



‘On the job’ training delivers positive results in Salford

First Step Trust (FST) and its approach

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 – an end of life vehicle recycling centre in Salford, Greater Manchester, with funding from the Invest to Save – Inclusive Communities Fund and the Big Lottery Fund. This initiative

was designed to draw a workforce from a wide range of long-term unemployed, including people with mental health problems, and provide them with an opportunity to gain new skills, qualifications and work experience to enable them to move into paid employment. FST’s SMaRT project has now grown to include a registered MOT centre providing garage services to local residents and businesses.

“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.”

This booklet summarises an independent evaluation of First Step Trust’s SMaRT project in Salford, Greater Manchester which aims to help long-term unemployed, including those with mental health problems, back into employment.

For further copies of this summary or for the full report, visit: www.firststeptrust.org.uk

What FST's workforce members said:

“Working with the team here gave me massive confidence and I was promoted to take charge of new starters ... I've gained so many skills I didn't know I had.”

“At first I just thought it would be good to work on cars ... but now we're doing MOTs 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.”



Evaluation and methodology

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 attending FST's SMaRT project had had on work skills and attitudes, in particular people's confidence to aspire to, and gain, 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 informal methods such as direct observation.

Participants in the study

FST's SMaRT workforce members made up a diverse group which included ex-offenders and people experiencing a range of issues such as disability, mental health problems and drug and alcohol misuse.

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 more.

Evaluation findings

Positive impact on work skills and attitudes

Attendance at FST's SMaRT project 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 month's engagement with FST, 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 led to the increased perception and development of crucial work attitudes such as timekeeping, 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.

... I've gained so many skills I didn't know I had.”



What FST's workforce members said:

“We all help each other out. If somebody's struggling with their work or they've got a problem we all help them.”

“I probably have got more confidence in communicating in certain ways.”

“... 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.”

What employers said:

“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.”

“Out of all my staff [the person I recruited from SMaRT] is the one I would trust the most to get the job done when he’s left on his own.”



“I want to be in, I need to be in, people are relying on me as well as needing me there.”

FST model is effective for both long and short-term unemployed

The evaluation found that the FST approach of delivering access to the pressures and responsibilities of working life, is highly effective for 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 FST as a ‘stepping stone’ back into paid employment. They were looking for an opportunity to 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 FST 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. This group was more likely to have learning disabilities and/or current mental

ill health. For people in 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 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.

FST’s culture of ‘real’ work key to success

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 an FST project provides.



Commercial pressure leads to higher performance

As with all FST projects, 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 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.

What employers said:

“Working closely with FST 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.”

First Step Trust provides a SMaRT and supportive environment.

“... they are always there to give a hand if you are really stuck on something. 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.”



Easier and quicker to learn 'on the job'

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.

Recruiting from the private sector

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.

Evaluation of the FST approach: key findings

Impact on work skills

Engagement with SMaRT:

- Improved work-specific skills such as dealing with customers and servicing cars;
- Improved generic work skills such as writing, numeracy and IT;
- Improved personal skills such as communication and working with others.

Impact on attitudes towards work

Engagement with SMaRT:

- Increased perception and development of critical work attitudes such as timekeeping, attendance, discipline and taking responsibility;
- Increased levels of confidence and self-esteem;
- Redefined and/or revised expectations of future work options.

Evaluation's conclusion

FST is clearly achieving significant outcomes at it's SMaRT project, 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 FST, has a much wider impact on an individual's life than merely the ability to find and sustain paid work.

SMaRT proves effective for both the long and short-term unemployed.





November 2008

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This publication is available in electronic form on First Step Trust's website:
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Publication reference:
FSTpub_024

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