

# The Role and Experience of the Job Coach: The experience of a nation-wide Supported Employment project

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# Abstract

**Background:** People with an Intellectual Disability (ID) and/or autism experience low employment rates compared to the general population. Supported Employment (SE) is an effective approach to raising employment rates, and Job Coaching is key to its effectiveness. This qualitative study explores Job Coach views of the role, challenges, and effectiveness within the all-Wales Engage to Change SE programme. It also addresses adaptations during and after Covid.

**Method:** Data was collected from focus groups (22 participants), and a web survey (13 participants) of Job Coaches working within the Engage to Change programme with young people with ID and/or Autistic people aged 16-25 years. A thematic analysis of transcripts was carried out using Nvivo 12.

**Results:** Job Coaches helped people access a range of pathways into employment. They offered a range of assessments, guidance, support and training to do this. Wage subsidies and a range of additional resources helped. The training was key to the Job Coach role with some feeling under-equipped in understanding specific conditions and welfare benefits. Barriers included regulations and family attitudes to welfare benefits, and excessive paperwork. As workplaces change post-Covid Job Coaches are using IT for clients to work, to teach clients jobs, and to communicate with employers.

**Conclusions** The paper highlights lessons for SE, Job Coach management and training, and funding policy.

**Keywords:** Supported Employment, Job Coaching, Employment, Autism, Intellectual Disability, Practice.

# Introduction

Young People who have Intellectual Disabilities (ID), specific learning disabilities (SpLD) and Autistic young people are disadvantaged in the labour market and face significant challenges in finding, obtaining, and maintaining employment. The transition from education to adulthood often does not culminate in employment despite this being a key element in achieving independence, better physical and mental health, improved wellbeing and social inclusion (Robertson et al., 2019). Employment rates are much lower than for other forms of disability. In 2020-21, only 5.1% of adults with ID aged 18-64 (BASE, 2022), and 21.7% of Autistic people were in paid employment in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2022). In recent years the UK has moved significantly away from congregate models towards individually selected and supported jobs using a Job Coach model, but there remain significant barriers to young people with ID and Autistic young people making the transition into employment but also maintaining and progressing employment over their life span. The Covid pandemic dealt progress a blow. Job Coaches needed to quickly modify how they worked. Face-to-face support for job seekers by Supported Employment (SE) agencies and personal interactions with employers had to adapt to new ways of working. Job Coaching is recognised as a fundamental aspect of SE but there is little evidence about the role from the Job Coaches' perspective.

Engage to Change is a 7-year project across Wales aiming to support 1000 young people aged 16 to 25 who have an Intellectual Disability, Autism or a specific learning difficulty to increase employment skills, gain employment experience and ultimately move into paid jobs. The project works with young people who are not in education, training or employment (NEET) or in danger of becoming NEET. The project brings together a consortium of partners including a North and a South Wales SE agency to deliver Job Coach support, paid placements and paid jobs in ordinary workplaces following the SE model. SE is a 5-step process, delivered by Job Coaches, involving: participant engagement; vocational profiling to establish a good job match; job finding; employer engagement; and in-work support and career progression (EUSE, 2010). Research has shown that people with ID and/or Autistic people are good, committed and valued workers if the right work environment and the right support are in place, bringing significant benefits to employers (Rashid et al., 2017).

The role of the Job Coach is key here within the SE model (Townesley et al., 2014; Bennett et al., 2016; CooperGibson, 2020). Trained Job Coaches provide tailored input to help the individual learn specific work tasks and the tools to navigate workplace rules and relationships, concentrating on increasing independence.

A key principle of Job Coaching is to focus on ability rather than disability. Research shows that people with ID are able to learn complicated tasks and work processes, and contribute to the economy, when the correct job match and needs-led support are in place (Mank et al., 1997). The Job Coach plays a pivotal role in the process of understanding people's skills and abilities, developing a vocational profile based on this and supporting their individual needs, together with finding the most suitable combination of work tasks, environments and the level of support needed. This is key to gaining and maintaining employment. Additionally, Job Coaches support employers, giving advice on the needs of their workplace and fostering inclusive working practices to widen participation of disabled workers.

The perspective of the Job Coach has not been extensively researched. An understanding of factors that may help or hinder the success of SE for people with ID, SpLD and Autistic young people from this viewpoint is helpful in ensuring the efficacy of the model.

## Method

A study was undertaken to: (i) understand the role of the Job Coach within the Engage to Change Project; (ii) identify issues Job Coaches experienced, including any barriers to employment; (iii) understand “what works” in Job Coaching to help young people who have an Intellectual Disability or are Autistic to gain employment skills and experience; and (iv) identify how Job Coaching has adapted following the Covid Pandemic.

Two methods of data collection were used. First, three in-person focus groups were held for Job Coach staff across agencies and geographical areas. Focus group questions were open-ended and examined how Job Coaching was organized, supported and received by project participants in each geographical area. 22 Job Coaches participated.

Second, a survey was co-produced with young people with Intellectual Disabilities and/or Autism who had been supported by the Engage to Change project, building on themes identified in the focus groups and based on the young people research interests. The survey was a combination of open text and multiple-choice questions. Survey data was collected online using a secure server and processed in compliance with GDPR. The survey was distributed to staff members who held Job Coaching roles within the Engage to Change project (including Employment advisors). In total 13 Job coaches from two SE agencies completed the survey, representing a response rate of 52%. Participants who took part in the focus groups and online surveys provided informed consent prior to data collection. A thematic coding of the Job Coach responses was completed by one researcher using Nvivo 12 (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes were identified using the framework of the focus group questionnaires, with new themes generated deductively based on frequency of occurrence within the data.

# Results

**Figure 1:**

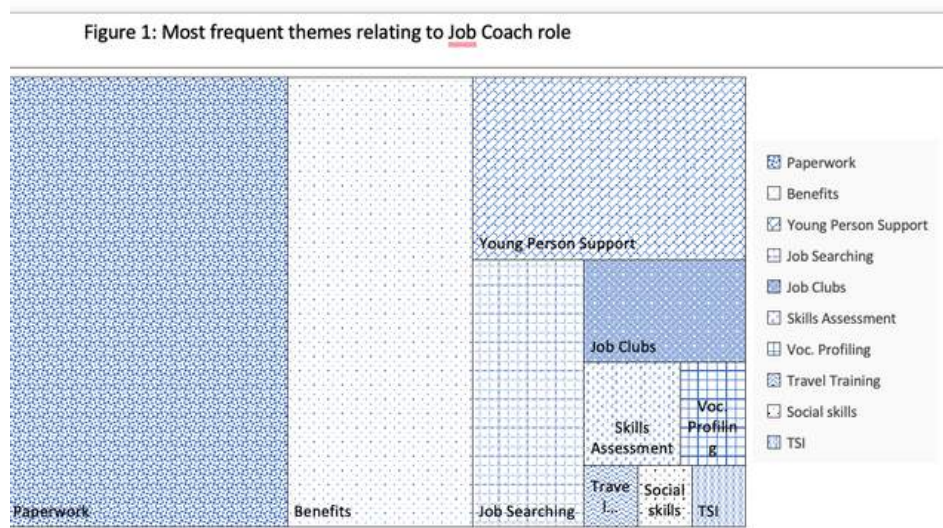


Figure 1 illustrates the combined findings of the focus group and the online survey data showing that, generally, Job Coaches[1] reported that they were offering a prepare, place, train and maintain model. However, in practice, the role was much more complex, with the “preparation” element being seen as a significant step for the successful transition of the young person into work. “Getting to know the person” was one of the key elements of the role. Spending time with the young person, highlighting their strengths through conversation and assessment from the first engagement was pivotal in determining the amount of time support would be needed, the type of support required, and the employer to be found.

[1] Also called Employment Officers or Advisers.

P02F3: “My role is to help the clients prepare for work, so one of them might meet with the employment officer, I would then meet with them on a weekly basis to help them prepare their CV’s, portfolios, help them apply for work and once they’ve found that paid placement I would then visit them and help them settle in their work and withdraw support.”

Job Coaches said their approach was tailored to individual needs and preferences. This resulted in a variety of pathways into employment being offered with differing lengths of time engaged, and different levels of Job Coach support. Pathways included unpaid work experience, paid work experience, volunteering and direct entry to a paid job. Services offered included: vocational assessment; careers guidance; CV preparation; job searching; support for interviews and work trials; travel training; and general emotional support. These services all contributed to the number of Job Coaching hours needed to support young people into employment. The average time taken to get a young person into paid employment through the Engage to Change project took 105 Job Coaching hours (Beyer et al., 2019).

P13F2: “So you can’t class everyone as needing the same skill, so you have to know your customer really well before you place them and know the job that you’re offering or the placement that you’re offering to give.”

P10F3: “It is different for all of them, some need quite a bit of job coaching and it needs staff to go through every task that they need to do in the workplace breaking it down into smaller tasks or anything that helps them learn the task, others pick it up straight away and won’t need as much job coaching.”

Job Coaches were asked “How do you recognise a person’s skills if they don’t recognise them themselves?”. Job Coaches spend time understanding an individual’s job interests, what they are good at, and the work environments suited to them. This is summarised in a Vocational Profile document. They also use job tasters and work experiences to aid vocational decision-making, to encourage informed choice and better job matching.

P08O1: “[We do this] through discussions, assessments, one to one support, work trials, feedback from others, observations”

P09O1: “The most important part is getting their views and preferences correct to find the correct suitable type of employment”.

P01F3: “The vocational profiling is definitely very helpful, (I) would say it works, but also alongside the training we do with them, that looks at likes and dislikes....Strengths and weaknesses.. Yes, it gives you a better picture of what might work for this individual and see whether that is a good fit really”.

Online respondents were asked “How do you build and manage relationships and develop trust with young people?”. Here “honesty”, “openness”, “understanding”, and “regular contact” were all terms used to describe what was needed for successful Job Coach /client relationships.

P02O2: “I have always tried to find common ground and ask them about their interests and hobbies. Always show interest in what they do in their spare time. Develop trust by meeting them weekly and continuing to ask them about themselves.”

P09O1: “Follow their lead and never promise something you can’t guarantee can happen. Be consistent and honest with them”.

Trusting relationships were essential to building self-assurance. All Job Coaches said that they had autonomy to decide what they told young people about the placements they were offered, often matching this information to the level of understanding of each individual. 77% of online Job Coaches frequently used “Easy Read” material to give the young people the correct information they needed to make informed choices about employment and to understand the support they could expect from them.

Job Coaches identified a wide range of responsibilities they had, recognising that it was a specialist role. Staff training was viewed as essential, but some respondents reported that more regular or specialised training would be helpful in their role, such as continuing disability awareness, epilepsy, welfare benefits, and use of Information Technology. Use of non-specialist techniques by untrained Job Coaching staff may have a negative effect on the effectiveness of employment support, further limiting the pathways available to young people with ID into employment.

P01F3: “There are lots of things that I’m not sure if I’m doing it correctly or not. There have been instances as well where we have had clients with epilepsy so we’ve been working for 2 1/2 years but we have never been shown how to work with somebody with epilepsy. I’ve never had that training.”

P03F1: “There’s some of us who only do [training] probably once a year so we don’t do it that often [welfare] benefits wise with advice, so we would generally go to, like, another member of staff who .... I’m a bit rusty ‘cause I don’t always do the benefits... I always go to them first to double check, because I’m so cautious that if I say the wrong thing.... I don’t wanna get anyone into trouble with benefits.”

Selling the prospect of working with young people with ID to employers, particularly large national employers, was a difficult part of the Job Coach role. Working with employers required a strategic approach if Job Coaches were to be successful in obtaining employment opportunities. Engage to Change offered employers a wage subsidy for paid placements for young people, tapering across a 6 month period.

Job Coaches found this subsidy useful when approaching smaller businesses in their geographical area, but this funding was not always a useful strategic tool for larger national employers. Larger companies with national “head offices” would absorb the funding, thus leaving no benefit to local branches.

P10F2: “If you’re talking about someone like let’s say (national chain 1) or (national chain 2) everything is done by head office all the applications all the finance all the budget so even if you offer a financial subsidy or an Employment Development Grant as we call it then it doesn’t directly get to store, so it goes to head office that won’t impact on the amount of hours that store could take on, so even though you are saying to this manager in (local area) I can, you know, I can pay you for 26 weeks duh, duh, duh because their store has an allocation budget of hours the money will never make a difference it will be super numerate to that store, it’ll be a bonus for head office”

Misconceptions around ID and Autism were a common barrier. Job Coaches called for more frequent disability awareness training for all employers, regardless of company size. Job Coaches reported that part of their role often included raising awareness of ID and Autism, advocating for people as valuable workers, and helping employers to make adjustments and modelling good practice.

P02O2: “A lot of employers are already very negative at the thought of taking somebody on who may have autism and/or learning difficulties/disabilities. Although we can provide job coaching, many employers refuse to give people a chance at all.”

A relationship was identified between prior positive contact with the SE agency, or with people with ID, and the business offering opportunities. Employers who had personal experience of disability or had previously employed people with disabilities were seen as generally more positive about hiring people with the same characteristic.

P01F3: “A big problem is a lot of employers don’t have previous experience with individuals with autism, it’s like you usually find a lot of managers who’ve got somebody in the family with autism, or have worked with somebody like that before, are willing to give them an opportunity... But with some employers as soon as you say you’re looking for work for somebody who is autistic they just say no straight away, which is really disappointing.”

Job Coaches reported that employers need direct support around individuals if they are to make substantial progress with recruitment, training and progression of jobs. Building and maintaining good relationships with employers was recognised as a key role in Job Coaching, involving engaging the employer, sometimes to develop placements where no job is yet available, and providing ongoing support within the business when required.

P03F3: “It’s not always a case of it’s good to apply for any job that’s out there ..... I have found more success going to an employer where there’s not a job advertised and asking for some work experience, which then turns into a paid work placement for up to 6 months which is luckily, thankfully, turned into paid employment at the end.”

P05F3: “[I] try and plant the seed of thought, especially when, like I say, with the ones where there wasn’t actually a job there to begin with. Sort of check that they agree that everything is going really well with the individual and they are working hard and all the tasks are completed correctly and then just hopefully let them think that, well, they don’t know what they would do without this person, they were that good”.

## Barriers to successful Job Coaching

Job Coaches said that a person’s capacity for work is only one element within a larger system where all the barriers must be removed for successful employment to occur. Job Coaches worked to remove a range of obstacles: regional variations in opportunities for work and travel options, particularly key in rural areas; the design of job adverts and eligibility criteria for who can apply for them; inaccessible application processes; and lack of disability awareness and equal opportunities.

The most frequent barrier mentioned by Job Coaches in focus groups was “Paperwork”. Job Coaches recognised that paperwork was necessary, but that the level of paperwork required was also an obstacle. They reported that paperwork was sometimes overwhelming, detracting from working hours they felt could be better used directly supporting young people. Duplication of paperwork across the project was frustrating. Together with deadlines for forms and general administrative responsibilities, Job Coaches felt inundated and were aware that this could lead to mistakes being made.

P02F1: “Sometimes I’ve maybe forgotten to get forms signed for whatever, and it’s not purposely, it’s just because you get inundated where it could be queries from employers, parents, benefits, job. Now there’s so many things and aspects to our job it could be simple, a form that’s supposed to get signed, stamped, dated, sent off and you have just forgotten to do it because there’s so much admin you’ve got to do.”

P92O2: “And that’s why I say I’ve worked in supported employment for over 12 years and this is the most complicated process driven project, [...] I am finding I am supporting less people with the more support offer than I used to with the less support to offer if that makes sense, because the processes have taken over.”

Job Coaches recognised the importance of Access to Work paperwork for funding purposes to enable their agency to maintain staffing levels but completing this paperwork was stressful and caused additional pressures in their daily role.

P01F1: "I think it's also balancing job coaching hours and funding, so trying to hold down Access to Work is a tricky one for us because obviously it pays for our job coaches and its then that balance as well when you need time to do the paperwork, and you need time to get applications done, to start getting people out and ready, but you have a demand and pressure that money needs to be coming in and you're having to balance then that time..."

Job Coaches also felt that the level of paperwork could sometimes affect their relationship with employers. Employers could become disengaged when asked to complete employee assessments or paperwork relating to the placement, with a risk that this would impact on future opportunities with that business.

P34F2: "I mean from an employer's perspective as well there's a lot of stuff that a job coach that has got to go and sign, like there's so many work books, monthly reviews, all the sort of induction, time sheets, that sort of stuff you can see, Access to Work, so you can really see employer's disengaging from you and being like 'I didn't expect it to be as much paperwork when we initially signed up'. So it does need to be streamlined."

The majority of online respondents (92%) felt as though their caseload was realistic and 77% responded "No" when asked if the area they covered was too wide. However, working in more rural areas increased transport barriers and decreased the range of employers that could be approached. It was important that Job Coaches working in rural areas had smaller caseloads so they could maintain quality of service while travelling further.

P08F3: "I find that travel is also an issue. One of my clients was offered paid employment and had to refuse the job because of [lack of] public transport."

P06O1: "Yes in terms of miles and distance from home, but as it is rural the caseload is low, so manageable."

The topic of benefits was complex. Many Job Coaches reported that they often needed to work with the young person, the family, and the employer to navigate the benefits system to ensure that the appropriate benefits were claimed for the young person. Benefit systems and applications were difficult to navigate, particularly where young people were transferring to Universal Credit. Complex changes to thresholds and unclear, inaccessible guidance from Jobcentre Plus and other departments added barriers to getting young people into work. Families were also anxious about changes to benefit income within their household. Job Coaches often had to concentrate on the best interests of the young person to ensure the young person was better off in work rather than maintaining welfare benefits in line with family wishes. The issue of benefits could make or break a young person's move into employment.

P17F2: "...and a lot of the time it's not just about them either, especially if they're quite young, they're on their family, their Mum, their dad's benefit and it's not really their choice anymore, it's Mum or Dad saying, "no you can't because I'll have my money..." you know it'll affect the household..."

Ensuring they did not give incorrect information was a source of stress for Job Coaches and meant additional workload in some cases, again affecting the workplace support they could offer. Some Job Coaches felt that having designated benefits advisors within the organisation would be beneficial to them, young people and their families.

P24F2: "You can't be like, right well I know everything about Universal Credit, you need to know everything about everything because so many people have got like random elements of different bits at different levels within the benefits and stuff."

## **What works from a Job Coach Perspective?**

Working within Engage to Change had benefits for Job Coaches, providing more opportunities for personal skills growth and a greater knowledge of the way SE and Job Coaching work across Wales. Table 1 shows the principle themes relating to "what works." A needs-led, one-to-one approach was reported as the most useful element of SE in getting young people into work. Having flexibility and an element of autonomy in working with each young person allowed the Job Coaches to tailor packages of support to individuals and to employers.

P08O1: “One to one support being provided by people who have received training to support individual’s needs, and employers being informed and supported during the employment”

P06O1: “Understanding the needs of the participant and the employer and matching these.”

Next, activities such as travel training and supporting social contact in the workplace were important for building confidence, self-esteem, resilience and independence in young people. Job Club activities, offering on-going group training, and supporting continued engagement to job search, were regarded as important by smaller numbers of Job Coaches. A commitment to work from the young person and family support enabled Job Coaches to have a more open working relationships with those involved and achieve better outcomes.

P12O1: “Job club activities, I can pick up on their interests and utilise this to strike up good working relationships.”

**Table 1**

Summary of key themes from Job Coach survey open text responses

Main Theme	Key Sub Themes	% Survey Responses
What elements of the supported employment model are most helpful in getting people a paid job?	Needs Led Job Coach Support	46%
	Promoting Independence activities	15%
	Employers (funding/financial support)	15%
	Work trials/ placements	15%
	Job Club activities	8%

P01F3: “What helps is that motivation and attitude. Last year’s [internship] cohort that we had there were a lot at the start were very interested in the programme but didn’t really understand too much about it then. We had to take from them how much they had to put into it to get out of it – there was a lot...there were a few this year that didn’t really have the commitment and it felt like they just used the year just to fill in a gap.”

P11F3: “He proved to be an important member of their team and that’s how he has just stayed there. I think that’s important as well, their attitude competing in the workplace for those six months is always going to determine how the employer feels about employing them.”

Funding for employers through the Engage to Change Project was a third prominent theme amongst Job Coaches. Being able to offer a financial incentive to employers for paid work placements enabled Job Coaches to offer a wider variety of options to the young people. They allowed for short-term work trials and longer-term paid work experiences, these were viewed as essential for job retention and enabling young people to make informed choices about the work they wanted to do.

P04F3: “I think it makes it slightly easier because you have the wage incentive and I think that does help a lot! I hate to say it but... you know... that’s the truth of it. All employers seem to be struggling and what have you.... The approach I’ve taken with a few is ‘right which job would you like?’ and ‘OK there’s no job there’, but then if you kind of say, you know, there is a wage incentive then they are likely to agree to a placement obviously so that helps. Without that then a lot of them would really struggle I think.”

Being able to directly approach businesses, in which the Job Coaches offered in-work support and training, social support, disability awareness input, and problem-solving were seen as important in opening up opportunities, particularly when exploring options for job carving. Job carving is where elements of the work of others are drawn together into a job for a young person, increasing productivity for the company.

P04F2: “Sometimes job carving can be useful, especially if it’s with a lot of vacancies and stuff ‘cause loads of our people don’t want the bigger hours, if it’s like a 16 hour contract they will split that into 2 jobs and have 2 x 8 hours and have like some person who really loves doing the till and some person who loves doing job stacking. I’ve done that a couple of times and that’s worked really, really well. One job vacancy and I split that into 2 job outcomes because it works.”

Job Coaches also reported that they found greater success working with smaller local businesses who would benefit from the additional staffing available to them and also from the financial incentive that they could be offered.

We asked Job Coaches “What did you learn during the Covid-19 pandemic about the way you support young people into employment?”. Job Coaches recognised that workplace guidelines were now changeable and could differ between employers. Working to new Covid rules added extra challenges for Job Coaches. In some cases, Job Coaches felt that employers used Covid as an excuse to not to offer a job to a young person with ID or Autism. In other situations, placements were withdrawn because there was not enough room in the workplace for the young person and accompanying Job Coach to maintain social distancing from other workers. There were also fewer paid opportunities available in the immediate post-Covid period.

P19O2: “Employers found it easy to use Covid as an excuse to say ‘no.’ I think there are more jobs available but, due to the lack of staff on shifts managers and staff are too busy to meet, listen and commit to giving our people a chance.”

Job Coaches learned to adapt to new patterns of working in companies by offering blended approaches to support. Technology was central to this and there was a clear shift to supporting digital inclusion. Technology was mainly used in two ways: helping young people learn how to use computer technology; and Job Coaching people using video platforms such as Teams and Zoom. This may become central to future opportunities for some young people, depending on the nature of the employer. Providing good quality digital training is important.

P06O1: “The world is moving to a very tech centred way of life and being able to use tech is important for participants, and this may even need to be something we need to train them in.”

P10O2: “Learnt that sometimes our individuals could do the job without close supervision, but mostly support had to be done remotely by keeping in close contact over phone or zoom etc..”

Other working patterns also had to change, 54% of Job Coaches reporting that they had to change the support offered to employers. Again, there were reports of meetings or telephone calls with employers to discuss workers and how to help them move online.

## Discussion

The shift towards individualised jobs, with skilled in-work support that is individually tailored and needs-led, can increase the options for paid employment for people with ID and/or Autism. Job Coaching is central to supporting this and it is a specialist role. The role of the Job Coach is clearly wide-ranging, working to raise disability awareness and navigating the complex benefits system with: the young people; their carers; employers; funders; and referrers. SE is an individualised approach, the Job Coach matching features of a job to the interests, talents, and abilities of the person with ID and/or Autism, and tailoring support to the needs of the person and employer. Supporting young people to experience several different workplaces informs choice by the individual and promotes their inclusion across the lifespan. Preparing the young person for the work environment, and the environment for the young person, helps the employee and employer recognise the mutual benefit that each can bring to the other (Irvine and Lupart, 2008).

Although Job Coaches reported high levels of job satisfaction, there are clearly barriers to the role. Job Coaches spend significant amounts of time addressing paperwork, travelling, applying for Access to Work and other funding, job searching and managing welfare benefits. Sometimes the balance feels wrong to them. Further, research has shown that employment for people who have ID and/or Autism is not enough of a priority within the education system, and Job Coaches frequently have to work to raise it as a priority. Also, helping young people to understand what employment entails, what skills they have and what they can do, takes additional time and resources. This all competes with time for finding, getting and teaching jobs. There is a balance to be achieved between administrative work designed to make services accountable, to aid communication and to manage a service, and the time spent in direct work with clients. Job Coaches clearly believe that at times that demands are not balanced and resulting time pressures can lead to mistakes and delays.

Changes in the Job Coaching role were evident during and following Covid. Experience of helping people to work digitally, at arms-length from workplaces, and of digital Job Coaching, may help SE respond to employers shifting to blended working and increased flexibility in the nature of work, and particularly in supporting workers in more rural areas.

Family attitudes influence job procurement and retention. The role of the Job Coach in working with families to initiate or improve family support should be given greater prominence at referral to SE Services. Welfare benefit regulations should incentivise employment and not undermine it. SE clearly has benefits for businesses. Funding and support incentives, such as those offered within the Engage to Change project, to help engage employers and open up opportunities for work placements and paid employment, should be more widely available.

## Conclusions

Job Coaches are central to Supported Employment and they deliver a wide range of services to do this. Their flexibility and a degree of autonomy allow them to individualise their support. Availability of wider resources, such as employer subsidies, travel training and job clubs helps. Given the range of tasks that Job Coaches deliver, services need to monitor and balance the demands on their time between administration and direct client support. SE providers would gain from having specialist benefit advisor roles working with clients and Job Coaches to ensure information provided to people and families is relevant and accessible.

Job Coach experiences during Covid have led them to support people to work at a distance using computers and to Job Coach using digital means. The balance of their work is likely to continue to change as workplaces change and must be reflected in the SE model and its funding.

Engage to Change is a time limited project. The provision of a nationally funded Job Coaching programme would provide a longer time period for young people with ID and/or Autistic young people to build relevant work skills and provide a real opportunity for development towards employment post-education. The specialist role of the Job Coach in the employment of people with ID and/or autistic people should be formally recognized and more widely supported through policy and funding.

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