



Briefing paper

Workforce Development in Employment Support: Fresh Insights

Whilst employment support programmes may come and go, one thing remains common to them all and that is the central role played by the employment adviser or employment coach. In 2024, the ReAct partnership of providers delivering the Restart programme conducted a research project called [*Maximising Adviser Impact: Supporting workforce development*](#) which looked at the employment adviser role through three key lenses:

- Understanding the skills needed to be an effective adviser.
- Identifying best practice in recruitment, retention and progression.
- Understanding role of line managers in developing and retaining the adviser workforce.

At the time of conducting the research, we had the input of the ReAct partnership through focus groups, a survey and interviews with a range of relevant stakeholder groups.

Eighteen months after publication, the ERSA conference in November 2025 gave us an opportunity to reflect on this topic through a workshop format with a group of 25 professionals from across the employment support spectrum. We aimed to reflect on how thinking has advanced, how circumstances have shifted, and how understanding of the topic continues to evolve and deepen. We worked with small groups of attendees to examine the following questions from the perspective of either advisers or line managers:

- **Attraction and selection:**
 - How would you attract candidates who are aligned with the values and realities of this role?

- What skills and competencies would you look for in applicants?
- **Onboarding and development:**
 - How would you onboard them and prepare them for the complexity of the role?
 - How would you support their development in an evolving landscape?
- **Retention:**
 - How would you retain them?

The responses we gathered reinforced and reflected many of the key messages from the 2024 report, but there were new insights and perspectives that came from having representatives from delivery organisations of all sizes. The points outlined below compliment and add to the original research and demonstrate some of the commonalities between staffing in employment programmes. With the evolution of employment support programmes, the topic of recruitment of effective advisers is again high on the agenda for many organisations and some of the factors below may help guide and support those tasked with building effective teams.

Recruitment

On the theme of recruitment, some of the insights that emerged included the following points:

- The workshop heard from organisations that take a structured approach to recruitment and target sectors that employ staff with suitable core transferable skills. The reliable sectors specifically referenced to recruit employment advisers from included education, retail, armed forces, pubs and hospitality as well as the care sector.
- Another recruitment consideration that emerged is that employability has relatively low visibility as a profession. If looking to broaden the pool of candidates, organisations can target graduates, many of whom have a strong desire to make social impact. Whilst new graduates may lack work experience in the sector, they can be highly motivated, making graduate recruitment initiatives beneficial.
- Several attendees agreed that recruitment can be enhanced by recruiting for lived experience, for example by targeting ex-participants or those with other relevant lived experience.

- Where recruitment processes have been adapted to focus more on social values, some organisations have faced challenges with a proportion of hires that struggle to balance values-driven behaviour with the target-driven nature of employability work. This highlighted the need for balanced recruitment criteria that include values, resilience, and performance orientation. Offering job shadowing opportunities can help prepare people for the reality of the role to ensure the right people are moving through the recruitment process.
- In terms of skill set, it was agreed that it can be hard to train people to have the necessary empathy. Therefore, recruitment should prioritise empathy and values alignment, as technical skills such as managing the systems and processes can be taught later. Human connection, however, is something more innate. This finding echoes the original research, but the point was made more strongly in the workshop. Added to this was a recommendation within the group to ensure that situational judgement and awareness are tested as part of a selection process.
- The point was also made that small organisations can benefit from collaboration to create leverage of voice in the sector and recruit high calibre candidates. In fact, it was suggested that there may be a role for umbrella organisations to co-ordinate national recruitment campaigns for the industry at times when new provision is being developed and recruitment needs are high across the board.

Retention and progression

On the theme of retention and progression, some of the insights that emerged included the following:

- As with the original research, the topic of onboarding of advisers was discussed at length as many attendees felt that onboarding has a direct link to retention. Attendees recommended taking a tailored approach, depending on the background and prior experience of the new staff member. A key point of advice was that induction periods need to be long enough to allow full understanding of the role before embarking on full caseloads, which means that this can take up to three months.
- Having transparent career progression was also felt to be key to retention. Whilst not all advisers can move through to managerial roles, a number of organisations felt that more exploration of sideways movements into specialist roles can be well utilised, besides the more conventional movement into managerial roles. Progression opportunities within

the advisor role can be funnelled through 'lead' or 'senior' advisers with specific areas of expertise. Specialists are less likely to move and can build a body of expertise which can be valued and recognised internally and provide good job satisfaction.

- The workshop attendees discussed the role that pay has in retaining staff. With caseloads viewed by the group as becoming increasingly complex, there is therefore a tight balancing act between pay and the workload levels needed to maintain staff motivation and retention. Some attendees discussed the role of developing the existing skills of staff and providing opportunities for them to stretch and develop as a way of aiding retention. This approach to internal talent development can have mutual growth benefits for both the organisation and the individual, as the organisation gains enhanced capabilities while the individual gains valuable experience.
- When it comes to training, smaller organisations may rely on external providers like the IEP for adviser training and development. In contrast, larger organisations tend to deliver training internally, leveraging their own resources and structured programmes. There was much discussion about the benefits and limitations of both approaches and perhaps the key here is to utilise both approaches depending on size, range of internal experience and topic. Internal peer group learning can be an effective route to workforce development for some topics.
- The workshop also heard from smaller organisations where the practical reality of limited resources can make retention harder. However, talent development in these organisations is often informal but highly personalised, which can be very effective.

Line managers

Workshop discussions about the recruitment of line managers also reflected and built on several of the topics debated in the original research:

- One group of participants felt that recruitment was most effective when line managers were promoted from within, and where that is not possible, preference was for candidates with first-hand experience of the adviser role. However, as with the original research, this view was hotly debated. Others felt that greater emphasis should be placed on a line manager's capability to understand the contract in detail, to be able to manage the process elements, to understand the local area and to have appropriate coaching skills rather than direct experience of the adviser role. Candidates from outside the sector bring a fresh approach, but attendees reported challenges in finding candidates that understand the full parameters of the role. It was also noted that there

is always movement within and between organisations, which can be both a challenge and an opportunity for recruiters.

- Considering line manager retention, the point was made that it can be important to protect manager and team leader time to coach advisers effectively. Where line managers were previously high-performing advisers themselves they may welcome the opportunity to give the benefit of their experience and contribute to staff development rather than solely administering the programme.

Insights to inform future recruitment and retention of advisers

The 2024 research commissioned and conducted through the ReAct partnership focused on the delivery of Restart, but the insights gained through this broader workshop enhanced understanding of the topic, by adding fresh factors for consideration through the input of those running a range of employment programmes in organisations of all sizes and covering a range of employment support programmes. Many of the challenges faced in finding the right balance of values and skills within the workforce were echoed in both the original report and the conference session and will be relevant to organisations building teams for the future. What is clear is that organisations are working hard to create workforces that can deliver results for the programme participants and those that do it well create a common sense of purpose across their teams.

As employment support programmes continue to evolve, the role of advisers and their line managers remains pivotal to achieving meaningful outcomes for participants. The insights gathered from the ERSA workshop reaffirm the importance of balancing values, resilience, and performance in recruitment, while highlighting onboarding, career progression, and tailored development as critical to retention. Organisations that invest in structured recruitment strategies, transparent progression pathways, and collaborative learning approaches will be best placed to build strong, motivated teams. Ultimately, creating space for shared learning and ongoing research will ensure the sector adapts effectively to future challenges and opportunities. Organisations such as IES and the ReAct partnership will be working to maintain that focus and support organisations that deliver employment support in the UK.