

DEMOS

What role can life skills play in helping homeless people prepare for employment?

Life skills and employability

20th January 2005

Hannah Lownsborough

020 7367 6319

Hannah.lownsborough@demos.co.uk

Introduction

In *Survival Skills*, Demos investigated the role that life skills development work can play in helping people to overcome lifelong problems with social exclusion.¹ Through investigating the work carried out by the Crisis Skylight centre, as well as four other organisations working with a variety of user groups, researchers identified the various different ways in which life skills work could make a long-term difference to people encountering exclusion.² Key benefits of life skills training included:

- Helping people to access basic services effectively
- Enabling people to move on from tailor-made services, to mainstream provision and employment
- Building people's "social capital": their social networks that help to maintain stability in the longer term
- Raising people's aspirations, and transforming their own sense of identity, as well as changing wider perceptions about what socially excluded people can achieve.

Social exclusion describes both the causes and effects of poverty, discrimination and disadvantage, and unemployment could be categorised as either, or both.³ But the indications are that employment, for those who can work, may be one of the best ways to escape social exclusion permanently.⁴ Living on the low income provided by state benefits and occasional odd jobs is not only problematic in itself, reducing the people's quality of life, but also increases the impact of other issues that people may face. As a result, those with lower incomes are also more likely to experience a range of other issues, including poor housing, ill-health and low skill levels.⁵

For organisations aiming to address the difficulties faced by people experiencing homelessness, finding ways to bring people into sustainable employment has consistently been a high priority.⁶ As life skills are increasingly acknowledged as a vital part of provision for socially excluded adults, it is also critical that we are clear about the connection between this area of development and subsequent progression into lasting employment.⁷

¹ See Lownsbrough H., Gillison S. and Thomas G., *Survival Skills* (Demos, 2004). You can download a free copy of the report from the Demos webpage at

www.demos.co.uk/catalogue/survivalskills/

² The other organisations were Fairbridge (www.fairbridge.org.uk), Kaleidoscope (www.kaleidoscopeproject.org.uk), NACRO at Drake Hall Prison (www.nacro.org.uk) and Toynbee Hall (www.toynbeehall.org.uk)

³ *SPIU Briefing Paper 13: Social Exclusion* (Lothian Anti-Poverty Alliance, 2001)

⁴ Kleinman M., *Include me out? The new politics of place and poverty. Case paper 1*, (LSE 1998)

⁵ Gordon D., Adelman L. et al, *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2002)

⁶ *Off the Streets and Into Work Annual Report, 2002-2003* (OSW, 2003)

⁷ For example, see information on the Department for Education and Skills website (www.dfes.gov.uk), which describes the way in which Progress Files can be used to keep track of life skills development, or *Improving Employment Options for Homeless People* (ODPM, 2004) also available on the ODPM website (www.opdm.gov.uk).





The new collaboration between Demos and Crisis will aim to address the issue of homelessness and unemployment, from the perspective of life skills training provision. This paper will consider the ways in which life skills development work can directly impact upon employability. A second paper, for the seminar on 26th January, will explore the context in which homeless people experience the job market, and will use interviews with service users, as well as existing research, to investigate the particular barriers encountered by people aiming to get into work. In our final seminar on February 23rd, we will explore the possible approaches to overcoming these barriers, looking specifically at the progression from life skills development into other forms of training, as well as exploring the users' suggestions for ways to overcome long-term disadvantage in the employment market.

What are life skills?

Life skills describe the skills that people need in order to live a reasonably independent life. As a result, they fall into two main categories. Practical life skills are those which relate to managing the day-to-day business of independent living: cooking, cleaning, budgeting and coping with bureaucracy, amongst other things. Equally important, however, are the softer life skills that allow people to form relationships and develop social networks, and that act as a springboard for making practical life skills relevant. Soft life skills include the capacity to negotiate, emotional resilience, interpreting secondary communication cues and managing negative emotions, like anger or anxiety.⁸

For many organisations working with socially excluded people, the concept of life skills development is one which sums up work that they have been doing for some time. Typically, organisations that describe themselves as developing life skills engage their users in activities that allow them to develop the softer life skills through constructive relationships with staff and peers.⁹ Practical life skills are frequently taught in a more explicit way, with courses in cooking and budgeting and advice services assisting people in their first steps navigating mainstream services provision. Providing opportunities to learn and develop these essential skills in a less pressurised way equips people with the skills they need to cope with the increasing demands made upon them as they re-enter the mainstream.

Life skills and employability

Both practical and soft life skills are closely connected with people's levels of employability. The connection happens in a number of different ways:

- *Life skills help to maintain the stability necessary to remain in employment:* many initiatives targeted at addressing unemployment find that frequently, it is not finding people a job that creates the difficulty, but

⁸ *Breaking the Cycle: taking stock of progress and priorities for the future* (SEU, 2004)

⁹ *Basic Skills for Housing Associations* (BSA / ACLF)



helping them to keep it.¹⁰ Life skills offset the sort of chaotic lifestyles that can make employment difficult to sustain, as well as giving people the tools to ask for help with difficult situations when they need it.

- *Life skills development as a forerunner to vocational training:* learning practical life skills can frequently act as a gateway for learning the same skills in a more technical way, so that it becomes relevant for employers. Cooking is one obvious example; numerous organisations working with life skills have examples of clients who have progressed from basic cooking and nutrition to finding work in professional kitchens.¹¹ Equally, however, courses in DIY and budgeting can enable people to identify areas in which they would like to find employment.
- *Life skills act as a conduit to convert previous negative experiences to valuable professional understanding:* life skills, especially the “softer” skills are associated with forming relationships and becoming more self-aware. Often, the benefits of this are not only realised in present behaviour and attitudes, but also in the way in which past experiences are understood, analysed and communicated to other people. Frequently, organisations may find that people engaged with life skills development are gradually able to take increasingly significant roles in supporting other people in difficult circumstances, with some becoming full staff for similar organisations to those where they first became engaged.

Understanding life skills’ role in employability: what makes a difference?

Learning life skills is only sometimes an experience on which people can commentate, and so identifying individual skills emerging from training that are particularly relevant to subsequent employment is difficult. But there are a range of overall shifts in people’s outlook and behaviour that frequently emerge when people engage in life skills development work. Establishing the ways in which these connect with employment is important if we want to understand the role that life skills development might play, not just in enabling people to lead fuller and more engaged lives, but also to sustain the type of employment that will allow them to take a permanent and decisive step away from persistent exclusion in the longer-term.

There are several areas in which the outcomes associated with life skills development work seem to show a close association with the increased likelihood of getting and keeping a job. These fall into three main categories:

- Self-perception and self-assessment
- Improved coping and engagement strategies
- Renewed capacity for personal development

Self-perception and self-assessment

¹⁰ Randall and Brown, *Employment and Training Schemes for Homeless Young People* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1999) also see Off the Streets and into Work website (www.osw.org.uk)

¹¹ For example, Fairbridge (www.fairbridge.org.uk)



For people living in excluded circumstances, the capacity to judge your own abilities can easily be jeopardised, both by the type of life circumstances that would endanger anyone's sense of self-worth (such as abusive relationships, or prolonged ill-health), but also by the repeated failure to engage with a system in which the majority of people seem to operate successfully within.¹² People develop distorted or inaccurate impressions of their strengths and weaknesses and this, in turn, presents a serious difficulty in relation to accessing jobs, either because they choose jobs that are not a good fit with their needs, or existing skills, or because they are not selected in the first place.

Life skills training challenges people's misperceptions about their own abilities. Much life skills development work makes use of self- and peer-assessment, giving participants the ability to assess their own achievements without their judgement being coloured by other, negative experiences they may have had previously.¹³ From these changed self-perceptions emerge qualities that make sustained employment a realistic option.

First, participants' greater understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses makes them more able to apply for jobs that suit their levels of skills, and their own particular talents. They are also in a better position to develop once they are in their new post, and more likely to be able to make good decisions about how to progress. After life skills training, participants are also more able to operate successfully within teams and project groups that characterise many workplaces. Finally, these changed self-perceptions can mean that people start to see their experiences outside employment and other services as a valuable perspective to have on subsequent roles they may take, rather than something of which to be ashamed. This, in turn, means they stand a better chance of enabling those that they work with to understand their previous circumstances, rather than being alienated by people's suspicions about the struggles they may have faced in the past.

Improved coping and engagement strategies

Marginalised lifestyles frequently require people to adopt a range of mechanisms for coping with circumstances beyond the range of many people's experience that they have encountered. But with a move back into the mainstream, these strategies for dealing with difficult situations can seem extreme and out of place, making it hard for people to reintegrate in workplaces and social groups. Aggression, emotional detachment and other, similar reactions to difficult life experiences can make keeping a job almost impossible.

Equally, repeated experiences of rejection and failure that are common to many people that end up homeless or otherwise excluded, can impact on people's resilience later on in life. After a number of these negative experiences, people will eventually reach a point where it becomes unrealistic to expect that they will be able to continue to pick themselves up and carry on as normal. But this low resilience can make the workplace extremely difficult to negotiate, with

¹² Randall and Brown, *Employment and Training Schemes for Homeless Young People* (JRF, 1999)

¹³ *Emmas in the UK: Building on Success* (Emmas, 2003)

colleagues' limited understanding of a person's "starting points" making it hard to explain reactions that seem oversensitive, or outside the usual boundaries that people observe at work.

Life skills development work can help, partly because it changes some of the patterns of rejection for its participants, but also because it gives people the opportunity to develop their own strategies for dealing with testing situations in which they find themselves.¹⁴ Giving people a clearer sense of their own value and talents is important, but won't necessarily be enough to offset the damage done earlier in a person's life, leaving them with "Achilles' heels", that make them vulnerable to behaving in a way that an employer would find unacceptable. Rather than being critical of people's existing behaviours, life skills programmes will work with users' from their own starting point, supporting them through the process of replacing some of the se testing behaviours with improved strategies for dealing with challenging situations.¹⁵

For employers, people that have done life skills work are able to cope with normal workplace routines and interactions without as much difficulty as others from socially excluded backgrounds. The value of this understanding of their own behaviour and associated emotional literacy can also become an asset to other people in their lives, including colleagues at work.

Renewed capacity for personal development

For many people experiencing social exclusion, generations of disappointed ambitions give rise to low aspirations. Combined with the other potentially detrimental effects of life on a low income, this can make the possibility of progression within a job or training seem beyond the bounds of possibility.¹⁶ As a result, highly vulnerable people often compound their situation by taking the only jobs that they believe will be open to them, in low-paid, poorly managed industries, with little possibility of advancement. In some cases, their employers will be actively exploiting their labour force, by undercutting holiday allowance, or keeping people on long-term temporary contracts. In others, it will simply be the case that the industry itself expects a high turnover of casual labour and is not, therefore, equipping to support someone's promotion – it is left largely to the individual to seek opportunities to progress.

The result is that for people already struggling to stay in work, their situation is made even harder by being in organisations where their aspirations are kept low, and the chances of being able to decisively escape poverty remain slim. Gains made in achieving a more stable lifestyle, such as coming off drugs or learning basic skills, can start to seem insignificant, as they haven't led to the "real" mainstream; people are instead locked in a limbo of low pay and low horizons, which serve only to make former addictions and chaotic lifestyles more attractive again.

¹⁴ For example, the work of the Big Life Employment programme, part of the Big Life social enterprise group.

¹⁵ *Emmas in the UK: Building on Success* (Emmas, 2003)

¹⁶ *Breaking the Cycle: taking stock of progress and priorities for the future* (SEU, 2004)





Resilience has already been identified as one of the most important assets that people gain when engaging with life skills work. With that analysis of outcomes of life skills development, one might conclude that newly employed participants are able to sustain their resolve and self-discipline in the face of a disappointing experience of work. But learning to “put up with things” isn’t enough. It is important in the short-term when things don’t work out with a job, but in the longer-term would simply abandon life skills participants in a lifetime in jobs that were unfulfilling.

Life skills work makes a far more constructive, long-term contribution to people’s position in employment, however. Through engaging in a range of new skills-based activities, members of life skills schemes are given the chance to “learn to learn”, so when training opportunities come up at work, life skills participants will be well placed to take full advantage of them. Equally, the action planning that most life skills courses involves (participants will identify a longer-term plan for themselves once they have attended for a period of time, to ensure there is some cohesion to their programme of work), enables people to consider their own personal development at work, and to look beyond the boundaries of their present role if necessary.¹⁷ Even in jobs which don’t offer many opportunities for progression, life skills learners are often in a position to cope far better to considering their different options than others from a similar starting point who have just been moved straight into work.

Life skills and work: strengthening the link

There is a clear case for connecting life skills work more explicitly to employment, but at the moment the connection is made only in a limited way. This may be partly because of a perceived distinction between foundation skills and technical skills needed for work. Life skills are frequently seen as the first step of skills development; the work that people must do before they are able to progress on to learning the skills they need at work. But in reality, life skills development is essential throughout the process of re-entering mainstream employment and possibly beyond; many professional development courses offered to high-level employees focus around “soft” skills, such as negotiating and providing feedback to colleagues.

Making a better connection between life skills work and re-establishing socially excluded people in employment has the potential to be a powerful addition to the range of strategies for bringing an end to severe poverty and exclusion amongst disadvantaged adults. To ensure the work has the greatest possible impact, however, it is vital that we ensure that life skills / employment work fits within the wider cross-section of initiatives currently operating in the social exclusion sector. Participants and staff in life skills work will also have key contributions to make on ways to make the connection increasingly powerful.

First, however, we must answer several key questions:

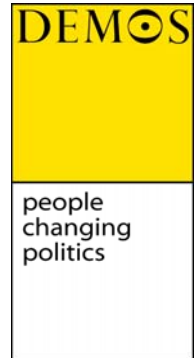
- What are the main barriers to employment for homeless people?

¹⁷ For example, in St Mungo’s “Getting a LIFE” programme

- What initiatives currently help to lower those barriers? What is the present place of life skills within those initiatives?
- What other interventions would help? How could existing ones make better connections with employers?

Over the course of the next two seminars, Demos researchers will be aiming to provide some answers to these questions, with the eventual recommendations bringing together our findings from the work.

Please do get in touch if you have any questions about the work, or suggestions about possible areas for further investigation.

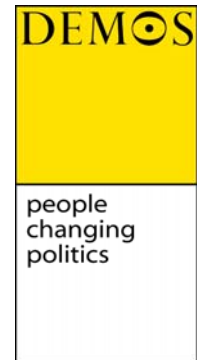


- Appendix 1 – About Demos

“Demos provokes exactly the sort of long term thinking missing from the current debate” – **The Financial Times**

“Demos never reads like a scholar along with his books...[it] bursts with new ideas. Until Demos came along, think tanks were dry academic places run by men with pipes.” – **The Independent on Sunday**

“We came to Demos because we needed an intellectually robust and politically astute perspective.” – **Emma Gilthorpe, Vice President for Public Policy, Cable & Wireless**



Demos is a greenhouse for new ideas which can improve the quality of our lives. As an independent research organisation, our aim is to create an open resource of knowledge and learning that operates beyond traditional parties, identities and disciplines.

Demos connects researchers, thinkers and practitioners to an international network of people changing politics. Our ideas regularly influence government policy, but we also work with companies, NGOs, colleges and professional bodies – any organisation that can make change happen. Our partners share a desire to understand a complex, globalising world, and to play an active role in shaping its future.

Demos knowledge is organised around five themes, which combine to create new perspectives. The themes are democracy, learning, enterprise, quality of life and global change.

But we also understand that thinking by itself is not enough. Good ideas grow out of practice. Demos has helped to initiate a number of practical projects which are delivering real social benefit through the redesign of public services.

Like a greenhouse, Demos is open and transparent. We share our ideas as widely as possible, through books, seminars, conferences and the internet. As a registered charity, all our research is carried out in the public interest.

For Demos, the process is as important as the final product. We bring together people from a wide range of backgrounds to cross-fertilise ideas and experience. By working with Demos, we expect *all* our partners to develop sharper insight into the way ideas shape society.