

CASE STUDY: UNEMPLOYED FAMILIES – A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

REPORT PURPOSE

Long term unemployed families “**make up 1% of the UK population, but cost taxpayers an astonishing £8bn a year.**”
(Daily Mail 5 January 2012)

The UK government has launched a £200m European Social Fund-backed programme to tackle the issue of workless households. However, there has been surprisingly little research undertaken to establish the fundamental dynamics of this group, in order to ensure that activities are as targeted - and effective - as possible.

Ixion has led studies in both the UK and Australia to understand the influence that being in an unemployed family has on worklessness, unemployed family members’ “readiness to change”, and which techniques work with family members to engage with them and get them back to work.

KEY INITIAL FINDINGS

In a new study by Ellis, Katsikitis, Gibbon & Coppin, it was found that people with many unemployed family members were much more likely to identify with an “unemployed In Group”.

Belonging to an In Group can affect intervention success when it is delivered by a member of the “Out Group.” (Amiot & Hornsey* 2010, Brewer 2007). This suggests that peer interventions, or those by a person clearly identified as having been unemployed, will carry more weight and be more effective.

WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE CIRCUMSTANCES

Common sense suggests that when one is surrounded by people in the same circumstances, the motivation and lack of peer pressure to change is not as great. The courage required – not only to face an interview or start a job – but also to break away from one’s family – is considerable. However, this had not been previously studied and evidenced in unemployed people and their families.

The Ellis, Katsikitis, Gibbon & Coppin study found that as the length of unemployment increases, readiness to change decreases. There is a significant relationship between the number of unemployed family members and readiness to change: if many of your family are unemployed, it is likely that you will be in the “Pre-contemplation” (oblivious to the need for change) and “Contemplation” (just thinking about changing) stages. However, having many unemployed friends did not impact upon a person’s readiness to change, endorsing the old German adage that “blood is thicker than water.”

AN UNEMPLOYED “IN GROUP”?

Humans compartmentalise their social world into “them” and “us” categories (Billig & Tajfel 1973). Belonging to an “In Group” maintains the positive ideals of one’s social identity (DeCremer 2000) and creates a bias towards one’s own group when there is an “out group” to compare against. This can enhance self-esteem*.

Self Esteem is considered particularly essential for an unemployed person – in a loose poll of 40 Employability Advisors (Ixion 2010), 72.5% named “self esteem” as the most important quality to enhance in their unemployed clients in order to improve their likelihood of attaining a job.

However, initial studies are indicating that **self-efficacy** is the key trait to enhance in an unemployed person. This is generally defined as “a person’s belief in their ability and capacity to accomplish a task or deal with challenges.”

The biggest influence on a person’s actions is peer pressure. Most people didn’t quit smoking because of the long-term health issues, they did it because friends stopped, and restaurants/pubs/employers literally left them out in the cold. Success rates with weight loss, alcoholism etc are all greatly improved if you undertake the challenge with others (Wing & Jeffery 1999). If you join a weight-loss programme with 3 friends/colleagues, your odds of maintaining weight loss improve by 66%. These principles can be applied to welfare to work activities.

STAGES OF CHANGE

Prochaska and Di Clemente developed a “Transtheoretical Model of Change” which identified that individuals need a sense of autonomy and control over the change process – until the individual is willing to make a change, progress cannot occur. This carries echoes of Galileo’s “You can’t teach anybody anything... you can only help them to discover it for themselves.”

They found that clients who are in the “Contemplation” and “Preparation” stages of change used significantly more verbal processes than those in the “Action” and “Maintenance” stages, who implemented behavioural processes.

This infers that effective intervention techniques differ, depending upon the “Stage of Change” that the unemployed client is in. “For an intervention to be effective it should be tailored to the individual’s needs, and an individual who is in the pre-contemplation stage has very different needs to an individual in the action stage of change.” (Vinokur, Schul, Vuori, Price 2000)

This adaptation of intervention techniques has now been successfully implemented in many environments over the last 20 years: smoking, eating habits, studying, domestic violence, delinquency, safer sex, panic



IMMEDIATE RECOMMENDATIONS

- If interventions are to be effective, they need to be tailored to the specific Stage of Change an individual is in.
- Stage of Change Assessment of the unemployed is required.
- Initiatives that address a whole family are likely to be much more effective.
- “Peer” delivery, where advisors are identified as having been part of the “In Group” of unemployed people, will positively impact upon outcomes.
- The impact of interventions to improve “Courage” and reduce fear should be studied.
- Utilising positive psychological interventions and the “CHIPS” model is likely to result in more “Into Work” outcomes.

UNEMPLOYED FAMILIES PILOT

BEST-CDG, an employability provider in Australia was funded by DEEWR’s Innovation fund to test innovative approaches to tackling unemployed families in Bundaberg, a large town with unemployment considerably above the national average.

To date the initiative is delivering market-leading performance (see below) at a time when unemployment in the town leapt from 4.7% (Mar11) to 8.3% (Sept11):

| OUTCOME | Performance Vs Target |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Participants Started | 172% |
| Families Engaged | 294% |
| Job Starts | 120% |
| Mentoring | 119% |
| Training | 233% |

This performance is attributed to project strategies known by the acronym “CHIPS”, instigated by BEST CDG’s General Manager, Chris Dale:

1. **C**ase Loads – lower, more intense case loads than industry average, with both a Family Case Manager and a Family Development Coordinator working with the same people.
2. **H**olistic – receiving referrals from a number of agencies and offering benefits advice, relationship advice, employability advice, skills-building advice etc.
3. **I**nclusive – interventions with several family members at once, as well as one-to-one time.
4. **P**ositive Psychological interventions – specifically devised to build self-efficacy in a client. These include Solutions focused, Strengths Development, Resilience, Growth Mindset and Social Skills techniques.
5. **S**ocial Activities – facilitation of BBQs and babysitting circles, where clients can organise childcare to facilitate interviews, and embed psychological traits, such as Growth Mindsets, for use with child rearing, but that impact upon the parent’s own habits. Organising these activities, however, is rather time-consuming.