

Job Brokerage in In-Work Progression Programmes

Learning from the Step Up pilot

Hannah Murphy

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Executive Summary

The Step Up pilot highlighted the importance of employer engagement, a sound knowledge of the local labour market and job brokerage approaches in in-work progression programmes, in order to support low paid workers to access vacancies with new employers. However, developing effective employer engagement and job brokerage approaches has been a consistent challenge for in-work progression initiatives.

To explore this issue further, Learning and Work Institute (L&W) held a roundtable with a range of representatives with experience of employer engagement, job brokerage or delivery of in-work progression support. The roundtable covered:

- Challenges and best practice in employer engagement and job brokerage for in-work progression programmes;
- How employer relationships can be established and maintained; and
- Options for future employer engagement and job brokerage for in-work progression provision.

The main challenges identified included the relatively small scale of in-work progression pilot initiatives, which reduced resource available to develop relationships with employers; the wide breadth of participants' employment aspirations which required engagement with a wide range of employers; and tensions between maintaining employer relationships and brokering job moves for employed participants.

Roundtable participants identified three main approaches to managing employer relationships and increasing employer engagement in in-work progression initiatives. These approaches each had distinct strengths and weaknesses:

- **'Workforce development'** approaches which focus on progression within the same employer. This enables the maintenance of employer relationships but constrains providers from delivering individual focussed support.
- **'Pipeline' approaches** which involve engaging employers and offering to (re)fill vacancies when participants progress into new roles. This is relatively unproven in practice but could support employer and participant priorities.
- **Separating adviser support from job brokerage activities**, utilising wider employer engagement teams, recruitment agencies or job brokers. This would give in-work progression advisers more time to support individual participants and utilise existing organisations with employer links. However, employer engagement activities are currently fragmented and there are no existing frameworks for this type of provision.

Roundtable attendees generally felt that employers could identify more with local areas, rather than sectors. Roundtable participants identified several organisations which could act as hubs for employer engagement and job brokerage activity. These included local authority teams, Jobcentre Plus and existing networks such as Chambers of Commerce.

Introduction

Step Up was a pilot designed and commissioned by Trust for London and the Walcot Foundation in partnership with Learning and Work Institute (L&W). The pilot tested new approaches to supporting progression among low paid Londoners. Step Up was delivered from October 2015 until September 2018 by six voluntary sector organisations, which each designed a distinct support model or targeted a specific group of low paid workers. This report forms part of the third year evaluation of Step Up. The evaluation and key findings from the first two years of delivery can be found [here](#)¹.

The Step Up year 2 evaluation report highlighted the importance of employer engagement and job brokerage in assisting low paid workers to progress their earnings by moving to a new employer. This accounted for the majority of progression outcomes (61% in year 2). Step Up partner organisations found that employers wanted involvement in brokerage services to ensure high quality candidates who were screened and prepared for the application process. This job brokerage or intermediary model is traditionally used in welfare-to-work programmes for unemployed people and less is known about its application in in-work progression support.

L&W held a roundtable with range of representatives who had experience of employer engagement, job brokerage or delivery of in-work progression support to explore how this model could be implemented in in-work progression programmes. Representatives included funders, stakeholders, managers and frontline staff from support organisations. The roundtable sought to learn lessons about brokering job moves for low paid workers. This included the potential role of recruitment agencies and existing employer engagement teams.

This report presents findings from the roundtable and their implications for future in-work progression support. It is also informed by findings from previous in-work progression evaluations.

Roundtable aims

The roundtable sought to build on the lessons learnt from Step Up, identify current challenges and propose approaches for improving job brokerage and employer engagement in in-work progression programmes.

There were three main topics for discussion:

- Challenges and best practice for employer engagement and job brokerage for in-work progression programmes;
- Potential tensions between brokering vacancies for employed participants and retaining employer relationships, and how these could be managed; and
- Options for future employer engagement and job brokerage for in-work progression provision.

¹ <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/resource/step-up>

Job brokerage for in-work progression programmes

Job brokerage involves working with both participants and employers. Participants receive personalised advice to prepare them for the recruitment and interview process as well as the job role that they are applying for. Employers receive a service which caters to their needs to enable strong relationships and repeat business.

Job brokerage typically follows a model of engaging with employers, matching individuals to vacancies, modifying recruitment processes as needed and providing post-placement support. The main elements of job brokerage are outlined below.

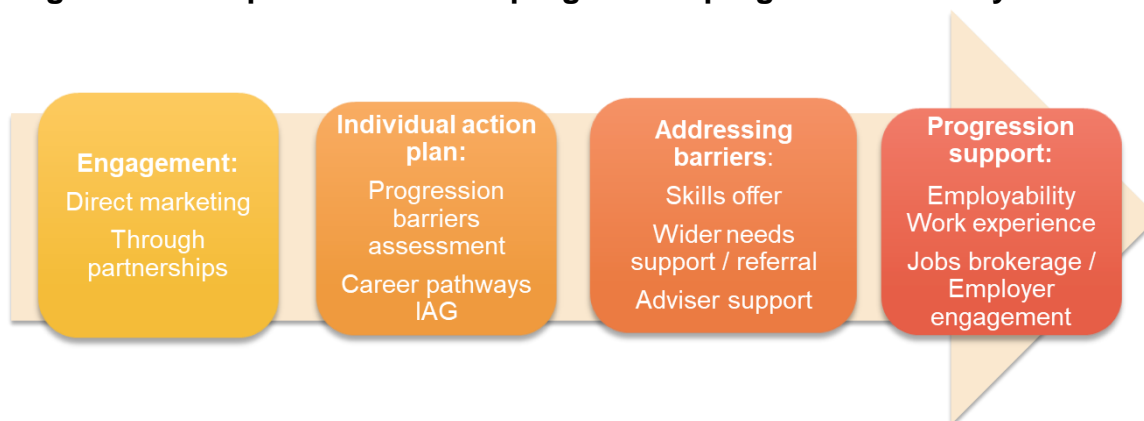
- **Employer engagement** - an adviser or employer engagement specialist engages with employers to outline the business benefits of engaging with their service rather than using alternative recruitment mechanisms. Business benefits include: the relative cost of their service, 'role-ready' candidates, support to enable a more diverse workforce, and aftercare support for the employer and individual to help opportunities to be sustained.
- **Modifying recruitment processes** - if needed, advisers may encourage employers to modify their recruitment processes to remove some of the barriers to employment for their participant group, for example, opening up access to part-time opportunities for single parent workers.
- **Individual preparation** - job brokerage requires accurate job matching to ensure employer and participant's expectations are met. This involves preparing individuals for both the recruitment process and job role.
- **Post-placement support** - aftercare may be offered to the employer and individual as needed to sustain the employment outcome.

This job brokerage model is commonly used in welfare-to-work programmes to support unemployed participants into employment. However, job brokerage activities have also been utilised in in-work progression initiatives which support individuals to progress into better paid work.

As demonstrated in Figure 1 below, support for participants to prepare for, find and take up new jobs is an essential part of effective individual focused in-work progression support².

² Individual focussed in-work progression models support individuals to progress their income by overcoming their personal barriers to progression. Employer led models engage employees within a particular organisation and support employers to improve internal progression opportunities.

Figure 1: Example of an in-work progression programme delivery model



Individuals accessing in-work progression support often express a desire to leave their organisation or change sector. The majority (77 per cent) of Step Up survey respondents explained that they wanted to get a new job with a different employer³. In-work progression programme participants therefore require access to a wide pool of vacancies outside of their current organisation or current sector. Job brokerage activities involving an adviser who matches individual skills, experiences and interests to vacancies and acts as a bridge to access relevant new employment opportunities are highly valued in this context. Evaluations of in-work progression pilots have found that participants can struggle to access appropriate progression opportunities, even following support to address their barriers, due to the value employers place on work experience. These programmes therefore can lack a clear line of sight to job outcomes.

The Step Up year 2 evaluation found that that the majority of employment outcomes were achieved by changing jobs (61 per cent of employment-related outcomes). Therefore, the main 'progression' route for participants was to an external opportunity, rather than with their current employer. This is consistent with other individual focused in-work progression pilots, including the Skills Escalator pilot in West London⁴ and the Timewise pilot.⁵

Challenges

Employer engagement and the 'progression support' element (shown in Figure 1) have been identified as a key area for improvement in several individual-focussed in-work progression support programmes.

³ Murphy, H., Bennett, L., Klenk, H., Ray, K., Stevens, C. (2018). Step Up: Trialing new approaches supporting low paid workers to progress their careers.

⁴ Colechin, J., Murphy, H., Stevens, C., Penacchia, J., Ray, K., Vaid L. (2017). Evaluation of the Skills Escalator Pilot: Final report. <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Evaluation-of-the-Skills-Escalator-Pilot-FINAL.pdf>

⁵ Colechin, J., Bennett, L. (2017). Evaluation of Timewise Foundation's Earnings Progression Trial A demonstration trial to support 102 low income parents to progress in-work. <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Evaluation-of-Timewise-Foundations-Earnings-Progression-Trial.pdf>

This has been a weakness despite the ability for advisers to leverage the job-readiness of candidates who are currently in work to employers; which is an advantage in comparison with working with unemployed individuals. The main reasons for this are the:

- limited scale of in-work progression initiatives which are often small pilots;
- competing priorities for the adviser role; and
- wide breadth of participant's employment aspirations.

In-work progression programmes are a relatively new form of employment support and have been short term and small-scale localised pilot initiatives. Employer relationships take time to develop, and pilots have faced challenges engaging with employers with limited time and resource. These difficulties engaging employers with this new type of support has been exacerbated by limited adviser time which is dedicated to recruiting and supporting participants. The identification and recruitment of low paid workers has been particularly challenging and resource-intensive in some pilots, in comparison with engaging unemployed individuals⁶.

Effective employer engagement requires a distinct skillset and may require the recruitment of specialist staff. In-work progression advisers may not have the necessary skillset or could lack confidence to develop effective employer links and partnerships. Linked to this, in-work progression initiatives that were not sector specific found that participants could have a wide range of employment aspirations. This is different to sector specific progression support or into work support which focusses on entry level sectors. Therefore, the range of participant experiences and needs limits providers' ability to establish long term relationships with employers and generate repeat business. Tapping in to existing employer engagement teams and job brokerage services has also been challenging. This is because these predominantly focus on supporting unemployed participants into employment and therefore have largely entry level contacts.

Tensions between job brokerage and employer relationships

The above challenges have presented practical difficulties for advisers delivering employer engagement as part of in-work progression initiatives. A further challenge is the inherent tension between engaging employers for job brokerage and the other reasons that providers delivering in-work progression support engage with employers.

Box 1 provides an example of how employers were engaged with on the Step Up pilot. Generally, in-work progression pilots have engaged with employers for four key reasons:

- to provide vacancies for participants who have received in-work progression support and wish to change their job;

⁶ The main reasons for this are that low paid workers are time poor, less likely to be seeking employment focussed support and less likely to be in contact with support organisations.

- to recruit their low paid employees as participants into in-work progression support (focussed on internal progression within that organisation);
- to ask employers to deliver support to participants (e.g. employer- delivered employability workshops, networking events and mentoring with industry specialists), and;
- with the aim of changing employer practice, for example by promoting progression pathways.

A key challenge of employer engagement in in-work progression programmes is employers fear that, by engaging with in-work progression support, their staff may leave. This is a particular barrier for businesses with a smaller number of employees (SMEs), but is damaging for any employer relationship. Job brokerage activities were viewed as particularly sensitive or conflicting as they are designed to support an individual to move from one employer to another. Providers found it difficult to balance this form of job brokerage for employed participants while sustaining employer relationships and gaining employer input into their programme.

A further tension was identified by providers who sought to encourage organisations to consider changing their business practices or behaviour, facilitate conversations about staff development, or recruit participants through their employers. These providers highlighted that developing approaches which encourage individual labour mobility is likely to conflict with employers' intentions to retain staff and their skills.

Box 1: Step Up employer engagement approach

Step Up partners delivered one-to-one support to improve individual's employment prospects and earnings, rather than attempting to alter progression practices of organisations or sectors. Step Up partner organisations utilised both existing and new employer contacts to enhance the support offer and improve participants' access to external progression opportunities.

There are broadly three approaches to progression support delivered by Step Up: individual support to change jobs (without employer engagement), engaging employers and marketing Step Up participants to them, and using external agencies to broker roles. These approaches are outlined in more detail below.

Individual job change support

Some Step Up partners provided support for participants to upskill, access work placements and prepare job interviews. However, they did not broker employment opportunities. Instead this support focused on enabling individuals to address barriers to progression, and then support them to find vacancies in the open labour market. The main reason for this approach was the time needed to effectively engage with employers. However, there were additional barriers to effective employer engagement, particularly in trying to broker roles for participants with ESOL needs.

In some cases, advisers supported individuals with the job search process, for example by providing personalised advice about the recruitment process and support to search for vacancies. One provider purchased an online job search tool which sweeps adverts and agencies for relevant opportunities.

Engaging employers and reverse marketing participants to vacancies

Other Step Up providers engaged employers to access relevant job opportunities. Partners identified and engaged with employers through approaches such as:

- building on established or previous relationships and contacts;
- targeting living wage employers, for example through using the Living Wage Foundation's employer map, and;
- engaging with employers at networking events, and at meetings or steering groups for their wider work.

One provider used an approach called 'reverse marketing' where the adviser targeted employers that were advertising vacancies relevant to participants' job goals and skill sets. Once they had established the participant as the right person for the job, the adviser negotiated with the employer on flexible or part-time hours to fit around their childcare responsibilities.

Using external agencies to broker roles

Some Step Up providers worked with recruitment agencies (with expertise in specific industries) to meet a broad range of participant needs and broker jobs. They referred participants to these agencies when they were deemed sufficiently 'job ready' to access local opportunities through the broker's contacts.

Enabling factors

Factors which enabled Step Up providers to find participants new jobs included:

- The ability to offer employers' a clear business benefit of engaging with the service, namely a high quality and free recruitment service, with candidates with workplace experience, who had been screened, appropriately job matched and prepared for the application process.
- The fact that candidates were in employment and had recent experience of the workplace. This proved to be a key selling point of the programme for employers.

Potential approaches to employer engagement

Roundtable participants discussed potential approaches to employer engagement and job brokerage for in-work progression programmes, given the inherent tensions and need to manage employer relationships. The three approaches discussed where in-work progression support could:

- Focus solely on workforce development (i.e. earnings progressions within same employer);
- Enable employer involvement through pipeline development (providing participants with internal and external progressions) by engaging employers and offering to (re)fill vacancies if participants progressed to a new employer; and
- Keep job brokerage activities and processes separate to other employer engagement activities by using wider employer engagement teams, recruitment agencies or job brokers.

The distinct benefits and drawbacks of each approach are discussed below:

Workforce Development

Overview

This approach involves accessing low paid participants through their employer and supporting them to progress internally, within that organisation. It requires a strong 'sell' or 'hook' for the employer about commercial benefits of developing their staff.

Benefits

- Providers can maintain employer relationships and secure progression outcomes without the need for job brokerage.
- Employer-led approaches can enable recruitment of large numbers of people into in-work progression support. Recruitment of low paid workers is a key challenge because low paid workers are harder for referral partners to identify, have limited time to engage and are less likely to seek support due to limited awareness of in-work progression support. Therefore, this approach is particularly useful where there are no proactive referral routes into support.
- Evidence suggests that this approach could work well within sectors with clear progression routes which are linked with the acquisition of skills. The care and security sectors are examples of sectors which providers have targeted.⁷

Drawbacks

- This approach requires providers to prioritise employer relationships. Therefore, their support offer has been limited to supporting internal progression only, rather than building transferable skills or employability support.
- While employer-led approaches could meet programme outcomes (i.e. an increase in hourly/weekly wage, or a contract change), these outcomes may not correlate with participant's aspirations if they wish to change employer or sector.
- Outcomes are dependent on the employer's inclination and ability to progress staff. Further research is needed for 'what works' around effective messaging to ensure employers understand how metrics of progression could work within their business and are able to offer genuine progression to staff.

⁷ For example, in the ESFA In-Work Progression Programme and In Work Progression Pilot for the Care Sector as part of the Glasgow City Deal.

Pipeline approach

Overview

This approach involves accessing low paid staff through their employer and supporting them to progress in accordance with individual priorities. Employers are assured that providers will support them with recruitment, including (re)filling vacancies of staff that progress externally.

Benefits

- This approach presents a unique offer to employers by joining up, and providing support with, the upskilling of staff and recruitment business needs. This approach could work well in sectors where there are clear progression routes as well as a recruitment need – as an initiative can provide skilled entry level staff as well as training to help staff to progress.
- It enables progression support to be led by individual needs as it promotes both internal and external progression.
- Highlighting the recruitment support available when engaging employers could address employer's key concerns about staff retention.
- This approach could enable providers to join-up into work and in-work progression initiatives on a local level. Into work contracts could support the outcomes of in-work progression contracts through supporting recruitment and re-filling vacancies.

Drawbacks

- The approach remains relatively unproven in practice⁸. Effective engagement and wider scale implementation would require a proven model.
- It would be difficult to implement the pipeline approach in the context of a low unemployment rate. Providers would need a full understanding of local labour market demand and supply for a particular sector in order to target employers who are more likely to have a recruitment need.
- The approach may not appeal to those industries that do not have progression routes as there are no incentives or options for staff to progress once they had upskilled.

⁸ This approach was utilised on a small scale in the Skills Escalator pilot. This was delivered through a close partnership with other business support services within a local authority which offered support to fill vacancies if participants left their original employer.

External job brokerage

Overview

This approach involves keeping job brokerage activities separate to other employer engagement activities and in-work progression programme advisers by using wider employer engagement teams, recruitment agencies or job brokers.

Benefits

- Evaluations have pointed to the vital role of in-work progression advisers. The support they provide is wide ranging⁹ and may not be necessarily compatible with job brokerage skills. Some providers preferred a clear differentiation between employer facing and (more holistic) individual progression support.
- A review of job brokerage services¹⁰ highlighted the importance of additional support services. This included IAG, support with CVs, pre-training support with basic skills, demonstrating the value of separate support to support participants to become job ready prior to accessing job brokerage.
- Separating out job brokerage from the adviser role would increase the numbers of employers a specialist could engage with and enable the adviser to focus on supporting participants with their wider needs.
- Utilising established agencies such as recruitment agencies enables in-work progression support to utilise specialist staff, which is useful for programmes supporting low paid workers with a range of progression ambitions.
- It is important that job-brokerage links into needs of different sectors, the local labour market and wider economic development policies. Therefore, a wider in-work progression programme could utilise several job brokerage services across a wider area, or a range of sectors.

Drawbacks

- Roundtable participants suggested a reticence among providers with employer relationships to share these contacts.
- Due to a lack of coordination amongst providers, employer engagement activities within and across different areas are fragmented, which risks duplication.

⁹ The evaluation of Step Up highlighted that advisers need to be adept at: identifying client needs, building rapport and trust, coaching and challenging participants, delivering – or accessing - tailored careers guidance attuned to local labour market, networking and building knowledge of training provision and wider services and providing a range of employability support.

¹⁰ Smeaton, D., Mansour, J. (forthcoming) Understanding the role and effectiveness of brokerage and re-employment interventions in supporting in-work adults into new employment. Department for Education.

Implications for commissioners

Roundtable participants identified that employer engagement and job brokerage for in-work progression support could either take a sector-based approach or a place-based approach.

Sector-based approaches

The first approach discussed was sector-based employer engagement and job brokerage. Chicago's Sectoral Workforce Centres¹¹ offers an example of effective sector-based employer engagement where one of the providers supported employers with the internal progression of staff. This provider targeted the manufacturing sector and used effective messaging which was linked to the priorities for employers in the sector.

Implementing in-work progression programmes within certain sectors would enable job brokerage to further specify their target group, allow messaging to be tailored appropriately and ensure that job brokerage workers have the specialist knowledge of the target business sector required. There was consensus that there is potential for co-ordination with a number of employers within certain sectors, particularly health and social care or security sectors which have a proven link between skills need and progression pathways.

This approach relies on sector-based institutions that represent the sector's interests (such as the Construction Industry Council). Roundtable attendees generally felt that employers could identify more with local areas, rather than sectors.

Place-based, local approaches

Evidence suggests that effective job brokerage needs to be embedded in the local community, with active links with local employers as well as existing provision such as skills providers and community groups. Job brokerage activities can be strengthened through strategic engagement with wider local or regional partnerships including local employers, Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) and Growth Hubs.

Roundtable participants felt there was potential to map and build upon existing sub regional business engagement networks, forums and coalitions to engage employers in in-work progression initiatives. Engaging these networks could support programme design by providing information about the local economy to enable a more targeted and coordinated approach. This could include growth sectors and skills gaps. Small, local in-work progression programmes could also achieve greater impact and economies of scale in employer engagement by developing a multi borough or sub regional approaches. This

¹¹ Schrock G (2013) Reworking Workforce Development: Chicago's Sectoral Workforce Centers: *Economic Development Quarterly* 27(3) 163-178

was a key recommendation in the Skills Escalator pilot evaluation report¹², to support the wider rollout of the pilot.

Roundtable participants identified several organisations which could take the lead in developing employer relationships and brokering roles for in-work progression support. These included the commissioning of a business relationship manager model, building on active networks such as Chambers of Commerce, Jobcentre Plus or borough employer engagement leads.

There is potential for a business relationship manager model to be commissioned which operates across different providers delivering individual-focussed in-work progression support. This is an approach which could be adopted across smaller organisations working in partnership similarly to Step Up.

This overall business relationship manager approach could also be adopted in wider commissioning. For example, to align the efforts of smaller contracts and make links across a range of objectives including recruitment, up-skilling and supporting internal progression opportunities.

There are examples of organisations which have taken this role to align policy agendas with employers. This includes Union Learn, which increased the ability of smaller employers to commission skills training for staff and the Chambers of Commerce in Brighton and Hove which lead the Living Wage Campaign. These organisations have demonstrated ability to integrate local and wider economic policies with business priorities to address weak demand, maximise use of available resources and prevent duplication.

Other options suggested were:

- Working with Growth Hubs, which provide business to business advice and support, and has a responsibility to support local employer engagement efforts.
- Jobcentre Plus taking a lead role in sharing their employer links and working with local providers to develop them further. Roundtable participants believed that buy-in from DWP would greatly increase efficiency of in-work progression support.
- A borough hub such as the Islington Customer Centre which acts as a 'one stop shop' for employers to access business support, upskilling and progression support, and for in-work progression initiatives to tap into employer contacts.

¹² Colechin, J., Murphy, H., Stevens, C., Penacchia, J., Ray, K., Vaid L. (2017). Evaluation of the Skills Escalator Pilot: Final report. <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Evaluation-of-the-Skills-Escalator-Pilot-FINAL.pdf>

Conclusions

Several in-work progression initiatives, including the Step Up programme, have highlighted the importance of employer engagement and job brokerage to achieve progression outcomes. Progression outcomes for individual focussed progression support have, mostly, been driven by participants changing to a new employer. However, employer engagement and job brokerage for in-work progression pilots has been identified as a key challenge due to the limited scale of pilot programmes, a wide breadth of participant aspirations and tensions between meeting both participant and employer needs.

The roundtable and review of evidence highlighted several approaches to address these challenges. These were workforce development, pipeline activities and external job brokerage. Although such approaches all have distinct trade-offs, they would help to unlock vacancies for participants and navigate tensions between engaging existing employers to access low paid participants.

Workforce development: designing progression support as an employer-facing intervention which focuses on workforce development only. This approach enables the maintenance of employer relationships but constrains providers from delivering individual focussed support and relies on employer ability (and wider sector opportunities) to progress their staff.

Pipeline approaches: offering to support employers with recruitment as well as providing their employees with progression support. This approach remains relatively unproven in practice but has the potential to support both employer and individual participant priorities.

External job brokerage activities: separating adviser based progression support from job brokerage activities using wider employer engagement teams, recruitment agencies, or job brokers. This approach enables advisers to focus on providing support to address barriers and utilise previously developed employer networks.

The key considerations for these approaches are:

- Employer-facing support may be more successful where there is a close partnership with other (pre-existing) business support services. This can support employer engagement since a wider offer for employers can provide support to fill vacancies as well as progression-focused support.
- Lessons could be learned from the Living Wage campaign to facilitate workforce development and foster progression opportunities within businesses by showcasing the business benefit such as increased retention or building a competitive edge through ethical practice.
- Additional business support services, such as support for employers to identify skills needs and to progress staff, could also usefully add to the support offer

and ensure that employers are able to make the most effective use of the service.

- Employer characteristics such as sector, size, type and business model can also determine the best suited approach. Workforce development and pipeline approaches could have higher levels of success in sectors such as care and security which have a strong link between skills acquisition and progression opportunities.
- Commissioners developing job brokerage as a separate aspect of in-work progression support need to explore how to address the fragmentation and scale of existing employer engagement to meet the need of in-work progression support initiatives.
- There is potential for commissioners to link up out of work and in-work programmes and agendas, which could support employer engagement. However, currently this is difficult due to varying eligibility criteria, funding rules and targets. Linking up provision would require consistency of outcomes and eligibility.
- To achieve economies of scale in employer engagement in-work progression support initiatives could work in partnership with existing sub-regional business engagement networks and forums. These could operate on a sector based, or locally based approach. This would require an external coordinating organisation to hold employer contacts for in-work progression support.
- Commissioners could make use of existing local or sectorial networks to map potential agencies with appropriate employer contacts. Potential coordinators of employer engagement included local authority teams, Jobcentre Plus, recruitment agencies and employer networks such as Chamber of Commerce.