

## **‘On the job’ training delivers positive results in Salford**

An independent evaluation of First Step Trust’s SMaRT project in Greater Manchester which provides work and training opportunities for long-term unemployed including people with mental health problems

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## Executive summary

First Step Trust (FST) is a charity that provides real work and training opportunities for people excluded from ordinary working life because of mental health problems or other disadvantages. In 2005, FST set up SMaRT<sup>1</sup> an end of life vehicle recycling centre in Salford, Greater Manchester. This initiative was designed to draw a workforce from a wide range of long-term unemployed people, including those with mental health problems, and provide them with an opportunity to gain new skills, qualifications and work experience which would enable them to move into paid employment. SMaRT has now grown to include a registered MOT centre providing garage services to local residents and businesses.

An independent evaluation of SMaRT was undertaken by Credo Community Solutions, an independent consultancy specialising in the health and social care sectors. The evaluation was carried out from July 2006 to June 2008 and examined the impact that SMaRT has had on people's work skills and attitudes, in particular their confidence to aspire to, and obtain, future employment. Information was gathered from workforce members, salaried staff and employers and also from management information systems. Methods included in-depth interviews, a focus group, questionnaires and more informal methods such as direct observation.

SMaRT workforce members made up a diverse group and included people with a range of disabilities, mental health problems, drug and alcohol recovery problems and ex-offenders. Ages ranged from 18 to 60 with a good representation of non-White British groups compared with the local population. About three-quarters of the sample group had been out of work for over a year, with almost half of those being unemployed for five years or longer.

SMaRT was found to have a positive impact on the following: work-specific skills such as dealing with customers and servicing cars; generic work skills such as writing, numeracy and IT; and personal skills such as communication and working with others. Improvements in developing work-related skills were found after two months' engagement with SMaRT, with stronger increases after four to six months. The strongest trends were seen in the development of personal skills. There was also good evidence to suggest that attendance at SMaRT led to the increased perception and development of crucial work attitudes such as timekeeping, attendance, discipline and accepting responsibility for your own work.

Alongside these results were strongly-reported increases in confidence and self-esteem and redefinition and/or revised expectation of future work options. Of the 58 people leaving the project during the study period, 19 went on to paid employment, four to college and five to other forms of work-related activity. Analysis of outcomes showed no differential effects according to gender, ethnicity or age.

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<sup>1</sup> Socially-Minded and Responsible Trading

The evaluation found that SMaRT is highly effective in providing employment support to meet the needs of two very different groups: those who have become unemployed relatively recently (three months or less); and those who have been unemployed for long periods of time or have never worked.

The first group of recently unemployed were more likely to view their engagement with SMaRT as a 'stepping stone' back into paid employment. They were looking for an opportunity get themselves back into the discipline and routine of regular work – for them building up their confidence and motivation to seek work was more important than gaining specific skills. It was also noted that some people in this group did not want a future employer to know of their engagement with SMaRT, which may have implications for follow-up monitoring, reporting and support.

The second group was made up of people who had been unemployed for long periods of time or who had never worked. People in this group were more likely to have learning disabilities and/or current mental ill health. For this group the gaining of generic or work-specific skills was as important as personal development however progress was likely to take much longer. Some of the people in this group did not necessarily see gaining paid employment as the ultimate aim of their engagement with SMaRT; what they saw and valued in the project was a far preferable alternative to college, day care, drop-in centres or staying at home.

A number of factors contributed to successful outcomes for workforce members, however, rather than operate as discrete features, these elements combined to form a unique 'cultural' effect. Fundamental to this was the real work experience that SMaRT provides. SMaRT operates as a commercial trading business and members of the workforce have the same expectations placed upon them as salaried staff in terms of contributing to the success of the business – consequently they experience the same pressures. Rather than view such pressures in a negative way, workforce members not only perceived but also actually valued the benefits that this approach brings. They recognised the need for a work-based discipline and appreciated the opportunity to develop this at SMaRT before going into paid employment. Several found learning new skills far easier in a real work environment because tasks were learned as and when needed which meant that they could see their relevance and importance.

Achieving goals, overcoming difficulties and making mistakes were all valued because they had a real impact on the business and this experience led to tangible increases in confidence and self-esteem. A key component of this cultural factor was the salaried staff that SMaRT employs. As a matter of policy FST recruits salaried staff largely from a commercial rather than from a health or social care background. This results in a very natural, 'on the job' style of coaching and support that develops people's attitudes, behaviours, skills and knowledge in response to what is needed for the business to succeed. This style of learning and support is invaluable because it is similar to that which workforce members will go on to experience as employees in a mainstream workplace.

SMaRT is clearly achieving significant outcomes in terms of employment and increased employability for those people who are furthest removed from the job market because of

the length of time they have been out of work, whatever the reason for that unemployment. These outcomes are manifested not only in the development of work-related skills but also in the strong self-reported increases in confidence and self-esteem that enable people to believe in themselves. Therefore the outcomes of a person's engagement with SMaRT, has a much wider impact on an individual's life than merely the ability to find and sustain paid work.

### National context

The importance of work for mental well being is well documented<sup>2</sup> as are the low employment rates for people with disabilities (30-50%)<sup>3</sup> – particularly for those with mental health problems (10-20%)<sup>4</sup>. At a time when employment rates are high nationally (75%), the impact of unemployment increases the social exclusion of people with mental health problems and other disabilities and deprives them of an important means of overcoming their difficulties. Work plays a key role in the recovery process which involves finding and maintaining hope, re-establishing a positive identity, building a meaningful life and taking responsibility and control<sup>5</sup>.

Over recent years, there have been a number of national government initiatives to address these issues which have been based on the over-riding principle that access to work is a necessary precondition for social inclusion. In the arena of disability, both the Disability Discrimination Act and New Deal for Disabled People aim to make work more accessible for people with disabilities. Within mental health services, the National Service Framework for Mental Health emphasises the importance of work and occupational activity in combating stigma and improving opportunities for people with mental health problems. A recent report commissioned by the Cross Government Health Work and Wellbeing Programme concluded that 'work is central to two of the values that underpin mental healthcare for people with severe mental illness – social inclusion and recovery.'<sup>6</sup>

The primary vehicle for addressing these issues has been the reform of welfare benefits which aims to prevent the allocation of people to long-term support benefits, such as the (soon to be replaced) Incapacity Benefit (IB). The objective of these changes is to provide short-term, focused interventions to get people back into paid employment before they become institutionalised on long-term sickness benefits. The process for achieving this is that a claimant will undergo the new Employment and Support Assessment and then, if considered able to work, be allocated onto one of the many Pathways to Employment schemes – a national programme providing a range of short-term individualised support to enable people to return to work.

In mental health, important changes to the Care Programme Approach (CPA) were introduced in April 2002 as a result of the National Framework for Mental Health services placing access to work opportunities high on the agenda. This continues to

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<sup>2</sup> Waddell, G. & Burton, A.K. (2006) *Is work good for your health and well-being?* Norwich: The Stationery Office.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Work and Pensions Statistics 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Social Exclusion Unit (2004) *Mental Health and Social Exclusion*. London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister; Meltzer, H., Singleton, N., Lee, A., Bebbington, P., Brugha, T., & Jenkins, R. (2002). *The social and economic circumstances of adults with mental disorders*, London: The Stationery Office; Marwaha, S. & Johnson, S. (2004) Schizophrenia and employment. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 39, 337-349.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson et al in 'Making Recovery a Reality', SCMh March 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Royal College of Psychiatrists. (2008) *Mental Health and Work*.

shape commissioning strategy across Primary Care Trusts and requires the written care plans for those on enhanced CPA to include objectives 'to secure suitable employment or other occupational activity' (Department of Health, 2000).

At the same time, the commissioning within Health and Social Care, of services that are designed to assist people with disabilities access employment, has been increasingly influenced by the Individual Placement and Support Service model (IPSS) – a system brought over from USA with a strong evidence base<sup>7</sup>, that places people directly into employment with support to sustain them in their job.

The overall impact of these government initiatives has been two-fold. On the one hand, the reforms increase the availability of services designed to enable those who are relatively work-ready to access employment. On the other hand they have little or no impact on those who have been unemployed for many years and who have significant gaps in their experience, confidence and skills which need to be filled before they can consider themselves employable. This second group make up the long-term IB claimants and whereas IB claims are gradually reducing overall, the proportion of claims of five years or longer continues to increase (from 42% in 1999 to almost 55% of the total IB caseload by 2006)<sup>8</sup>.

### **Local context (Manchester/Salford)**

SMaRT is located in Salford, part of the Greater Manchester conurbation which has a population of around 216,000. Greater Manchester, as a whole, has a disproportionate number of people who are economically inactive, with Salford having unemployment levels above the national average (4.5% compared to the UK average of 3.4% in 2007).

Tackling worklessness has been acknowledged as a key priority at all strategic levels within Salford, Greater Manchester and across the North West of England. This objective is embedded in the Community Strategies, Employment Plans, Local Public Service Agreements and Local Area Agreements of the ten Greater Manchester Local Authorities. In addition, work undertaken on developing the Regional Skills Priorities 2007-2010, identifies significant skills deficits and addresses this by promoting the linking of people, jobs and training as a key way of tackling worklessness. The Salford Local Area Agreement 2008-2011 identifies three main indicators relating to worklessness: reducing the number of people of working age claiming out-of-work benefits; increasing the overall employment rate; and increasing the number of adults receiving secondary mental health services, in employment.

The Greater Manchester City Consortium has produced a three year business plan from 2007-2010 which sets out four strategic objectives to reduce worklessness rates across

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<sup>7</sup> Bond, G.R., Becker, D.R. Drake, R.E., Rapp, C.A., Meisler, N., Lehman, A.F., Bell, M.D. & Blyler, C.R. (2001) Implementing supported employment as evidence-based practice. *Psychiatric Services* 52, 313-322.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Work and Pensions Statistics 2007.

their key areas including Salford. The first of these identifies a need to change the motivations and behaviours of workless residents, as well as improving access to training, vacancies and work. Improving people's basic employability and occupational skills is also seen as a necessary way of enhancing their employment prospects. Priority groups include those with disabilities, mental health issues and ex-offenders and, for people with health needs in particular, the strategy focuses on more effective co-ordination between employment and training provision and PCTs, Mental Health Trusts and Public Health. The overall aim is to increase the type of referrals from healthcare practitioners which develop discharged pathways linked to employment – in other words, promote 'employment on prescription'.

## **Rationale for setting up SMaRT**

### **First Step Trust**

First Step Trust (FST) is a charity that provides real work, training and employment opportunities for people excluded from ordinary working life because of mental health problems or other disabilities or disadvantages. The organisation aims to help people manage their problems, become less dependent on health and social care services and, where possible, make the transition to paid employment. FST is based on a belief that everyone has the right to work whatever their previous situation or disadvantage. People who join the workforce include not just the long-term unemployed but many who have never worked or who are deemed incapable of work. People join FST as colleagues and equals, sharing the responsibility of making the business work. The FST model is designed to enable workforce members to gain a sense of purpose, a reason to stay well, feel valued, make new friends, learn new skills and grow in confidence.

FST's objectives are threefold:

- to assist people to become more employable by developing basic work disciplines such as reliability, punctuality and concentration, as well as building up confidence and updating work skills
- to assist those who are ready to move on to paid employment – both in the wider community and within FST
- to enable those who may take many years to consider employment, or may even never do so, lead a useful and satisfying life, with a self respect engendered through working rather than remaining isolated at home or stagnating in unchallenging day centres.

FST has been in operation since 1994 and has 14 such projects around the UK, both in the community and in secure psychiatric services. During a year there will be 1,000 people participating and trading in a range of activities including garage services, design and print services, catering, painting and decorating, facilities maintenance and grounds and garden maintenance along with getting involved in the administrative support for the business.



## **FST SMaRT**

FST set up SMaRT in 2005 in Salford as an end of life vehicle recycling centre, funded through Invest to Save Budget and Big Lottery Fund grants. The aim was to pilot a model that:

- offered a more challenging and marketable range of skills than the gardening and painting and decorating undertaken by the majority of FST projects. New skills included: those specific to the automotive trade; office and clerical work; retailing and marketing; warehousing; and buildings maintenance
- recruited from the wider range of long-term unemployed, including people with mental health problems, in order to create a more inclusive environment. The more socially inclusive image of the project has been valuable in creating an effective work-related discharge pathway from local medium and low secure units which protects individuals' anonymity
- operated under significant commercial pressures enabling people to experience the demands of meeting customer needs to high standards and tight timescales
- generated substantial trading income
- incorporated into people's work, opportunities to gain formal training qualifications (NVQs 1 and 2 in automotive skills, vehicle maintenance and repair, ICT, office and business administration and health and safety as well as basic literacy and numeracy).
- enabled people to move into paid employment more intensively
- created working partnerships with local businesses which resulted in sponsorship and modern apprenticeship opportunities for FST workforce moving on.

Since it was set up three years ago, SMaRT has grown to include a registered MOT centre which provides garage services and repairs to the general public and local businesses.

## **Evaluation aims**

The purpose of this study was to carry out an independent evaluation of the impact that SMaRT has on people's work skills and attitudes – in particular their confidence to aspire towards future employment and ability to obtain employment. The study also aims to identify any differential effects relating to age, gender, disability and ethnicity and to identify factors within FST's SMaRT model that contribute to successful outcomes for workforce members.

## **Methodology**

The study period covered from July 2006 to June 2008. Information was collected by four different methods, over a period from September 2006 to June 2008:

1. **Interviews with workforce members:** a series of in-depth, structured interviews were carried out with a sample of workforce members. A first interview examined issues relating to the following: their engagement with SMaRT; previous experience of work and education; social life; and future plans. For those in the study group who were still engaged with SMaRT after nine months, a second interview was carried out that examined future plans and how helpful they perceived various aspects of their experience at SMaRT to be. Any of the study group who were still engaged with SMaRT after 12 months participated in an individually-designed final interview that revisited themes arising from their first interview.

A group of nine workforce members participated in the initial set of first interviews. This was followed three months later by a second group of three people and nine months later, by a third group of five people. Any of the study group who left during the study period was asked to complete an Exit Interview Questionnaire.

2. **Focus group:** a group comprising of three salaried staff and seven workforce members who were not part of the study group, was held six months after the initial set of first interviews. The purpose of the focus group was to examine emerging themes from the first interviews and to examine different perspectives on the features and benefits of the SMaRT model.

3. **Interviews with employers:** towards the end of the study period, interviews were held with a sample of employers who had taken SMaRT workforce members into salaried positions. These were semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring how well SMaRT had prepared employees for working life and any differences from an employer perspective between SMaRT workforce members and other potential employees.

4. **Information from data monitoring:** information obtained from routine monitoring of workforce characteristics, attendance, training and outcomes across the project, was used to provide data across a wider group than those in the sample.

In addition to these formal methods, researchers held unstructured conversations with workforce members and salaried staff and made and recorded personal observations during their engagement with the project.

All individual interviews were transcribed and both qualitative and quantitative information was analysed using SPSS software.

The study was undertaken by Credo Community Solutions, an independent consultancy specialising in the health and social care sectors in the Midlands and North West regions.

## Workforce profile

Information was collected on a total of 95 workforce members over the study period, including the 24 workforce members participating in the study (17 in individual interviews and seven in the focus groups). Referrals are received from mental health services, including secure psychiatric services, along with Young Offenders' Institution, Job Centre Plus and disability services. The resultant workforce is a changing mix of long-term unemployed, people with a range of disabilities, mental health problems, drug and alcohol recovery problems and ex-offenders.

Further detail on the demographic breakdown of the workforce is given in the appendix (see page 23). This indicated that the study group proved to be broadly representative of the total workforce in terms of age, gender and ethnicity.

In summary, of the 95 workforce members, 16 (17%) were women and 79 (83%) were men<sup>9</sup>. There was a spread across all age groups from 18 to 60, with the largest single group being the 19 to 25 year olds (35%). In terms of ethnic breakdown, non-White British groups are well-represented (46%) compared with the local population (4%).

Primarily, this was a group of people who had experienced long-term unemployment, with by far the majority (74% of sample of 47) who had been out of work for over a year – after which point, the likelihood of returning to employment becomes very small. 40% of those who had been out of work for over a year had been unemployed for five years or longer.

## Findings

### Impact on work skills

Most of the people in the study group had had some work experience before joining the project; mostly casual or unskilled work and this was representative of the whole workforce. Four people had no previous work experience, including one person who had not had a job for 25 years and one person who had been at college for the seven years since leaving school.

Although some had experience of mechanics or administrative work this was not true for the majority and not everyone who applied to the project wanted to get a mechanics or office type job; almost half of the study group wanted jobs in areas such as the arts, media or catering. Most of the study group saw SMaRT as an opportunity to develop and gain the confidence to seek work as much as

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*“To be honest I was surprised at the level of knowledge [workforce members come with]. Taking an apprentice off the street would be a lot harder.”*  
**Employer**

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<sup>9</sup> The high proportion of men is perhaps as expected, given the nature of the main activities involved at SMaRT. However from observations, individual interviews and the focus group, it was apparent that both men and women workforce members were involved in the full range of activities from administrative and reception work to technical and mechanical work.

an opportunity to gain skills. They also cited other benefits such as getting back into a work routine, getting a reference and gaining qualifications.

The impact on work skills broadly can be divided into three groups; work-specific skills such as filing, ordering stock or servicing a car; generic work skills such as writing, number or IT skills and personal skills such as working with people, timekeeping and communication.

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*“I have learned a lot about scrapping cars ... taking the lights out and seat belt out ... how to use the ramp and how to take an engine out.”*

**Workforce member**

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Impact on work-specific skills was reported in individual interviews, the focus group and recorded in Personal Development Plans and exit questionnaires. Every member of the study group, regardless of disability, reported some increase in work-specific skills, for example answering the telephone, preparing

spreadsheets for invoicing, dealing with customers and servicing and scrapping cars. Even those people who did not aspire to working in a workshop or office-type environment, valued increases in their work-specific skills, not necessarily for their transferability, but for the increase in confidence that came with achieving something in a real work environment. Achievements were valued because they were not token gestures but had a real impact on the success of the business. All but one person rated the structured training they received at SMaRT as very helpful or fairly helpful and for the majority of people the helpful aspect was the feeling of learning ‘on the job’. Tasks were learned as and when needed and the real work environment gave a feeling of the urgency and necessity to learn.

Improvements in generic work skills, such as writing and numeracy, were identified from questionnaires which formed part of the individual interviews for study group members and which were sent out as an exit questionnaire to people who had left the project. Almost three-quarters of people who responded to the questionnaire rated an improvement in writing and IT skills, with almost a third rating an improvement in number skills. There were clear relationships between the duration of engagement in the project and personal improvement ratings, with increases being reported after two to three months participation and stronger increases after four to six months.

For many in the study group and focus group, the work environment and the support on offer were crucial factors impacting on their ability to learn. All of the study group, and all but two of the focus group, had attended college previously though a third did not complete their course, often because they found learning in a college environment difficult. In two cases, workforce members had achieved NVQ qualifications at SMaRT much quicker than they would have done at college – they felt that this was because they had had more opportunity to learn and

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*“I got my City & Guilds in motor vehicle technology in 18 days. It would normally take 12 months but my assessor came to the workplace and I did handpicked jobs so I could get it much quicker”*

**Workforce member**

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apply the practical skills they needed and because, generally, they had more confidence within a work environment than a college setting.

The achievement of qualifications was more apparent with workforce members in the workshop than in the office. Several study group members said that they would have liked the opportunity to achieve an administrative-related NVQ whilst at SMaRT, but that

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*“We all help each other out. If somebody’s struggling with their work or they’ve got a problem we all help them. It’s not just [salaried staff]’s job. They’ve got other things to do. You don’t just walk past somebody who’s having a problem sweeping up. You help them out.”*

**Workforce member**

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no opportunities were available to them. A lack of qualifications was identified by over half of the study group as a significant barrier to their obtaining work. Several of them felt that they needed to have a qualification to prove to an employer that they were capable, rather than expecting an employer to take a chance on them and train them once they got a job.

Increases in personal skills such as working with others and verbal communication were reported by all of the study group including those who responded to exit questionnaires. For verbal communication and working with others the improvement was rated as greater than expected by nearly three-quarters of respondents. One of the issues that came out strongly from the focus group

was how workforce members and salaried staff worked together as a team and supported each other. Also workforce members did not see support and supervision as solely the responsibility of salaried staff.

### **Impact on attitudes to work**

There is good evidence to suggest that attendance at SMaRT leads to the increased perception and acceptance of crucial work attitudes such as timekeeping, attendance, working with others, discipline and accepting responsibility for your own work.

Over three-quarters of the study group had previous employment experience and they identified the things that made work difficult for them – issues such as bullying or unpleasant colleagues, getting up for work, mental ill health or poor pay. Approximately one quarter of the group was not sure what the difficulties were for them. All but one person identified the main strengths or benefits of work as working with people, learning skills and gaining self-confidence – pay was a minimal factor.

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*“I’ve learned that there is a discipline in work. You can’t just come in and do anything you want ... if you didn’t listen to your boss in a real job, a paid job, then they would just fire you, so you have to be disciplined.”*

**Workforce member**

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Evidence from interviews and focus group discussions strongly indicates that SMaRT is viewed by workforce members as a real work environment, rather than a work placement or work experience. Although there is room for flexibility of working days, workforce members are expected to honour their own commitment and whilst some



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*“Like I said, the first thing I thought was just to do garage work, go home every night and just do nothing until when I am back in, but now it’s more. I want to be in, I need to be in, people are relying on me as well as needing me there.”*

**Workforce member**

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found this difficult at times, all study group and focus group members recognised that an emphasis on timekeeping and workplace discipline was essential in maintaining their employment in the future.

The experience of SMaRT as a real working environment was illustrated through scenario discussions in the focus group. Workforce members were asked to discuss what would happen in various situations covering lateness, poor performance, illness and discipline. In all cases workforce members’ responses reflected those that may be found in most working environments – the supervisor

would have a word with someone about lateness; the supervisor would make sure the person got more experience before trying for a job they weren’t up to; a person genuinely ill would be sent home after making sure someone was in, but someone ‘blagging it’ would be spoken to by their supervisor; violence in the workplace would not be tolerated. Focus group members were also clear about the difference between SMaRT and other day activity, including paid employment. SMaRT was seen as a place to help people back into education or work and having to get up in the morning, do your job and work as a team were seen as important elements of being employable.

The exit interview questionnaire asked respondents to identify what they felt they had learned most whilst attending SMaRT and which areas of learning they felt were the most and least important. Over half of respondents stated that what they had learned most was the discipline of regular work with a quarter of people stating this had been the most important area of learning for them. Within individual interviews and the focus group, the impact of doing work that had a real commercial consequence was significant. It not only reinforced the experience as real work but also emphasised the need to accept personal responsibility and make a worthwhile contribution.

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*“At first I just thought it would be good to work on cars ... but now we’re doing MOT’s these are real people’s cars. You can’t mess about when you’re doing somebody’s brakes. It’s a real responsibility. Quite scary really.”*

**Workforce member**

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### **Impact on self-confidence and ambitions for the future**

Lack of self-confidence was the second most commonly identified factor stopping the achievement of personal aspirations, behind qualifications. Everybody in the study group said that their confidence had improved a lot, with almost three-quarters of people saying that the improvement was more than they expected. Such increases in confidence were reported at two to three months, with stronger improvements at four to six months. The majority of open comments from individual interviews, the focus group and exit questionnaires included statements about confidence and there is little doubt that this was one of the most valued outcomes for the majority of people who participated in the study.

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*“I probably have got more confidence in communicating in certain ways ... sometimes when they ask me to ring big companies and things I don't like it. I don't really want to do it and I try to put it off and put it off and then when I have done it I thought it's not that bad, so I was alright at it ...”*  
**Workforce member**

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In their first interview study group participants were asked: in an ideal world what job they would like to do, what was good about that type of work and what, if anything, was stopping them doing what they aspired to. These themes were again explored with those study group members who participated in second and third interviews. There was some evidence to suggest that during their period of engagement with SMaRT, people had adapted their work aspirations. One person who originally wanted a job in the travel industry found she enjoyed administrative and office work and so intended to look for jobs in that area. Another who wanted to work in the building trade discovered an aptitude for repairing cars and took a job in the motor trade.

For these people, aspirations may have been revised as a result of discovering new talents or interests during their engagement with SMaRT. However for others, future work ambitions were reconsidered on the basis of what they thought would be more realistically possible for them. One person who wanted to be a chef had decided that because of the examinations required and having to remember orders, it was probably not a job that would suit him. Another said that he had realised that getting a job in the media was more difficult than he first thought and so was looking at other alternatives.

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*“Being a chef was a job that I [thought I] might try but being a chef is getting loads of orders on your head so, I am like, no thank you. A baker has got loads of orders too so I am like – no.”*  
**Workforce member**

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None of these study group members could be clear about how SMaRT had specifically helped them arrive at a decision about what was best for them. Some people had recorded Personal Development Plans but it appeared that as significant as the more formal approaches, were the informal conversations with salaried staff. One person gave an example of taking in a newspaper job advert to show a paid member of staff and having a chat at break time about what the job might involve. Examples of this kind of informal coaching approach were observed on several occasions and it appears to be an integral part of the culture at SMaRT.

Many participants recognised the need for self-confidence, not only in helping them achieve their aspirations, but also in dealing with the changes, difficulties and pressures that are part of daily life and inevitably occur in a work situation. Not everyone will be successful in obtaining or holding down a job but for some people their increased self-confidence made a significant difference to how they responded to difficult situations, as in the following case study – see p17.

## Case study

*"I have had mental health problems for many years and although I have had jobs in the past, during difficult or stressful times my problems return. When I first came to SMaRT I had just come out of an in-patient unit and I was very shy and lacking in confidence. I had never done anything like mechanics or working in a garage so it was a bit daunting. I started off doing half a day a week because I thought that was all I could manage but I absolutely loved it and went up to four full days a week. Working with the team here gave me massive confidence and I was promoted to take charge of new starters. No way would I have volunteered for that but they saw it in me and taking it on made my confidence grow massively. I've gained so many skills I didn't know I had.*

*"After I'd been here for about six months I was offered a job as an apprentice at Mitsubishi and a place at college. I did have problems there though. It wasn't easy being a 27 year old woman when the other apprentices were 15 year old lads doing Saturday jobs. I had to do a lot of cleaning and tidying and very little hands-on work and I knew I could do much more. I became depressed and my problems came back and I was admitted to an inpatient unit which meant that I had to hand in my notice.*

*"Before SMaRT I would probably have given up but now I've got the confidence to come back and try again. I'm on the front desk at the moment which is quite hectic, but having the technical knowledge helps. I'm still on my college course. It's a three year course but after a few weeks I was put straight on to year two because of what I'd learned here. I've gained a lot of knowledge as well as technical skill.*

*"SMaRT has 110% changed my life completely and all for the better. I just want everybody else to know how brilliant it is here."*

**Workforce member**

## Impact on ability to obtain employment

Information was gathered on 58 people leaving the project during the study period. Of these 19 (33%) went on into paid employment, 4 (7%) to college, and 5 (9%) to other forms of work related activities – voluntary work, self employment, work placements. The study group followed a similar pattern but with more going into voluntary work and slightly less into paid employment.

To put these achievements in context it is important to understand who they were. Not only had the majority of workforce members experienced a long period of unemployment, but also, what was apparent throughout the evaluation was that there was a wide range of abilities and impairments within both the study group and the workforce as a whole and that some of those people were far from 'work ready' when they started at SMaRT.

For these people the increase in their work-specific skills, general work skills and personal skills was no less significant, or important, than for the more 'able' workforce members. However, realistically, progression onto paid employment was likely to take



much longer, especially where employers relied on selection methods such as interviews. One employer, who has employed several workforce members and who works closely with SMaRT, gave an illustration of how this approach had given someone an opportunity that they might have found difficult elsewhere.

*“Actually, I don’t think [the workforce member] would have got through the interview stage. He’s very quiet and his communication’s quite poor ... but we knew his work because we’ve seen him [at SMaRT]. Last week, for example, he was working until 3am because we had a deadline and he volunteered to do the extra. Out of all my staff he’s the one I would trust the most to get the job done when he’s left on his own, yet if I didn’t know him I don’t think he’d have got through an interview.”*

**Employer**

What was more difficult to establish was to what extent the self-reported increases in confidence, self-esteem and other skills equipped people to seek their own work opportunities. There was certainly evidence early in the evaluation that not everyone relied on SMaRT to find work for them, especially those who did not want to work in the

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*“... to be honest I’m looking on this as a stepping stone. Now I’m better I just need to get myself back into a work routine then I’m fine. For some of the others though, like, there’s one guy here who can’t even tell the time, well, it’s a different story isn’t it ...”*

**Workforce member**

vehicle trade or do office work. Conversations with workforce members indicated that one or two at least would not necessarily want future employers to know of their association with SMaRT. There was a clear group of workforce members who felt that they were almost work ready but lacked the confidence to go directly back into paid employment. This group saw SMaRT as an opportunity to ease themselves back into a work routine or work environment and/or to test themselves out in terms of being able to manage day-to-day work pressures.

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There were some indications that people in this group did not necessarily report back to the project when they moved onto employment, so that it is possible that the 33% gaining paid employment is an underestimate. A study to test this hypothesis would need to maintain contact with leavers over a specified period.

### **Differential impact according to gender, ethnicity, disability and age**

Statistical analysis (SPSS) showed no differential impact on any of the above findings according to gender, disability, ethnicity or age. This is perhaps not unexpected, given the length of time unemployed. Incapacity benefit statistics show that the length of time a person is unemployed, as it extends beyond 12 months, increasingly becomes the overriding factor influencing their success in gaining employment.

*“Once a person has been on an incapacity benefit for a year, they only have a one in five chance of returning to work within five years.”<sup>10</sup>*

With 74% of the workforce at SMaRT unemployed for over a year, this is highly pertinent. It is also a witness to the project’s effectiveness that it achieved 33% of people moving into paid employment.

## **Factors contributing to successful outcomes for workforce members and employers**

Information was gathered from a range of sources, including individual interviews, the focus group, exit questionnaires, unstructured discussions with workforce members and salaried staff and from the research team’s observations throughout the study period.

A consistently strong theme from workforce members concerned the helpfulness and support they received from salaried staff and generally, the supportive working atmosphere. In questionnaire responses, all but one person rated the working atmosphere and office and workshop staff as very helpful or fairly helpful. The more detailed evidence arising from interviews, the focus group and other sources, pointed to a cultural factor rather than the helpfulness of specific individuals and this conclusion was consistent with the research team’s observations. Importantly, the most valued aspect of this ‘helpfulness’ was the opportunity to learn the potential consequences of making mistakes and achieving success, in a commercial environment. Many workforce members were able to acknowledge their own tendencies to ‘opt out’ of or avoid difficult situations or tasks. They appreciated the confidence and sense of achievement that came with having to tackle these issues because they directly impacted on the business and because other people depended on them. Achieving a balance between supporting people to achieve at their own pace and operating under commercial pressures, is not easy, but getting this balance right seems to be fundamental to many of the positive outcomes that workforce members report.

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*“... they are always there to give a hand if you are really stuck on something. One time I was really stuck on a cheque [requisition] ... I didn’t have to worry that it took me nearly two days to get it right and the people that helped me were really helpful.”*

**Workforce member**

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Another important outcome for workforce members, and one that is essential for sustaining employment, is the ability to function within a work routine. Workforce members choose how often they want to attend SMaRT. However, they are expected to make a commitment that suits them and then honour this commitment. Many workforce members, even those who had been out of work for a relatively short period of time, said that this commitment was important and helpful for them because it helped them

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<sup>10</sup> Department of Work and Pensions: Pathways to Work. Helping People into Employment November 2002.

adjust to a regular routine at a pace that suited them. For many, a work routine meant more structure and discipline than they were used to and just getting themselves up and out to work on time was a big achievement. For others – for example those who were used to an institutional environment, the issues were to do with dealing with *less* structure and *less* discipline than they were used to. Some of these people felt that the flexibility of work days was less helpful because they felt that it was too easy to change their mind about whether to come into work, though most acknowledged the need to develop some degree of personal responsibility and self-discipline if they were going to get and keep a job.

The social aspect of work was also explored in individual interviews and in the focus group. Whilst there was strong evidence of peer support and working as a team,

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*“... when I first started I only ever did two to three days a week because I was quite a lazy person ... but then it turned into me coming in at 9 until 1 and then 11 until 5 and now it's actually Monday to Saturday ...”*

**Workforce member**

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workforce members made a clear distinction between friendships and working relationships. Those people who socialised with colleagues from SMaRT did so because they had socialised with them before joining – because, for example, they lived in the same place. The need to get on with work colleagues and work together was recognised, but SMaRT was not seen as a place for making friends. Workforce members said that being too friendly with people at work could present a distraction and could cause others to feel left out. This view was in marked contrast to the same people's views of college which was seen as a place for socialising as well as

learning. Many of those spoken to said that they went to college, or chose a particular course, simply because their friends did.

The employers interviewed tended to work very closely with SMaRT and had taken on more than one person as a paid employee. They felt that the close relationship that had developed between themselves and SMaRT was one of the most important factors in achieving a successful employer-employee outcome. These particular employers were able to send in vehicles and identify which workforce members had worked on them, so assessing the quality of work. They were also able to observe workforce members at work, take them on placement and get direct feedback from salaried staff, making for a much more robust selection process. This translated into a number of benefits for both employers and employees, for example cost and time savings on recruitment, induction and monitoring processes.

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*“Working closely with SMaRT has been great for our business. We can identify potential and take people on placement to cover busy periods. Because we know the quality of work we don't have an interview or probationary period for [workforce members] and we don't need to monitor them in the workplace. That saves time and money and gives security for both us and them.*

**Employer**

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One of the points that these employers made however, was that without this close relationship they may have been wary of taking on employees from somewhere like

SMaRT. They felt that trying to explain what SMaRT did to other employers was difficult but that if employers saw for themselves how SMaRT functioned and what workforce members did, they would be much more likely to see the benefits for themselves.

The employers interviewed saw little difference in levels of literacy and numeracy between workforce members and other employees and no differences in the ability to work with others. They did notice a difference in skill level, with workforce members exhibiting a higher level of technical skill than they expected and that other employees in similar roles generally demonstrated when they started work. The one exception to this was in holding a driving licence and in a mechanics or engineering setting they considered this a significant barrier. The biggest differences between workforce members and other employees noted by these employers, however, were in attitudes to work. Workforce members were much more able to manage work pressures, meet deadlines and work without support and although employers were surprised and impressed at the level of knowledge and skills, what they valued even more was the enthusiasm workforce members showed for getting on and doing the job.

## Discussion

A number of themes emerged from the study. SMaRT is effective in providing employment support that is tailored to meet the needs of two distinct groups:

- those who have become unemployed relatively recently and who are looking for a brief period of support, three months or less, using SMaRT as a 'stepping stone' back into employment. This group often did not want a future employer to know of their association with SMaRT and were less likely to be looking for mechanics or office-type jobs. What SMaRT offers this group is an opportunity to ease themselves back into the routine and discipline of work and to build up the confidence and motivation they need to seek work for themselves. Developing work-specific or generic work-skills within SMaRT is less important or significant. It is confidence and motivation that enables this group of people to get them back to work relatively quickly.
- those who have a much longer period of engagement with SMaRT. These people are more likely to have learning disabilities or current mental ill health and/or have been unemployed for long periods of time with some never having worked. Developing work-specific and/or generic work skills for this group of people is as important as personal development skills such as communication, working with others and functioning within a work routine. As might be expected, achieving these outcomes for this group takes longer and some have no immediate plans to progress to paid employment. What SMaRT provides is a real work environment that enables the development of skills, as and when needed, to achieve a valued and tangible outcome. At the same time, people are able to explore what work or learning opportunities might be available to them and to revise or develop work aspirations or expectations. Although the people

who fall into this group may start at SMaRT being far from 'work ready', their progression towards a readiness to work is continued and sustained for the most part. Demonstrating such progression, especially where it is slow, does present a challenge, as does developing a sense of what it is that individuals want to achieve if not a job. What is evident, however, is that even if paid work is not their ultimate aim, some people see attending SMaRT as far preferable to alternatives such as college, staying at home, day care or drop-in centres that would otherwise be available to them.

Several people gave examples of how they had learnt much quicker at SMaRT than in a college environment and there appear to be several reasons for this. One is to do with people's motivation for attending college or choosing a course in the first place – often the decision was based around what their friends were doing and/or the social aspect of college. That was not the case with SMaRT. Even those workforce members who did work with housemates or other acquaintances made a distinction between social and work relationships. Another reason is the practical nature of learning skills in the SMaRT setting. Skills are learnt in order to complete tasks as and when needed. Not only does this minimise the need for the conceptual or theoretical thinking that some people find difficult, but it also provides a legitimate reason for needing to learn. Though new tasks may be small and relatively simple, workforce members often complete many of them in one day, which may partly account for the huge increases in confidence and self-esteem that are a particular outcome of people's engagement with SMaRT. The real working and trading environment provides an added incentive for learning – how and when tasks are completed have a real impact on the business and on their work colleagues.

## Conclusion

SMaRT is clearly achieving significant outcomes in terms of employment and increased employability for those people who are furthest removed from the job market because of the length of time they have been out of work – whether that is due to mental health problems or other disabilities, drug and alcohol recovery problems, histories of offending.

One of the biggest factors in achieving positive outcomes at SMaRT is its culture. As a matter of policy, FST recruits salaried staff largely from a commercial rather than a health or social care background and the impact of this approach is seen in the way in which SMaRT operates as a commercially trading business. Workforce members have the same expectations placed upon them as salaried staff in terms of contributing to the success of the business – consequently they experience the same pressures.

Support is provided naturally by salaried staff and workforce members alike and there is a strong emphasis on 'why' as well as 'what', 'when' and 'how', which results in an informal but effective coaching approach. Dealing with personal difficulties and work pressures are seen by all as an essential part of developing the skills needed in order to

be truly 'work ready' and although people do develop work-specific and generic skills, the biggest impact is on the development of self-esteem and confidence that enables people to believe in themselves. It is this positive change in the way people see themselves that has a much wider impact on their lives than merely the ability to find and sustain paid work.



## Appendix

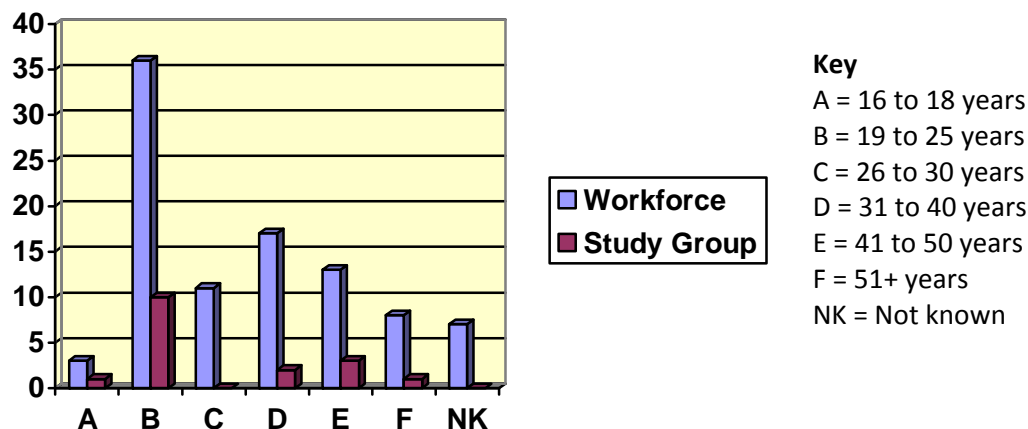
### Main characteristics of the workforce and study group members

Information was collected on a total of 95 workforce members over the study period, including 24 workforce members who participated in the study (17 in individual interviews and 7 in the focus groups)<sup>11</sup>.

Of the 95 workforce members, 16 (17%) were women and 79 (83%) were men. This compares with the sample group of 2 (12%) women and 15 (88%) men. The high proportion of men is perhaps as expected, given the nature of the main activities involved at SMaRT however from observations, individual interviews and the focus group, it was apparent that both men and women workforce members were involved in the full range of activities from administrative and reception work to technical and mechanical work.

A breakdown of the groups by age is shown in *figure 1*. 19 to 25 year olds formed the largest group of workforce members, though a wide range of age groups were represented.

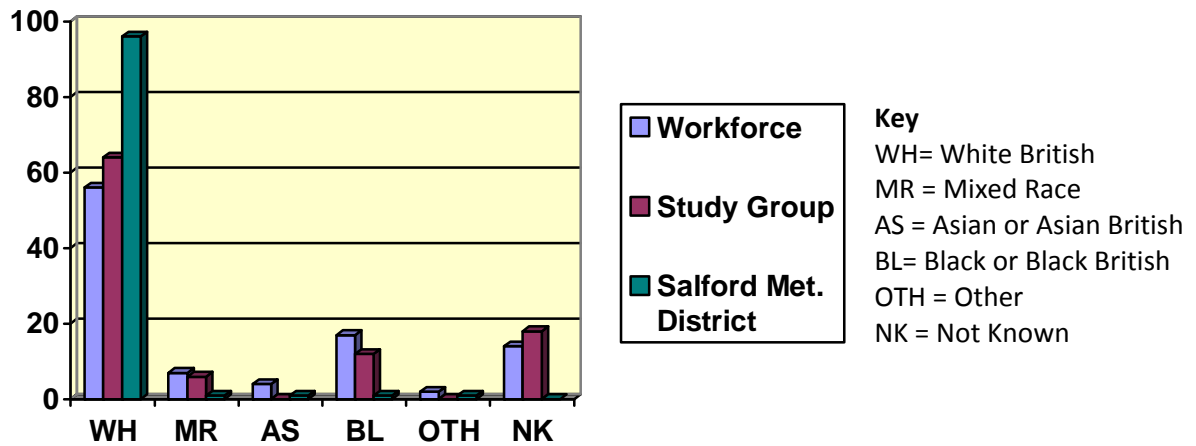
*Figure 1: Number of people within each age group*



*Figure 2* shows the breakdown according to ethnic group for both the workforce and study groups, compared with census data for the local area. It can be seen that non-White British groups are well-represented within the workforce compared with the local population and that the study group is broadly representative of the workforce.

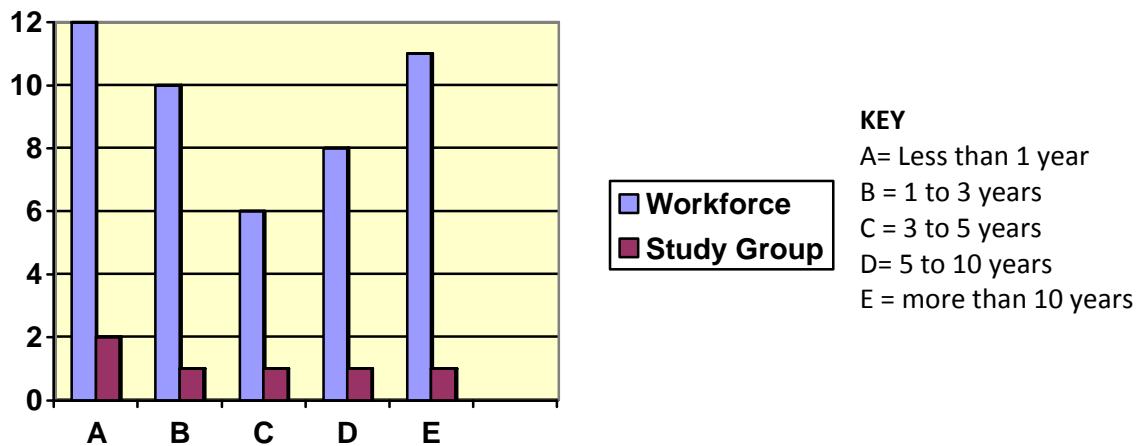
<sup>11</sup> During the study period SMaRT experienced several break-ins during which computer equipment was stolen. As a consequence some data was incomplete or could not be verified reliably from original sources or paper documentation. In order to preserve the integrity of analysis, any unreliable or incomplete information was disregarded.

Figure 2: Percentage of people within each ethnic group



Information regarding the length of time people were unemployed before joining SMaRT was available for 47 workforce members. Figure 3 shows a significant group of people unemployed for less than a year (25%) with 75% who would count as long-term unemployed (over a year) 40% of which were very long-term unemployed (five years and longer).

Figure 3: Number of people according to length of time unemployed





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## For further information

If you would like more information about this report or the work that FST does nationally, or if you would like to arrange a visit to FST SMaRT, please contact us.

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