or have done. It also includes unpaid transactions between community members that also facilitate the smooth running of the workplace based economy, such as provision of informal childcare and the transactions and mutual aid currently understood as social capital.

INTRODUCTION

The current economic situation in Glasgow is one of relative buoyancy with labour market vacancies at a high. Despite this, a significant number of people remain marginalised from the growth of opportunity in the city². Not all of “the one-hundred thousand” who are currently without paid work will face the same barriers in getting into work. Some of this group will be closer to work than others. In this study we are interested in those who, on account of high levels of unemployment at a local geographical level, reside in pockets of persistent high worklessness, where the barriers to employment are complex and multifaceted and are not easily surmounted by interventions aimed at tackling deficits in singular areas (such as increasing labour market demand or providing skills training). Additionally, the policy drive to lower the number of people on Incapacity Benefit (IB) will include a focus on many who live in such areas and face similar problems of persistent distance from employment. Understanding the problems faced by such workers with low employability could help in finding suitable and sustainable solutions for some of the IB group.

The Full Employment Areas Initiative (FEA) employs outreach workers known as “community animators”. These are often local people who have experienced long-term or repeated worklessness. They act as mentors for those furthest away from the labour market and who live in concentrated pockets of high unemployment in three areas of Glasgow. Their style of working is novel as they provide information and advice on a range of issues not entirely related to employment, but any issues people may present to them (often referring to appropriate agencies). Although getting people into employment is a long-term aim, the approach operates on long timeframes and has the development of a deep bond of trust at its core. It is this approach that is referred to when using the term ‘outreach approaches’ in this paper.

On the ground experience of the FEA indicated that the social networks of those far from the labour market might be a contributing factor in continuing unemployment or under-employment in particular geographical patches of high unemployment. Our research explored this proposition using qualitative methods to look at the flows of information and social capital within the social networks of those unable to secure sustained, long-term employment.

² One figure puts this at 110,000, representing 30% of the working age population as economically inactive. Source: Annual Scottish Labour Survey quoted in Let Glasgow Flourish (Hanlon, Walsh and Whyte 2006).

AIMS AND PURPOSE

- To evidence common expectations of and aspirations around work or non-work within social networks.
- To explore experiences of work within people's social networks to ascertain whether and how this can shape expectations of work at the individual and network level.
- To explore the nature of support provided by network members.
- To explore how work aspirations and the search for work intersects with areas of life such as peer group, housing, community, benefits, health and family.

APPROACH AND METHODS

The aim was to explore experiences at an individual and network level. The research approach comprised shadowing staff who worked for the FEA in a community outreach role, followed by face-to-face interviews with 22 clients on these networks to collect and explore client centred issues in finding employment or readiness for employment.

The data collection attempted to explore and describe the forms of social and cultural capital that those living in Full Employment Areas Initiative neighbourhoods had access and contributed to. The questions used to explore this were:

- What evidence is there of common expectations and aspirations to work or non-work within social networks?
- What are the experiences of work within the social networks? This involved identifying similarity and difference in work experience and the effects this had on expectations at the individual and network levels.
- What was the nature of support provided by network members (e.g. for child-raising, accessing work, etc.)?
- What experience did network members have of contact with animators? What were the characteristic ways animators would assist them?
- Were there any previously unrecognised areas of support need?
- How did work aspirations and search intersect with other realms of experience such as the peer group, housing access, community, receipt of benefits, health and family?

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- Participants' social networks are typically high in bonding capital and low in bridging capital (Halpern 2005), with an absence of 'weak-ties' to different networks of employment information and opportunity. This means interviewees' contacts are family, friends and acquaintances that live locally, and people they have known for an extended period of time and who share many of the same life experiences and opportunities. Local networks have limited value in providing access to new opportunities. Non-local contacts are predominantly extended family. Younger participants refer to few, or no, role models in employment. Moving away can be perceived as a necessary step to 'moving on'.
- Social networks evidence both strengths and deficits which should be taken into consideration in future interventions. Kin and family support can be a factor in both sustaining and limiting participants' aspirations. Network roles provide sources of esteem and value particularly when paid-work does not provide these forms of worth. Where formal work is defined as lacking value, primary network based roles can become more important than gaining employment (see Box 1).

Box 1. Strengths and weaknesses within social networks

'I know everybody in the full street because they aw come fae roon aboot but there is a couple I have just met. The wee woman over there, she wis blind, I go in and help her every noo and again. And Stan, I have got to help him [lives across the road] cos he canny work his washing machine. Anybody in the street could come in here an have a cup of tea. I know every single one of them, nobody really dislikes me or dislikes ma family or anything... [That] wee lassie, her daughter comes over, 'Eh, ma mammy wants ye', mibbe she's sittin depressed. It just depends if they come tae me.'

(Karen, 22, Lone Parent Benefit)

'I didn't have good experience the last time I put Libby in childcare, so I wouldn't want like to put her back into childcare, I'd rather my mum was watching her... aye my mum would look after her so I could go out and do my course.'

(Mary, 21, Lone Parent Benefit)

'Like when I stayed in Royston I didnae know anyone that had bought a house, I didnae know anyone that owned their own house and no one in my family really worked, and all my friends were kind of in and out of work, know what I mean. They all did like the unskilled work, kind of bottom level stuff... and since I've moved away, most of my friends now have all worked all their lives and are in steady jobs. It's things like that. In Royston as long as you don't turn out to be a junkie or a criminal then you are doing alright for yourself. That's why I was happy doing security work and menial kinds of jobs.'

(Stuart, 24, full time employment)

- Feelings of wellbeing are more likely where employment meets or fits in with network based roles and a sense of personal worth (e.g. being a good parent). Local, temporary, flexible work is a key source of income for females with children and other caring responsibilities.
- Unsatisfying experiences of work and training negatively impact on participants' wellbeing and aspirations – keenly evidenced amongst those for whom employment has been marked by repeated experiences of temporary, casual work at the lower end of the manual or service sector labour market (see Box 2).

Box 2. Work experiences and relationships to future and self-esteem

'I've been trying to think to myself what do I really want to do with myself... I want a job now where I can say I am happy wi' the job, am no just doing it for money. I want something that makes me happy, I want to be happy at my job... I've got to start aiming higher in life... I can do better fir myself... I always just took the easy option... I'm going to try and push myself that wee bit extra'

(Sean, 25, Job Seekers Allowance)

'I worked in a call centre as well. That wis along the same lines that you just asked for a shift and they would give you it- three hours, fifteen pound. It was cold calling and I don't like dain stuff like that... you were phoning wee old wummin who haven't got a clue what you are talking about and that is just no nice, you don't want to do that'

(Raymond, 19, currently in training/education)

Karen: 'I don't want to do cleaning again...I think I've done enough of that... that's out the window...I really don't want to do that again.'

Interviewer: 'What did you not like about it?'

Karen: 'Being a scrubber... a want something better.'

(Karen, 23, Lone Parent Benefit)

'I've done a lot of hard work out there but I've got nothing to show for it.'

(Bobby, 25, Job Seekers Allowance)

- Changed routes into employment mean participants' networks no longer provide the access to opportunities that they once did. Access to work based on reputation or through 'word of mouth' occurs primarily in the low-level, flexible labour market work that can impact on future employability. Participants evidence both unfamiliarity and discomfort with formalised recruitment practices (see Box 3).

Box 3. Finding work through network contacts

'I have never been for an interview as such in my life. I went to the shipyards and I got a test. I sat an exam ... you got a wee quick, "What trade do you want to do, which one are you suited to? We will let you know". That was your interview... Then I worked in a building site through a pal.'

(Jim, 38, in employment)

'My brother got me in construction sites but there is hardly any work there at the moment... just enough to keep him, my brother and his boy in work the noo... The contract out there for scaffolding is no really very good, it's not a permanent job that you can keep a hold of.'

(Bobby, 25, Job Seekers Allowance)

- Repeated experiences of rejection in interviews can lead to the perception that one's 'face doesn't fit' particular sectors of the labour market. These experiences contribute to perceptions of risk and to participants 'playing safe' with occupational or training opportunities.
- The 'push' factor of poor school experience can mean labour market entry is primarily motivated by financial necessity without clear direction or purpose. Negative school experiences can also dilute more ambitious aspirations that parents, family and teachers can have for pupils. There was an ambivalence regarding post-school education and training provision heightened by a perceived absence of a link between training, education and opportunities for paid work, or when remuneration for training is low.
- Outreach workers were crucial contacts in bridging network based limitations. They provided access to new opportunities that had the potential to transform their clients' life in a manner sustainable over the longer term. The outreach workers' similarity to their clients, in terms of background and experiences of unemployment, was the basis of their shared bonding capital; their access and knowledge of different agencies provided bridging capital; and their own developing network contacts within the employability field were linking capital.
- Every participant cited the quality of time that outreach workers provided as a crucial and hopeful aspect of their interactions – one that had either led to success or was seen as making long term success a more likely possibility. Underpinning the 'client centred' approach was a commitment to being led by clients' needs, perspectives and their definition of success either in relation to the labour market or other roles. Labour market cycling between periods of work, unemployment and (re)training was considered more likely by both clients and workers if people had been rushed into work that provided very little connection with their existing sources of self-worth.

IMPLICATIONS

This study provides evidence of the nature of barriers facing those distant from the labour market. By starting from the experiences of both those who are unable to find sustainable work, and some of those who have, in areas characterised by high levels of worklessness, we can point to factors located within the intentions and ambitions of those living in such areas. In the absence of revision, the current dominant model of service provision in employability will not address the needs of this intractable group of workless people. In particular, a target-driven approach to finding people work is likely only to produce temporary solutions to the personal experience of worklessness and unemployment that could, through negative experiences of the workplace and reduced roles in the “core economy”, actually produce further exclusion from job opportunities in the longer term.

On a practical strategic level, one option is to strengthen existing services by placing a particular emphasis on identifying and signposting key individuals and resources within local networks, and understanding clients holistically; producing and incorporating the strength of outreach approaches in current assessment and evaluation tools and standardising referral processes between outreach and mainstream agencies. The holistic approach, however, operates on timeframes that are not well suited to current policy drivers and involves a re-conceptualisation of individual ‘usefulness’ and productivity. The key findings of this research were not, as might be anticipated from previous studies, the presence of cultures, attitudes and values antithetical to work (the so-called ‘underclass’ thesis of Murray (1996) and others). Rather, people’s experiences of labour market positions that held little self-worth or esteem or worse, and psychologically injurious experiences of the labour market, led to refuge in non-paid roles (parenting, or identities based on kith or kin). Such outcomes produce broader more difficult questions that are less easily answered by policies in one sphere, such as employment services. They require a wider debate about the nature of work in the contemporary economy and its separation from other realms of life.

From the perspective of the economy, the creation of a flexible labour market in recent years has produced more insecure, low skilled and low paid forms of work. For those with little labour market capital this type of employment represents the most likely experience shaping perspectives on work. When paid work does not provide sources of esteem, value and prestige, roles within the “core economy” of family and social networks can become more important to the creation of individual identity. This was particularly evident in the experiences of women. For others, the black and grey economies may provide such sources of worth.

Consequently, there is a need to instill meaning in even the lowest paid jobs. Its absence has implications in the creation of social exclusion, particular if identity and worth in the broader society are shaped by income and consumer spending power. A key feature of the experiences of work for those who had become disengaged from the labour market was a failure to relate their experiences of work to a long-term projection into the future that they could live with. The creation of, and access to, labour markets in areas with high levels of worklessness are therefore necessary but not sufficient approaches to increasing employability in the longer term. A role for employers exists here, not only in recognising the nature of barriers to sustained employment (skills, appropriate dispositions and family

commitments) and acting in a manner to assist a smooth transition into work, but also in recognising that by giving high-turnover, “hard to fill” roles a more meaningful relationship with employees’ futures and identity, more sustainable employment opportunities are likely to be produced.

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