

# **Personal Effectiveness Training for Unemployed People: Where to now?**

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## **Personal Effectiveness Training for Unemployed People: Where to now?**

### **Abstract**

Unemployment remains a major social problem in Australia. Successive governments have attempted to address the problem, in part, by funding occupational skills based training programs for the unemployed. This paper reviews the general area of occupational skills/personal effectiveness training for unemployed people, and reports on outcomes for individuals attending “typical” courses in Australia. Also reported, are outcomes for unemployed people who attended specially devised training, based on the cognitive-behavioural (e.g., Beck, 1976) and learned optimism (Seligman, 1990) intervention approaches, that was aimed at improving well-being, confidence and coping abilities. Variables assessed include individual well-being (e.g., psychological distress), confidence (e.g., self-efficacy), attitude-to-work (e.g., work-commitment); training climate; and labour market outcomes such as return-to-work. More positive outcomes were identified for unemployed people attending the specially devised programs. The authors argue that training targeted at unemployed people must be based on sound theoretical principles to produce measurable long-term benefits. Future applications of personal development programs are discussed in relation to occupational skills based training and as stand-alone programs.

Unemployment remains a major social problem in Australia today. It has been a re-occurring problem throughout this century, and has been a feature for Australia as well as for other industrialized countries since the early to mid 1970s. The current unemployment rate in this country hovers between 8-9 percent, although some estimate that there are large numbers of "hidden unemployed" who do not feature in official statistics that place this figure much higher (Sheehan, 1980). The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), for example, has estimated that the hidden unemployed could be as numerous as the official unemployment statistic (Spiers, 1991). Included among the hidden unemployed would be married women who want to work and would if they could; as would older males who report themselves as being retired, but who would also work if it was possible. The official unemployment rate of 8-9 percent equates to some 800,000 people out of work, with approximately one third of these being long-term unemployed, or out of work for 12 months or more (A.B.S., 1994, 1995).

It is now well documented that for many the experience of unemployment brings with it problems related to personal effectiveness and general well-being. Evidence for this comes from very early studies carried out during the Great Depression of the 1930s (e.g., Jahoda, Lazarsfeld & Zeisel, 1933), and from research conducted more recently when the Western economies again went into decline (for example see Allatt & Yeandle, 1992; Barling, 1990; Leana & Feldman, 1992; Winefield, 1995; Winefield, Tiggemann, Winefield & Goldney, 1993). Further, longitudinal studies have been able to demonstrate that the negative effects associated with unemployment have been caused by people moving from being employed to being unemployed, and are by and large not associated with individuals with fewer skills or personal resources "drifting" into joblessness (e.g., Patton & Noller, 1990; Winefield & Tiggemann, 1990).

Successive Australian governments have attempted to address the problem of unemployment, in part, by funding occupational skills based training programs for the unemployed. Skills development for unemployed people has also met other national goals related to structural adjustments that need to be made to the national economy to convert it from one heavily dependent upon exports of natural resources to a broadly based and internationally competitive economy with sound manufacturing and service sectors (Dawkins & Holding, 1987). This focus on improvements to the national skills base has resulted in increased secondary school retention rates, increased tertiary participation, broadened post-school training opportunities through apprenticeships, traineeships and TAFE colleges, and a range of special measures to assist the unemployed enter and re-enter the labour market (D.E.E.T., 1991a).

During the 1990s there have been three major programs specifically aimed at skilling/re-skilling the large numbers of unemployed in Australia. These are: (a) formal training courses delivered through the TAFE network, fee-for-service private providers, and industry bodies (e.g., more than 70,000 course places per year for unemployed individuals have been funded by the federal government, D.E.E.T., 1991a); (b) wage subsidies where employers receive cash benefits to hire an individual and provide on-the-job training; and (c) training delivered by community based centres, primarily Skillshare (e.g., approximately 100,000 unemployed individuals per year received training at a Skillshare, D.E.E.T., 1991b). Other training interventions, such as “work-for-the-dole”, will also begin to feature towards the end of this decade. Reviews of the effectiveness of these training programs indicated that they have not been successful at substantially reducing the overall level of unemployment (Bessant, 1997). Other benefits may have accrued, for example here, equity issues have been addressed by assisting unemployed

people from especially disadvantaged groups to be more competitive in the labour market (Binstead, Banks, de Lautour & Lum, 1997).

Despite their widespread use there have been very few evaluations of these training-based interventions for unemployed people (e.g., Caplan, Vinokur, Price & van Ryn, 1989; Creed, Machin & Hicks, 1996, Creed, Hicks and Machin, 1996; Eden & Aviram, 1993; Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Muller, 1992). Immediate post-WWII reviews focused on the effects of training on the work retention rates of the “hard core” unemployed. These were unemployed individuals who were potential workers who could not obtain employment despite a high demand existing in the labour market (Cohn & Lewis, 1975). More recently, evaluations have focused on the psychological benefits to participants identified as having accrued as a result of attending training, including: reductions in psychological distress (Harry & Tiggemann, 1992), improvements in self-esteem (Donovan et al., 1986), improvements in life satisfaction (Donovan et al., 1986), and reductions in levels of depression (Winefield, 1985).

Some benefits identified for participants while they were in training have also been found to persist at follow-up (Harry & Tiggemann, 1992; Muller, 1992). However, not all evaluations have demonstrated improvements in personal functioning for participants (e.g., Branthwaite & Garcia, 1985; Caplan et al., 1989), and in some studies, negative consequences for participants have been identified (Creed, In press; Kristensen, 1991).

From the above, there is some evidence that training programs which include personal development and/or occupational skills training do improve the functioning of some unemployed in the short-term, and that these results may persist following the end of the course or intervention. Improving psychological functioning is important because it better equips individuals (e.g., for the job-search process, to start work), it is beneficial to training organisations (e.g., improving turn-up rates, less conflict on courses), and it has

benefits for the community (e.g., such as reducing drain on community resources by distressed unemployed). There is also evidence that such interventions can operate to improve the employment outcomes for some participants, but the results here are not consistent for all trainees and across all courses. Some participants are more successful at achieving employment outcomes. One explanation here that needs to be examined is that those trainees who have been able to develop higher levels of self-efficacy may be the ones who are able to make better use of their training, develop more effective job-search strategies and have higher self goals for using their training.

Evaluations of training courses in Australia by the authors have focused primarily on occupational skills based programs, although a typical component of these programs in this country is that they include aspects of personal development training (Creed, In Press; Creed, Hicks & Machin, 1996; Creed, Hicks & Machin, In Press; Creed, Machin & Hicks, 1996; Creed, Machin & Hicks, In Press; Phelps & Creed, 1995). Variables examined in this research have included well-being dimensions (e.g., self-esteem, psychological distress, depression), attitude to work variables (e.g., employment value and commitment), life situation variables (e.g., social support, use of community resources), causal attribution and blame variables, coping, training climate, and changes to occupational status.

Based on this research, it was determined that outcomes for unemployed people who attended occupational skills based training were more favourable in the areas of personal functioning than for those who did not. There was consistent evidence that attendance at the training courses improved well-being for participants as a group, as compared with the control subjects. Lower levels of depression, psychological distress, helplessness, and negative mood were recorded after the courses compared to pre-course levels, and there were improvements in levels of self-esteem, life satisfaction and positive mood over the same time period.

There was little evidence that the courses led to changes in attitude-to-work. Employment expectations were generally raised as a result of course attendance. However, no changes were identified on variables of employment commitment (which was already high pre-course), employment value, self-efficacy and confidence. There was also little evidence for changes in life situation variables such as perceived social support, financial strain, and the unemployed person's use of community resources.

The greatest gains from the training courses were made by those unemployed who began the training courses with the poorer levels of well-being. Those participants with higher psychological distress and depression levels, for example, improved more, that is, responded differently to the training courses, than those who started the training with better levels of well-being.

These typical occupational skills/personal development training courses were able to improve well-being for participants. Changes were identified for trainees between pre- and post-measures. However, these gains made by participants generally did not persist into the longer-term (three month follow-up), unless the person was able to find paid employment. In other words, well-being scores typically returned to pre-course levels by 12 weeks after course.

Theories which have been used to explain the differences between unemployed and employed people in general have also been utilised to explain improvements in well-being for unemployed people attending training programs. Donovan et al. (1986) and Stafford (1982), for example, drew on Jahoda's (1981, 1982) deprivation model and argued that training activities provided many of the latent functions (e.g., time structure, opportunity for skills utilization) that are catered for when one is in employment, and that are important for good well-being.

A second possible explanation for the improvements in well-being can be found in the agency restriction model proposed by Fryer (1986, 1988). In this model, individuals are seen as being active, having initiative, able to influence their future, and striving to have some control over their lives. Frustration of this personal agency is likely to have negative effects on well-being, while opportunities for the individual to be active and exercise goal directed behaviours, such as by gaining employment or undertaking occupational training, would lead to improvements in functioning. Harry and Tiggemann (1992) used this latter approach to explain improvements in, and maintenance of well-being for a group of sole parents who attended a work re-entry course. They argued that this model allowed a better understanding of why levels of well-being persisted beyond the period of the training program. However, strong long-term effects for well-being were not found by the authors in the present series of studies, and support for choosing this explanation over Jahoda's is not warranted.

The evidence is that the standard occupational training programs being widely run in our community are poor vehicles for fostering the personal growth and initiative which would allow personal agency to flourish. This longitudinal pattern of negative well-being while unemployed, being ameliorated by attendance at a training course, and then reverting to similar pre-course low levels at follow-up, is consistent with the situational model proposed by Jahoda. However, it is unlikely that improvements in well-being can be explained by resort to one of the general factors which might be involved. Behaviour changes brought about by attendance at the training programs, and the maintenance or otherwise of these changes, is likely to be influenced by the context of training and the environment to which the individual returns, as well as internal individual processes. Further, other variables, such as personality, ability, demography and previous experiences, are likely to act as moderators and mediators to influence outcomes, as has been found in explanations of individual responses to unemployment in general (Winefield, 1995).

Subsequent to these findings demonstrated by the Australian research presented above, the authors developed a short (three-day) Cognitive Well-being course aimed at improving the general psychological functioning of the unemployed participants. This course was based on the cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) approach (e.g., Beck, 1976), and on the learned optimism work of Seligman (1990). The cognitive-behavioural model assumes that thoughts and views of the world determine feelings and consequent behaviour.

The authors demonstrated that, as expected, the courses impacted positively on participant's well-being. Those attending the training courses demonstrated a significant improvement in their level of personal functioning and coping skills when compared to a waiting list control group, and significantly, and in contrast to the results found for the more typical training courses for the unemployed, these benefits were maintained for the duration of the follow-up period. Again, the greatest improvements were achieved by course participants who reported the lowest initial levels of well-being and coping skills.

Other psychological interventions that have been designed to improve the effectiveness of training programs have focused on enhancing the learning outcomes of participants during training, and on enhancing the transfer of skills after training. Some of these interventions have included: the development of "learning skills" (Downs & Perry, 1984), relapse prevention training (Marx, 1982), goal-setting (Wexley & Baldwin, 1986), and behavioural self-management (Gist, Stevens, & Bavetta, 1991).

Variables which have been found to impact on training outcomes and transfer include individual characteristics, training design variables and environmental factors (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Self-efficacy has been identified as one of the major determinants of trainees' capacity to benefit from training. Self-efficacy has been found to be significantly related to performance levels after training and skill maintenance over a follow up period (Gist, Bavetta & Stevens, 1990; Gist, Stevens & Bavetta, 1991). Self-efficacy has also been

found to affect both the level of goals trainees set and their commitment to those goals (Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Machin & Fogarty, 1997). Self-efficacy can therefore be viewed as an important predictor of training outcomes, and an important outcome of training in itself.

Bandura (1986) defines self-efficacy as, "People's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. It is concerned not with the skills one has but with judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses" (p. 391). This definition highlights a key aspect of the self-efficacy construct. Specifically, it indicates the importance of distinguishing between component skills and the ability to "organize and execute courses of action". For example, in discussing driving self-efficacy, Bandura distinguishes between the component skills (steering, braking, signaling) and the behaviours one can accomplish (driving in freeway traffic, navigating twisting mountain roads). Therefore, in the area of employment re-entry, the component skills which are the focus of most occupational training programs need to be complemented with the self-management skills which enable unemployed trainees to successfully compete for paid employment, and manage their own skill development.

Levels of self-efficacy are directly linked to subsequent performance, such that higher levels of perceived efficacy lead to relatively higher levels of performance (Bandura, Reese & Adams, 1982; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Where self-efficacy levels have been raised from very low bases to pre-selected differential levels (low, medium or high) using mastery experiences, the efficacy/performance relationship has consistently been demonstrated for all levels induced (Bandura, Cioffi, Taylor & Brouillard, 1988).

Phelps and Creed (1995) examined the role of self-efficacy in determining immediate performance outcomes, and delayed occupational satisfaction outcomes, for groups of long-term unemployed individuals who attended occupational skills/personal development training courses in rural New South Wales. Previous employment history and

commitment-to-work were predictive of initial levels of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy was shown to predict the performance outcomes of training, and level of occupational satisfaction at follow-up. Participants with lower levels of self-efficacy were also more likely to drop out of the training programs.

Therefore, strategies which are designed to enhance the self-efficacy for training and transfer of skills for unemployed people prior to their commencing occupational training programs are likely to impact positively on a range of performance indicators, including the ability to successfully complete training, the training outcomes, the transfer of skills following training, and the ability to successfully compete for and maintain paid employment.

The primary goal of occupational training programs for the unemployed is to produce motivated trainees who have the basic skills and confidence to apply what they have learned and the commitment to continue learning in any subsequent skill development opportunities, including training they receive while employed.

The way to achieve this goal is to deliver training programs to unemployed participants which increases the level of self-efficacy, motivation, commitment, and the potential for better learning outcomes from their training. One aspect of enhancement of self-efficacy is to improve levels of well-being and reduce levels of psychological distress by the use of positive self-talk and coping strategies, as was demonstrated for participants who attended the Cognitive Well-being courses referred to above. Benefits can be expected at many levels from such an approach. Training providers can expect to benefit by having more motivated trainees who are better able to cope with the demands of the training and produce better learning outcomes and subsequent transfer of their skills. Specific course benefits should include reduced attrition from training through greater motivation and commitment, a greater degree of involvement in training, better problem-solving skills

which impacts on the level of conflict and number of complaints about the course, a more positive training climate, and higher levels of performance.

Staff members from the organisations providing the occupational skills/personal development training can also expect to benefit from the development of new skills and higher levels of self-efficacy, which will assist them to deliver more effective training programs. The community benefits from having participants who have a greater capacity to benefit from their training, and who are more competitive in their work re-entry, avoiding the wastage of valuable and increasingly scarce taxpayer-funded resources. Such an approach will also benefit the employers of these trainees by having employees who are committed to continuing their skill development.

It is only through training programs based on sound theoretical principles which have been shown to improve the level of individual self-efficacy and well-being, that better outcomes and measurable long-term benefits will start to flow. Where training ignores these principles, any positive outcomes will continue to be temporary at best.

Programs based in theoretical frameworks of demonstrated value have the potential to assist the unemployed to more effectively transfer the skills that have been acquired during training. For practitioners, this means they will have tools to enhance the outcomes of occupational training programs by directly assisting participants to reduce their psychological distress and improve, as well as maintain, their motivation and commitment to their training. As the accumulated evidence for the benefits of the self-efficacy based program approach increases, other training providers and organisations which provide assistance to others than the unemployed (such as students, the employed, those in rehabilitation), can be expected to include this approach in their curriculum. This application implies self-efficacy/well-being programs being attached to other education/training programs similar to the application evaluated in the Australian research.

Such programs need also to be evaluated in stand-alone situations where they could provide self-management skills for direct application in the participants' lives. This might mean, for example, that unemployed people could benefit from stand-alone efficacy training to enhance their job-search outcomes, or that employees would enhance both their work satisfaction and production by an increase in self-management abilities.

It is a matter of priority that these types of training programs be further developed and thoroughly evaluated to provide the unemployed with the best possible assistance so that they will maximize their chances of finding work, and develop skills which will inoculate them against the serious negative effects of unemployment. The programs developed by the authors are current and local examples that have demonstrable benefits. There are also several overseas programs which have self-efficacy as a component or a major aspect of their focus, and have outcome evaluations which have been positive in both the short-term and long-term for unemployed trainees (e.g Caplan, Vinokur & Price, 1997; Eden & Aviram, 1993). The theoretical base for these interventions need to be developed further, and more field evaluations are required in the Australian context.

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