

# Making Effective Plans to Meet Work Search Goals

## Introduction

This Good Practice guidance is designed to support Work Coaches and Assistant Work Coaches in helping claimants to plan and agree to detailed work search activity. It will support the completion of the 'My Work Plan' booklet, in particular the 'My actions for getting work' templates.

The last page contains a quick checklist for coaches to remind themselves of the skills required to make effective plans.

## Overview

We all have goals in life and many of these goals are achievable. We might want to get fitter; save more money; or learn to play an instrument. However, as we know from everyday life, merely having a goal is sometimes not enough. It is easy to sit down and decide to try and get closer to a goal, wonder: "What do I need to do next?" and then end up not doing anything at all. Having a plan can help.

Planning is something we all do in our professional lives but we don't necessarily do it so well when it comes to our personal goals. The same applies to our claimants. Some may not use planning for anything, others may have a great deal of planning experience from their time in work but are not planning effectively as part of their work search routine.

Of course, other claimants will already be following a detailed plan for getting back into work. Making a plan and agreeing to specific activities can help claimants to get back to work quicker. If a claimant makes a good plan, it can also help Work Coaches and Assistant Work Coaches, to quickly assess whether claimants have put in sufficient effort in looking for work. This means spending less time looking back and more time helping claimants to plan their future activities.

Planning is also very valuable as it allows a claimant to break a large goal, which may seem overwhelming, into manageable steps. For many claimants, the thought of a task as large as finding work is very daunting. Helping them to see the immediate actions that they can take today, tomorrow and next week,

to move closer to this large goal, can help manage this stress and focus their activities.

Before discussing and planning detailed specific actions with the claimant, it is important to find out if the claimant already has a plan and if so, what this is and what they are already doing to fulfil it. This will make it easier to tailor support and agree specific actions that are relevant to the claimant. It will also give coaches an idea of the claimant's current job seeking strategies and routine.

Claimants should be encouraged to think for themselves about the steps that they need to take to achieve their overall objective of getting into work. These should be discussed and then broken down into smaller goals to achieve each step along the way. Specific plans to undertake actions can then be made to define the path to achieving each of these smaller goals.

### **Why ask claimants to plan and agree to specific actions?**

We ask claimants to agree, in writing, to undertake a specific action based on evidence that people are more likely to fulfil a task when they formally agree to it in this way.

## **Completing the My Work Plan booklet**

The activities included in the My Work Plan booklet should follow the ABCDE framework and should be:

- Ambitious;
- Behavioural;
- Challenging, but consider Contingencies;
- Detailed; and
- Evidence embedded.

### **Ambitious**

All plans need to be stretching but realistic. We recognise that meeting the high level work search requirement (to take all reasonable steps to give the best prospects of finding work) is challenging. The setting of stretching but realistic goals is important. Setting minimum standards reduces motivation and may result in lower outputs.

Coaches should negotiate with claimants to ensure that the level of activity that they plan to do is ambitious. This negotiation should start with a claimant describing their daily activity and the coach pushing them to see where they can achieve more. The negotiation should reach a point at which a jointly agreed plan is agreed.

When asking claimants to increase the amount of time they are investing in their job search coaches should start from a high point and negotiate down to a jointly agreed realistic target, rather than up from the current number.

For example, if a claimant appears to need to spend more time looking for job online, or has not set an initial benchmark, saying something like “most effective claimants I see invest around 4 hours a day in searching for jobs online, how much do you think you could do to reach this goal?” will be more effective than saying “You are currently doing one hour a week, how can we increase this?”

### **Behavioural**

A plan should specify the detailed actions that a claimant needs to complete to achieve a high level goal. These are not high-level goals themselves. Goals are what claimants want to achieve, and behaviours are the specific actions that they need to take to achieve these. High level goals will be that specified in the Claimant Commitment. For example, a plan should not state that a claimant will find a job vacancy, but rather that they will look on for a vacancy on a specific website, at a specific time, in a specific place.

The language used to describe behaviours should be clear and simple and should not involve any jargon. They should literally describe what a claimant is undertaking. For example, the term “sell yourself” does not describe a specific behaviour that is useful for job seeking, but calling employers directly on the telephone about their strengths is something that they can do directly.

## **Challenging, but consider Contingencies**

The claimant's assumptions about their work search should be challenged. Rather than saying "that job doesn't exist anymore", it is better to say "OK, I'll give you two weeks to try and find that type of work. If you have no luck we will look at different options". This approach helps to build new constructive beliefs.

Challenging in this way will also help coaches test whether their understanding of the local labour is correct, as some claimants will state that they are looking for an obscure type of work, which coaches may not be aware of. By challenging claimants to find this work locally the coach places more responsibility onto the claimant looking for particular work.

If claimants are looking for work that the coach does not believe is available in the local area, claimants should be encouraged to conduct other worksearch activities alongside those that they feel are not available. If claimants fail to find vacancies in the local area to find the specific work they state that they are looking for and, therefore, confirm coaches' beliefs about the local labour market, coaches should discuss what other types of work they can do.

Plans should also consider the risks that may occur during the claimants' job search and how they can be mitigated. This will stop claimants giving up on failed plans. For example, if a claimant is working on a friend's computer to create a CV, the advisor should ask how likely it is that the computer remains available to the claimant and what happens if the computer no longer becomes available. These contingencies should be built into plans.

Coaches should discuss likely pitfalls with their claimants and work together to find solutions that will mitigate any risks. These should be written in their plans.

## **Detailed**

Claimants need to be specific about the What, where, when, why and how. What specific actions are required? Formulating a plan in as much detail as possible will encourage the claimant to fulfil the task. Having concrete implementation plans makes it much more more likely they will be followed through.

When discussing when a claimant will undertake an activity, it is important to tie the activity to an event that occurs in the claimant's daily routine, rather

than a numerical time. For example, “after breakfast”, rather than “9am”; although the coach needs to establish whether the claimant regularly eats breakfast. This will tie an activity to an event, which will serve as a reminder to undertake an activity. It is harder to miss an event than a numerical time of day due to oversight.

### **Evidence embedded**

For conditionality to be effective, claimants need to understand what is expected of them. If claimants feel that their Work Coach is trying to trip them up to sanction them, then the relationship between the claimant and Work Coach suffers. The plan must state exactly what they are expected to show.

Claimants cannot be mandated to bring in their evidence in a specific form using the My Work Plan booklet, however, coaches should discuss what the likely outputs of an activity are and specify what evidence they will bring in if their activity goes according to plan.

Example: The claimant has agreed that they will speculatively contact employers on a regular basis. The claimant has previously worked in retail so decides to structure one of their plans to say:

- “I will do a CV drop in the shopping mall. To do this, on Monday, after breakfast I will make a list of all the employers I wish to contact and ensure I have an appropriate CV and covering letter to leave with the employer. On Tuesday, after my girlfriend returns from the gym, I will personally take my CV to each store I am applying to and ask if they have any vacancies and/or leave my CV with them”

It would be reasonable to expect the claimant to bring copies of the employer list, CV and covering letter as well as any results from this activity as evidence of all three activities. Assistant Work Coaches may also question the claimant to enhance this evidence further.

#### Good practice

1. It is important that specific actions should be prioritised and realistic. They should follow a logical order where appropriate and build on each other. For example, there is no point in a claimant agreeing to drop 50 CVs into shops if they have not written one.
2. Claimants should be encouraged to build the activities they have planned to doing into their daily routine, so that the task starts to become a habit. This can be done by the claimant stating when they are going to do the task as part of the plan. For example, after breakfast, or after taking the kids to school.
3. By planning how the task will fit in with their routine, claimants are more likely to effectively anticipate problems and challenges that stand in their way and to plan around these. The ability to plan around existing obligations is a very useful skill – and one that claimants will need to do when they start work.
4. Actions should be detailed, answering the what, why, where, when and how questions. Formulating a plan for achieving the task in as much detail as possible will also encourage the claimant to fulfil the task.
5. This detail should be discussed with the claimant verbally before they start writing the plan, so that they fully understand what is required of them.
6. Specific actions should be proactive to encourage the claimant to take charge of their situation and job seeking process.
7. They should focus on what claimants will do, rather than will not do. This means that plans starting with “I will...” are more effective than those starting with “I will not...”. Where possible think of replacement activities for bad habits.
8. When asking claimants to increase the amount of time they are investing in their job search coaches should start from a high point and negotiate down to a jointly agreed realistic target, rather than up from the current number. For example, if a claimant appears to need to spend more time looking for job online, or has not set an initial benchmark, saying something like “most effective claimants I see invest around 4 hours a day in searching for jobs online, how much do

you think you could do to reach this goal and how do you think we can achieve this?” will be more effective than saying “You are currently doing one hour a week, how can we increase this?”

9. It is important that the claimant writes down the specific action themselves.
10. Work Coaches should not be afraid to allow claimants time to think through what they are going to write, as some need time to reflect in a way that others don't. It is better for claimants to come up with some ideas themselves and to discuss how these might be expanded upon, rather than them being led and told what to write.
11. There is a lot to absorb during this discussion and claimants are likely to get faster and more effective at setting their plans after a bit of practice.
12. Finally, it is important that claimants are encouraged to provide examples of what they have done, such as job applications, CVs, covering letters, and that they are given positive constructive feedback on their efforts.



## Approaches for different types of claimants

We recognise that for many of our claimants, asking them to write specific actions can seem patronising or baffling. We are encouraging claimants to use the My Work Plan booklet to help with this process but completion is not mandatory. However, whether the booklet is used or not, Work Search Coaches should encourage the use of detailed planning and taking specific actions, as an effective way to get into work more quickly. Approaches to take with different types of claimant are outlined below.

### **Claimants just out of education and starting work**

This group may need more help with planning or understanding the detailed steps required to look for work as they may not have previous experience of doing this before. Even students leaving university may have little, or no experience of the working world and may have never had to write a CV, or fill in a job application.

It is important not to assume that because these claimants are highly educated and a little older, they are also competent in looking for work.

Typical plans for this group may be centred around learning how and where to look for work, constructing a CV and covering letter, understanding what transferable skills they have to offer and establishing a job search routine.

Examples of good plans for claimants moving from education into work would be:

- “After lunch on Monday I am going to spend the afternoon putting my CV together. In order to do this I’m going to have a look online at guides for writing CVs and use the ‘Build CV’ function in Universal Jobmatch, to create my CV. I will bring my CV to my next meeting”; and
- “Every morning after breakfast I am going to spend an hour looking at vacancies on Universal Jobmatch and then each day find a different job site and spend an hour looking through their vacancies”.

If more people know about an action, the more likely someone is to fulfil it and so it might be useful for younger claimants to share and discuss their specific actions with their parents, so that they can provide help and support and



monitor progress. It is recognised that this might seem a little patronising, so care must be taken when providing this advice.

### **Claimants who have claimed JSA before**

This group may include those who are the most sceptical about planning specific actions and completing the My Work Plan booklet. For them, this could be a change to the service they are used to receiving. They may be worried about sanctions or having to adapt to a new system that requires them to take more control over their job search and ultimately work harder for their benefit.

It is important that any concerns they have with the new approach are addressed and that they fully understand what is required of them straightaway. Coaches should explain that planning and structuring activities will give a claimant the best chance of finding work quickly. It will also help claimants to confirm their ongoing entitlement to Jobseeker's Allowance, by demonstrating they have done all they reasonably could be expected to do, each week to get a job.

Typical specific actions for this group may be centred around establishing a job search routine and finding additional resources to compliment their existing job search strategies.

Examples of good plans for returning claimants would be:

- “Every week day after breakfast, I will spend 3 hours looking for vacancies online and in newspapers”; and
- “Before picking the kids up from school on Tuesday, I will go into town and do a CV drop at all the high street stores. I will look out for any job postings in windows and go inside with my CV and ask about the job”

### **Professionals**

Claimants who have worked in professional occupations will probably be used to planning from their previous work. If it is felt that explaining planning and plans to them may be patronising, the discussion should be adapted to reflect their experience. Saying that, the approach was designed for claimants coming from all backgrounds and so it may seem intuitive to them is fine. Explaining plans in terms of goals or tasks to do for next time is also fine, as is saying things like: “I’m sure you’re already doing this but could you please write it down for our records?”

We recognise that people are all different and so are their attitudes and efforts to finding work and that some may need more help than others.

Typical plans for this group may be centred around networking with contacts, making sure their CV is up to date and searching for recruitment agencies specific to their industry.

Examples of good plans for professionals returning to work would be:

- “On Monday, after walking the dog in the morning, email LinkedIn contacts to see if there are any vacancies at their companies”; and
- “Spend Tuesday afternoon, after lunch looking for IT recruitment agencies and send them my CV”.

### **Job ready claimants**

Once a claimant is job ready, specific actions can be centred around researching employers, suitably tailoring CVs and covering letters, so that job applications are of the best quality they can be.

The My Work Plan booklet can actually be a very helpful way for those who are job ready in planning and focusing their work search. As a result, they may need minimal support from the Work Coach and can report back easily on what they have been doing each week.

Examples of good plans for job ready claimants are:

- “I will spend 3-4 hours on Tuesday, morning after dropping off the kids, identifying and researching employers that I would like to work for. I will research the company’s background and future vision. I will also identify where they are based, how I would travel there and the cost of this.”
- “Directly after I find a job I can apply for, I will spend 1 hour checking whether I have an appropriate CV for the job and will write a tailored cover letter. If the application has a special application process, I will look for any guidance on their website on how to complete this, even if it takes much longer than one hour.”
- “I will spend 1-2 hours per day for the next 3 days going over my CV and covering letter, tailoring them to suit the employers I have found, by identifying which of my skills are most relevant to the employer”

- “After breakfast on Friday, I will telephone the employers I have identified and I will either send, or drop in a copy of my tailored CV.”
- “I will spend 3 hours after lunch on Wednesday planning for my interview on Friday. I will decide what I am going to wear and how I am going to get there and make suitable travel arrangements. I will also review my CV and application and think about questions that I might be asked in the interview.”
- “On Monday morning after doing the laundry, I will review all my recent applications and contact employers for feedback on applications/interviews.”

### **Working with challenging claimants**

Agreeing specific actions will inevitably force difficult conversations. This should be viewed positively, as it allows a Work Coach to get to the root of any difficulties faced by claimants. However, it can also be challenging.

Most coaches, no matter how experienced, find some conversations around plans difficult. Although each coach has their own techniques for getting to the result in these challenging discussions, this section gives some helpful guidance on how to deal with common situations, as well as a method that can be used to help coaches work through the situations they personally find difficult.

We have already seen that claimants benefit from making a plan, anticipating what challenges they may encounter and how to overcome them. This is because ordinarily, we tend to take the path of least resistance in most situations.

This means that where this involves a routine, we tend to do what we have always done, unless we make a conscious effort to do otherwise. Where it involves a difficult situation, it means that we tend to behave in a way that neutralises the difficulty and by-passes it where possible.

If a claimant says that the My Work Plan booklet is “stupid”, they could be simply told what they need to write. Although this diffuses the immediate tension and it will certainly get the job done, it does not help the claimant in the long run. It is much better to understand why they feel this way, listen to their concerns and tackle the issue head on.

#### Useful techniques

“If... then...” statements can be developed into a detailed plan of action that you can draw on when particular situations arise. In order for these statements to be most helpful, they should be very specific about when the difficulty is likely to arise (the ‘if’) but also what the reaction is, how it will be done and where it will be performed (the ‘then’).

##### Example 1

If the claimant thinks writing down plans is patronising then I will tell them to look at plan writing as an exercise. I will remind them that they are required to spend any reasonable action to secure employment and that planning will help them to think about what they are going to do while they are still in the jobcentre. I will remind them that writing this plan down is useful as they can refer to the list during the week and they can use it to show what they have done next time they come in.

##### Example 2

If the claimant is unhappy about making plans, then I will explain that this process is designed to help all claimants and so, some may find it more beneficial than others but that, on the whole, people find that it encourages and helps them to remember to do their tasks for next time.

##### Example 3

If the claimant gets angry about having to write plans, then I will address their emotions by saying something like: “I’m sorry that this seems to be upsetting you. What are your concerns about planning specific actions?” and try to get to the bottom of their emotional response.

##### Example 4

If the claimant doesn’t see the point in writing plans, then I will explain the theory behind why they are being asked to take specific actions. I will say that the reason we are asking them to plan tasks, is that research has shown that people are much more likely to fulfil a task if they formally plan it.

### Keeping Activities fresh

Tailoring specific planned activities to each individual person is the key to keeping them fresh. The more the coach knows about the individual and their daily routine, the easier it will be to do this.

Obviously claimants will all be taking part in similar job seeking activities, such as looking for jobs online and doing CV drops. The key is making sure that they are doing this effectively, spending a lot of time on these activities and making them a part of their routine.

So, ways in which plans can be made to maximise these aspects of job seeking is crucial. This will involve finding out as much as possible about the claimant's current job seeking strategies and identifying what can be done to strengthen them. For example, rather than having an action to spend 2 hours searching for jobs online but to spending 2 hours searching on specific websites every day.

We understand that the longer the claimant is supported by the Work Coach, the harder it may become to come up with new specific actions. This is where planning will help, especially when addressing long term goals, which require actions to be broken down into plans.

Claimants should focus on conducting activities that result in something some learning that will move them closer to the labour market. Coaches should remind claimants why they are undertaking an activity but highlighting how the tasks that they complete today, tomorrow and next week will help them achieve their overall objective. An example of this might be breaking down long term goals, such as improving numeracy, literacy or IT skills, into small daily challenges. For example, practising reading aloud for an hour a day.

When claimants are job ready, specific actions can start to focus on researching employers, tailoring CVs and covering letters, increasing the quality of applications, preparation for interviews and seeking application/interview feedback. It may be that actions start to focus on smaller details, such as planning travel to and from interviews and become more specific to the jobs that the claimant is applying for.

## Brief Guide to Making Effective Plans

### Introduction

Does the claimant understand the purpose of making plans?

### Understanding claimant circumstances

Does the coach understand the claimant's daily routine; key strengths and what is holding him or her back?

### Deciding on plans

Are the plans:

- Ambitious?
  - Are they stretching but realistic? Remember, setting minimum standards reduces motivation and may result in lower outputs.
- Behavioural?
  - It is easier for people to follow through with concrete behaviours than with abstract goals. Are these concrete behaviours?
- Challenging, but consider Contingencies?
  - Challenging claimants' assumptions, so they can build new constructive beliefs, but have you considered where plans can go wrong and how to deal with it?
- Detailed?
  - Have you included details in plans for action makes it much more likely that the plan will actually be put into action?
- Evidence embedded?
  - Have you and the claimant thought about what they will bring back?

### Plan ownership

Has the claimant agreed to actions or do they feel coerced into doing them?

### **Writing plans**

Are the plans handwritten and in priority order?

### **Discuss next meeting**

Does the claimant know when he or she are next likely to be seen and by whom?