Information technology and job-seeking in rural areas

Policy-makers are increasingly turning to information and communications technologies (ICT) to provide public services. This approach is particularly relevant in rural areas, which often lack services 'on the ground'. Researchers from the Employment Research Institute at Napier University, Edinburgh, have examined the potential benefits and barriers associated with using ICT to deliver job search services for unemployed people in remote rural communities and areas located near the periphery of major cities. The research team found that:

- Although ICT plays a growing role in the job search activities of many unemployed people, it remains of marginal importance to most - only 18 per cent of survey respondents across all study areas had used the Internet to look for work on a regular basis.

- Those in more remote rural communities were much more likely to use the Internet to look for work, and were particularly reliant on telephone helplines provided by the public employment service, Jobcentre Plus (reflecting the absence of Jobcentre offices in these areas).

- There was evidence of a 'digital divide'. A minority of all job seekers had access to the Internet at home, but young people, the unqualified, the low skilled and the long-term unemployed were less likely to have access than others. These groups were also less likely to use the Internet to look for work.

- Telephone helplines were popular in remote rural areas. Job seekers thought that it was crucial that these drew on local knowledge and understanding, as well as providing information. Respondents were concerned about the gradual replacement of local telephone advice services with the national 'Jobseeker Direct' helpline.

- Job seekers had adapted well to the introduction of Internet-linked 'jobpoint' terminals in Jobcentre offices, suggesting that there may be scope for an expansion of ICT-based services. However, respondents suggested that the design of these and associated web-based services could be improved to allow easier browsing across a range of different occupations within local labour markets.

- In many rural areas, it was suggested that the impact of any technology-based or other policies to assist job seekers would also be limited by:
  – the importance of informal social networking to the job search process;
  – the lack of sustainable job opportunities within declining rural labour markets.

Background

Policy-makers are increasingly turning to Internet and other ICT-based approaches to deliver public services. It has been suggested that ICT has the capacity to improve access to services, with particular benefits in rural communities, where problems of remoteness and scattered populations can result in limited provision 'on the ground'. The public employment service, Jobcentre Plus, has promoted its Internet 'job bank' and telephone helplines as important supplementary services throughout the country and as its primary means of contact with job seekers in remote rural areas.

This research examined the current and potential role of ICT in delivering job search services for unemployed people, and addressed two key questions facing policy-makers and service providers:

- What are the potential benefits and barriers associated with the delivery of services for job seekers through the use of ICT-based systems, and particularly the Internet, in rural and other labour markets?
- What is the nature and extent of the 'digital divide' affecting unemployed job seekers and what policies are required to address this problem?

Job seeking and the role of ICT

Survey research was carried out with 490 unemployed job seekers across three areas of Scotland: a centrally located, peri-urban labour market (West Lothian); a rural town (Wick); and a very sparsely populated, remote rural area (Sutherland).

ICT remained of marginal importance to the search activities of most unemployed people. Some 18 per cent of all those surveyed used the Internet on a regular basis to look for work. Job seekers in the remote rural Sutherland area were much more likely to use the Internet (28 per cent). Access to the Internet was similarly limited - only 23 per cent of all job seekers reported having home access. Again, those in more remote areas were more likely to have home Internet access (27 per cent). These remote rural job seekers were also particularly dependent on telephone helplines provided by Jobcentre Plus.

Those living in areas close to Jobcentre offices, i.e. West Lothian and Wick, were less likely to have regularly used ICT as a job search tool, and were also less likely to rely on informal social networks (found to be crucial in remote rural areas) as a means of identifying job opportunities. It would appear that the combination of geographical remoteness and the absence of services 'on the ground' in these areas has resulted in the growth of the use of the Internet as a means of job seeking.

There was evidence of a 'digital divide' affecting the most disadvantaged job seekers. Access and use of the Internet was more common amongst job seekers at the 'top end' of the scale in terms of educational attainment, household income group and ICT skills. Furthermore, young people and the long-term unemployed (exactly the client groups that can most struggle to access informal, social networks in the labour market) were disadvantaged in terms of Internet access and use. The shift towards ICT-based services risks leaving these people behind, unless they receive adequate training and support through accessible local services.

Attitudes to ICT-based job seeking

The second phase of the research, carried out through twelve focus groups, highlighted that job seekers are usually adaptable when faced with the introduction of new services delivered via ICT. They largely welcomed the introduction of computerised 'jobpoint' terminals in Jobcentres, valuing the autonomy and privacy that this system provided compared with the previous approach, where job information cards were displayed on vacancy notice boards. However, some job seekers thought that the current design of the 'jobpoint' software over-complicated the process of looking for a job and could be improved.

Internet-based job seeking again emerged as of relatively marginal importance in most cases, although people in rural Sutherland were much more likely to use the Internet to look for work than those in other areas. But even in Sutherland there was scepticism as to whether web-based job search services added value to existing local telephone helplines. As the Jobcentre Plus agency has no local offices in the area this helpline provides the main source of information and advice services for clients.

However, the gradual replacement of a 'local' telephone advice service, provided by staff at a Highlands-based Jobcentre, with an increasing

reliance on the centralised national telephone helpline, 'Jobseeker Direct', left many job seekers in Sutherland's remote communities frustrated by the lack of 'local knowledge' and understanding amongst helpline advisers.

> "A while ago, you used to phone up the Jobcentre at Wick to do a job search and they would do it there. Now they put you through to Jobseeker Direct, and they have no idea about where you live. I told the operator that I was sixty miles from my nearest Jobcentre and she didn't believe me. They were offering me jobs in Fort William [a journey of over 200 km by road]. It's the same every week, they just don't know where you are."
> (Eric, 26, unemployed five months, Brora, Sutherland)

This issue highlighted the way in which the introduction of 'remote' ICT services can unintentionally increase the sense of isolation amongst vulnerable groups, with implications for the overall quality of services delivered by public agencies.

The limitations of ICT-based job seeking

Focus group participants in the study areas served by Jobcentres saw ICT-based job search tools as a supplementary service rather than a replacement for attending the Jobcentre. In rural areas (especially Sutherland's remote communities), participants were more aware of the potential value of ICT, but identified a number of barriers to its effective use in job seeking. Job seekers in both Wick and Sutherland suggested that the depressed state of the local economy limited the impact of any formal services, delivered via ICT or in person. As a result, they were generally sceptical about the value of services provided via the Internet, given the more fundamental problem of a lack of opportunities in rural labour markets.

> "All the technology in the world will not help if the jobs aren't there. It doesn't matter. We could all have PCs at home, be continually on-line looking for jobs, but if there are no jobs in the area, high technology does nothing at all for you."
> (Iain, 63, unemployed two years, Wick)

Job seekers in rural areas also pointed to the importance of informal, social networking to the job search and recruitment process. It was suggested that the strength of informal network relations and the tradition of recruitment by word of mouth in these communities meant that many job vacancies were not communicated to the Jobcentre or advertised by any other formal means.

> "In smaller communities, if there's anything going people know about them. Some jobs are just sort of arranged beforehand - the person who is going to get the job has already been decided before the vacancy even occurs. These things don't get advertised."
> (George, 54, unemployed two years, Lochinver, Sutherland)

The role of informal networking has implications for already disadvantaged job seeker groups. A number of focus group participants stressed the importance of personal reputation - 'being known' - and suggested that, as a result, the long-term unemployed, young people and 'incomers' faced particular problems in establishing themselves within the local labour market or rejoining it.

Implications for research and policy

The findings suggest that while ICT-based job seeking (especially via the Internet) remains of relatively marginal importance at present, there may be opportunities for policy-makers to promote new technologies as a means of widening access to both formal information and advice services, and informal job search networks.

● In terms of the formal information and services, there would be advantages in the development of more interactive job search sites, allowing job seekers to store search preferences and user profiles, and to follow through with identified vacancies by making on-line applications. At a more basic level, changes to the design of the web-based resources provided by Jobcentre Plus, to allow general browsing across occupations and areas, as well as targeted searches, would be welcome. For instance, people should be able to easily identify all of the unskilled jobs in a local area.

- There may also be value in the development of local community-focused, web-based resources providing easy-access to local job bulletins and interactive services such as e-mail vacancy updates and 'virtual spaces', where job seekers, employers and service providers can share information and interact on a less formal basis.

- However, unlocking the potential of the Internet as a job search tool will rely upon the provision of adequate local community ICT facilities and support. Local facilities offering easy access to hardware, training and advice provided by professional staff, and an emphasis on social interaction and peer support, may be able to combine the best elements of informal networking (so important in rural labour markets) and formal job search services.

- Finally, there is a need for further research into the relationship between ICT access and use and job search success, together with the most effective strategies for implementing ICT-based services in both urban and rural settings. At a more fundamental level, a key question for future research relates to how policies will strike the balance between designing ICT services to *match* how people actually look for work, and designing ICT services which help people to *change* how they look for work – i.e. to what degree should the technology reflect what people currently do, or be used in an attempt to change their behaviour?

About the project

The study is based upon the findings of two phases of research and compares the experiences and attitudes of unemployed job seekers in two Scottish study areas: the remote, small rural town of Wick and neighbouring Sutherland in the extreme north-east Highlands; and the peri-urban, West Lothian local authority area near Edinburgh.

The first phase of the research involved the comparative analysis of two pre-existing datasets developed as a result of commissioned research undertaken between November 2000 and May 2001 in the study areas. They included 490 mostly face-to-face interviews with a random sample of unemployed job seekers in each area (300 in West Lothian and 190 in Wick and Sutherland, including a small number of postal responses). The second phase of the research followed up the issues raised by the quantitative data analysis, and examined the attitudes of job seekers towards ICT and the job search process in depth. A series of twelve focus groups were held with job seekers between July and November 2002 in the same study areas (six in West Lothian, and three each in Wick and Sutherland).

The study was carried out as part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's research programme, *Internet provision of goods and services: what are the social implications?*, by Professor Ronald W. McQuaid, Colin Lindsay and Malcolm Greig at the Employment Research Institute, Napier University, Edinburgh.