Peer support for employment

- Peer support offers potential as a means for improving employment outcomes for people with long-term health conditions and disabilities;
- Though it is used in pockets throughout the UK, and there are promising practice examples, we do not currently have sufficient evidence to demonstrate whether or not it is effective as a back to work, retention or career progression intervention;
- We believe there is considerable potential in testing peer support as a means of improving both health and employment outcomes.

Peer support for improving employment outcomes

‘Peer support’ is the help and support that people with lived experience of mental or physical health conditions or disabilities are able to give to one another. Though more commonly used in relation to recovery, supporting self-management and treatment, significant pockets of peer support activities are focussed on improving employment outcomes. Peer support of this nature is found in disabled people’s user-led organisations, in back to work programmes and employment services, in health organisations, and within businesses - supporting people into new jobs, as well as helping people to retain and progress in their existing job. Peer support is highly valued as an approach: a group of disabled people’s organisations, convened by Disability Rights UK, identified expanding access to peer support as their top priority for improving employment support.

Despite this interest and indications of its value, there is relatively little evidence available about how peer support is being used specifically to achieve employment outcomes. In light of this, The Work Foundation and Disability Rights UK have been working together to improve understanding of the role and use of peer support in improving employment outcomes for people with long-term health conditions and disabilities. Building on a roundtable event held in early 2016, at which Justin Tomlinson, Minister for Disabled People did a keynote, The Work Foundation and Disability Rights UK have produced two papers – exploring the evidence, and the practice – through which we hope to shine a light on peer support for employment.

The review of the evidence conducted by The Work Foundation found, that though evidence was limited, what there was indicated considerable potential in the use of peer support. Studies in both the academic and grey literature explore a range of peer support delivery methods including support groups and one-to-one mentoring, both inside and outside of the workplace. Outcomes measured range from directly work related – such as job retention, reduced sick leave or moving into work - and more indirect outcomes including changes in participants’ confidence and self-esteem. Importantly, all identified studies reported some level of positive outcome. There are a number of gaps in the currently available research – for example, around the effectiveness of peer support as a single intervention (rather than as part of a wider programme), the value of peer support for supporting in-work progression, and the relationship between direct and indirect outcomes. The evidence review also suggested that there is little publically available information on the wide range of employment-related peer support interventions that we know, anecdotally, are used in the UK.

Consequently, building on this work, Disability Rights UK undertook a review of practice in the UK - drawing together many of the schemes, programmes and avenues for peer support which exist or have recently existed. Over 60 organisations responded to an open survey, to share details of their programs. Within this were a range of delivery methods and outcomes, undertaken by a wide variety of organisations including the NHS, employment
support providers, businesses and charities. Disabled people’s user-led organisations in particular have a strong track record in peer support – being led by people with lived experience they therefore have peer support ‘in their DNA’. Several important findings can be drawn from this review; notably no programmes were discontinued due to lack of interest; and – with the exception of those that were too new to have done even preliminary monitoring - all programmes reported some positive outcomes. The practice review report provides a summary of the findings, and looks in detail at selected programmes and schemes - representing a variety of approaches. These selected examples not only demonstrate the breadth of possibilities when developing peer support schemes (from job clubs to peer mentoring, and from on-line support to in-work disability employment networks), but also the significant long-term effect they can have in enabling people to be independent, employed and feeling well.

Call to action
Bringing together these two pieces of work provides us with a picture of what is happening in terms of peer support and employment, and what the evidence tells us work. Together they show not only that peer support is widely used for employment - in a number of contexts and to achieve a variety of work-related outcomes - but indicates that it is an effective means of doing so.

What is less clear is which models work best, and how we might optimise peer support to improve employment outcomes for a wide variety of people with long term conditions and disabilities. We recognise that peer support is not a single magic bullet: it may be one component of someone’s employment support (for instance, delivered alongside Individual Placement with Support). The field of peer support for employment is still under-developed, with a lot of activity being small scale and developed in isolation, and under-evaluated.

The Work Foundation and Disability Rights UK believe we should ramp up effective activity so that the clear potential of peer support for employment is more fully realised. This could be led or co-led by Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs). DPOs have been particularly influential in developing peer support and are in a position to connect employment peer support to a range of other life issues, enabling people to overcome barriers (from debt to housing problems) that need to be addressed for the person to turn their life around.

Recommendations
1. Create a national Peer Support for Employment Network to share expertise, evidence and practice – involving DPOs, academics, commissioners and other providers. This could be jointly convened by The Work Foundation and Disability Rights UK. Its first task should be to create a framework for practice and evaluation, to help generate improved evidence.

2. To complement DWP’s Journey to Employment project, which is showing positive results from group-based approaches, we propose that government next invest in testing peer mentoring delivered by disabled people in work to those out of (or in) work – to offer individual encouragement and role modelling.

3. There is an opportunity with the Joint Work and Health Unit to encourage approaches that bring together objectives for health gain and employment gain: not in the traditional sense of providing treatment so that people can work - often what people with permanent or fluctuating conditions need are strategies to manage work and workplace adjustments in the context of life challenges more broadly, from transport to social care. The purpose would be to encourage joint commissioning at local/regional level of peer support for both employment and health/well-being.

The time is right to build good practice and evidence on peer support to enable people living with health conditions or impairments to work to their full potential.

For more information please contact us on
info@theworkfoundation.com
www.theworkfoundation.com
+44(0)20 7872 5416

All rights reserved © The Work Foundation (Lancaster University) June 2016