

Sprouting Seeds– Outcomes from a community-based employment programme



As unemployment falls it is often the most disadvantaged unemployed who get left behind. To identify what works to improve the job prospects of this group, Helen Evans has looked at Bootstrap Enterprises in Hackney, an example of a community-based employment project working for 22 years with this target group.



This study analyses the Bootstrap model of intervention in the context of other approaches. Through a survey and case histories of a random group of Bootstrap users it also assesses the changes which it has brought about over a nine year period and looks at the nature of the support which actually changes people's lives.



The findings show that the group surveyed faced many barriers to employment but that the outcomes were good (nearly two-thirds into jobs). These outcomes were largely sustained and many users were progressing. Those interviewed also spoke of changes in confidence and direction which led to empowerment and sustained change.



What works:

- a caring approach, encouragement and respect are as important as the services themselves;
- support, skills development (especially 'soft skills', basic skills and IT) and long-term follow up support;
- outreach and a neighbourhood base with employment and training advice;
- varied, 'low risk', entry level services open to all who wish to improve their job prospects;
- childcare allowances whilst parents are training;
- customised training, work experience and job links for the more job ready.

Further information

A more detailed account of this research can be found in CASEREport 7, *Sprouting Seeds – Outcomes from a community-based employment programme*, by Helen Evans. Copies are available from Jane Dickson, CASE at the address below or can be downloaded from our internet site: <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/Case>.

Introduction

Bootstrap Enterprises in Hackney has worked for 22 years to improve the job prospects of disadvantaged unemployed people, particularly in areas undergoing regeneration. It works with over 1,000 people each year (75 – 80% black or ethnic minorities) providing a range of services on a pathway to employment.

This study analyses the Bootstrap model of intervention in the context of other welfare to work and area regeneration approaches. It identifies key success factors in working with this target group through survey responses of a random group of 134 people who had used Bootstrap's services in the last nine years and 20 case histories from in-depth interviews. These small sample sizes (particularly with sub-groups) mean that caution is needed in using these results.

The Bootstrap model and other approaches

- Bootstrap is a community-based training and employment organisation. This sector works with the most disadvantaged and is committed to their empowerment. The sector is innovative, flexible, locally responsive and trusted by those who use its services. It takes a long-term, holistic approach. Despite little funding security or infrastructure support it has a strong track record of success.
- Many national welfare-to-work and area-based programmes have focused simply on job outputs. This has been an obstacle to meeting the target group's needs. Integrating national welfare-to-work programmes with small-scale, area-based regeneration schemes is difficult, especially those targeting the most disadvantaged unemployed. However, Intermediate Labour Market projects provide successful examples.

Findings from the survey and interviews

- The Bootstrap service users interviewed faced many barriers to employment: discrimination in the labour market; long-term unemployment; or casual or informal economy work. Most had poor academic achievement at school, particularly those who had been separated from a parent, for example through death or divorce, in childhood. None had received professional support.
- Just over half of those interviewed contacted Bootstrap through outreach services or word of mouth recommendation. They all wanted to improve their job prospects but had a variety of needs and job readiness.
- Those in the interview group with overseas qualifications faced difficulties getting work which was suited to their skills and abilities.
- This study indicates that Bootstrap helped survey responders to move along a pathway to employment. These changes were largely sustained. 94% of survey responders moved to work or training/education/work experience after using Bootstrap (65% into jobs). 86% were still in work or training/education/work experience, when they responded up to nine years later (63% in jobs). There were signs of progression in this time, with an increase from 30% to 41% of those in full time permanent work. The interview group confirmed this and reported higher pay rates, better quality work and improvements in qualifications.
- Most interviewees talked about changes in confidence, direction and motivation, sustained for up to nine years. Progression in jobs and qualifications and ambitious career plans bore out the empowering effects of these changes. Over half the survey

responders (particularly women) found confidence boosting useful. Under 25s found this least useful: interviews suggest that more of them still had confidence or that they were reluctant to admit they had not. Men were similar.

- The level of satisfaction from those using the services was high, averaging more than four on a five-point scale. Women rated the services higher on average than men. Under 25s were less satisfied than over 25s.
- Work experience and training services were rated higher on average than the estate-based advice service. This may reflect disproportionate use by women. But the survey results suggest it could also be because the advice service is less intensive or is seen as less linked to a job than the other two services.
- Those using the work experience service had the best job outcomes (89% into jobs). Those using the training services had better job progression over time than those using the advice services. Outcomes after training rose from 62% to 73% into jobs over time and from 19% to 46% into full time permanent jobs over time (by the survey). This may also link to gender, as most of those using training were women. The men surveyed got more permanent jobs in the short term, but did less training and had higher unemployment than women. Several male responders suggested more work experience and links with jobs and employers were needed.
- Individual trajectories show that 82 % of those in a job immediately after Bootstrap were in a job at the time of the survey. Half of those unemployed at the time of the survey had care responsibilities or were sick/disabled.
- Half those interviewed found other aspects of their lives benefited after using Bootstrap's services, in particular, by having more friends and support.

Findings from the interviews – what works

- A caring, friendly approach, encouragement and respect from staff are as important as the services themselves.
- Close support, skills development (including 'soft skills', basic skills and IT) and long-term follow up support are also crucial. The questionnaire responders also rated 'information' highly.
- Several of those in the survey and interviews who were less satisfied with Bootstrap's services wanted more support.
- Outreach, neighbourhood bases and an 'open door' approach encourage the target group to make use of the services. Varied, entry level and 'low risk' services, including job search and careers support, help bring people in. Practical skills like first aid and IT can encourage the scared. Training leading to real jobs can encourage the cynical. Work experience – ideally paid – encourages those with lots of training but little experience. Several suggested Bootstrap increase this provision.
- Customised training targeted at local people for local jobs in, for example, employment advice and health and social care, are popular and effective. Work experience, job links and brokering also work well. Several responders who had suggestions for improvement or were less satisfied wanted these employer links increased.
- Long-term follow up support when people leave a programme, can help sustain employment and develop careers, at modest additional cost.
- Many get help from employers, family, friends and agencies. However agencies which are disrespectful or insensitive to service users can hinder progress for this group, especially if it occurs before they build up confidence.

- Childcare and travel allowances allow wider participation in further education and training, for low-income groups.

Recommendations from the findings

Increasing access through measures to reduce barriers and widen participation:

- developing local centres in a low income areas with outreach programmes and varied, attractive, 'low risk' or practical services;
- opening these services to all who want to improve their job prospects;
- providing childcare and travel allowances.

Increasing retention and progression through increased confidence and motivation, by ensuring that:

- staff have the skills to deliver services in a friendly, encouraging and respectful way;
- staff have time to give personal support, including long term follow up support;
- services for this group include information and skills development, particularly 'soft skills', IT, basic skills and job search support;
- varied services are provided which create a pathway to employment.

Resources and performance criteria for employment support agencies:

- creating more flexible national welfare to work programmes so that there can be more synergy with community-based regeneration schemes;
- making funding regimes simpler and more long term;
- creating a better balance between getting a person into a job quickly and improving skills which could lead to better quality work in the longer term;
- rewarding retention and progression in the jobs market

As unemployment falls it is often the most disadvantaged unemployed who are left behind. The community-based sector has an excellent reputation for improving the job prospects of this group and has a vital role to play in drawing them out of economic exclusion. Area regeneration and welfare-to-work policy makers and practitioners should look closely at why this sector is effective, particularly the critical relationship with the user. Key features of the model could then be incorporated into their programmes. This could be crucial with the new 'ONE' Service for claimants.

About the study

Helen Evans, formerly Director of Bootstrap Enterprises, was a 'user fellow' at CASE for part of the 1999-2000 academic year, funded by the ESRC's general support of CASE.