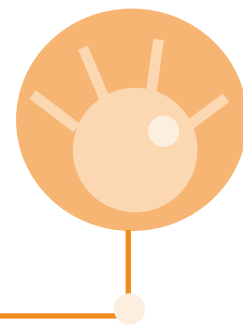


Gateway to Work: a look at an employment training course for young people



Once more, Coyote has taken a look at training outside the immediate world of European youth work, at the fight against unemployment. In several European countries schemes have been developed to increase the employability of especially young people and get them off state benefits. Training programmes form an important part of them. In her article, the author describes a training course which is part of the New Deal scheme of the British government.

How different is this training, with its focus on the building of confidence and competencies and personal development, from training in non-formal education and youth work? Here is an article that invites us to reflect about similarities and the specificity of different training contexts.

Background to Gateway to Work

In 1998, the British government launched its New Deal scheme, an intrinsic and important part of its 'Welfare to Work' strategy which is focussed on helping unemployed people get back into the workforce, and off of state benefits. New Deal was first targeted at young people aged 18-24 years, before the scheme was expanded to include jobseekers of all ages. The criteria for eligibility varies from age group to age group and depends on individual circumstances. Young people will automatically go onto the New Deal scheme if they are aged 18-24, have been unemployed for six months or more, and are claiming Job Seekers' Allowance (state benefit given to those who are unemployed and are looking for work).

The young person will be appointed to a 'Personal Adviser', who for the first 13 weeks (the 'Gateway' period) of their time on New Deal sees them fortnightly, on an individual basis. S/he assists the client in their search for work and can refer them onto appropriate providers should they require further assistance, for example in compiling a CV. The focus in this period of time is to help the client back into work, which could be a 'New Deal' job, where an employer receives a subsidy towards paying for the young person's training and wages. If the client is unsuccessful in gaining a job in this period New Deal then offers its clients three options: embarking on full time training or education; undertaking a work experience placement in the voluntary sector, or joining the 'Environmental Task Force', which involves undertaking practical work aimed at improving the environment in the local community.

The options are aimed at helping young people become more employable, through offering them the opportunity to develop skills which will hopefully stand them in better stead in the job market.

Course structure and content

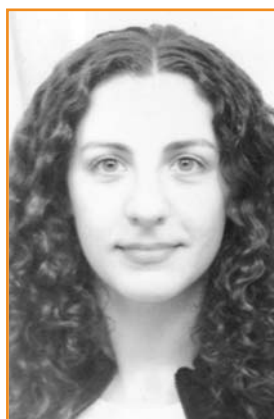
In the year 2000, a new project was launched as part of the 18-24 year old New Deal scheme: Gateway to Work. Gateway to Work is a full-time, two-week course, which falls roughly in the middle of the young person's Gateway period. The project is aimed primarily at helping the young person find a job, and provides support and guidance for the young person, as well as training in a variety of areas. The training given can be broadly separated into two categories: specific job seeking skills, such as CV preparation, interview skills and telephone techniques, and 'soft' skills to encourage personal development generally. Areas covered here include communication skills, motivation and personal presentation. Training is mostly carried out in group sessions, but the emphasis is on individual development. Naturally, the needs of the clients are extremely varied, and the trainer must be aware of this and be flexible enough to adapt training sessions to ensure that they are relevant to all individuals in the group. This is certainly a challenge: remember, the only thing that many of the young people really have in common is that they all don't have a job.

On any given course you can have a client with a poor educational background and literacy and numeracy problems sitting next to a graduate struggling to find a suitable job after graduation. This makes for interesting group discussion, and gives clients the opportunity to share experiences and often learn from each other. Some training sessions work for all (for example, teambuilding sessions) but others (for example, writing speculative letters) need a lot of one-to-one work built into them to ensure clients' individual needs are met.

Overcoming barriers

Clients are referred to Gateway to Work by their Personal Adviser: the young person must attend.

by Angela Vettraino



The course, like the New Deal as a whole, is mandatory. This means that should the client fail to attend, their benefits may be affected. The result of this is that clients are often resentful about being, as they see it, 'forced' to do the course. They are frequently very distrustful of the training staff initially, and it is of vital importance to deal with the anger or resentment that the young people may be feeling, in order to clear the air and allow for a constructive relationship to be built up between staff and clients. Staff may state that they understand that the clients may not be happy to be there, and ask them to share the concerns and feelings. The recognition of these negative feelings is vital, and staff need to deal with these through pointing out potential benefits of the course and through reassuring clients that the course will not be 'like being back at school' (a very common complaint from clients on their first day!). The skills of selling and persuading are used here - ultimately you need to convince the client that their time on the course will be at best, beneficial, and at worst, bearable!

In addition, many New Deal clients face a range of social problems which are hindering them in their search for work. Some common problems are: ex-offenders feeling that their criminal records are a barrier to employment, drug or alcohol abuse, housing problems and lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills. If an individual is facing any of these issues, training staff will assist them with these, often by referring them onto an appropriate organisation to give them specialist advice. Many clients simply need encouragement; their motivation and self-confidence have dwindled and they just need someone to show belief in them, give them a push and tell them that they can succeed.

The role of the trainer and the client-trainer relationship

Gateway to Work training officers take on many roles. They can be facilitators, guidance counsellors, information givers, facilitators, motivational coaches, liaison officers, assessors and supporters all at once. They are also learners, learning from the various experiences and stories that the client shares with them. Having worked on the project from its beginning until the beginning of this year, I feel that it has helped me develop as a trainer and as an individual. Before I came into this job, I was previously an English language teacher, and clearly the differences between the two jobs were great. As a teacher, I had always had the sense that the way to make my classes work was to have clear aims, objectives and structures in place, and that a certain amount of discipline was necessary to ensure smooth running of lessons. In my new role in Gateway to Work, I found that very often I had to question approaches that I had learnt as a teacher, and that if I wanted to get the best from these young individuals, and build a meaningful relationship with them, a tight structure and any whiff of a disciplinarian approach (at least initially) would make progress very difficult, if not impossible. A far more informal approach was required, and I realised that I had to befriend the clients and thus earn their respect and trust, before they would share their problems and allow me to help them. The first two days of the course are crucial in this respect. In particular, the preparation of CVs, which is done over days one and two, allows the client-trainer relationship to develop. In one-to-one sessions, the clients and trainer have

the opportunity to discuss the kinds of things the client has done in the past and what their hopes are for the future. Through a sensitive, non-judgemental and open exchange, a relationship of trust can start to develop between the two. Assurances of confidentiality are vital, as are reassurances that despite what may have happened in the clients' past, a step forward can be made through either gaining employment or moving on to another, suitable option.

The preparation of CVs is also important in a motivational / confidence building way. A professional looking document, which highlights the individual's skills and personal qualities, is a major confidence boost. Further, the trainer encouraging the clients to apply for vacancies, showing belief in their ability to achieve, is another boost to confidence. Clients also motivate each other, through building up friendships within the group and encouraging each other to express opinions, share stories and apply for jobs. It is important to bear in mind that clients may not have had any structure in their lives for very long time, and social interaction with others may also be limited, particularly with unknown others. Having a place to go everyday, and having contact with people who have undergone, or are now undergoing, similar experiences to yours, is in itself very often a big step forward for the young people.

Naturally, the course is not always smooth-running. On a couple of occasions clients have had to be dismissed from the course, and a few verbal and written warnings have had to be given out. These have mostly been for repeated minor misconduct, such as smoking repeatedly in unauthorised areas or generally being uncooperative or verbally abusive to staff or others in the group. But these have, thankfully, been a tiny minority compared to the numbers of clients that we have had on the course. In addition, young people may go on to work after or during the course, and then you hear from their advisor later on that it didn't work out for them for whatever reason, and this can be disappointing, as you know that sometimes getting a job and more money is never going to be enough to give these young people stability in their lives, and you can sometimes feel frustrated by your inability to give more long-term or in-depth support, as you can naturally become attached to clients.

Overall, though, I would say that working on the course has been fulfilling for me. I am also pleased to report that the project I worked on was also successful in helping young people back into work. In the first year it ran, over 40% of the participants gained employment (with the majority of the other clients moving on to the other options mentioned above). To see someone develop from being de-motivated and lacking in confidence, to feeling more enthusiastic and optimistic about their future is very rewarding, and is, in essence, what training young people is all about.

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